



**Education
and skills
report**



Education Minister Norma Foley TD: 'Education is the great leveller'

While she follows in a long line of Fianna Fáil education ministers, Minister for Education Norma Foley TD became the first Kerry woman to sit at Cabinet when she was appointed in June 2020. The Minister sits down with Ciarán Galway to talk equality of opportunity, access, teacher recruitment, reform, and her vision for education in Ireland.

Sitting at a large conference table at the centre of her office off the ministerial corridor in Leinster House, the Education Minister is overlooked by select scattering of children's artwork exhibited on the walls, not least an homage to the woman herself. Naturally enough, these are complemented by picturesque County Kerry landscapes.

Norma Foley is equipped with over 20 years of teaching experience – first as an Irish and English teacher at St Aloysius in Carrigwohill, County Cork and then at Presentation Secondary School in her hometown of Tralee.

Allied to this is a strong political lineage – her father Denis Foley was twice elected as a Fianna Fáil TD for Kerry

North. Ascension to the education portfolio, therefore, appears to be a perfect marriage of her persona.

Having previously served on Kerry County Council between 2004 and 2019 – including as mayor in 2018/2019 – Foley secured the fifth Dáil seat in the Kerry constituency for Fianna Fáil in February 2020. Embarking on a career break from her teaching post, following government formation she achieved the distinction of becoming the first woman from Kerry to sit at Cabinet when she was appointed Education Minister.

Acknowledging that she has brought “a particular perspective” to the role, the Minister recalls: “I would always say to my own students that my ambition for

them is limitless, there is nothing that they cannot do, and nothing that they should feel that they could not achieve. We need to make sure that they have the support and the opportunity, at all times, to realise whatever their dreams or ambitions might be.”

Priorities

Outlining her strategic priorities as Minister for Education, Foley identifies several key policy themes and associated initiatives, including:

- equality of opportunity;
- access to education; and
- inclusive education.

“Fianna Fáil has always believed that education is the great leveller. I believe that fundamentally myself.”

Minister for Education Norma Foley TD

Free schoolbooks

Foley’s self-stated priority in education is equality of opportunity. Rationalising the introduction of the free schoolbook initiative at primary school level at a cost of €55 million in 2023/2024, she insists: “I do not believe that any child should feel disadvantaged, because they did not have the resources at home to purchase whatever they require for school or for their education.”

However, while Budget 2024 extended the initiative to Junior Cycle students at a cost of €67 million, political opponents criticised this iterative approach, characterising it as a ‘missed opportunity’ to make both primary and secondary school education ‘genuinely free’.

Responding to this, the Minister defends the decision, indicating that there was method behind the initiative’s implementation, including a budgetary consideration, and a determination to ensure its success.

Articulating her department’s logic, she explains: “We are doing it this way because we were very clear that there would be great learning for us out of how it went in primary schools. A review has been done and is ongoing in relation to how that worked, what might we do differently as we move into the post-primary element of it, and we bring that learning into post-primary. Then how it works at Junior Cycle level will inform how we will deliver it at Senior Cycle.”

Special education

Our conversation then pivots to special education. After announcing the establishment of four new special schools for 2024/2025 in Limerick city; Enfield, County Meath; Gower, County Wexford; and in “the south Kildare area”, in addition to seven special schools established in Dublin and Cork in the previous four years, the Minister is evidently buoyed.

However, as government seeks to recruit 744 additional special education teachers into the profession, alongside 1,216 additional special needs assistants (SNAs), ensuring sufficient skills capacity will inevitably be a challenge.

Yet, with over 20,000 SNAs – and a target of 21,000 by the end of 2024 – already among 40,000 professionals dedicated to special education, the Minister insists: “We have not had difficulty around [recruitment of] SNAs, I want to be very clear around that. We have very good uptake and [they are] adding so much and bringing extraordinary giftedness also into the world of special education.”

In terms of special teachers, meanwhile, the Minister emphasises that “we are a country at near full employment” and that this is creating a staffing challenges in education, as well as other sectors.

Staffing initiatives

Outlining the measures introduced by the Government in response to these challenges, she highlights:

- the introduction of a €2,000 bursary for postgraduate teaching students upon completion of their course;
- free of charge upskilling courses for teaching staff to support subject areas which are experiencing particular challenges;
- 1,000 additional posts of responsibility being introduced;
- working with the higher education institutes to release 3,000 student teachers into the system in 2023/2024;
- increasing the number of days being provided by retired teachers into the system;
- exploring shared teacher schemes; and
- introducing a pathway for teachers who qualified outside the State to register complete their Droichead induction in Ireland.

“We are constantly looking at ways and means to ensure that there is a sufficiency,” Foley remarks, qualifying: “But I do not for one minute underestimate the challenge and the difficulty that there can be for principals in particular areas at particular times. So, we are happy to look at any measures going forward as well. We have been proactive in this space and will continue to be proactive in the space.”



Teacher shortage

Regardless, a collaborative recruitment and retention survey published by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), and the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) in November 2023 indicated that there was an "unprecedented level of vacant teaching posts in primary and special schools".

INTO Deputy General Secretary Deirdre O'Connor commented: "This survey indicates that in the schools who responded, there is a current shortfall of 809 teaching posts in the schools surveyed, with another 1,202 expected vacancies in the next three months. In the midst of a staffing crisis in our schools, particularly in our urban areas, all options must actively be explored to ensure that no child is left without a qualified teacher."

Asked about the extent to which the shortage of teachers in primary and secondary schools can be characterised as a recruitment and retention crisis, the Minister insists that retention is not a challenge.

"Our staff that are in the system are staying in the system by and large," she says: adding: "Even in terms of those who might choose to leave early, it is very, very low if you were to look at it comparatively across other sectors."

On recruitment, Foley responds: "It is important to say that we have never had as many teachers registered with the Teaching Council as we do presently."

While this statement aligns with the fact that the Register of Teachers has expanded each year since 2006, with an annual net growth of 3,600 registrants according to Director of the Teaching Council, Lynn Ramsey, it may suggest that even increased teaching numbers cannot keep pace with rapidly evolving demographic pressures.

CAO applicants

However, as a third-level qualification, teaching, the Minister insists, is still an attractive option for CAO applicants. "Across the CAO, we have seen a 14 per cent increase this year [2023] and that is on top of 9 per cent increase last year [2022]," she highlights.

Not taking account of trends prior to 2022, this is accurate in one sense. CSO figures from July 2023 recorded 2,450 first preference applications for primary teaching and 2,561 first preference applications for post-primary teaching, compared with 2,592 and 2,242 in July 2022 respectively. This represents an annual decrease of 5.5 per cent in primary teaching and an annual increase of 14.2 per cent in post-primary teaching.

Challenges

Acknowledging that there are "difficulties and challenges in some areas" of teacher recruitment, the Minister restates the Government's measures to address these and reiterates: "There will always be challenges, but again, you must remember, there is a backdrop of near full employment in this country."

Overall though, as "somebody who comes from the teaching profession", the Minister believes that teaching remains an attractive career prospect, as illustrated by CAO applications. Again emphasising that teaching "it is not a career without challenges", she concedes that "more and more has been asked every single day of the education sector".

Illustrating this point, she highlights the pivot to remote learning during the Covid pandemic, and classroom demographic changes amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine as two examples of "the education sector [stepping] up to the mark every single day".

Housing crisis

Asked about the extent to which the housing crisis and the associated dearth of affordable accommodation is impacting on recruitment, especially for newly qualified teachers, the Minister emphasises that "the issues around housing are impacting lots of people in lots of different careers and professions" and that government is "being proactive in this space".

"It is no one measure that is going to eradicate the issues that we have at the minute but there is a general acknowledgement across government that – and [Housing] Minister Darragh O'Brien TD is working assiduously in this area – a whole suite of measures at different times to meet the different needs and the different challenges of people is what is required and each one of them needs to be supported," she remarks.

Senior Cycle reform

Pivoting to address a final priority, the Minister delves into Senior Cycle reform. Alongside a new Primary Curriculum Framework, in March 2022, the Minister published the plan to reimagine Senior Cycle education. Guided by a vision of "equity and excellence for all", the plan has three objectives:

1. "empower students to meet the challenges of the 21 century";
2. "enrich the student experience and build on what is strong in our current system"; and
3. "embed wellbeing and reduce student stress levels".

"We have a Leaving Certificate, which is very highly respected and rightly so, but we have an acknowledgement as



“Look, we are one island at the end of the day.”

well that we can never stand still in education and if we want our young people to compete as we are doing here, for example, in [the OECD’s 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022], but to compete across the world now, they have to have appropriate curricula and they have to have appropriate assessment as well.”

Consequently, an updated programme was announced in September 2023 to accelerate Senior Cycle reform, including the introduction of two new Leaving Certificate subjects – drama, film and theatre studies, and climate action and sustainable development – for students in 2024/2025.

