BUILDING HUMAN CAPITAL
LESSONS FROM COUNTRY EXPERIENCES

Ireland’s Human Capital: The contribution of education and skills development to economic transformation

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Executive Summary

Over the last 60 years, Ireland has experienced profound economic, social, technological, occupational, cultural, and demographic changes. It has emerged from the most recent economic crisis stronger than ever and remains committed to its vision of a nation of people armed with the relevant knowledge, entrepreneurial agility, and analytical skills to support economic and social prosperity and to enhance the well-being of the country. Education has been at the heart of this transformation and has been a central component of Ireland’s human capital development.

Ireland’s journey towards prosperity has not been without challenges, and some of these are acknowledged in this case study. Nor is there any room for complacency – many of the goals and targets set in the policy documents described in the report are ambitious and have yet to be achieved. However, they act as a touchstone for Ireland’s commitment to developing a more equitable, sustainable, just, and peaceful society. Other countries that might be interested in learning from the Irish experience will note the coherence between the vision that Ireland has for its citizens and the vision that motivates its engagement with the world as articulated in Ireland’s *A Better World development policy*.¹ Key to achieving prosperity and peace is the eradication of poverty and disadvantage and the adoption of a rights-based approach to educational opportunity.² This requires deliberate, strategic policy interventions so that education, skills training, and entrepreneurship are available to all citizens and provide opportunities for everyone to participate on an equal footing in the economic prosperity that can follow.

The first part of the case study looks at the story of Ireland’s remarkable economic and social transformations since the 1960s, with a focus on the contribution made by education. The opening section sets the context and notes a number of macroeconomic features that have contributed to the creation, maintenance, and development of a business environment that establishes Ireland as a cost-effective and attractive place to live and work:

¹ Department of Foreign Affairs (2019).
² Ireland has committed to providing at least €250 million to global education over the next five years.
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1. The dismantling of trade barriers throughout the 1960s and 1970s and entry into the European Economic Community enabled Ireland to participate in the global economy.3

2. A focus on foreign direct investment (FDI) enabled Ireland to enter industrial niches that became the global cutting edge and to integrate FDI alongside local industry in clusters of excellence in various regions of the country.4

3. A shift from centralized, top-down governance to a more inclusive and participative approach, as evident in the seven social partnership agreements that ran from 1987 to 2008, resulted in a stable labor market climate that was attractive to investors.5

4. Amid these changes, budget allocations to education have remained relatively stable as a percentage of total government expenditure at around 15 to 17 percent. When resources were scarce, positive discrimination in favor of the disadvantaged was used as a mechanism to reduce inequalities in educational attainment and to increase participation in the labor market.

The second section charts the story of education success in Ireland. A firm and shared belief in the latent value of human capital, particularly in a small island economy, has been the foundation for a range of social and economic strategies designed to ensure that Ireland’s people would be appropriately educated and trained to meet the growing demands arising from economic expansion and success. The educational policies of successive governments since the 1960s have enabled Ireland to take its place in an increasingly open and interdependent international economy. Strategic and interventionist policy approaches arose out of a general commitment to the principle of equality of education opportunity and a desire to raise the educational achievements of all in order to promote and develop economic advancement, sustainability, and peace.

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4 Although investment flagged during and for some time after the financial crisis of 2008-2009, FDI rebounded after 2012, and since 2014, Ireland has once again acquired the mantle of the fastest growing economy in Europe.

The key actions taken by the government are as follows:

1. The range of educational opportunities was broadened for all citizens including early childhood care and education, support for children in disadvantaged communities, and increased participation of adults in lifelong education.

2. Equity of access to higher education is a fundamental principle of Irish education policy, and since the early 1980s, a range of state-funded targeted initiatives have been put in place. Increased participation in further and higher education has helped to advance government policy goals in relation to scientific, technological, and vocational development and has helped to achieve increased productivity, employment, and economic growth.

3. The successful implementation of education policies has been enabled by the agreements between the education partners – a broad set of education stakeholders – that were achieved through consultation and engagement. Four landmark national consultative forums influenced education policy through the 1990s, and this case study discusses the policies that have advanced the provision of and participation in early childhood education and development and adult education programs. Also, representation on the bodies that advise the government such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is typically broad and cross-sectoral.

4. Since the 1960s, successive governments have maintained a policy aimed at increasing the employability of its people by investing in their skills and competences. The Transition Year Program at the post-primary level is an example of a curriculum innovation designed to do this. Key curriculum priorities were developed in several strategy documents, which have all sought to ensure that all citizens acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills, have opportunities to build their vocational skills, and can maximize their informal education potential (for example, in STEM). Irish policymakers recognize the necessity to anticipate and respond to the changing needs of learners, society, and the economy. They have developed a new national skills architecture that brings together a broad

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6 These include the Millennium Partnership Fund (2000) and the Strategic Innovation Fund (2007).
7 Coolahan (2017).
8 See NCCA Curriculum Online Transition Year for further information on this program.
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group of stakeholders to help to identify current and future skills needs in the labor market. This group also advises the government on ways to help education providers to respond quickly to cover the identified skills areas.

Regular monitoring of learner outcomes and the professional preparation and development of teachers are key to maintaining the high quality of education in Ireland. Learner outcomes in standardized tests at two points in the primary cycle are reported to the Department of Education and students in post-primary sit public examinations, at the end of lower secondary and on completion of upper secondary. In addition, Ireland participates in international studies such as the Progress in Reading International Study (PIRLS), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The Department’s Inspectorate also operates a programme of external evaluation of schools.

The quality of the teaching force is supported by the establishment, in 2006, of the Teaching Council. It is the professional standards body for the teaching profession, and it promotes and regulates professional standards in teaching. The Teaching Council has published a Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers, which sets out the standards of professional knowledge, skill, competence and conduct which are expected of registered teachers. The Teaching Council also has many functions relating to teacher education. It has, since 2011, set out the standards which ITE providers must achieve\(^\text{10}\) and these were revised in 2020. These functions span the entire teaching career from entry to initial teacher education programmes, accreditation of such programmes, and induction of newly qualified teachers into the profession, to the continuing professional development of teachers throughout their careers. Its *Policy Paper on the Continuum of Teacher Education* and a suite of ancillary documents emphasise innovation, integration and improvement at every stage of the teacher learning continuum.\(^\text{11}\) In Ireland, teaching is a highly regarded profession, benefitting from a high level of public interest, trust and confidence in the schools.

\(^{10}\) Teaching Council (2015) CEiM - Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers. Available at ceim-standards-for-initial-teacher-education.pdf (teachingcouncil.ie)

\(^{11}\) Teaching Council (2011) *Policy Paper on the Continuum of Teacher Education*. Available at policy-on-the-continuum-of-teacher-education.pdf (teachingcouncil.ie)
and teachers. Maintaining the supply of such teachers into the future is a priority, and recommendations made in the final report of the Technical Working Group on Teacher Supply\(^\text{12}\) are intended to ensure that teaching is an attractive option for the best qualified graduates.

Several lessons can be learned from the Irish experience of education:

- a. The importance of *strategic intention in guiding policy development*.
- b. The advantage that consultation and engagement bring to the implementation of policies.
- c. The centrality of *social inclusion as a driver of policy*.
- d. A strong focus on *maintaining the high quality of learning and of outcomes*.
- e. The coherence and effectiveness of conceptualizing *education as a lifelong process*.
- f. Ensuring the *availability of good quality data on the impact of policy on learner outcomes*.

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\(^{12}\) Department of Education and Skills and the Teaching Council (2015).
I. The Irish Economy Before and After 1987 – Accounting for the Take-off

When Ireland gained independence in 1922, the country’s economic center of gravity was rural, and trade was largely oriented towards the UK. Tensions at the time resulted in the UK Government imposing tariffs on Irish beef and other agricultural exports, which in turn was followed by the Irish government imposing duties on imports from the UK. Ireland also embraced an import-substituting industrialization (ISI) strategy to accelerate structural change, wean the economy away from its dependence on farming, create urban jobs, and meet domestic demand for manufactures. ISI was in vogue during the 1930s with European and Latin American countries sheltering nascent industries behind trade barriers. Industrial protectionism remained in effect in Ireland throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and agriculture continued to be the country’s economic mainstay and the principal employer.

By the 1960s, in view of the incipient second round of globalization and perceived advantages of openness, the government decided to dismantle trade barriers and lessen Ireland’s dependence on the slow-growing UK economy. This was followed in 1973 by Ireland’s entry into the European Economic Community (which subsequently became the European Union/EU in 1993 under the Maastricht Treaty). Ireland has benefitted greatly from EU membership in financial terms over the years, to the tune of approximately €40 billion in receipts, net of contributions. It is difficult to quantify how much Ireland has benefitted in terms of economic (single market access), social, and environmental factors, but no doubt these benefits far exceed the above figure.

However, the 14 years following membership were difficult ones for the country. Ireland was hard hit by the international oil crises in 1973-4, and domestic banking crises and labor strikes generated pressures throughout the 1970s. A series of macroeconomic policy missteps resulted in increasing public indebtedness and worsening unemployment and caused a spike in emigration during the 1980s. An

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13 ISI was instituted through the Control of Manufactures Acts of 1932 and 1934, which remained in effect until 1957.
14 World War I brought the first globalization to an end and, with it, the era of free trade that had begun in 1870. One outcome of interwar tensions (1919-1939) was the advent of economic nationalism and ISI in Europe and Latin America. See Berend (2000) on Eastern and Central Europe experience and Baer (1972) on Latin America.
15 Whitaker (1958).
expansionary fiscal policy launched in 1977 briefly stimulated growth but also widened budgetary and current account deficits and led to rising inflation in the early 1980s.\textsuperscript{16} The then coalition government’s response, which was to steeply increase tax rates so as to narrow the budget deficit, was largely unsuccessful. Growth plunged, and the economy stagnated between 1981 and 1987. There were other social and structural reasons why Ireland failed to catch up with affluent European countries. Girvin (2010) remarked that “Ireland [for two decades after the early 1960s] remained a traditional zero-sum society with all groups and individuals in competition for relatively scarce resources.” There was opposition to the employment of married women, while the farming community continued to exercise significant influence over economic policy and compelled industry to be located in rural areas, thereby slowing the pace of structural change and urban development.

A significant turnaround commenced with a change of government in 1987. After promising to increase fiscal spending, the new government altered tack and, with the support of the largest opposition party, adopted a strategy of fiscal retrenchment to correct Ireland’s persistent macroeconomic dysfunction.\textsuperscript{17} This fiscal correction alone would not have sufficed to revive the economy. Arguably, the decisive step was an enduring understanding reached between the government, private sector employees, and labor unions to contain wage demands to restrain the cost-push pressures that had been limiting Ireland’s industrial competitiveness. The willingness of labor unions to support the Programme for National Recovery (PNR)\textsuperscript{18} meant that both the government and workers were committed to laying the groundwork for macroeconomic stability. The PNR’s average 2.5 percent increase in wages reassured employers. By bringing wage-push inflation under control and reducing the public sector budget overrun, the government was also able to trim marginal tax rates that had risen to over 60 percent and were eroding work and investment incentives. Thus, fiscal policy plus a newly cemented social partnership were among the measures that enabled Ireland to begin emerging from persistent economic decline and lack of growth.