Contextualising this, the Education Minister contends that an achievement in a subject like drama, theatre, and film studies should have parity with an achievement in any other subject “because that is a talent and that is an ability”.

Assessment

As well as introducing new subjects, the government is also overhauling Senior Cycle assessment. On a personal level, Minister states that she “never felt it was right that 100 per cent of a student’s ability could be examined on one single day in one moment in June”.

In practice, this means ensuring that each subject has a second assessment component. As such, in future, at least 40 per cent of each Leaving Certificate subject will be assessed by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) prior to students sitting exams in June.

“The type of assessment will be different to what they are doing presently. For example, there will always be a place for the written exam but there has to be a place as well for

application of knowledge,” she insists.

Similarly, since the Covid pandemic, students have been provided with an opportunity for a second sitting of the Leaving Certificate. Emphasising the Department of Education’s role in serving students, the Minister adds: “I think that is fair. I think if there are circumstances from a health and wellness point of view that prevented a student from taking an exam in June, to the best of our ability we should be able to provide a second opportunity.

“I want students to succeed to the maximum. For them to be able to do that, I have to ensure that they get the maximum of facility to do it... recognising their individuality in terms of their various talents.”

Referencing generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in the context of assessment, the Minister notes that a work is underway. “We have tasked the SEC to look specifically at how we can harness the opportunity that AI is bringing to us, but also be mindful of the challenges. That also will inform how Senior Cycle and how education will work going forward.”

All-island cooperation

Turning to the Government’s efforts to deepen all-island education connections and cooperation, Foley indicates that “a significant body of work is underway under the auspices of the Shared Island Programme”.

“We are currently working on a north/south programme – and more of those details will unfold – but it is specifically in the area of education, and specifically in the area of [tackling] disadvantage in education and promoting equality of education.

“I am a huge believer in the wisdom of the collective. We can garner so much more when we work with others and

there are great opportunities in education for us to share expertise and wisdom and experience. We are in the throes of doing that now, and you can see it from a higher education point of view in terms of research and an infrastructure point of view. Financial supports have already been put in place. There is enormous scope. Look, we are one island at the end of the day.”

Asked if she has given consideration to the INTO’s calls for an all-Ireland teaching council to be established within the Department of the Taoiseach’s Shared Island Unit amid the “erosion of teachers’ conditions in the North”, the Minister is reticent.

“I am not going to comment on that,” she says, before adding: “Look, we have young people from Northern Ireland who are [living] on the border and working in the south, and we have people [living] in the south and working and crossing over.

“Obviously, the more closely we can work together, learn from each other, and support each other [the better]... Opportunities going forward in terms of the teaching council and all of that, I have no doubt that all these opportunities can be looked at going forward.”

Vision for education

Asserting that education is at “the very core” of her party’s philosophy, Foley outlines: “Fianna Fáil has always believed that education is the great leveller. I believe that fundamentally myself. It is the great leveller in society. If we can get it right in education, ultimately, we will get it right in society. That means ensuring that we have an education system that is inclusive, that is open and welcoming to everyone, and that is ambitious. We should always be ambitious as a country, so we should always have an ambitious education system.”

Paying tribute to the “many who contributed to the richness of education”, Foley articulates her belief in “the capacity of Irish people”. “We see Irish people perform every day, not just on the local and the national stage, but on the international stage. That is the consequence of opportunity being provided, supports being provided, a good education, and a rootedness in community. I would like to think that we will continue that; that we will continue in education to promote equality, to promote inclusion, and to promote opportunity and access for all.”

Get ahead with NZEB and retrofit training



Bebhinn Kennedy, Enterprise Engagement Officer, at The National Construction Campus, Mount Lucas.

As we look ahead to the future of construction, it is vital that the right skills are developed in the Irish construction workforce to ensure that we can meet the requirements of the construction industries sustainability agenda and deliver on the Government's climate action and retrofit targets in line with Ireland's green transition.

Retrofitting and nearly zero energy building (NZEB) are shaping the future of green construction, with training and upskilling programmes crucial to equipping construction workers and industry professionals with the expertise required to ensure buildings have a very

high energy performance in line with industry requirements.

A growing number of NZEB and retrofit programmes are available across the country, delivered at little to no cost by a network of NZEB centres of excellence that have been established by a number

of education and training boards (ETBs) across the country at City of Dublin ETB, Cork ETB, Laois and Offaly ETB, Limerick and Clare ETB, Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim ETB and Waterford and Wexford ETB.

Funded by SOLAS, the Further Education and Training (FET) authority, the centres provide training in all areas of NZEB and retrofit, including anything from starter programmes, post apprenticeship, upskilling to conversion courses. These are part of a broader suite of national green skills FET programmes that aim to provide every learner with green skills and sustainability awareness to become agents of change in climate action.

NZEB centres of excellence have an important role in upskilling thousands of workers and new entrants to support the sector in meeting its housing and sustainability targets. Working in collaboration with industry to address the skills needs, the NZEB centres of excellence develop programmes in collaboration with industry for industry to ensure the provision of training in these centres is both relevant and current.

The National Construction Training Campus in Mount Lucas, County Offaly is leading the way in construction related training for the country, which includes an NZEB and Retrofit Centre of Excellence, all under the provision of Laois Offaly ETB.

Bebhinn Kennedy, Enterprise Engagement Officer, at The National Construction Campus, and member of the NZEB Retrofit Centres of Excellence Construction Steering Group, tasked with ensuring consistency and standardisation in NZEB and retrofit provision across the country outlines that "depending on the course that we are developing, we would



The National Construction Training Campus, Mount Lucas

work with stakeholders within that specific industry to ensure that the training provision that we are developing is meeting their needs”.

All business models and working schedules have been carefully considered in the delivery of training programmes, with a blended approach to learning offered by the Mount Lucas NZEB and Retrofit Centre of Excellence.

Courses are also available for evening and weekend delivery, to accommodate traditional operating hours. The theory element of programmes is delivered online where possible to minimise the time off site for companies. All courses are fully funded for both unemployed and employed learners.

An exciting new development in construction skills training developed by Laois Offaly Education and Training Board and the National Construction Training Campus at Mount Lucas is the Mobile NZEB Training Unit. Designed to increase the flexibility of training provision, the mobile unit travels to construction companies and schools across the country to ensure greater accessibility to upskilling opportunities for workers in construction, as well as introducing students to Modern Methods of Construction.

Kennedy outlines the full “range of innovative methods of education on site” including fully immersive training through a simulated construction hall, in addition to two varieties of VR assimilation training. This state-of-the-art construction technology “allows the learner to experience a range of real-life scenarios, simulating real construction sites”. “We have installed a range of equipment for demonstration and training purposes, and we hope that the learner or the



Behhinn Kennedy, Enterprise Engagement Officer, National Construction Training Campus with Nerea González, Building and Surveying Technician, KRA Visionary.

visitor is fully immersed in low energy construction technologies from the minute that they walk through the doors, be it for NZEB reasons or for retrofit.”

The National Construction Training Campus offers a broad suite of NZEB courses tailored to meet the needs of new entrants to skilled managers and professionals, including NZEB fundamental awareness, NZEB retrofit, NZEB site supervisor, retrofit skills, air tightness and vapour control, external wall insulation installer, and many more.

NZEB fundamentals is an introductory course (one day onsite or two half days online) that leads learners on to a variety of pathways into further NZEB training across various trades, with specific courses identified for both site supervisors and construction workers. NZEB and retrofit courses incorporate digital construction technologies. For example, the retrofit skills course includes virtual reality (VR).

All courses are City and Guilds assured or QQI validated and Construction Industry Federation (CIF) approved, with Construction Industry Register Ireland (CIRI) Continuous Professional Development (CPD) points available.

Mount Lucas will also be home to Ireland’s first ever Demonstration Park for Modern Methods of Construction, which will be key in the continued provision of critical construction skills of the future.

Discover NZEB and Retrofit courses provided by the NZEB centres of excellence across the country at thisisfet.ie/nzeb. Training is also delivered through the NZEB Centres of Excellence at City of Dublin ETB, Cork ETB, Laois and Offaly ETB, Limerick and Clare ETB, Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim ETB and Waterford and Wexford ETB.



Education in Budget 2024

Budget 2024 delivered real terms funding increases for both of the Government's education departments when compared with Budget 2023, but real terms decreases when compared with the *Mid-Year Expenditure Report 2023*.

When compared with Budget 2023, the Department of Education saw an increase in total voted expenditure from €9.625 billion to €10.467 billion, an increase of 8.7 per cent that outstrips the predicted rate of inflation throughout 2023, which stands at 5.3 per cent, as predicted by the IMF, and 6.4 per cent as predicted by the ESRI. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science received an increase in total voted expenditure from €3.888 billion in 2023 to €4.148 billion in 2024, an increase of 6.7 per cent that also outpaces the rate of inflation.

The Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science received current expenditure funding increases when compared with the *Mid-Year Expenditure Report 2023* of 4.6 per cent and 4.9 per cent respectively, which amount to real terms cuts. In terms of capital expenditure, the Department of Education saw an increase of 9.3 per cent and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science received an increase of 4.5 per cent.

Department of Education

The €10.467 billion allocated to the Department of Education in Budget 2024 contains within it an increase in current core expenditure of €421 million, a 4.4 per cent increase from Budget 2023 that amounts to a real terms cut in current core expenditure. The Government states that the funding will “provide supports to primary and post primary schools, while investing significant resources in special education”, with key measures cited including:

- the provision of 1,216 additional special needs assistants;
- free school books and classroom resources for Junior Cycle students in the free education scheme in autumn 2024, meaning that circa 212,000 students at Junior Cycle level will receive free school books;
- the progression of 500 school building projects, including 300 already at construction phase and 200 proceeding to construction;
- the provision of 774 additional teachers for special education;
- an increase in capitation funding;
- additional funding to support students at risk of education disadvantage;
- continued investment in the School Transport scheme;
- continuation of the Enhanced Summer Programme; and
- increased provision of management and staffing supports in special schools.

Speaking after the publication of the Budget, Minister for Education Norma Foley TD stated: “The significant increased investment is the largest education budget in the history of the State and reflects the Government’s commitment to a quality inclusive school system and improved learning outcomes for every student.”

However, despite its record level of funding, the education budget has come in for sharp criticism from teachers’ unions, particularly for a failure to tackle Irish class sizes and a reduction in additional funding to meet day-to-day costs such as heating and electricity in schools. Having stood at €90 million in Budget 2023, this figure was cut to €81 million in Budget 2024.

General Secretary of the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation stated Budget 2024 “fails miserably” and said: “There is no getting away from the fact that Ireland’s primary school classes are the highest in the eurozone, remaining almost three pupils per classroom more than the average throughout the EU... It would have been a legitimate hope that a government with a record budget surplus would have taken decisive action. Instead of doing that, today’s no-change announcement will add to overcrowding in schools. Our politicians had a once in a lifetime chance to reach the EU class size average. They missed an open goal.”

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science received an increase of €164 million current core expenditure in Budget 2024, a 4.3 per cent increase from Budget 2023 that fails to keep pace with Ireland’s rate of inflation.

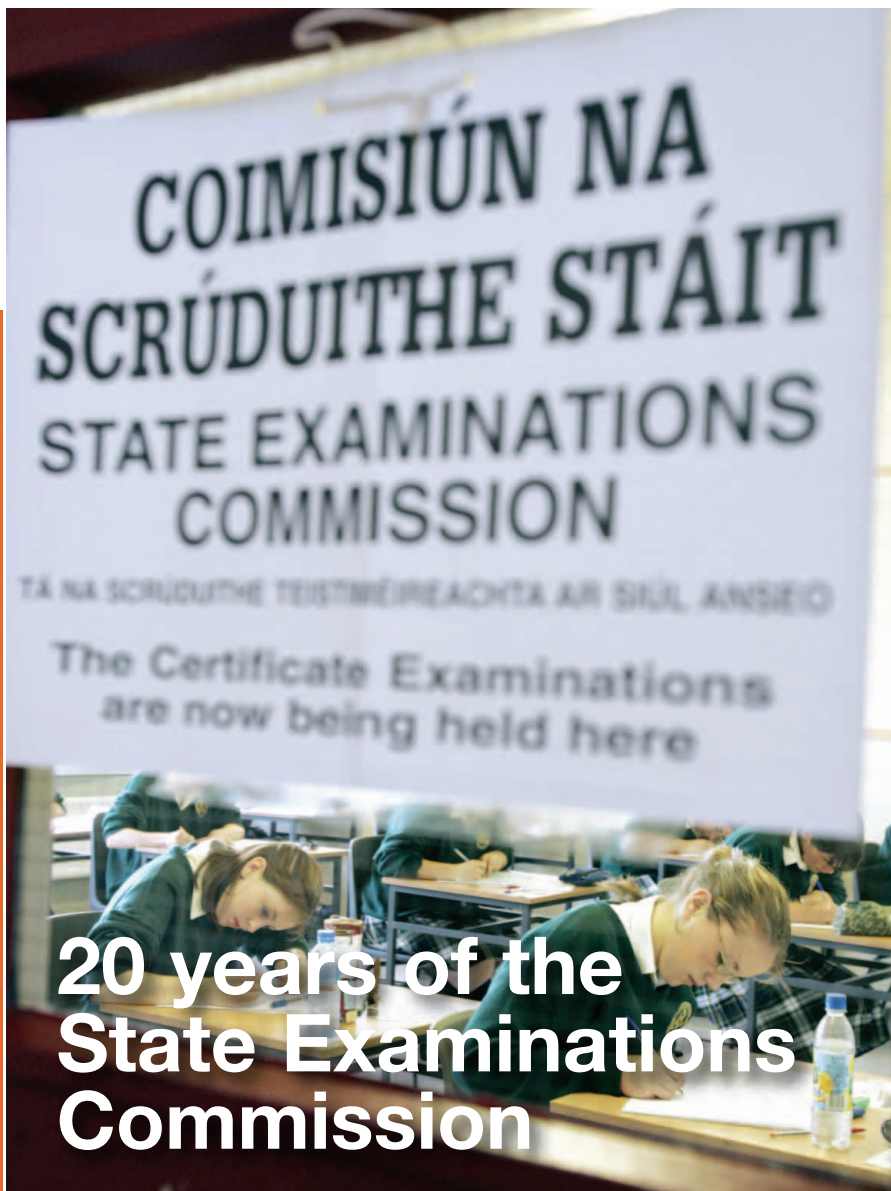
Benefits from this level of investment, as outlined by the Government, include:

- additional funding of €194 million in current expenditure to provide €60 million for Funding the Future, over €30 million for additional student supports for those attending third-level education, and measures to ensure greater access to the further and higher education sectors;
- an additional allocation of €67 million to provide for the continued growth of the craft apprenticeship system from 13,000 places in 2022 to over 16,000 places in 2024;
- the allocation of €31 million to increase all non-adjacent maintenance grant rates by €615 with a pro rata for students in the current academic year; and
- the increase of all adjacent rates by 10 per cent.

Also included in the budget was a €3,000 increase to the PhD stipend, which Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Simon Harris TD stated is not the “end of the story” after coming in for criticism from the Postgraduate Workers’ Organisation of Ireland, which stated the increase did not go far enough. An independent national review of State support published in May 2023 recommended that the stipends be increased to €25,000 per year.

“It is step one,” Harris said. “The independent report ... says we need to get to €25,000. This, I think, is the largest increase in PhD stipends in many, many years. This is not the end of the story, far from it.

“I think €25,000 is where we need to get to, but I would argue that by any fair measure €3,000 in one go is a good step. I am pleased that we have been able to do it.”



20 years of the State Examinations Commission



Andrea Feeney,
CEO,
State Examinations Commission

Andrea Feeney, CEO of the State Examinations Commission (SEC), tells *eolas Magazine* how the SEC's new *Statement of Strategy 2023-2027* lays the path for development which takes account of the organisation's ambitions to

develop the State examinations service for the future, while holding to its enduring mission of providing a high-quality candidate-centered service.

The certificate examinations provided by the State Examinations Commission are part of a rich tapestry of public examinations in Ireland, which stretches back almost 150 years. Second-level examinations were first provided by the Intermediate Education Board for Ireland in 1879 and continued to be provided by

the Board until 1924, when the Department of Education provided the State Examinations for the first time. Following a major restructuring of the Department of Education, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) was established on 6 March 2003, to deliver the national certificate examinations on

behalf of the State to the highest standards of quality, security, and integrity.

The provision of the State examinations is a key national service which touches on the lives of over 130,000 young people and their families each year. The SEC works with the education system in the provision of this service and relies hugely on the collaborative efforts of school leaders, teachers, the education stakeholders. Teachers marking the examinations are the lifeblood of the examinations system. In 2023, we worked intensively, including with stakeholders, to ensure that sufficient numbers of teachers engaged in this critical work. The SEC is extremely grateful to those teachers who engage in the State Examinations in a variety of roles, and to school leaders in supporting our efforts.

In the 20 years since our establishment, much has been achieved; the examinations system of 2023 is very different to 2003, especially in the range of services we provide and in how we provide them. What remains constant is our absolute commitment to continued partnership with stakeholders to deliver a system of examinations that enjoys high levels of public trust and confidence.