\textsuperscript{16} Inflationary pressures were exacerbated by increasing commodity prices and exchange rate movements.
\textsuperscript{17} Honohan and Walsh (2002).
\textsuperscript{18} https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/efemiredictionary/programme-for-national-recovery-pnr
However, other factors, both external and domestic, also contributed. Four key external developments were instrumental in the making of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger\textsuperscript{19} economy: (i) the second wave of globalization; (ii) the formation of the EU and its impact on foreign direct investment (FDI); (iii) technological change; and (iv) the availability of EU structural funds.

First, by the 1980s, a succession of trade rounds – Kennedy, Tokyo, and Uruguay – and the easing of capital controls had begun stimulating global trade, presenting countries with the opportunity to pursue export-led growth, a strategy that the East Asian Tigers had successfully pioneered. Cross-border capital flows also grew, with multinational enterprises (MNEs) demonstrating an increasing willingness to outsource their production and establish subsidiaries overseas. Declining transport costs, advances in telecommunications, and the growing capacity of companies to manage supply chains that encompassed globally dispersed operations meant that trade and FDI spiraled upwards together.

\textsuperscript{19} Kevin Gardiner of Morgan Stanley may have been the first person to coin the term, which appeared in a report published in 1994.
Second, MNEs from the United States in particular sought ways to deepen their penetration of the growing and increasingly affluent EU market, and Ireland, a member country with a young well-educated population and long-established and strong socioeconomic links to the USA, offered an attractive point of entry.

Thirdly, computerization and advances in electrical and biopharmaceutical technologies were significantly expanding opportunities in high-tech manufacturing as leading companies sought to establish bases in major markets to minimize their costs and to surmount remaining barriers to trade. One wave of investment radiated across the Pacific to East Asia, while a second wave crossed the Atlantic, with some of the investment by electronics and pharmaceutical companies finding a home in Ireland.

A fourth development that helped to remedy Ireland’s infrastructural deficiencies was the creation of a number of Structural and Cohesion Investment Funds by the EU\textsuperscript{20}.

The purpose of these funds was to reduce disparities in income and welfare among member countries and ensure that the incomes of poorer countries rose towards the EU average. As Ireland was then one of the least developed of the countries in the EU, it was the beneficiary of assistance from: (i) the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for lagging areas; (ii) the European Social Fund (ESF) aimed at augmenting human capital and enhancing the employability of job seekers; (iii) a Cohesion Fund to overcome infrastructure deficits that were especially serious in Ireland; and (iv) the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), which supported the income of farmers through subsidies and modernization. The availability of these significant financial resources enabled Ireland to significantly modernize its infrastructure and services in a relatively short period and enhance its attractiveness as a production platform for MNEs focused on EU markets.21

The external developments that transformed the Irish economy were complemented and reinforced by domestic policies on a number of fronts with the express purpose of attracting FDI. Macroeconomic policies that corrected structural imbalances and the social compact that defused wage pressures have already been noted above. Domestic investment in infrastructure supplemented by EU Structural Funds significantly improved the business environment and increased the attractiveness of living in Ireland and its cost competitiveness. However, these factors alone would not have sufficed to crowd MNEs into Ireland. The country offered three additional inducements.

The first inducement was a competitive corporation tax regime. Building on the Export Sales Relief introduced in the 1950s, a corporation tax was introduced in 1981. With an initial rate of 10 percent, this new tax applied only to trading manufacturing profits. In 2003, the base was widened to include all company trading profits, and the rate was increased to 12.5 percent, where it has remained ever since.

The second inducement was the existence of a highly educated English-speaking workforce, which was a particularly big attraction for American companies.

The third inducement was the existence of the Industrial Development Authority (IDA), a statutory, semi-autonomous body tasked with persuading leading MNEs to

set up shop in Ireland. With their eyes on the EU market, Irish policymakers had set up the IDA in 1949 in pursuit of an FDI-oriented industrial policy to diversify the manufacturing sector and export markets. The IDA spearheaded Ireland’s industrial policy by targeting FDI once the economy began opening up in the 1960s. As the potential of the electronics and pharmaceutical industries became increasingly apparent in the 1980s, the IDA targeted leading US firms to persuade them to locate some of their operations in Ireland, highlighting Ireland’s favorable tax regime, employment grants, rent subsidies, and offsets against capital investment, emphasizing the lure of the EU market and the capabilities of the workforce.\textsuperscript{22}

The Industrial Development Bill of 1993 strengthened these promotional efforts by creating three separate agencies: (i) the Industrial Development Agency, the new version of the Industrial Development Authority (IDA); (ii) *Forfas*, which was given responsibility for the overall coordination and administrative oversight of industrial policy; and (iii) *Forbairt*, which incentivized local businesses and provide them with technology support and extension services (which was previously the responsibility of another agency, Eolas).\textsuperscript{23}

The IDA’s mandate was not just to attract FDI to Ireland, but also to move this investment up the value chain, thereby enabling Ireland to enter industrial niches that were at the global cutting edge and integrate FDI with local industry in clusters of excellence in various regions of the country. As it is currently configured, the IDA offers training grants to MNEs to encourage them to increase local R&D and improve the skills of the local workforce. It coordinates with other agencies to ensure that investors are not constrained by a lack of infrastructure and that follow-up is not neglected. Equally important is the IDA’s image-building activity overseas. It has 14 offices in eight countries to make the case for Ireland as the ideal European location for MNEs. As Ireland’s investment reputation improved in North America, capital and talent began flowing in, with many Irish emigrants making their way back to their home country.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Gunnigle and McGuire (2001) and OECD (1994).
\textsuperscript{23} “Extension services” refer to an informal educational process directed toward the rural population to increase the efficiency of the family farm, increase production, and generally increase the standard of living of the farm family. Whether the efforts to create links with local firms and generate indirect employment were successful is disputed (Gorg et al, 2010).
\textsuperscript{24} Yusuf and Nabeshima (2012).
Throughout much of the 1990s, in accordance with Ireland’s industrial policy, the IDA targeted FDI in manufacturing and, increasingly, high tech manufacturing. The decision by Intel in 1989 to set up a production facility in County Kildare (near Dublin)\textsuperscript{25} triggered investments by others such as Dell, HP, Boston Scientific, Google, and Facebook as well as by Pfizer, Johnson and Johnson, and Allergan. Thanks to the IDA’s efforts and those of its sister agencies, Ireland attracted 12 of Fortune’s top 20 American electronic firms and all 10 of the top pharmaceutical firms, all of which set up production facilities in Ireland. By the late 1990s, Ireland had become the largest exporter of packaged software after the United States.\textsuperscript{26}

Along with Singapore’s EDB, Costa Rica’s CINDE, and CzechInvest from the Czech Republic, the IDA is one of the world’s leading investment promotion agencies and a model for other countries that want to leverage FDI to grow their economies. However, all small economies that have successfully used FDI to move up the value chain have one thing in common: they have all taken a conscious decision to build and improve their human capital.

In the period leading up to the 2008 financial crisis, the Irish economy experienced a decline in competitiveness. With the economy operating at effectively full employment, a credit-fueled surge in property investment (both residential and commercial) and persistent pro-cyclical budgetary policies caused resources to shift into the non-traded sectors at the expense of the exporting sectors (crowding out). This expansion of import-intensive domestic demand without parallel growth in the exporting sectors led to a significant current account deficit. This situation quickly became unsustainable.

The correction began in 2009 with the rapid downsizing of the construction and (to a lesser extent) retail sectors and an associated compression of imports. Unfortunately, however, the contemporaneous deterioration in the global economy, in conjunction with the accumulated loss in competitiveness, limited the pace at which capital and labor could be reallocated to the traded sector. As a result, the adjustment was very costly when measured in terms of lost output and employment.

\textsuperscript{26} Donovan and Murphy (2013).
The trigger for correcting these unsustainable developments was the collapse of the domestic property market from 2008-2009 onwards. In part, this reflected the onset of the global financial crisis at the time. However, the seeds of domestic problems had previously been sown and, irrespective of international developments, a rebalancing of domestic economic activity was inevitable.

The swift recovery was, unsurprisingly, led by the exporting sectors in the initial phase, supported by an increase in the competitiveness of the domestic economy and a pickup in external demand. Much of this recovery was facilitated by the 2010 EU-IMF Program and the associated structural reforms that aimed to create jobs, promote competitiveness, restore economic growth, and place public finances on a sustainable path. The recovery broadened after Ireland left the EU-IMF Program in 2014 as domestic demand began to play an increasingly significant role with strong contributions from consumption and in particular investment spending. Following several years of rebalancing, the composition of activity became more sustainable, with all sectors positively contributing to growth.

The substantial production of ICT products and services in Ireland meant that total factor productivity was a significant driver of overall growth. Although investment flagged during and for some time after the financial crisis of 2008-2009, FDI rebounded after 2012, and since 2014, Ireland has once again become the fastest growing economy in Europe. The total stock of FDI in Ireland in 2019 amounted to €1,026 billion. The US accounted for €734 billion on an ultimate investor basis, most of this in manufacturing activities. MNEs in Ireland account for almost 60 percent of value added, a higher share than in other countries, and almost 20 percent of jobs and contribute over three-quarters of the corporate tax revenues collected by the Revenue Commissioners.

29 IDA now pays equal attention to business services, recognizing that digital technologies are revolutionizing tradable services.
30 OECD (2020b).
31 CSO data indicate that employment by FDI-associated firms amounted to 383,000 workers in 2018 (17 percent of total employment). Foreign MNEs account for 77 percent of corporate tax. https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-fdi/foreigndirectinvestmentinireland2018/ae/
In summary, while Ireland’s competitive tax rate was attractive, it was only one of the factors that attracted foreign investment. The other factors included the availability of a relatively young and English-speaking workforce with a high level of education, the wage and industrial relations stability assured by the Social Partnership, the country’s strong institutional and regulatory framework, and its large Euro market, all of which combined to make Ireland an attractive FDI option for MNEs.\textsuperscript{32}

The impact of the departure from the UK from the EU on the Irish economy is significant. Joint research published by Ireland’s Department of Finance and the Economic Social Research Institute (ESRI) in March 2019 on the macroeconomic implications of Brexit explored a range of possible future relationships between the EU and the UK. This included a limited free trade agreement (FTA) scenario (based on zero-tariffs and a zero-quotas goods-only agreement), which is broadly in line with the Trade and Cooperation Agreement that was recently concluded between the EU and the UK.

Under this FTA scenario, the level of Ireland’s GDP would be around 2 or 3 percent lower over the medium term (around five years) and long term (around ten years) than if the UK had remained in the EU.

While the new Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the UK is a positive conclusion to the transition period, it still represents a break from previously existing arrangements, and thus Brexit will still have a negative economic impact on the Irish economy.

\textbf{II. Charting the Story of Educational Success in Ireland}

“We want an education and training system that empowers learners to be confident in their national, cultural, and individual identity, to be aware of their capability to achieve more and to take every opportunity that arises to be the best that they can be.”\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} Turley and Maloney (2011).
\textsuperscript{33} Department of Education and Skills (2019a).
Any summary of Irish educational policy since the 1960s must acknowledge three key inter-locking themes: (i) a strong shared commitment to broadening the range of educational opportunities for all citizens; (ii) the value of shared ambitions for the contribution that education can make to individual and societal well-being; and (iii) the necessity to anticipate and respond to the changing needs of learners, society, and the economy. These themes are presented in Figure 3 below and will be discussed later, and all three have been relevant in shaping education provision and in delivering greatly improved outcomes since the 1960s.34

Education has always been highly valued in Ireland, and government funding to education has reflected this. Between 1994 and 2019, expenditure on education and skills increased from €2.5 billion to €10.9 billion per annum. As a proportion of total government expenditure, the budget category of education and skills remained relatively stable at between 15 percent to 17 percent over this period. The 2021 budget allocated €8.9 billion to the Department of Education, an increase of €410 million or some 5 percent in 2020. A further €3.3 billion will be allocated to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) bringing the total investment in 2021 to €12.2 billion. This reflects the government’s continuing commitment to its program of major reinvestment in Ireland’s primary and post-primary education system building on the initiatives set out in the Programme for Government.35

Figure 3: Direction of Irish Educational Policy Since the 1960s

Growing educational opportunity for all  Building partnership and shared ambition  Renewed focus on skills and competences

34 There are five sectors in the Irish education system, spanning early childhood through formal schooling, to further, adult, and higher education. A state-funded, two-year pre-school programme, the Early Childhood Care and Education program, is available to all children and is delivered outside the formal education system, by a diverse range of private, community, and voluntary interests. Education is compulsory for children in Ireland from the ages of 6 to 16 or until students have completed three years of second-level education. Primary education consists of an eight-year cycle: junior infants, senior infants, and first to sixth classes. Children normally transfer to post-primary education around the age of 12. Post-primary education consists of a three-year junior cycle leading to public examination and certification and a two-year senior cycle, at the end of which students take the state-administered Leaving Certificate examination. An optional additional Transition Year programme is available after the junior cycle and before the student commences senior cycle studies. Provision for further education and training, tertiary education, and adult education completes the continuum.

35 The Programme for Government is a statement of the policy priorities of the government of Ireland. Typically issued on the formation of a government, the Programme sets out the goals to be achieved by Government over its lifetime. The current programme “Our Shared Future” is available here: gov.ie - Programme for Government: Our Shared Future (www.gov.ie)
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**Figure 4: Department of Education Expenditure, 1996-2016**

Source: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2017).

**Growing Educational Opportunity for All**

The 1960s was marked by the emergence of a strategic policy approach that emphasized the critical role that education would play in helping Ireland to take its place in an increasingly open and interdependent international economy. Designated internationally as the “Development Decade” by the United Nations, the 1960s in Ireland was a period of significant investment in, and growth of, educational opportunities. Two important developments occurred during the decade – the raising of the school leaving age to 15 and, critically, the provision of free post-primary education. The Primary Certificate exam was abolished, and new curriculums at both the primary and post-primary levels were introduced. In addition, free school transport was introduced. Training for apprenticeships was regulated, and a national training agency, An Comhairle Oiliúna, was given the responsibility for training at every level – within industries, in training centers, and apprenticeship training. A non-governmental agency for promoting adult learning, AONTAS, was founded in 1969, and in 1977, the National Adult Literacy Agency was formed. At the tertiary level, the Higher Education Authority was established as was a network of regional colleges to provide progression paths for vocational and technical education.
Two developments were key in driving policy during the 1960s. These were the advancement of the government’s first and second Programmes for Economic Expansion and the publication of the OECD’s Investment in Education report.\textsuperscript{36} The Programmes acknowledged an urgent need to “adapt, re-equip, extend, and reorganize all sectors of the economy to ensure the greater strength and efficiency needed to prosper in a more acutely competitive world.”\textsuperscript{37} The second Programme deliberately linked educational and economic policy in a virtuous cycle – increased productivity would provide the resources to increase educational provision, which in turn would support and stimulate continued economic expansion. “The economic returns from investment in education and training are likely to be as high in the long run as those from investment in physical capital.”\textsuperscript{38}

The OECD report, and the research which underpinned it, was highly influential in shaping the discourse about education and education policy in Ireland. It has been described as one of the foundation documents of modern Irish education.\textsuperscript{39} The report made a strong argument for an education system that would take into account the needs of the economy. It expressed concern that there would not be enough appropriately educated and trained workers to meet the growing demands associated with Ireland’s economic growth unless there was significant reform of the education system.

The intertwining of educational and economic policy was not new or unique to Ireland, but the explicit statements in the Second Programme for Economic Expansion had a strong and lasting influence on policy development over the following decades. This strategic, interventionist policy approach led to the extension of educational opportunities, particularly at the post-primary level, to all children. A national system of primary education had been in place in Ireland since 1831, and by 1980, universal completion of primary school was achieved. In the mid-1960s, one-third of all children were leaving full-time education after completing primary schooling, and fewer than 60 percent of all 15-year-olds were remaining on in school. In 1967,
the introduction of the free post-primary education scheme extended access to post-primary to all, irrespective of economic status, and raised the school leaving age to 15. By the end of the decade, the number of students enrolled in post-primary schools rose from 124,415 in 1965/66 to 209,812 in 1970/71, and enrollments continued to rise over the following years.

**Figure 5: Post-primary Enrollment in Ireland, 1965-2019**

Up to the early 1960s, secondary-level education was provided in two types of school: secondary and vocational. The former offered an academic curriculum, based on the classical model, and prepared students for the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations. The Leaving Certificate state examination was required for entry into higher education, the professions, and highly sought-after jobs such as those in retail banking, teaching, and the civil service. The vocational schools provided two years of technical education that culminated in the Group Certificate examination, leading to apprenticeships and work placements. In effect, children were separated into distinct streams with consequent differences in education progression opportunities. Policy changes in the 1960s attempted to dismantle these disparities by creating new comprehensive schools that were open to all children, were co-educational, and offered a wide curriculum. Measures were put in place to raise the profile of vocational schools. The curriculum that they offered was expanded to include the full range of post-primary school subjects, and the students in these schools could take the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations.

Source: *Annual Statistical Reports, Department of Education and Skills*
Vocational education and training in a number of European countries has helped to match the demand for skills with supply and increased the competitiveness of their industries.\textsuperscript{40} Outside of post-primary school provision, the policy of the Irish government was to extend tertiary provision to meet the needs of the expanding and more diverse student population and to meet the economic need for more highly skilled workers.\textsuperscript{41} A Commission on Higher Education was set up in 1960 and published its report in 1967. Arising from this, the government created the Higher Education Authority to co-ordinate tertiary provision and to advise the Minister. Plans for the expansion of the university sector were devised, and new universities were established in the 1980s. Parallel to this, a separate tertiary education sector was emerging, with the establishment of eight regional technical colleges (RTCs) through the 1960s and 1970s to expand and develop technological and vocational learning outside of the universities, and two National Institutes of Higher Education were also founded as a way to progress from RTCs. Policy focused on creating progression routes and on dismantling perceptions that vocational education was

\textsuperscript{40} http://www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/vet.htm.

\textsuperscript{41} White (2001).
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less valuable. The National Council for Educational Awards was formed in 1972 to monitor standards and curricula in technical, industrial, scientific, technological and commercial education provided outside the universities. It could confer degrees, diplomas, certificates and other educational awards.42

Over the next 30 years, further and higher education became a central pillar in the development of Ireland’s human capital. Higher education was “positioned at the heart of the ‘knowledge triangle’ of education, research, and innovation designed to improve [increase] competitiveness and economic growth.”43 In October 2013, following the passing of the Further Education and Training Act 2013, SOLAS was created to work with the Education and Training Boards (ETBs),44 statutory education authorities responsible for education and training and youth work, to support the development of appropriate further education and training programs and curricula. This initiative was accompanied by the sourcing of further education and training interventions from the private, public, and not-for-profit sector. As the flow of FDI into Ireland increased the demand for higher-level skills, the numbers of students enrolling in tertiary education rose in response. The OECD has concluded that this ramping-up of enrollment was achieved without any decline in quality.45 The introduction of a free fees scheme for higher education in 1996 removed a key barrier to participation. Although universities and colleges currently charge a registration fee to cover their operational costs, the state covers the costs of tuition in order to encourage greater participation in higher education. The formation of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in 2020 indicates the importance of education for growing Ireland’s human capital. This conscious decision by the government to separate out tertiary education and research from primary and post-primary education was made in order to focus on growing this sector, which is critical to ensuring Ireland’s continued competitiveness and ability to provide the skills needed by the market.46

42 The NCEA was established under the National Council for Educational Awards Act, 1979 Available at National Council For Educational Awards Act, 1979 (irishstatutebook.ie)
44 White (2001).
45 ETBs manage and operate secondary schools, further education colleges, pilot community national schools, and a range of adult and further education centers delivering education and training programs. The ETBs were established under and governed according to the Education and Training Boards Act 2013 and replace the former Vocational Education Committees (VECs).
46 gov.ie - Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (www.gov.ie)
The development of both tracks at the tertiary level (university and non-university) has had positive outcomes for both individuals and society. Employment and earnings prospects for individuals have significantly improved. Those with a Bachelor’s degree earn on average 81 percent more than those with an upper secondary education, while those who have completed at least a Master’s program can expect to earn twice as much as those with an upper secondary education. Close cooperation between the universities and the IDA ensured that Ireland had a pool of skilled graduates to attract high-value investment throughout the 1990s. Increased participation in further and higher education by learners has helped to advance the government’s policy goals in relation to scientific, technological, and vocational development, which in turn has been critically helpful in increasing productivity, employment, and economic growth. In 2017, almost 90 percent of school leavers went on to further and higher education. Currently, 47 percent of the population aged between 25 and 64 years old have attained a tertiary education, one of the largest proportions in the OECD.

Table 1: Transition Rates from Post-Primary to Further and Higher Education, 2015-2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% students who sit LC-Retention</td>
<td>90.2%</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
<td>91.6%</td>
<td>91.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition rates from post-primary to higher education</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of which DEIS schools</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of which non-DEIS schools</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>69.1%</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition rates from post-primary to FET</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of which DEIS schools</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of which non-DEIS schools</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: DEIS schools are those schools serving disadvantaged communities.

OECD (2020a).
Building Human Capital

A Policy Focus on Social Inclusion

There is ample evidence internationally that students’ socioeconomic backgrounds affect their educational achievement. Reducing achievement gaps due to unequal opportunities requires a whole-of-government approach that addresses the social and economic forces involved. As Charles Haughey, the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) stated in February 1991:

“Our education system must provide the opportunity for all to develop their potential to the full... All children must be given equal opportunity... We must ensure [that] we have an educational system second to none, geared to the needs and opportunities of the modern world and, most important of all, accessible to all.”48

As detailed in Section I, Ireland’s economy shrank in the 1980s with a related increase in unemployment and emigration. The public sector borrowing requirement rose from 13 percent of GNP in 1976 to 20 percent in 1981.49 The adoption of a tighter fiscal policy was inevitable, and this had an impact on education policy. The 1984 Programme for Action reflected the change in emphasis in financial policy by aiming to improve education outcomes through the effective and cost-efficient use of scarce resources. In particular, positive discrimination in favor of the disadvantaged was used as a mechanism to reduce inequalities in educational attainment and in participation in the labor market.

Strong economic growth is one way to reduce poverty, but when this is not the case as in the 1980s and towards the end of the 2010s, investing in educational measures designed to facilitate participation in the labor market (and thereby augment incomes) becomes even more critical.