New Statement of Strategy

Our *Statement of Strategy 2023-2027* follows a wide-ranging consultative process with stakeholders from across the sector including the Department of Education and agencies, school leadership and management bodies, teachers and teacher unions, and the important voices of students and their families.

Six ambitious goals support our mission "to provide a high-quality candidate-centred State examination service" and our vision of "a progressive, fair, and responsive examination service and organisation with a positive impact on learners and society". Those goals are:

1. To provide a high-quality, fair, and inclusive State examinations service.
2. To develop a State examinations service for the future.
3. To provide all candidates with opportunities to demonstrate their attainment.
4. To seek opportunities for improved service delivery to meet current and future challenges.

- To be organisationally excellent with staffing, infrastructure, and systems aligned to deliver on our mission.
- To be accountable for our decisions and actions.

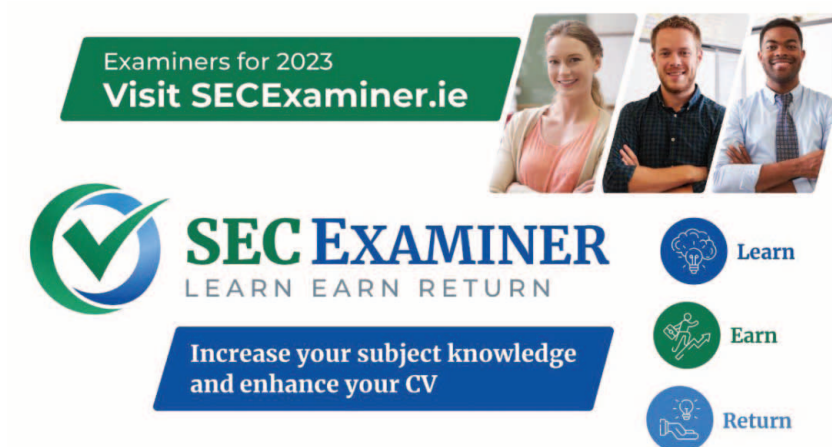
Delivery and curricular reform

The number and modalities of assessment deployed in the State examinations continues to grow on foot of the introduction of new subjects and through reform of existing subjects. In 2023, only 13 of the 41 curricular Leaving Certificate subjects were examined exclusively by written examination. Assessments include point in time written, aural, oral, and practical tests; coursework components involving research reports and portfolios; and physical or digital projects.

The SEC has a central role in curricular reform at both Senior Cycle and Junior Cycle working with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Department of Education. Over the lifetime of our strategic plan, we look forward to working on the ambitious programme of Senior Cycle redevelopment which has been announced by the Minister, including undertaking research into generative artificial intelligence (AI) and digital assessment; and introducing additional assessment components worth at least 40 per cent in all subjects.

Digital transformation

In recent years, the SEC has undertaken transformative change involving a number of complex digital projects. These include online marking of scanned examination scripts, which is now our normal way of working, with over 4,000 examiners using the system in 2023. Of the one million Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle results issued this year, 98 per cent were in subjects which were either fully or partially marked online. The adoption of a design for digital approach in relation to examinations coursework is underpinned by our Schools Portal, which facilitates secure transmission of digital coursework to the SEC. We have also integrated digital coursework directly to the online marking platform to provide fully digitised end-to-end assessment. Finally, we provide the Candidate Self Service Portal (CSSP) to offer a complete one-stop shop of examination services to Leaving Certificate candidates. The SEC is a world leader in terms of openness and transparency in the examinations. Through the CSSP candidates access not only their overall



results but also the marks they achieved in individual subject components, and they can also view their scripts online to see how their work was marked.

Under our new strategic plan, we want to exploit many more opportunities for improved service delivery to meet current and future challenges.

Supporting students with special educational needs

The SEC provides fair access to the examinations through inclusive design and the provision of appropriate accommodations under its Scheme of Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations (RACE) Scheme. The scheme enables candidates with special educational needs to demonstrate what they know and can do, without compromising the integrity of the assessment.

An extensive range of individual supports is available through the scheme including assistance with reading; writing accommodations; access to assistive technology; and the provision of modifications, waivers, and exemptions. In 2023, almost 30,000 candidates (22 per cent) out of the overall cohort of 132,000 candidates required access arrangements under the RACE Scheme.

The scheme is continually evolving to better meet the needs of candidates with special educational needs while preserving equity and fairness. Deferred Leaving Certificate examinations were introduced in 2022, for candidates experiencing serious accident, injury or illness, or close family bereavement at the time of the main sitting. The provision of read-only PDF papers to vision impaired Leaving Certificate candidates was piloted. These are significant, improvements which make very real differences in the lives of young people taking the State examinations.

Supporting candidates with special educational needs is a strategic priority for the SEC and over the lifetime of the next strategic plan we aim to increase the use of assistive technology to enhance access and integrity and to support independent learning.

Conclusion

We have experienced many challenges in our history, particularly in recent years given the impact that the pandemic has had on candidates due to take their examinations. Fortunately, we have a very strong innovation culture, which really stood to us in our pandemic response as we demonstrated agility, and creativity in meeting the unprecedented level of change required to the various arrangements for examinations candidates which were introduced in the years 2020-2023. Team work is exceptionally important to the SEC as we are driven by a common purpose in providing an examinations system which places the candidate of everything that we do. We are extremely fortunate to have an excellent staff who consistently deliver outstanding work year on year.

In delivering our strategic objectives we intend to build on our achievements and use our history and experiences to enhance our capacity to innovate and develop a world class examinations system for the future.

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Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission



Irish education: A 20-year review

The Department of Education's *Overview of Education 2002-2022* publication demonstrates the significant shifts which have taken place in Irish education settings over the last two decades.

Over the 20-year period from 2002 to 2022 there was an increase of 114,423 (25.8 per cent) in enrolments in primary schools (both mainstream and special), although the Department has stated that enrolments are projected to fall over the coming 11 years.

Looking at total enrolments in primary schools, the report states that in 2022 there were 558,143 primary school pupils, an increase of 3,355 on 2021 when the total was 554,788.

Primary school enrolments

When the change in enrolments by administrative county over the past 10 years is examined, the data shows the largest proportional increases occurred in Roscommon at 13.1 per cent, followed by Dublin at 9.9 per cent, and Monaghan at 9.5 per cent.

The smallest increase occurred in Mayo (1.1 per cent) and Tipperary (0.6 per cent), while Offaly, Clare, and Donegal were the areas that saw the largest decreases by 1.1 per cent, 0.9 per cent, and 0.2 per cent respectively.

Primary schools by religion

The total number of mainstream primary schools has declined by 57 since 2012, from 3,152 in 2012 to 3,095 in 2022. However, the pattern is not uniform, with 118 Catholic schools and 11 Church of Ireland schools closing between 2012 and 2022, while the number of multi-denominational schools has increased by 69 in the same period.

These clear trends in school ethos are a result of the closure of schools with declining enrolments and the amalgamation of schools in close proximity to each other, as well as the opening of new multid denominational schools in response to parental choice. All 25 newly established mainstream primary schools opened in the last five years have been multi-denominational in ethos, spread over various patrons. Despite these changes, Catholic schools still comprise the vast majority of primary schools, with 88.5 per cent of schools having a Catholic ethos in 2022.

Post-primary education

While enrolments in primary schools peaked in 2018, enrolments in post-primary schools continue to rise and, according to the published post-primary projections, are expected to reach their peak in 2024.

In post-primary schools, total enrolments stood at 406,392 in 2022, an increase of 14,694 on 2021. Enrolments have risen by 48,984 over the past five years. The largest increases can be seen in Roscommon (42.4 per cent), Meath (34.3 per cent), Laois (31.4 per cent), and Kildare (31.2 per cent), all of which increased by over 30 per cent, while Monaghan (2.7 per cent), and Sligo (0.5 per cent) saw smaller increases.

There is a growing importance of large schools in the post-primary system. While small schools (less than 300 pupils) made up 29.8 per cent of all schools in 2012, this has dropped to 19.8 per cent in 2022, while the number of large schools (800+ pupils) has more than doubled (from 65 to 148). The number of pupils attending small schools fell by 12,614 over this period, while the number of pupils attending large schools has increased from 62,038 to 143,088.

More boys than girls consistently attend mixed-sex schools, with 72 per cent of boys in a mixed school in 2022 compared with just 64.6 per cent of girls. This is reflected in the number of schools by gender category; in 2022, there were 124 all-girls post-primary schools, compared with 96 all-boys schools.

Looking at the changing participation rates in Leaving Cert (LC), Leaving Cert Vocational Programmes (LCV) and Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) since 2002, the percentage of pupils following the LCA programme stood at 6.4 per cent in 2022, up slightly on 2021 (5.8 per cent); participation in the LCV programme stood at 27 per cent, which shows a change in previous downward pattern for this programme (23 per cent in 2021), while LC stood at 66.6 per cent, a decrease on 2021 (71.2 per cent).