48 Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Charles Haughey in February 1991 in the Dáil Éireann debates on the approval of the Program for Economic and Social Progress. Available at Programme for Economic and Social Progress: Motion. – Dáil Éireann (26th Dáil) – Tuesday, 19 Feb 1991 – Houses of the Oireachtas
49 Hogan (2010).
Since 1997, Ireland has developed a series of national anti-poverty strategies with social inclusion as a core objective. Under each of the national strategies, responsibility for specific actions has been assigned to the Department of Education, encompassing actions directed toward ensuring access to early childhood education, primary and post-primary, and adult, further, and higher education.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the government increasingly focused on supporting the participation of women (particularly mothers) in the workforce and on addressing the issue of educational disadvantage. Table 2 presents a timeline for the main measures introduced to ensure that high-quality childcare and education was available to enable parents to work.

Table 2: Timeline of Key Moments in the Provision of Early Childhood Care and Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1960s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
<th>2010s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rutland St project 1969</td>
<td>Expert Working Group on Childcare 1997</td>
<td>White paper on Early Childhood Care and Education – Ready to Learn 1999</td>
<td>Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme introduced 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rutland St project 1969</td>
<td>National Childcare strategy 1999</td>
<td>Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations 2006</td>
<td>Expanded in September 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Start program 1994</td>
<td>ESRI Study Childcare Arrangements in Ireland 1998</td>
<td>Early Years Education Policy Unit 2006</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prior to the 1970s, married women traditionally remained at home but as the economy expanded, their involvement in the workforce grew. An ESRI survey in 1998 revealed that 38 percent of parents with children aged 4 and under relied on some form of paid childcare arrangement and estimated that about 200,000 children needed childcare to enable their parents to participate in the labor force. Over time, the emphasis on early childhood provision extended beyond childcare to include education. Today, a free two-year pre-school Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program is available to all children within the eligible age range. The program is provided for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year from September to June. In 2019, 105,978 children participated in ECCE.

The government recognizes gender equality as both an objective and a driver of sustainable development. Gender mainstreaming was adopted at the national policy level in Ireland in the National Development Plan (2000-2006). In 2007, a National Women’s Strategy (2007-2016) was put in place as the core policy document for government action around women’s socioeconomic opportunities, wellbeing, and equal engagement as active citizens. A Gender Equality Division in the (then) Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform was set up to advise policymakers, to collect and analyze data, and to oversee progress on the strategy in conjunction with a Strategy Monitoring Committee. The regular monitoring of the commitments in this strategy and its successor, the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020, indicates that steady progress has been made in each of these areas.

Between 2014 and 2016, the employment rate of women aged between 20 and 64 years old grew to 65.4 percent but remained substantially short of Ireland’s national target of 69 to 71 percent. Women’s access to healthcare has increased, and equality in political decision-making was advanced significantly with the introduction of the Electoral Amendment (Political Funding) Act 2012, which introduced 30 percent candidate selection quotas at the national level. As a result of this move, female representation in the Dáil increased to 22.5 per cent after the 2019 general election (from 15.1 per cent in 2011) but remains below the EU average.
In business, government policy has supported industry-led employment initiatives such as the Balance for Better Business initiative and regional networks for women in farming. The office of the Balance for Better Business initiative has reported that female representation on ISEQ 20 boards had reached 26.3 percent by March 2020, which exceeded the interim target set by the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020. Also, 40 percent representation had been achieved on the governing boards of Irish State bodies, which reflected the efforts of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to achieve more gender-balanced representation.

In education, the gender gap between girls and boys in terms of educational access and attainment is narrow relative to other countries. In 2011, for example, the Central Statistics Office showed that 53 percent of women aged between 25 and 34 had tertiary qualifications and that girls were more likely than boys to achieve “A” grades in the Leaving Certificate in the subjects of English, Irish, French, Biology, Chemistry, Art, and Music. Also, the differences between 15-year-old boys and girls in Mathematics, Science, and Reading are not statistically significant, which is not the case in other OECD countries where girls continue to lag behind boys in these subjects.

Figure 7: Gender Differences in Performance on PISA 2018

Source: Adapted from OECD (2019).

56 Such bodies include the IDA, An Post (the Irish postal service); the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Irish Research Council. A full list can be found at Stateboards.ie
Building Human Capital

Beyond the post-primary level, young women are continuing to do well in completing tertiary studies, and this is translating into improved employment prospects. The proportion of 30 to 34-year-old women with such qualifications has stayed consistent since 2013 at over 58 percent.\(^{59}\) The employment rate of recent female graduates aged 34 and younger increased by 5 percentage points between 2015 and 2017 to reach 82.6 percent.\(^{60}\) Actions implemented under the *Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeships and Traineeships in Ireland*,\(^ {61}\) which included the introduction of new apprenticeship programs in areas such as ICT, bio-pharma, and financial services, have increased the number of women participating in apprenticeship programs.

**Table 3: Attainment at the Post-secondary Level by Gender, 2015-2019**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% 25-34 year old <em>males</em> with post-secondary education or above</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 25-34 year old <em>females</em> with post-secondary education or above</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from Department of Education and Skills (2020a).*

In 2016, an expert group reviewing gender equality in higher education highlighted significant under-representation of women at the highest levels of staffing.\(^ {62}\) Building on this review, a Gender Equality Taskforce was established in November 2017, which developed the *Accelerating Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions – Gender Action Plan 2018-2020*.\(^ {63}\) As part of the launch of the Gender Equality Taskforce report, it was also announced that a new Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) would be established. The key objective of this initiative is principally to attract outstanding female applicants both from among those who currently work in the sector and internationally. Under this initiative, 45 senior academic leadership posts are being created in higher education institutions over three years to help to achieve gender balance at senior levels of employment.

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\(^{59}\) Central Statistics Office (2020b) *Educational Attainment Thematic Report* Figure 3.5. Available at: [Profile of Age, Sex, Nationality and Region - CSO - Central Statistics Office](https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/)

\(^{60}\) Department of Justice and Equality (2018).

\(^{61}\) Department of Education and Skills (2020b).


Despite these very positive indicators and the range of actions being taken to accelerate the achievement of gender equality goals, the government acknowledges that some gaps remain. The whole-of-government approach to addressing gender equity issues involves a recognition that empowering women to participate fully in both education and the labor market and on an equal footing with men is necessary to grow Ireland’s human capital. It is a shared responsibility across all sectors of society. In 2020, a Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality was tasked with advancing gender equality. It invited submissions from the public and, following deliberations on discussions and submissions, will make recommendations to the government in due course.

The government’s concern for students enrolled in schools that serve disadvantaged communities arose from its commitment to the principle of equality of education opportunity and a desire to raise the educational achievements of all citizens in order to promote and develop economic advancement. In 1983, almost half of those who left school with no qualifications were unemployed a year later. Schemes for the Assistance of Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage were introduced by the Department of Education in 1984, and the first cohort of schools were identified, mostly in the urban centers of Dublin, Cork, and Limerick. These schemes initially included increased capitation grants for participating schools plus a grant to buy textbooks and to develop links between the school and the homes of children attending the school. It quickly emerged that additional teaching resources were also needed and that schools were struggling to achieve effective home-school links. The schemes were further developed over the following years to include concessionary teaching posts and the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, which was piloted in 55 schools in 1990, which allowed schools to appoint a teacher as a full-time coordinator responsible for forging relationships among schools, homes, and the community.

The most recent (and current) scheme, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), also includes measures such as school meals, supports for schools to develop action plans for improvement, and literacy/numeracy programs and the professional support needed to implement them. These measures are a tangible recognition of the importance of addressing some of the underlying causes of disadvantage.
Successor schemes\textsuperscript{64} to the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme have been evaluated, and the achievements of children benefiting from these schemes have been noted. In 2017, the Educational Research Center reported a significant increase over time in literacy test scores among students in DEIS primary schools. There have also been increases in numeracy test scores, though these trends are less clear-cut than is the case for literacy scores.\textsuperscript{65}

At the post-primary level, while there was a significant increase in overall achievement scores between 2002 and 2016 in the Junior Certificate examinations across all schools, the increase was larger in DEIS schools, and the achievement and attainment gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools continues to narrow. In addition, students attending these schools appear to have developed increased confidence in their own abilities, as well as having raised expectations among themselves and their teachers.

\textsuperscript{64} These include “Breaking the Cycle” (1996), which benefited 28 clusters of predominantly rural primary schools and which reduced the pupil-teacher ratio to 15:1 and “Giving Children an Even Break” (2001), in which 2,276 primary schools participated, 204 extra teachers were appointed, and a budget of IR£26 million was allocated to be spent over three years on children identified as being most at risk of not reaching their educational potential. The current scheme, “Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools” (DEIS) was introduced in 2005 and renewed in 2017. It was one element of a continuum of interventions to address disadvantage, which include second-chance education and training and access measures for adults to support increased participation by under-represented groups in further and higher education. Other elements include legislation such as the Education Act 1998 and the Education (Welfare) Act 2000.

\textsuperscript{65} Smyth et al (2015).
Students in DEIS schools were increasingly opting for examination papers set at more demanding levels of difficulty than they had done in the past. Students were also remaining in school beyond the compulsory school age of 16. By 2018, 82.3 percent of students in DEIS schools remained in school through to the Leaving Certificate level. This contrasts with 61.7 percent in 1995.\textsuperscript{66} As a consequence of these and other measures, Ireland had the second lowest level of educational inequality at the post-primary level among the 41 countries assessed in a recent UNICEF report.\textsuperscript{67}

Despite these achievements, the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools in terms of retaining students until the Leaving Certificate has recently begun to widen albeit slowly, from 8.5 percent in 2017 to 9.3 percent in 2019. The government’s education policy remains focused on closing that gap, and a revised DEIS Plan\textsuperscript{68} was published in 2017.

Adult education and second chance education were brought sharply into focus in the late 1990s by Ireland’s poor results in the International Adult Literacy Survey in 1997.\textsuperscript{69} With the help of European Social Funding, pre-employment courses targeted at post-junior cycle students had been introduced in 1977 and were extended in length to two years in 1984. In the same year, a scheme was established to provide full-time education for adults over 21 who had been unemployed for more than a year. National social partnership agreements, which existed between 1987 and 2008 and will be discussed in detail below, identified adult literacy and numeracy as important policy objectives. The national program of second chance education, the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), was introduced in 1989. In November 1998, the Department of Education published a Green Paper on Adult Education, \textit{Adult Education in the Era of Lifelong Learning}, which provided a template for the development of the adult education sector as part of the government’s commitment to establishing a comprehensive system of lifelong learning for all citizens. It prioritized adult literacy and included a National Adult Literacy Program, which expanded the definition of literacy to include literacy in ICT. Increasing the participation of adults in lifelong education and training is one of the government’s core strategic objectives, and a range

\textsuperscript{66} Weir and Kavanagh (2018).

\textsuperscript{67} UNICEF Office of Research (2018).

\textsuperscript{68} Department of Education and Skills (2017c).

\textsuperscript{69} The results showed that 25 percent of the population had very low levels of basic skills, and a further 30 percent had below average literacy skills.
of initiatives have been successful in growing this sector. In 2015, the percentage of adults aged between 25 and 64 who participated in formal and/or non-formal education activities was 6.5 percent, and by 2019, this figure had almost doubled to 12.6 percent.\textsuperscript{70}

Ensuring that there are education progression pathways available beyond the post-primary level is an important driver of social and economic equity. The \textit{Tomorrow’s Skills} report in 2007\textsuperscript{71} acknowledged that many people are reluctant to participate in education and training, with more pronounced barriers for those with lower-level skills. State intervention through a range of education and training initiatives was necessary to help the low-skilled to acquire the necessary training to enable their more active engagement in the economy. The \textit{Tomorrow’s Skills} report set specific targets for raising the attainment levels of the population by 2020. A review in 2016 noted that progress had been made in a number of areas but that the target to increase the percentages of people in the labor force holding a qualification at Levels 4 or 5 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) had not been met.\textsuperscript{72} A clear challenge also remained in relation to reducing the share of people with an NFQ

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{INDICATOR} & \textbf{2015} & \textbf{2016} & \textbf{2017} & \textbf{2018} & \textbf{2019} \\
\hline
Number of Springboard enrolments & 7,767 & 5,102 & 6,564 & 8,088 & 9,266 \\
\hline
Total persons registered on apprenticeship & 8,317 & 10,445 & 12,851 & 15,373 & 17,829 \\
\textit{of which Craft Apprenticeship} & 8,317 & 10,366 & 12,458 & 14,469 & 16,142 \\
\hline
Number of Skillnet learner & 48,923 & 50,373 & 49,194 & 56,182 & 63,000 \\
\textit{of which Up-skilling the Unemployed} & 6,695 & 5,915 & 3,705 & 1,980 & 1,871 \\
\hline
Enrolments in FET at NFQ levels 1-4 & n/a & 55,886 & 80,503 & 85,828 & Q1 2021 \\
\hline
Enrolments in FET at NFQ levels 5 & n/a & 43,868 & 39,609 & 41,432 & Q1 2021 \\
\hline
Enrolments in FET at NFQ levels 6 & n/a & 9,745 & 8,355 & 9,486 & Q1 2021 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Participation in Further Education, 2015-2019}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{70} Department of Education and Skills (2020a), p.36.

\textsuperscript{71} EGFSN (2007).

\textsuperscript{72} Specifically, the report proposed that, by 2020, 48 percent of the labour force should have qualifications at NFQ Levels 6 to 10, 45 percent should have qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5, and the remaining 7 percent will have qualifications at NFQ levels 1 to 3.
Level 3 as the highest level of education attained, which at 15.4 percent was still nearly double the 2020 target of 7 percent. *The National Skills Strategy 2025* set specific goals to increase these percentages by 2025.\(^73\)

Equity of access to higher education is a fundamental principle of Irish education policy that has been endorsed by successive governments in policy statements and commitments over the past 30 years and reflects a strong commitment to investing in Ireland’s human capital. Since the early 1980s, a range of state-funded targeted initiatives\(^74\) have been put in place. For several decades, the student grant system of the Department of Education and Skills, which now covers around 80,000 students, has been the main way in which the state supports students in financial need and is a mechanism for increasing equity of access. More recently, *a National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* contained targets for specific categories of students who are under-represented, including students from lower socioeconomic groups, people with special educational needs, mature students, and members of the Traveling community.\(^75\) A 2018 review of progress made towards the goals of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education noted that enrolment rates had increased among a number of target groups, particularly students with disabilities and students from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.\(^76\) However, key challenges remain, including difficulties in meeting the targets set for mature students and Travelers. A 2020 Higher Education Authority study demonstrated that further progress had been made towards meeting those targets. In terms of ratios, there are 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas enrolled in educational institutions to every 10 students from affluent areas, but this varies across institutions.\(^77\)

The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) Scheme helps students who have a socioeconomic disadvantage to enter higher education. The latest data show that, among about 4,000 eligible HEAR applicants in 2019, only just over 2,500 were accepted. The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a tertiary-level alternative admissions scheme for school leavers whose disabilities have had a negative impact.

\(^{73}\) Department of Education and Skills (2016a).

\(^{74}\) These include the Millennium Partnership Fund (2000) and the Strategic Innovation Fund (2007).

\(^{75}\) Government of Ireland (2015).

\(^{76}\) Government of Ireland (2018).

on their secondary education. The latest data show that of about 4,000 eligible DARE applicants in 2019, only just over 2,600 were accepted. Reasons for the lower uptake are complex, but data from 2017 indicates that almost one third of those who received a DARE or HEAR offer qualified for a college place without needing to take up that offer and a quarter went on to accept an offer in a higher education institute which does not participate in the HEAR scheme.\(^\text{78}\)

Springboard+, an initiative which began in 2011, initially targeted recently unemployed people with a previous history of employment. Since 2017, an expansion of eligibility means that those in employment and returners to the labor market can also participate in the program. Springboard+ provides higher education upskilling and reskilling opportunities in subjects for which a market need has been identified, either for free or covering 90 percent of the costs. Uptake of the places has been strong and, by 2020, over 12,000 people had been registered and accepted for courses under the initiative. All courses lead to qualifications at Level 6 (Certificate) to Level 9 (Masters) on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in skills needed by enterprise sectors that are growing and looking for skilled personnel. These include cross-enterprise skills such as innovation, enterprise/entrepreneurship, digital marketing, and project management.

Broadening the pool of available skilled workers is an essential element of Irish economic and social policy. Policy coherence across government departments is crucial. For example, while policies in relation to entitlement to welfare benefits for the unemployed can reasonably expect the recipient to be available and actively seeking employment, they must also facilitate participation in education, which will make it more likely that a recipient will find work. In Ireland, the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) enables people who are eligible for certain social welfare payments to continue to receive state benefits while participating in approved full-time courses in further and higher education. People taking part in the BTEA scheme are paid a weekly allowance equivalent to the social welfare payment that they were getting before starting their course. As of the end of April 2019, there were approximately 8,630 students receiving the BTEA.\(^\text{79}\)


Enrollment in tertiary education has steadily risen. In marked contrast to the situation in 1960, when only 5 percent of students went on to higher education, by 2019, 63 percent of 25 to 34-year-olds in Ireland had a tertiary education, placing Ireland first, ahead of the other OECD countries, which is a significant achievement.

Ireland’s success in its policy efforts to provide educational opportunities for all is evident in its early achievement of the EU’s ET2020 goals. These include: (i) achieving the highest participation rates in early childhood education and care in the EU; (ii) reducing the number of early school leavers to half of the ET2020 target; (iii) raising the rate of tertiary educational attainment beyond the ET2020 target of 40 percent; and (iv) making considerable progress in increasing adult participation in non-formal education and learning.

Figure 9: Share of 25 to 34-year-olds with a Tertiary Education by Level, 2019

Source: OECD (2020a).

ET2020 is the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. It provides opportunities for member states to exchange best practices in education policy to support the advancement of policy reforms at national level. See European policy cooperation (ET 2020 framework) | Education and Training (europa.eu).

Building Partnership Agreements and Shared Ambitions

Social partnership agreements were a distinctive feature of the Irish socioeconomic landscape from the 1980s through to the first decade of this century. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) was established in 1973 to advise the government on economic and social policy. It undertook a wide range of studies examining policy challenges in agriculture, housing, transport, and rural development as well as in welfare, education, health, and the labor market. The deep economic crisis of the 1980s re-shaped its role so that it contributed to the development of a coalition between employers, trade unions, farmers, and the government to address the severe difficulties facing the country. The NESC formulated a strategy that formed the basis upon which the government and its social partners negotiated the Program for National Recovery 1987 to 1990. This was the first of seven social partnership programs that ran from 1987 to 2008. The common interest of all the parties to social partnership agreements was in the economic and social prosperity of the country. They focused on designing purposive and efficient government interventions to increase the employability of the population and to create an environment in which jobs would be created. The publication of a series of strategy papers by the NESC, which reflected on the experience of the preceding program and set the agenda for the next, provided a measure of accountability and cemented the original consensus.

The shift from centralized, top-down governance to a more inclusive and participative system worked well for the country. In little more than a decade of negotiated economic and social management, Ireland enjoyed a period of significant economic growth. Stability in industrial relations and certainty in relation to employment costs created an environment that encouraged investment and employment growth. As Ireland became more comfortable with the social partnership model, the membership of the NESC was gradually widened to include representatives of voluntary and community organizations. By the mid-1990s, reflecting concerns about social exclusion, membership was broadened to include, among others, the unemployed, the disadvantaged, and women’s groups.

By reconciling the competing demands and needs of economic and social actors in a series of inter-connected policies, the Irish social partnership fostered a shared national understanding of the key opportunities and constraints shaping the country’s prosperity. Discussions within each of the partnership agreement negotiations extended beyond centralized wage bargaining to cover a wide range of economic and social policies, including education policies designed to boost Ireland’s human capital.

As the Irish Minister for Education, Deputy Niamh Bhreathnach said in February 1994 in the Senate Debate on the launch of the Report of the National Education Convention:

“Any society which [that] hopes to develop and improve the quality of life of its citizens needs to plan for their future education in a sophisticated and sustained way.”

The latter years of the 20th century heralded a period of partnership in educational policy development. In 1984, the Curriculum and Examinations Board was established to bring education partners together as members. This supported the development of curriculum informed not just by the government’s policy priorities but the experience and expertise of the education partners more widely. Today, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises the Minister for Education on curricula and assessments for early childhood education and primary and post-primary schools. The NCCA reflects the value placed on broad societal engagement, both in its composition and in the practice of curriculum development. Teachers representing the teachers’ unions, academics, and school inspectors as well as the professional staff of the NCCA are involved in developing syllabuses, and these are then made available for public consultation before they are finalized.

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86 Granville (2011).
88 The NCCA is a representative structure. The membership is determined by the Minister for Education and Skills. The 25-member council comprises nominees of partners in education, industry and trade union interests, parents’ organisations, and one nominee each of the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

The social partnership era provided a framework through which public policy could be developed. Building agreement on a shared ambition for the future of the country and on the contribution made by education has been instrumental in the transformation of the Irish economy. Today, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (DFHERIS) work closely with their education partners as new policy is developed and programs are implemented. Both departments contribute to the achievement of development priorities across a range of government policies. Ensuring the provision of high-quality education as a foundation for economic development is their primary objective. There are proven positive returns to the state, to enterprise, and to individuals from investing in education and training. Table 5 below illustrates the whole-of-government approach to developing Ireland’s human capital and provides some examples of the actions to which the DES and DFHERIS are committed in support of broader government policy.

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89 Coolahan (2017).
90 Social partnership ended in 2009 when talks between the government, employers, and public service unions broke down, and the government implemented pay cuts for public sector workers.
## Table 5: Exemplars of Education Actions in Support of Wider Government Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Originating Government Department and Policy</th>
<th>Examples of DES and DFHERIS actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media** | • Implementation of the Gaeltacht Education Policy  
• Differentiated supports for specific needs of island schools.  
• New curriculum specifications for primary and junior cycle Irish  
• Professional development support for teachers of Irish |
| 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 | |
| **Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth** | • Investment in high-quality early years care and education  
• Training and up-skilling of professionals to identify potential child welfare and mental health issues  
• Creation of mechanisms to provide children and young people with the opportunity to be heard through Student Councils or other age-appropriate mechanisms.  
Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill, 2019  
• Development of quality standards and training for all professionals working directly with children  
• Strengthening of transitions through the educational system |
| **Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment** | • Professional development for teachers  
• Ensuring the supply of Irish curriculum-related digital teaching and learning material  
• Introducing short courses in the junior cycle on Coding and Digital Media Literacy and Computer Science for the Leaving Certificate  
• Implementation of a Digital Strategy for Schools |
| National Digital Strategy | |
| **Department of Social Protection** | • Increasing the work experience/employment content of FET programs  
• Public consultations on an Apprenticeship Action Plan  
• Identifying the skills needs of employers to inform the development and delivery of programs to up-skill and re-skill unemployed people to meet the requirements of the enterprise sector  
• Strengthening the mechanisms and metrics for delivering the skills identified at the sectoral and occupational levels and the establishment of a task force to implement the 2020 findings of a DES commissioned review of guidance provision |
| Pathways to Work 2016-2020 | |
| **Department of Health** | • Increasing the work experience/employment content of FET programs  
• Public consultations on an Apprenticeship Action Plan  
• Identifying the skills needs of employers to inform the development and delivery of programs to up-skill and re-skill unemployed people to meet the requirements of the enterprise sector |
| Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery | |
Focus on Skills and Competencies

A DES publication in 2019 stated that:

“Our aim is to provide an education and training system that equips learners with the knowledge and skills that they need to achieve their potential and to participate fully in society and the economy through the delivery of high-quality education and training experiences.”