In terms of pupils who participate in transition years by gender and Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) status, more females than males consistently do Transition Year (TY), and uptake is lower in DEIS schools than in non-DEIS schools. However, there has been a small fall in TY participation in both school categories between 2019 and 2020, and an increase in the following years, 2021 and, especially, 2022.

There is a consistent pattern of more boys than girls attending fee-charging schools. Overall, 7.6 per cent of boys were enrolled in a fee-charging school in 2022, compared with 5.8 per cent of girls. Enrolments in fee-charging schools, as percentage of total enrolments, are down on 2020 and represent a continuing pattern of falling attendance at fee-charging schools.

The report overall shows a shift away from denominational ethos in education, albeit marginal, towards increased secularisation of education in the State, which correlates with societal shifts outlined in Census 2022 which show more people moving away from religion.



(L-R) Pictured at the launch of the CPA Ireland Skillnet 'Metaverse' programme for financial services professionals are: Dave Flynn, Director of Business Networks, Skillnet Ireland, Trish O'Neill, Director of Member Services, CPA Ireland, and Gary O'Sullivan, Managing Partner UK and Ireland at Sia Partners Consulting 4.0.

Ireland's international reputation as an innovative, agile, and high-performing economy is critically dependent on its talented workforce. As the national agency responsible for spearheading workforce development for the enterprise sector, Skillnet Ireland is taking the lead in addressing 21st century skills challenges in an efficient and targeted manner.

A new report commissioned by Skillnet Ireland reveals valuable insights into the current and future skills needs of businesses. *Ireland's Talent Landscape 2024* presents the findings of a nationally representative survey of five hundred business leaders from businesses of all sizes, sectors, and regions. In this European Year of Skills, the report represents a timely assessment of our skills, talent, and workforce development needs.

The report demonstrates a commitment from enterprise to invest time and resources in people development to ensure competitiveness and future success. It also shows how crucial business leaders are in providing strategic direction and in recognising the value of lifelong learning and workforce development.

"The needs of industry are changing constantly," says Skillnet Ireland Director of Business Networks Dave Flynn. "Companies have to react quickly to changes in the broader environment. This has implications for skills needs and the education and training required to meet them. Skillnet Ireland has an important role to play in facilitating partnerships between industry and higher-education institutions around the country to develop impactful talent development projects which will help meet those needs."

Rapidly changing skills landscape

Accelerated digitalisation and the ongoing shift to a net zero carbon economy are resulting in widespread changes across all sectors and occupations. This evolving

landscape is evident in the 56 per cent of Irish business leaders who have seen a shift in their skills requirements in the past two to three years, with six in 10 anticipating further changes over the coming three years.

64 per cent of all businesses surveyed consider 'energy efficiency' to have the potential to facilitate growth in the next two to three years, with 69 per cent of large businesses highlighting the increasing importance of sustainable supply chain management, and 41 per cent of SMEs planning to focus on developing circular economy skills. These findings are consistent with the Skillnet Ireland *Talent for Ireland's Green Economy* report published last year in partnership with the Economic and Social Research Institute, in particular, the importance of green marketing, sustainability skills, and regulation.

Now more than ever, businesses need access to an agile, diverse, and talented workforce that is continuously acquiring and developing new skills so they can sustain their competitiveness in this rapidly changing environment. As evidenced in *Ireland's Talent Landscape 2024*, there is growing awareness among Irish business leaders that upskilling, reskilling, and talent development are intrinsically linked to growth. Flynn explains: "We know businesses and workers often struggle to engage with and commit to upskilling programmes. These barriers manifest in a variety of ways including cost, time, relevance, uncertainty of offerings, but in a recent Skillnet Ireland study we found that existing time commitments is the main barrier preventing workers from engaging in upskilling programmes. However, despite these difficulties our research also highlighted that almost three-quarter of employees have engaged in some form of upskilling in the past 12 months."

Accelerating digitalisation

As digital technologies continue to permeate and transform every aspect of a company's operations, business leaders are acutely aware of the need for talent to adapt and thrive in the 'digital economy'. 65 per cent of businesses surveyed said their staff will require some form of upskilling to facilitate their digital transition, with over 30 per cent indicating that over half of employees would need digital upskilling. Skillnet Ireland works with businesses to help them diagnose and assess their digital maturity to determine exactly where they are in their digitalisation journey and aligns skills needs to company objectives. We focus on the development of specialised talent for new or emerging technologies, in addition to raising baseline digital skills across all sectors. Overall, Skillnet Ireland supported 13,470 workers in 2022 through its dedicated digital focused networks across multiple sectors.

Skillnet Ireland also nurtures industry and academia collaboration by investing in the co-creation of new cutting-edge programmes with universities to address digital skills needs. For example, Cobotics Skillnet in partnership with the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) developed a new Higher Diploma in Engineering in Automation and Digital Manufacturing. Technology Ireland ICT Skillnet has also developed a number of programmes in recent years including the MSc in Artificial intelligence in



(L-R) Pictured at the launch of the Climate Ready Academy Stackable Microcredits in partnership with the University of Limerick are: Ken Stockil, CEO, 20FIFTY Partners; Kerstin Mey, President, University of Limerick; Senator Róisín Garvey; Paul Healy, Chief Executive, Skillnet Ireland; and Brian Leddin TD.

partnership with UL, and the MSc in Fintech Innovation in partnership with Munster Technological University.

Developing skills for climate readiness

Businesses play a vital role in Ireland's transition to a low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economy and the development of new workforce skills and competencies in this space is critical to ensure businesses remain competitive and resilient and can explore new opportunities for innovation and growth. Businesses are increasingly aware of this challenge, as proven by almost two-thirds of businesses who highlighted that their staff will require some form of upskilling in climate action and sustainability in the coming two to three years.

Skillnet Ireland supports businesses in developing talent for climate change through a range of initiatives, focusing on skills within the areas of energy management, sustainable finance, offshore wind, water stewardship, biodiversity, efficiency in building systems and the circular economy. In 2022, over 1,790 businesses and 5,800 employees benefitted from climate and sustainability upskilling programmes through the Skillnet Climate Ready Academy and specialised Skillnet Business Networks including Green Tech Skillnet and Sustainable Enterprise Skillnet. Skillnet Climate Ready Academy developed the first stackable micro-credentials in climate leadership in partnership with the University of Limerick to enable businesses to

respond proactively to climate change and to capitalise on the business opportunities transitioning to a low-carbon economy presents.

Flynn outlines: "It is vital that businesses across all sectors and regions have access to leading edge development programmes which keep their employees up to date with the latest trends and innovations to develop a sustainable business and contribute to Ireland's ambitious climate targets. This report demonstrates a strong commitment from enterprise to invest time and resources in people development, and a deep understanding of the importance of this for business competitiveness and future success."

The findings in this report support Skillnet Ireland's strategic commitment to meet the talent requirements of a digital future, to foster the growth of a low-carbon and sustainable economy, to enhance small and medium-sized enterprise leadership, and to bolster foreign direct investment through talent development. Skillnet Ireland will continue to respond to talent and skills challenges in a proactive and agile manner, and future-proof Ireland's businesses by equipping workforces with the essential skills, knowledge, and capabilities, for the world of work.

To learn more about Skillnet Ireland visit: www.skillnetireland.ie

QS World University Rankings 2024



Trinity College Dublin.

Seven of Ireland's top 10 universities rose in the QS World University Rankings in 2023. For instance, Queen's University Belfast rose by 31 places and is now ranked as the 202nd best university in the world. Trinity College Dublin retained its position as Ireland's best ranked university and is now ranked as the 81st best university in the world.

The rankings are determined by key indicators which include academic reputation, staff-to-student ratios, citations per faculty, and the international dimensions of the workforce and student populations.

1. Trinity College Dublin

Rank: 81 ↑ 17

Status: Public
 Research output: Very high
 Academic faculty staff: 1,383
Total students: 16,019

2. University College Dublin

Rank: 171 ↑ 10

Status: Public
 Research output: Very high
 Academic faculty staff: 1,852
Total students: 22,484

3. Queen's University Belfast

Rank: 202 ↑ 31

Status: Public
 Research output: Very high
 Academic faculty staff: 1,940
Total students: 21,850

4. University of Galway

Rank: 289 ↓ 13

Status: Public
 Research output: High
 Academic faculty staff: 1,876
Total students: 15,444

5. University College Cork

Rank: 292 ↑ 11

Status: Public
 Research output: Very high
 Academic faculty staff: 1,521
Total students: 16,709

6. University of Limerick

Rank: 426 ↑ 104-116

Status: Public
 Research output: High
 Academic faculty staff: 988
Total students: 12,110

7. Dublin City University

Rank: 436 ↑ 35

Status: Public
 Research output: High
 Academic faculty staff: 1,306
Total students: 14,728

8. Ulster University

Rank: 498 ↑

Status: Public
 Research output: High
 Academic faculty staff: 1,219
Total students: 18,197

9. Maynooth University

Rank: 801-850 =

Status: Public
 Research output: Very high
 Academic faculty staff: 718
Total students: 11,757

10. Technological University Dublin

Rank: 851-900 =

Status: Public
 Research output: High
 Academic faculty staff: 1,466
Total students: 20,790



20th anniversary of the NFQ: A cause to celebrate



Padraig Walsh, CEO Quality and Qualifications Ireland; Irene Sheridan, Chair, Quality and Qualifications Ireland; and Grant Klinkum, Chief Executive, New Zealand Qualifications Authority at a QQI conference to mark 20 years of the National Framework of Qualifications.

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) has stood Ireland well and has worked its way into the national lexicon over the last 20 years.

Achievements to date

The iconic NFQ fan diagram is apposite, depicting a rainbow that can be traversed rather than a ladder that must be scaled. A lifelong learning path through the Framework can and should involve going across and back down the Framework as well as going up.

In 2015, the pre-existence of the framework and its associated levels allowed for the Framework for Junior Cycle to make explicit reference to the NFQ and its ready accommodation of NFQ Level 1 and Level 2 learning programmes. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland are committed to working collaboratively to determine the appropriate inclusion of the various elements of senior cycle reform within the NFQ.

Another strength of the Framework has

been its facilitation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and particularly the concept of RPL for Award. Last year, the first graduates of the Level 6 Hairdressing apprenticeship offered by Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board received their awards solely through the formal recognition of their prior learning.

One of the main benefits of the NFQ was that it allowed Irish education and training to respond quickly to the Covid-19 pandemic and the sudden pivot from face-to-face teaching and assessment to an online environment.

Information

We have revamped Qualifax – with the new tagline ‘every course explained.’ The new site was launched in September and has a new, vibrant look and uses responsive technology so that learners, as its primary users, can access it on mobile devices.

We have also further developed the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ.ie), as the authoritative guide to quality-assured qualifications in the NFQ. This site contains all the awards made by the universities and QQI (therefore including most of FET and private HE).

Challenges for the future

- Resolving the issue of two major awards at Level 6 and the associated different credit systems used in further and higher education;
- ensuring consistency and clarity regarding non major awards, including micro-credentials, at levels 6-9 in terms of credit volume, titling, information, and quality assurance; and
- considering if the two awards available at Level 9 are sufficient and being appropriately used for increasing levels of qualifications.

QQI has been given the statutory responsibility to keep and maintain the Framework, to review the policies and criteria on which it is based, to review its operation and to amend it from time to time.

We believe it is timely to confront some of the challenges highlighted above – and we look forward to working with our stakeholders in the task of further developing the NFQ over the years ahead.

W: www.qqi.ie/national-framework-of-qualifications



Dearbhú Cáilíochta
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
Quality and
Qualifications Ireland

Government aims to tackle school bullying



Cineáltas
Kindness

In April 2023, Minister Norma Foley TD launched the implementation plan for *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying*; the Department of Education's approach to preventing and addressing bullying in schools.

Launched in December 2022, *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* was developed by the Department of Education in collaboration with a steering committee led by Noel Purdy of Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

A report in 2018 by UNICEF, found that 44 per cent of Irish schoolchildren are bullied in school. The study found that male and female students are equally at risk of bullying, with female students more likely to be subjected to psychological forms of bullying, while male students are more likely to be at risk of physical violence and threats.

Since passage of the programme, the Department of Education has established a Student Participation Unit, which aims to promote the participation of children and young people in the development of department policy.

The Department has also established an expert group to advise decision-makers on how best the Student Participation Unit can progress its work. Laura Lundy, professor of education law and children's rights at Queen's University, who developed the Lundy Model of children's participation, has been appointed as chair of this group.

The Government has set aside €5 million to pilot a programme of counselling supports for primary school students.

The Department further states that work to update the anti-bullying procedures for schools is underway with continuous professional development and training being developed for all school staff, board of management members and parents.

The implementation plan for *Cineáltas* commits to implementing each of the

61 actions contained in the original *Cineáltas* publication within a five-year period and sets out timeframes and information about how the Department is going to implement the actions

Minister for Education Norma Foley TD, who marked Anti-Bullying Week by issuing *Cineáltas* flags to all primary, post-primary, and special schools, said: "Cineáltas means kindness. Anti-Bullying Week is an important week in the school calendar where we can increase awareness about bullying behaviour and its impact on children and young people. We can also remind ourselves of the importance of kindness. All our schools are receiving their *Cineáltas* flags this week, during Anti-Bullying Week."



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OECD: Ireland's education positive but spending low

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) *Education at a Glance* report has delivered generally positive reviews on Ireland's education outcomes; however, the report makes it clear that Ireland ranks low in terms of education spending as a proportion of GDP.

Published in September 2023, the report states that, out of 38 OECD member states studied, Ireland spent 3.2 per cent of the national GDP on education in 2020, ranking the State precisely last in the list and below the OECD average of 5 per cent.

More positively for Ireland is the OECD's reporting on regional variation in the share of young people who are neither employed nor in education or training (NEET). These regional disparities, the OECD asserts, are smallest in Ireland, Denmark, and Norway where the gap between the highest and lowest regions is below 2 percentage points.

Further positively for Ireland is that, on average across OECD countries, the gender gap in employment rates among younger adults with vocational upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment has hardly changed between 2015 and 2022. Australia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, and Slovakia, however, bucked this global trend, with a reduction in these states' respective gaps of between 7 and 16 percentage points.

Although in many countries upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) serves both teenagers and adults, in a few countries initial upper secondary education is predominantly general. Among these countries is Ireland, where the OECD states that vocational programmes mostly serve those who have completed their initial schooling, and less than 12 per cent of 15–19-year-old upper secondary students are pursuing VET.

In contrast to this, there are 11 OECD countries where the majority of 15–19-year-olds enrolled in upper secondary education are in vocational programmes.

In Ireland, as well as Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, and Switzerland, around nine out of 10 upper secondary VET students are in a combined school- and work-based programme, spending at least one-quarter of their time in work-based learning, but in 10 countries, the share is less than one in five.

Integrating refugees

The report outlines measures taken to ensure that education was delivered to refugee students across many global countries. It states that Ireland aims to support all Ukrainian students “throughout all phases of the learning process”.

“This includes staff support in regional education and language teams placed around the country, resources for students include tutors who can offer academic guidance, among other localised forms of support. Furthermore, the Irish Universities Association is in the process of establishing a Central Irish Higher Education Helpdesk with the aim of providing support to those who wish to enter VET programmes.”

In May 2022, Ireland established the National Student and Researcher Helpdesk to assist displaced students and researchers from Ukraine to apply to the higher education system or to be matched with a principal investigator to continue their research.

“It is shameful that at a time of budget surpluses, Ireland is in last place when it comes to investing in our young people.”

Geraldine O’Brien, President, Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI)

The OECD outlines that over 1,126 students applied. The report praises that further support to these students – a temporary tuition fee support scheme – was implemented with the Irish Government paying tuition fees for students studying a full-time course in a publicly funded higher education institution. Students were also provided with a financial stipend of €1,150 from the Erasmus national grant. These measures were for the 2022/23 academic year only.

Tertiary education transition

The theoretical age of transition, referring to the age when students are typically expected to enter upper secondary education in the given country, once again shows positive outcomes for Ireland, where the OECD states that this transition has been “particularly smooth”.

Ireland, Iceland, Japan, South Korea, and Norway recorded at least 95 per cent of students at the theoretical transition age enrolled in upper secondary education.

This is in contrast with Colombia, Costa Rica, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, where the report says that the transition appears “less smooth”. In these countries, over 15 per cent of the cohort are still in lower education one year after the expected transition age.

Reacting to the publication of the report, the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) stated that although Ireland’s education system is delivering generally positive outcomes, that these outcomes are not resulting in prosperity for Irish teachers and education staff, with well-established destinations for Irish teaching graduates, such as Canada and Australia, offering significantly higher starting salaries.

The President of ASTI, Geraldine O’Brien, also said: “It is shameful that at a time of budget surpluses, Ireland is in last place when it comes to investing in our young people.”



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Championing engagement, partnership, and collaboration



The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) engagements, partnerships, and collaborations extend across the Irish early childhood, primary, and post-primary education sectors and beyond.