Research demonstrates that the quality of education provision is significantly correlated with positive outcomes for individuals in terms of income and for societies in terms of economic growth. The quality of the outcomes achieved is a function of what people learn (not how much) and how they learn. In essence, curricula and pedagogy matter. Since the 1960s, Ireland’s economic policy has been to increase the employability of its people through sustained investment in their skills and competences. This has also involved ensuring that employers and employees engage in ongoing up-skilling that takes into account the emerging and future skills needs of the labor market. This engagement reflects new and developing areas of economic growth and employment needs that affect education and training.

Since the 1960s, curriculum reform has been based on the principle that, for continued economic success, education must provide students with learning opportunities that achieve a balance between learning subject knowledge and developing a wide range of skills and thinking abilities. In terms of subject knowledge, the emphasis has been on ensuring that learners are exposed to subject disciplines that will both enrich their lives and serve the needs of the economy. Policy statements emphasized the role of education in providing students with the technical and practical skills needed to meet the economic needs of the country.

The free post-primary education scheme introduced in the late 1960s was intended to be largely vocational and that all schools would offer a broad, more comprehensive curriculum to meet the needs of the diverse and increasing student population.

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91 Coolahan (2017).
92 Hanushek and Wößmann (2007).
with a wide variety of talents, ability levels, and educational expectations. There was a renewed interest in vocational education. Curriculum reform at this time introduced the subject of Metalwork in the junior cycle and Engineering Workshop, Building Construction, Business Organization, Accounting, and Home Economics in the senior cycle.\textsuperscript{93}

Through the 1990s, in the senior cycle, new pathways to the Leaving Certificate were put in place in addition to the long-established, academically oriented Leaving Certificate. The Leaving Certificate Applied program was introduced in 1996. It is a two-year course designed for those students who do not want to proceed directly to tertiary education and is characterized by active, practical learning experiences. The Leaving Certificate Applied is structured around three main elements that are interrelated and interdependent: (i) Vocational Preparation; (ii) Vocational Education; and (iii) General Education. Another senior cycle program, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Program (LCVP), was introduced in 1994. Like each of the other two Leaving Certificate courses, it is a two-year program. It combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work, and the community. Students taking this program select subjects from the traditional senior cycle curriculum as well as two additional Link Modules in the areas of Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education. LCVP students must also study a modern foreign language.

\textbf{Table 6: Participation in Different Leaving Certificate Programs, 2015-2019}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of students taking the Leaving Certificate established program</td>
<td>66.9%</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students taking the Leaving Certificate Vocational program</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied Program</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students taking Transition Year program as % of previous 3rd year</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Source: Adapted from Department of Education and Skills (2020a).}

\textsuperscript{93} Commerce and Domestic Science were available as senior cycle subjects up to 1970.
In the 1970s, a Transition Year between the junior and senior cycles began to be offered on a pilot basis in a very small number of schools. This was later extended to all schools. The Transition Year is an optional sixth year in post-primary education between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. It emphasizes self-directed and experiential learning and provides a bridge to enable students to make the transition from the more dependent type of learning associated with the junior cycle to the more independent learning environment associated with the senior cycle. It encourages the development of a wide range of transferable critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills.

The Transition Year has three overall aims: (i) personal development, including social awareness and increased social competence; (ii) promotion of general, technical, and academic skills with an emphasis on interdisciplinary and self-directed learning; and (iii) experience of adult and working life, giving students the opportunity to have their skills assessed by an employer.\textsuperscript{94} The specific content of the program is selected by each school. While the content of the program will differ from school to school as a consequence, reviews of the program have noted that its outcomes have included improved social and emotional skills and a growth in social awareness.\textsuperscript{95} This may be due to the inclusion in the Transition Year content in most schools of a range of modules in areas such as community projects, cultural activities (both in Ireland and abroad), and modules that directly stimulate personal development.

Students are enabled to develop self-confidence, better social skills and a strong sense of citizenship and responsibility by participating in volunteer work with charities, local organizations, and community groups, as well as trips to local, national, and international cultural sites. Their engagement in national award schemes such as the Young Social Innovators,\textsuperscript{96} the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition,\textsuperscript{97} the Student Enterprise Program,\textsuperscript{98} and the Gaisce – President’s Award scheme\textsuperscript{99} provides opportunities for individual and/or team-based action projects on issues that interest the students. While there is no formal national assessment of students.

\textsuperscript{94} See NCCA Curriculum Online Transition Year for further information on this program.
\textsuperscript{95} Clerkin (2018).
\textsuperscript{96} Young Social Innovators (YSI) – Young Social Innovators Changing the World for Good
\textsuperscript{97} BT Young Scientist & Technology Exhibition
\textsuperscript{98} Student Enterprise Programme - Ireland's Largest & Most Successful Student Enterprise Programme
\textsuperscript{99} Home - Gaisce
through this course, students report that their aspirations become more focused, their relationships with peers and with school staff are enriched, and their ability to work both independently and collaboratively is improved as a consequence of completing the program.\footnote{Clerkin (2019).}

The Transition Year program gives students opportunities to engage with the world of work through actual work experience and enhanced careers education. Typically, students arrange their own work placements, and their experiences are monitored by the school through both student self-reporting and feedback from their employers. The benefits for students include a better developed awareness of work-related issues such as safety, the impact of technology, the importance of customer service and delivery, and personal responsibility and an appropriate work attitude. Students find that insights gained from work experience enable them to make better informed choices for subjects to study in the senior cycle and, in general, that they are more confident in their career direction.\footnote{Clerkin (2019).} Facilitating work experience has benefits for employers also. A key benefit is the development of positive relations with the community in which the business operates and providing an opportunity to evaluate practices related to the induction and support of new employees.\footnote{Business in the Community Ireland (2017) \textit{Lift Off - A Work Experience Guide for Schools and Businesses} Available at: \url{Treorachado-Thetaithi-Oibre.pdf(gcpl.ie)} Forging explicit links between school programs and the world of work is strategically important for the goal of ensuring a good fit between the education being offered and the needs of the economy.

As a result, the Transition Year program has been a successful innovation in Irish post-primary education. It promotes positive personal and social development among adolescents within the school setting and prepares them for the world beyond full-time education. In 2019, 74 percent of senior cycle students opted into this program.\footnote{Department of Education and Skills (2020a).}

Over the last 20 years, growing concerns that Ireland might lose economic competitiveness unless it produces a sufficient and sustained supply of high-quality scientists, engineers, technology experts, and mathematicians led to the development

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\footnote{100}]{Clerkin (2019).}
\item[\footnote{101}]{Clerkin (2019).}
\item[\footnote{102}]{Business in the Community Ireland (2017) \textit{Lift Off - A Work Experience Guide for Schools and Businesses} Available at: \url{Treorachado-Thetaithi-Oibre.pdf(gcpl.ie)} Forging explicit links between school programs and the world of work is strategically important for the goal of ensuring a good fit between the education being offered and the needs of the economy.
\item[\footnote{103}]{Department of Education and Skills (2020a).}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Building Human Capital

in 2016 of a national policy on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education. The STEM Policy sets out actions across four pillars to be achieved by 2025: (i) nurturing learner engagement and participation in the STEM disciplines; (ii) enhancing the capacity of teachers and early years practitioners; (iii) supporting STEM education practice; and (iv) using evidence to support STEM education. A 2020 review of progress towards achieving the goals set out in the STEM Policy in formal schooling indicated that there was a moderate increase of 5 percent in student uptake of the four STEM subjects in 2019 compared with 2016. However, this increase is less than that required to reach the goal of a 20 percent increase by 2026. More positively, significant growth has been achieved in Technology with a 32 percent increase in uptake, with 456 more students taking Leaving Certificate Technology in 2019 compared with 2016.

Table 7: Uptake of the Leaving Certificate in Physics, Chemistry, Technology, and Engineering, 2016 and 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>Real Increase</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>7,753</td>
<td>7,942</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>9,089</td>
<td>9,506</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>5,379</td>
<td>5,415</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1,415</td>
<td>1,871</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23,636</td>
<td>24,734</td>
<td>1098</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Education and Skills (2019b).

The syllabuses in Chemistry and Physics have recently been revised in the junior and senior cycles with a greatly increased emphasis on hands-on student imaginative work and on the application of science process skills. A particularly impressive aspect of STEM education in Ireland is the highly active informal STEM education sector. This sector, which operates outside the formal curricular teaching in schools, includes initiatives such as the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition.

104 Department of Education and Skills (2016b).
105 Department of Education and Skills (2020) Cumasú – End of Year Review Available at 79484_c6b83701-ffbb-4e9c-99ee-ec0f3a9c7a48.pdf
(BTYSTE), SciFest, CoderDojo, Coolest Projects, RDS STEM Learning, LearnStorm, and Smart Futures.\textsuperscript{106} The \textit{STEM Education Policy} seeks to ensure that the benefits of these initiatives, and the potential for much greater engagement with STEM activities, are fully realized, by integrating them into the curriculum.

Competency levels in foreign languages remain low even though Ireland is a small, open, economy that is substantially dependent on international trade and is now home to immigrants from almost 200 countries who, for the most part, have migrated here since 2000. In part, this relates to the dominance of English in the economic sectors in which Ireland is a major player, namely financial services, pharma, information technology, and medtronics. However, foreign language proficiency and cultural awareness are essential for enterprises to compete in the global marketplace. Given Ireland’s substantial export trade, curriculum reforms have reflected the fact that language skills confer a definite business advantage. Enterprise Ireland has identified eight languages as important for Ireland’s future skills needs: German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Arabic, and Japanese. A workforce equipped with significant foreign language capabilities can make Ireland an even more attractive destination for investment and provide the skills required by domestic companies to enable them to expand into overseas markets.

\textit{Languages Connect - Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026}\textsuperscript{107} was launched in 2017. It recognized that the range of languages offered to students by schools in Ireland was not sufficiently diverse, partly because of the global dominance of English, one of Ireland’s official languages. In setting ambitious goals to increase foreign language proficiency, the Strategy acknowledged that Ireland has a number of advantages: (i) children are exposed to bilingualism from an early age through teaching and learning in Irish and English; (ii) the immigrant population in Ireland provides a rich and diverse source of new languages; and (iii) there is a strong tradition of language learning in the curriculum, with almost 90 percent of students in the junior cycle and almost 70 percent in the senior cycle having studied a foreign language in 2017.