NCCA's approach to developing curriculum and assessment advice is marked by creative thinking and a keen eye for opportunities to bring together diverse views, perspectives, and areas of expertise to challenge and advance thinking on learning, teaching, and assessment. Guided by eight principles, one of which emphasises partnerships and collaborations, NCCA employs a variety of interaction formats to collaborate with early childhood settings and schools, and with the broader education sector in shaping curriculum

and assessment developments. This commitment translates into five specific actions.

- 1. Support for the capacity of schools and settings:** NCCA supports schools and settings in developing, introducing, and enacting changes in curriculum and assessment. We work proactively in a busy and dynamic environment with schools and settings as we develop, discuss, and review key developments. Through proactive

collaboration with a network of approximately 60 primary schools, special schools, post-primary schools, and special schools since 2018, we have involved teachers, school leaders, and early childhood professionals in the redevelopment of the primary curriculum, ensuring their insights directly influence the changes happening. In the words of one teacher: "The Schools Forum provides a space to ponder big questions such as what we value in education, what its purpose is, how and what children should be taught, what is important in our current context and what the future might demand."

- 2. Inclusive consultations:** NCCA ensures that the diverse voices and the experiences of children, students, parents, and communities are central to discussions and consultations on curriculum and assessment developments. We are committed to using a variety of ways for people to share their thoughts and experiences. Here are some examples from early childhood, primary, and post-primary. At early childhood, we are updating *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. This involves a far-reaching public consultation with the early childhood sector as well as consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children to hear their ideas on what they would like to see as part of their early childhood learning experiences. At primary, we are working closely with Hub na nÓg and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY) to provide spaces and opportunities for children to tell us about their hopes for the future of the primary school curriculum. At post-primary, as part of the broader redevelopment of senior cycle, a

revised *Transition Year Programme Statement (TYPS)* is currently being developed. During the consultation on the draft TYPS, NCCA included the voices of parents, students, teachers, TY coordinators, and school leaders during school visits. For schools not involved in the school visit component of the consultation, a school-based survey was available. NCCA hosted joint consultation events with the Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU) and members of the TY Teacher Professional Network.

3. Strategic collaborations: NCCA actively participates in research, curriculum, and assessment initiatives through collaborations with agencies, organisations, and networks. Examples include membership of the Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe (CIDREE). Involvement in this network enables us to contribute to and take account of national and international developments, including international curriculum reforms. Collaboration with external advisory panels is informing the redevelopment of the primary curriculum and the redevelopment of senior cycle. The panel members advising on the primary curriculum are drawn from Ireland, Scotland, England, and the USA. The panel members advising on the redevelopment of senior cycle are drawn from Ireland, the Netherlands, and Scotland. Members of both panels share their time, their expertise and experience within other education systems with NCCA.

4. Building capacity for change: NCCA collaborates with the partners in education, support services, and further and higher education institutions supporting early years educator programmes and initial teacher education. This collaboration spans all phases and stages of curriculum development, incorporating strategic and systematic opportunities for collaboration and networking with early years educators, teachers, school leaders, parents/guardians, children, young people, school management bodies, professional bodies, and teacher unions. We do so using a number of approaches and formats including but not limited to online and in-person seminars, webinars, symposia, bilateral meetings, focus groups,



“The Schools Forum provides a space to ponder big questions such as what we value in education, what its purpose is, how and what children should be taught, what is important in our current context and what the future might demand.”

networks, and other fora. We use up-to-date best digital practice and strategic digital activities, continually modifying communication approaches to suit the needs of different audiences. Our noble goal is to ensure that any person or organisation who wishes to express their views on curriculum and assessment is enabled to do so.

5. Alignment with wider policy: NCCA aims to provide a strong, representative, and responsive basis for our work. As an advisory body, with representation on our structures from various stakeholders, including early years educators, teachers, students, school managers, parents, third-level educators, and business interests. NCCA takes account of relevant policies in the wider education sector as it develops curriculum and assessment advice for the Minister. NCCA ensures that its work aligns with the priorities of

the Department of Education; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; and other relevant priorities from across government departments.

NCCA is deeply committed to fostering lasting and meaningful engagements, collaborations, and partnerships both within the Irish education system and internationally. The varied perspectives, voices and experiences gathered through such interactions enrich and strengthen NCCA's work in generating advice for the Minister for Education. These partnership activities are critical to providing curriculum and assessment advice that, in turn, ensures that children and young people benefit from quality educational experiences in the 21st century.

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Institutional barriers inhibiting student mobility

Credit: William Murphy.

Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland, a Shared Island Unit/Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) study examining undergraduate mobility within Ireland and between Britain, has highlighted a relatively insignificant level of student mobility, not least as a consequence of institutional barriers.

Contextualising the ESRI's research into student mobility, the report highlights the "increasing focus in policy development internationally and in Ireland on the globalisation of higher education and student mobility". Consequently, this enhanced volume of research has focused on the drivers of and obstacles to studying abroad. However, hitherto, there has been a dearth of systematic research into the factors which influence mobility within Ireland and Britain.

The report produced six main findings.

In the 2020/2021 academic year, a mere 1,255 students in the Republic were from Northern Ireland, while only 1,170 students in Northern Ireland were from the Republic. This equates to 0.6 per cent and 2.4 per cent of the total student population in each jurisdiction respectively. Students from Northern Ireland that did opt to study in the Republic are more likely to apply for third-level courses in locations in border counties and in Dublin.

While it is possible for students in Northern Ireland to apply through the Central Applications Office (CAO) process in the Republic, applicants must undertake four A Levels in order to achieve the maximum available CAO points. This process is

“Current higher education entry requirements in Ireland appear to disadvantage students from Northern Ireland...”

Emer Smyth, Research Professor, ESRI

hindered by the fact that most students in Northern Ireland undertake a total of three A Levels. Similarly, while many third-level courses in the Republic have restricted access on the basis of a foreign language requirement, fewer A Level students in Northern Ireland take a language compared with Leaving Certificate students in the Republic.

Meanwhile, more than three times as many students from Northern Ireland (13,685 in 2020/2021) study in Britain when compared the average total number of students from the Republic who study in Britain (around 4,000). Students from Northern Ireland are willing to relocate across Britain. However, there is relatively little mobility in the opposite direction as a consequence of the high degree of competition for third-level places.

Often, mobility is determined by availability of places, and this is particularly reflected in the significant number of applications to study competitive medical courses elsewhere.

Overall, a minority of students from Northern Ireland or from Britain complete the CAO process, are offered a place in a higher education institution (HEI) in the Republic and accept it. Where students from Northern Ireland do meet the minimum entry requirements, they are less likely to accept an offer. One explanation is that

they are using an application elsewhere as a safety net for an application to a high demand course. Additionally, they often receive an offer to study at a HEI in the Republic after they have received an offer for a HEI in Northern Ireland or in Britain.

At the same time, the rate of successful applications to HEIs in Britain are lower for applicants in the Republic.

In relation to these institutional barriers, report coauthor, Emer Smyth, observes: “Current higher education entry requirements in Ireland appear to disadvantage students from Northern Ireland. An adjustment of the points equivalences would likely make studying in Ireland a more realistic option for those from Northern Ireland. Although only one barrier to mobility, a change would have an important symbolic value in being seen as welcoming to students from Northern Ireland.”

Overall, the decision to study elsewhere is a consequence of several interacting dynamics, including tuition/registration fees, financial support, and cost of living. While many students from the Republic will find lower accommodation costs elsewhere, a large proportion avoid such costs by remaining in their family home. ▶

Policy implications

Emphasising the value of student mobility, both for the students personally and for HEIs, the ESRI's report has three main findings.

1. Career guidance within schools could promote enhanced awareness of third-level options elsewhere and this process could be supported by HEIs.
2. A rationale exists to redesign the CAO points equivalence to A Levels given the context in which very few students in Northern Ireland undertake four A Levels, and to reexamine modern foreign language requirements given that relatively few second-level students in Northern Ireland study a foreign language.
3. Given the significance of cost-of-living factors, prevailing accommodation costs and inadequate housing supply are inevitably acting as barriers to students from Northern Ireland and Britain studying in the Republic.

As well as benefiting students and HEIs, report coauthor Merike Darmody suggests: "Student mobility has the potential... to foster greater cohesion between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The study findings highlight the scope for greater cooperation across the island of Ireland in meeting student needs."

Launched by Fine Gael Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD, *Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland* was coauthored by the ESRI's Emer Smyth and Merike Darmody.

Conducted in conjunction with the Department of the Taoiseach's wider Shared Island programme, the ESRI report is one of the relatively few pieces of systematic research focusing on the institutional factors influencing student mobility within Ireland – north and south – and Britain.

The report addresses three research questions:

1. What is the level of student mobility within the island of Ireland and Britain? How has this changed over time, particularly during the pandemic?
2. What factors are associated with student mobility?
3. To what extent is there potential to increase student mobility across the island? Is this a desirable objective from a stakeholder perspective?