\textsuperscript{107} Department of Education and Skills (2017a).
Building Human Capital

The Strategy set out a number of measures targeted at increasing proficiency, diversity, and immersion. These include: (i) increasing the number of post-primary schools offering two or more foreign languages by 25 percent; (ii) increasing the number of students sitting two languages at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate by a similar amount; and (iii) achieving an increase of 20 percent in the number of students in higher education studying a foreign language, in any capacity, as part of their course.

A key aim in encouraging and supporting a multi-lingual population is the enhancement of appreciation of cultural diversity. The government appreciates the contribution that language learning can make to the development of positive attitudes towards other cultures and to improving relationships in a global society. Languages support social cohesion. It can also enhance the country’s capacity to trade in global markets as having a workforce with foreign language expertise is an advantage when entering new markets.

There is still some way to go before the vision set out in Languages Connect is realized. The many actions that it contains are intended to actively encourage and support citizens in learning to communicate in multiple languages and to appreciate other cultures, enabling them to become global citizens. A Foreign Language Advisory Group of key stakeholders has been put in place to monitor and report on the implementation of the strategy.

Ensuring that its citizens master the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy remains a central element of Ireland’s education policy. The country’s poor outcomes in PISA 2009 led to the development of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy - Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020. This strategy described targets to be achieved in six key areas, which had an immediate impact on the curriculum in schools and other centers for learning. For example, schools at the primary level were required to increase the time available for literacy to 90 minutes per day and to increase the time available for mathematics to 50 minutes per day (up from 36 minutes per day). While this had a consequent impact on the time available for other curriculum areas, the strategy was successful. An interim review in 2017 found that many of the targets set in 2011 had been reached and that standards in literacy and

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The review set new targets in four areas: (i) improving numeracy outcomes; (ii) tackling disadvantage; (iii) enabling higher-achieving students to reach their full potential; and (iv) sustaining these achievements gained in literacy, with a particular focus on literacy in the Irish language and digital literacy.

Support for increased literacy and numeracy is a key component of the new National Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024’s strategic priority of fostering Inclusion. Under this Strategy, a new ten-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills is under development. The strategy will take a whole-of-government approach and provide a framework to support individuals to improve their literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy. The aim of this new strategy will be to ensure that everyone has the literacy, numeracy, and digital skills to meet their needs and to participate fully in society. Adult literacy programs are provided for people who want to improve their communication skills in the areas of reading, writing, numeracy, and information technology with the aim of enhancing their participation in social and economic life. The target cohort are adults with a primary education or less and whose literacy and numeracy skills are not at NFQ Level 3/EFQ Level 2. A range of programs is also provided for adults who wish to develop their digital literacy. Basic ICT tuition is integrated within adult literacy and numeracy programs, which are designed to meet the needs of participants' personal and career goals and are offered on both a full-time and part-time basis. Some of these programs combine transversal skills such as literacy, numeracy, digital skills, communications, and team-working with specific occupational skills.

Since 1997, an Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) has advised the government on the current and future skills needs of the economy and on other labor market issues that impact Ireland’s enterprise and employment growth. Its membership consists of representatives of the business community, education and training providers, learner-support groups, trade unions, and several government departments and agencies. Research undertaken by the EGFSN identified trends in international labour market demand and found a diminishing demand for low-level skills and an increasing demand for skills in value-added enterprise. The study’s

110 Government of Ireland (2020).
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recommendations focused strongly on raising educational attainment levels across the entire Irish population. The alignment of education and training provision with the priorities set out in government programs made it easier to allocate resources more deliberately and productively to enable students to improve their achievements and reach their goals.

A key recommendation of the National Skills Strategy 2025 was the creation of a new national skills architecture that brings together various stakeholders to identify skills needs while at the same time enhancing the capacity of education providers to deliver courses in the identified skills areas. This led to the establishment of the National Skills Council, as well as the Regional Skills Fora and the Skills Planning and Enterprise Engagement Unit within the Department of Education and Skills. This new unit, which provides support to the National Skills Council and the Regional Skills Fora, is also focused on enterprise engagement and coordinates the responses of the different sectors of education and training to the skills needs identified by the National Skills Council. The new bodies are strategically important for Ireland’s human capital as they strengthen the link between industry and further and higher education, and their work will inform policy decisions on and funding for those sectors.

As Ireland moved out of the severe economic difficulties that it experienced in 2008-2013 resulting from the international financial crisis, employment levels substantially increased as progress was quickly made towards full employment. However, it became evident that there were skills shortages in areas such as information and communications technology, manufacturing, international financial services, and key skills that enterprises needed to trade internationally.\textsuperscript{112} The Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeships and Traineeships in Ireland 2016-2020 set out a series of detailed actions and annual targets with the aim of enrolling 31,000 people in apprenticeships by 2020.\textsuperscript{113} Thirty-four new apprenticeship programs have been delivered in areas as diverse as ICT, financial services, geo-drilling, and biopharma. These programs range in duration from two to four years and lead to qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 to 10. A successor to the current Action Plan that covers the period from 2021-2025 has recently been published.\textsuperscript{114} The government has set a target of 10,000 new apprentice registrations per annum by 2025.

\textsuperscript{112} Department of Education and Skills (2013).
\textsuperscript{113} Department of Education and Skills (2017d).
\textsuperscript{114} Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation, and Science (2021).
The identification, development, and implementation of apprenticeship schemes has been done by employers working closely with the government and providers of education, training, and development programs. Examples include schemes in financial services where leading global financial institutions in banking, funds management, and insurance have worked with the Department of Finance in designing and delivering apprenticeships. These schemes are in alignment with the government’s strategies (IFS2020 for the 2015-20 period and Ireland for Finance for 2020-25) to drive the continued development and growth of Ireland’s international financial services sector.

An employee development policy framework, *Skills to Advance*, was launched 2018. This initiative targets support to vulnerable groups in the Irish workforce, with a particular focus on employees with low skills levels who need more opportunities to advance in their working lives and careers, to sustain their employment and to avoid displacement, or to avail themselves of emerging job opportunities. The policy framework provides up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities for employees up to NFQ Levels 5 and 6. The initiative also supports small and medium-sized enterprises that need some assistance to develop their workforce.

The *Human Capital Initiative (HCI)* was created in 2019. It provides additional capacity across the higher education sector to meet priority skills needs for enterprises to the tune of €300 million (€60 million per annum from 2020 to 2024). The HCI forms a key part of the government’s strategic response to a changing world of work and to the challenges that the economy will face in the near future. With a strong focus on innovation and agility, the programs being supported will ensure that graduates and the education system as a whole are in a strong position to respond positively to the challenges and opportunities ahead.

As the curriculum in Irish schools has evolved, learning competences such as problem-solving, design and making and critical thinking have increasingly been integrated, as well as the kinds of learning behavior that are most likely to facilitate success, such as collaborative team-working, self-organization, and resilience. The 1971 primary curriculum reflected Piagetian principles, valuing childhood as a distinct experience to be enriched not only as a period of preparation for adulthood. This approach

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115 EFQ levels 4 & 5
emphasized the active participation of the child and on discovery learning. In 1984, the newly formed Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) articulated a set of aims for education that reflected the significant feedback received following the publication of an earlier framework for the early years of post-primary education.\footnote{CEB (1984) identified the need for "a broader and more balanced core curriculum, with an increased emphasis on skills and processes; a curricular structure that is sufficiently flexible to recognize and accommodate curriculum initiatives at [the] school and regional level; and assessment procedures that are determined by the aims and objectives of the curriculum" p.16.} This was the first systematic articulation of the purpose of education, and it viewed education as contributing to the holistic development of the person and, through him or her, of society in general.\footnote{"The general aim of education is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual including aesthetic, creative, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, social, and spiritual development for personal and family life, and for working life, for living in the community and for leisure" (CEB, 1984, p.14).} A new primary curriculum was introduced in 1999 in response to “a combination of educational, economic, social, and cultural developments in Irish society.”\footnote{NCCA (1999), p.2} It sought to take account of the changing nature of learning by providing a flexible framework within which to develop each child’s potential to the fullest and to help children to develop the skills that they will use all their lives.

Since 1999, significant changes have occurred in the education landscape in Ireland, including the provision of two years of universal pre-school education, significant curriculum changes in the junior cycle, and a more diverse pupil population. These developments have all led to changes in what children experience in school. A further series of curriculum reforms is currently underway on a phased basis, with the first element having been introduced in September 2016.

The Primary Languages Curriculum specifies clear learning outcomes to be achieved at each stage of a child’s language learning but is flexible enough to accommodate the needs of each individual child. This signals the approach that will be taken to the revisions of other curriculum areas, including providing playful and engaging experiences for younger children and encouraging children to talk and respond with their opinions, thoughts, and ideas.

A similar approach to curriculum reform is evident in the \textit{Junior Cycle Framework} published in 2015.\footnote{Department of Education and Skills (2015).} The emphasis in curriculum documents has moved away from specifying a body of content to be taught and towards identifying a set of learning outcomes to be achieved. The learning at the core of the junior cycle is described in
24 statements of learning. Schools must design a junior cycle program that will help students to acquire eight key skills. A set of principles is outlined in the Framework document to guide their planning.121

Figure 10: NCCA Framework for Key Skills in the Junior Cycle


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The junior cycle curriculum reforms are intended to provide students with opportunities to use and analyze information in new and creative ways, specifically to investigate issues, to explore, to think for themselves, to be creative in solving problems, and to apply their learning to new challenges and situations. Given the changing nature of knowledge, the ease with which students have access to information, and the pace of change in the workplace and the world generally, these competencies and skills are critical to the preparation of young people for learning and living.

Using High-quality Data to Support Policy Development

The quality of the education provided in Irish schools is ensured through the regular monitoring of learner outcomes and through the professional preparation and development of teachers. Since 2007, all children at the primary level take standardized tests in English reading and Mathematics at the end of first class or the beginning of second class and at the end of fourth class or the beginning of fifth class. While the main function of these tests is to inform schools in their decision-making related to teaching and learning, schools are also required to return aggregated data to the Department of Education annually. These data are a key source of information about the progress of learners in primary schools.

At the post-primary level, student performance in the junior cycle and in the Leaving Certificate examinations provide similar data. The Department of Education’s Inspectorate also gathers information on school quality. In the period between 2013 and June 2016, more than 4,000 school inspections were conducted, and reports were produced in most cases. In 2012, school self-evaluation (SSE) was introduced as a way for schools to keep their work and standards under review and to make specific improvements in any areas that they identify as lacking. A comprehensive set of standards for Irish schools was published in 2016 that guides both SSE and external school inspections.

122 These reports are published on the Department of Education website. Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Whole-School-Evaluation-Reports-List/
123 Resources to support SSE are available on the School Self-Evaluation website hosted by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education. Available at: http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/.
124 Department of Education and Skills (2016c).
Ireland actively participates in international assessments such as the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). These assessments yield valuable information on student outcomes by country. In PISA 2018, students in Ireland scored significantly above the OECD average in Science, Mathematics, and Reading, with their performance in reading literacy being among the highest in all OECD and EU countries.\textsuperscript{125}

The TIMSS assesses the mathematics and science skills of students in the fourth class in primary school and in the second year of post-primary education. Fourth class pupils in Ireland performed very well in mathematics in TIMSS 2018 with a mean score of 548, which placed Ireland in the top three performing EU countries in Mathematics at this level.

The skills agenda for the country, economy, and society is guided by the \textit{National Skills Strategy 2016-2025}. Underpinning the agenda are the Skills and Labor Market Research Unit (SLMRU), the Regional Skills Fora, the National Training Fund Advisory Group, and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), as well as employers. The research and analyses of these organizations helps the National Skills Council to define priorities and deliver responses in the area of skills needs.

\textbf{Figure 11: Performance of Irish Fourth-class Pupils in Math and Science on TIMSS 1995-2018}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure11}
\caption{Performance of Irish Fourth-class Pupils in Math and Science on TIMSS 1995-2018}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source:} Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (2019)

\textsuperscript{125} McKeown et al (2019).
Building Human Capital

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) has the statutory responsibility for ensuring quality in higher education. Its system performance framework sets out the priorities of the government under a number of headings that include economic renewal, social and cultural development and equity, and public sector reform. The first system performance framework covered the period 2014-16, while the second covered the period 2018-2020.126 To date, the HEA has published four reports reviewing the performance and progress of the system for the years 2014-2018.

Building Teacher Capacity

Implementing the curriculum effectively is dependent on having a high-quality teaching force. In Ireland, teaching is a highly regarded profession that benefits from a robust pre-service initial teacher education program. Historically, teacher education developed in tandem with wider education developments. In 1971, approximately 6 percent of the teaching force remained formally untrained because they entered the profession on an on-the-job training basis. Through the 1970s, there were major developments in teacher education, and three-year degree courses were instituted in newly constituted Colleges of Education from 1974. The teaching profession attracted applicants from the top quartile of entrants to tertiary education,127 and within just a short time, the teaching profession was staffed exclusively by graduates. Today, initial teacher education courses last for four years and result in a Professional Masters in Education qualification. For the majority of teachers at the post-primary level, this translates into five years of studies encompassing a three-year undergraduate program followed by two years of study for the Masters in Education qualification needed for registration.

A national network of locally based Teachers’ Centers was established in the 1970s (now referred to as Education Centers) to act as focal points for teachers to meet, to provide lectures and seminars, to deliver in-service courses and induction programs, and to provide and display resources and materials. While they began as informal study groups, Education Centers are now statutory bodies under the Education Act 1998, and there are 21 full-time and nine part-time centers in six regions.

126 HEA (2018).
However, there was no systematic provision for in-service education prior to 2000, and this had a negative impact on the ability of teachers to develop professionally or to respond to evolving priorities and practices within the system. This was evident, for example, in the failure of schools to fully realize the child-centered ambitions of the 1971 primary curriculum. The primary teacher’s role had to evolve from simply imparting information to being the architect of a learning environment in which the child was actively participating. The teacher had to become “one who provides suitable learning situations and who guides and stimulates the child in his pursuit of knowledge.” One of the biggest changes was the degree of autonomy given to schools to select content and methodologies, taking into account the school environment, facilities, and the interests and stage of development of their pupils.

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, many of the provisions in the new child-centered primary curriculum were not implemented as intended in schools. Pupils continued to be taught formally, much as they had been previously, and the new pedagogical vision of children learning through personal experience and discovery was not fully realized. Commentators have suggested a number of reasons for this outcome including: (i) limited teacher competence and confidence in the new subjects; (ii) a lack of resources; (iii) the prevalence of large class sizes; and (iv) the time pressure involved in trying to incorporate the wider curriculum while still covering ongoing work. A lack of real consultation and engagement with teachers by policymakers meant that “teacher conservatism and reluctance to change engrained and encultured practices also impacted negatively on enacting the curriculum in practice.”

In 1992, the In-career Development Unit (ICDU), later the Teacher Education Section, was established in the then named Department of Education and Science. Significant expansion of in-service teacher education (also referred to as continuing professional development) followed. A shift towards considering initial teacher education, induction, and in-service education as a continuum of support for teachers throughout their professional career followed.

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129 Walsh (2016b).
129 Walsh (2016a).
130 Walsh (2012).
131 Walsh (2016a).
132 Walsh (2016a).
Building Human Capital

careers is evident in the *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education* published by
the Teaching Council in 2011.\textsuperscript{133} This policy identified innovation, integration, and
improvement as important principles for teacher education.

In 2017, a system-wide teacher induction system, *Droichead*, was introduced.\textsuperscript{134} This
integrated framework for newly qualified teachers was designed by policymakers
in collaboration with the profession to reflect the importance of induction for new
teachers. The Teaching Council is developing its continuing professional development
policy entitled *Cosán*, with teachers and schools currently piloting the new national
framework in a practical setting.\textsuperscript{135}

Government policy on continuing professional development has been the subject
of some criticism in the past, with an OECD report in 2005 noting that “although
professional development is now receiving more policy attention, it often seems
to be fragmented and limited in scope.”\textsuperscript{136} However, the government has recently
strengthened coordination in the sector and ensured that far more teachers are
participating in continuing professional development. In 2010, a number of
standalone services that each focused on specific specialties were amalgamated to
form the Profession Development Service for Teachers, which provides a general,
integrated, and cross-sectoral support service for schools. In 2015, to support the
introduction of the new Framework for Junior Cycle, the Junior Cycle for Teachers
service was established. Both services use practicing teachers who are seconded from
their schools to support the continuing professional development program, bringing
with them practical experience of the on-the-ground challenges faced by their peers.
There is a very robust take-up of continuing professional development among
teachers. The OECD’s *Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS) in 2009
found that 86 percent of Irish teachers surveyed had attended continuing professional
development courses and workshops during the 18 months prior to the survey. This
was in contrast with the five years prior to the TALIS survey when only 51 percent
of Irish teachers surveyed had participated in professional development networks,
42 percent had attended education conferences and seminars, and 26 percent had

\textsuperscript{133} Teaching Council (2011).
\textsuperscript{134} Teaching Council (2017).
\textsuperscript{135} Teaching Council (2016).
\textsuperscript{136} OECD (2005).
participated in individual and collaborative research. Today, these figures are significantly higher because teachers are required to attend the comprehensive continuing professional development programs that have accompanied curriculum reform at the primary and post-primary levels.

In general, there is much to be positive about in terms of the teaching force in Ireland. Measures of students’ outcomes and Inspectorate reports indicate that teachers have the professional capacity to implement the new approach to teaching and the curriculum. The teaching profession has, by and large, risen to the challenges inherent in the shift away from a strong tradition of individualism in teaching style and towards collaborative teamwork within a whole-school self-evaluation environment. However, there is no room for complacency. Curriculum changes that require a skills-based approach to teaching and learning also require a different approach to initial teacher education and to continuing teacher education programs so that teachers are prepared and able to identify their students’ learning needs, to implement a variety of appropriate teaching strategies, to assess how much their students are learning, and provide feedback focused on improving learning outcomes.

There is a high level of public interest, trust, and confidence in Ireland’s schools and teachers. This is grounded in the existence of a highly qualified, well-trained, motivated, and caring teaching force. Maintaining the supply of such teachers into the future must be a high priority, and recommendations made in the final report of the Technical Working Group on Teacher Supply are intended to ensure that teaching is an attractive option for the best-qualified graduates.

The 2007 McKinsey report on the world’s best-performing school systems pointed out that, “the quality of an education system can never exceed the quality of its teachers.” In essence, investment in teacher education at each stage of the teacher’s career is essential for ensuring that they can play their part in the implementation of policies, curricula, and education initiatives that help learners to adjust to rapidly changing socioeconomic conditions and become active contributors to the country’s economy.

137 OECD (2009).
III. Lessons from the Irish Experience

National Strategy and Education Policy

One of the key lessons emerging from the Irish education story is the importance of a strategic underpinning to guide policy development. Over the last 60 years, Ireland has experienced profound economic, social, technological, occupational, cultural, and demographic changes. Education policy has been shaped by successive governments’ strategic visions for the nation as a whole, expressed in government program documents and implemented in education through structural, curriculum, and teacher education reforms.

Although Ireland encountered economic difficulties during the latter half of the 1970s until the mid-1980s, investment in education and training was not sacrificed. Therefore, when the economy turned around towards the end of the 1980s, and again since 2013, the education system was able to quickly and decisively support the country’s FDI-focused and export-led industrial policy. Ireland remains committed to its vision of a nation of people armed with the relevant knowledge, entrepreneurial agility, and analytical skills to support economic and social prosperity and to enhance the well-being of the country. As a small, open, economy, the government has recognized that it needs a very well-educated and highly skilled flexible population and workforce to ensure that it remains adaptive in the face of continued international competition for investment and exports. In effect, this was the key to Ireland’s success in tackling its past economic difficulties, and it will also be the key to ensuring that it can avoid similar outcomes in the future.

Consultation and Engagement

The implementation of reforms has been effective in large part because of the government’s engagement with and support from its education partners through processes of consultation and engagement that reflect the broader partnership approach adopted in Ireland since the 1980s. The whole-of-government approach that was set out in partnership agreements is built on a firm belief in the latent value of human capital, particularly in a small island economy.
Tackling Inequality and Social Inclusion as Drivers of Policy

Another lesson is the importance of basing policy on a commitment to tackling inequalities and fostering social inclusion. The *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*\(^\text{140}\) builds on earlier strategy documents by expanding the focus beyond income level to encompass housing, healthcare, childcare, and social integration. It provides a framework on which government departments, including education, can plan their activities and the initiatives within their remits aimed at ensuring that the student body at all levels reflects the full diversity of the population.

High Quality of Learning

Sustaining the high quality of learning and of the outcomes achieved by learners at every level is essential to maintaining Ireland’s competitive advantage. Curriculum development and reform at every level of the system has focused on including more flexible programs of learning, offering outcomes-based curricula, and increasing the focus on skills development and on assessment as an integral feature of teaching and learning.\(^\text{141}\) At the same time, policymakers have attempted to ensure that the quality of teaching has kept pace through measures designed to professionalize the teaching force.

Lifelong Education

In his landmark history of Irish education from 1800 to 2016, Professor John Coolahan characterized the period from 1980 to 2016 as marking “a paradigm shift in policy” as the state gradually moved towards viewing education as a lifelong process.\(^\text{142}\) The government’s interest in lifelong learning is motivated by both social justice concerns and a desire to ensure that citizens are equipped with the competencies and skills needed to participate in a fluid labor market and contribute to the economic security of the country. The concept of education as a lifelong enterprise rests on the proposition that it contributes to human capital development in three ways. The first is by maximizing the benefits that children

\(^{140}\) Government of Ireland (2020a).

\(^{141}\) Walsh (2016b).

\(^{142}\) Coolahan (2017).
gain from their early years and from the formal school system. The second is by ensuring that the focus of further and higher education is firmly on supporting the development of programs to meet the skills needs of the economy. The third is by ensuring that those within the workforce have opportunities to continue to learn. All of this must be supported by regular monitoring and data gathering together with rigorous evaluations of what progress is being made.

Data-Driven Policymaking

The availability of good quality data on the impact of policies on learner outcomes is a necessary input to decision-making. Specifying clear, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-specific goals also facilitates the collection of data to measure their effectiveness and ensures that policymakers remain accountable to society. When initiatives are subject to regular impact evaluations, the results can be used to inform the ongoing development of curricula, policies, and teacher education. These evaluations are complemented by the tracking of key national and international skills indicators. This is how Ireland maintains the quality and relevance of its education and training base, which is responsive to the changing and diverse needs of its people, society, and the economy.
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