Context

A cap on undergraduate places in Northern Ireland's universities poses a challenge by imposing a limit on options, increasing entrance requirements for high demand courses. As a result, more than one-third of undergraduates leave for universities in Britain.

Furthermore, insufficient understanding and perceived complexity of the higher education admissions systems – CAO and UCAS – has a negative impact on student mobility. Similarly, insufficient understanding of the transferability of UK qualifications also acts as a barrier to undergraduate mobility.

At the launch, Minister Harris asserted: "Today's report shows us once more the vital role education plays in strengthening relations north and south. I am pleased to launch this ESRI Shared Island report which provides some really valuable insights on student mobility across this island and also between Ireland and Britain.

"I am committed to working with Higher and Further Education Institutions and with partners in the UK Government and Northern Ireland to make it as easy as possible for students to choose to study in either jurisdiction. This is really important in deepening our connections both north/south and east/west and in ensuring that young people have access to the best possible educational opportunities."

In her response to the report, Terri Scott – a former Pro Vice Chancellor at Ulster University and former President of IT Sligo – concluded: "A joined-up approach to maximising the return on investment in tertiary education, on an all-island basis, will present greater choice, opportunities and employment prospects for the graduates of the future."

TrustEd: A new benchmark for international education



Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the state agency for tertiary education and training in Ireland, has announced TrustEd, a groundbreaking international education mark designed to guarantee the excellence of education received by international learners in higher education (HE) and English-language education (ELE) institutions in Ireland.

Aimed at reinforcing and protecting Ireland's reputation as a premier global education destination, it will set a new national standard for quality provision and learner protection for international learners. With rigorous quality monitoring mechanisms and a focus on safeguarding learner interests, TrustEd reflects QQI's commitment to upholding and enhancing the integrity of Irish education, ensuring that this €2 billion sector remains competitive and prestigious on the world stage.

For learners, the benefit of the mark will be clear: whether enrolling in ELE or HE programmes, the TrustEd mark will indicate that an education provider has met rigorous quality standards and offers

courses leading to qualifications that are respected and recognised worldwide.

In addition to setting high educational standards, TrustEd will be underpinned by a Learner Protection Fund to which all private/independent HE and ELE providers will be required to contribute. The fund will ensure that, in the unlikely event of a programme being discontinued, arrangements will be made

to allow national and international learners to complete their studies with another provider or, where this is not possible, to receive a full refund of their fees.

For Ireland's more than 50 HE and 140 ELE providers, TrustEd offers a distinctive, competitive edge in the global education market. Providers authorised to use the TrustEd mark will have been evaluated against a comprehensive code of practice for either HE or ELE and examined in areas such as ethical marketing and recruitment, learner support services, administrative processes, recognition of qualifications (HE providers), quality assurance of academic programmes (ELE providers), and overall organisational integrity.

In addition, private/independent HE and ELE providers will have undergone a robust due diligence assessment of corporate governance, finances and compliance with the law to assure QQI that they have the capacity and capability to deliver high-quality programmes.


Taken together, these measures will ensure that only providers meeting the highest standards of quality and integrity will be awarded the TrustEd mark. The mark will signify adherence to robust standards and a commitment to delivering excellence in education and learner welfare, fostering trust among prospective international learners.

The TrustEd application process will open in early 2024 with the first cohort of successful applicants expected to receive authorisation in early 2025.

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**Dearbhú Cáilíochta
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann**
Quality and
Qualifications Ireland



Capacity and supports central to education sector

The Department of Education is to prioritise improved capacity, service delivery, and supports for all those with special educational needs and their families in the next two years to 2025.

The Department's Statement of Strategy 2023-2025 sets out the direction and high-level work programme that the Department plans to undertake during the next three years, underpinned by a vision for an education system that is of the highest quality, where every member of educational communities feels valued and supported.

A number of key challenges and opportunities shape the 2023-2025 strategic direction, not least the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has inflated the trend of international migration, requiring effective adaptation of the education system.

As of May 2023, 15,589 Ukrainian pupils had been enrolled in schools across Ireland, with 10,105 accommodated in primary schools and 5,484 in post-primary schools. The higher-than-expected migration has somewhat distorted what was an

existing challenge of managing demographic pressures.

Existing projections were for post-primary enrolments across Ireland to increase by 8 per cent from 2021 and peak in 2024. At primary level, projections were for a steady decrease, reaching a low point in 2023, however, migration trends mean that both levels sit above projections for 2022/2023 school year.

The war has also had an economic impact, increasing inflation and thereby increasing pressure on finances and budgets. The importance of these budgets can be seen in the context that services are not just seeking to deliver business as usual, but to continue to address the impacts of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in relation to the wellbeing of children and young people.

Alongside the provision of measures to address this, the Department says:

"The Department continues to harness the learning from the experience of responding to the pandemic including the potential and importance of digital learning and use of digital technology in education. We must continue to develop the digital capacity of our education system and the digital skills of our students and wider school communities."

Overarching these challenges is that of necessary climate action within the sector, but also for skills provision to ensure a net zero future is possible.

To assist with meeting these challenges and grasping future opportunities, the Department has developed four strategic goals for the period of 2023 to 2025.

High-quality education

The first strategic goal of the Department is to "enable the provision of high-quality education and improve

the learning experience to meet the needs of all children and young people, in schools and early learning and care settings”.

Among the key strategic actions, the Department will seek to deliver is continued support to address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for those children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage.

The Department says that as well as supporting school communities in the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning, and assessment, it will build upon actions to support the supply of teachers and other members of the education workforce, while also supporting the current education workforce to strengthen their capabilities through professional learning.

Opportunity

Strategic actions under the second of the Department’s goals: “Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all children and young people are supported to fulfil their potential”, are also wide-ranging.

Some of the major actions include the implementation of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice and *Cineáltas: Action Plan for Bullying*, to support the mental health and wellbeing of children.

Additionally, the Department says that it will work together with the National Council for Special Education, and the HSE, to plan, design, and deliver an integrated suite of education supports aiming to support the participation and progression of children and young people with special educational needs.

Alongside a pledge to ensure policy in the area of special education is fully up to date following the review of the EPSEN ACT, the Department says that it aims to reduce the retention and

achievement gap between schools in the DEIS programme and non-DEIS schools.

Finally, the statement of strategy says that the Department will continue to provide access to high-quality and inclusive education for children and young people arriving in Ireland, while continuing the process of reconfiguring schools to increase diversity and strengthen the relationship between schools and their local communities.

Leadership

Goal three of the strategy is to: “Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector.”

The strategic actions range from the delivery of an extensive school infrastructure programme through to a school transport scheme, while also developing and delivering shared services and information systems for the Department and the sector.

Excellence

The final goal of the strategy is towards “organisational excellence and innovation”. The Department says that it aims to deliver efficient and effective customer-centric practices that best serve the public, the Government, and the Oireachtas. Additionally, plans are for the enhancement of the strategic planning capability, including horizon scanning and strategic foresight, to support the design and delivery of the education system of the future.

Finally, the Department says that it will continue to monitor its performance, “acknowledging success when achieved, learning when things can be improved, and committing to continuous quality improvement”.



The Voice of
Adult Learning

Rethinking the meaning of “skills” in education policy



In recent years, the primary measure of success in education has centred on skills and employment. This has been particularly evident since the 2007 global recession when, according to adult education advocate Denise Shannon in AONTAS' *Adult Learner Journal*, “the concept of skills replaced lifelong learning as common ground” in Europe.

We can still see this in 2023, designated European Year of Skills by the EU. The stated goal is to “get the right skills for quality jobs [and address] skill shortages in Europe”, and so “empower people to successfully navigate labour market

changes and to fully engage in society and democracy”. In her State of the Union address announcing the Year of Skills, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen noted that “we need an enabling business

environment [and] a workforce with the right skills”.

It is worth asking what this consistent pairing of the word “skills” with the needs of employers means to people who return to education as adults. Does it allow for a conception of success in education that is not solely determined by participation in the labour market?

We at AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, see success in education as measured by how individual lives and communities are improved by learning. We also prioritise the intangible benefits of adult education, such as developing a sense of identity,

belonging, and purpose. In times of great societal change and myriad perceived threats to safety and ways of life – including AI, war, political extremism, disease, and climate change – these intangible elements are essential to maintaining stable societies and actively-engaged citizens.

According to AONTAS' evidence-based research into lifelong learning, published in 2023, major factors that facilitate participation in adult learning include being younger in age, being employed, living in an urban centre, finishing school, and having third-level qualifications. The research found that university graduates are more likely than the sample average to continue with some form of learning. This aligns with the Matthew Effect, which suggests that earlier successful outcomes lead to continued successful outcomes. People from more privileged or economically wealthy backgrounds, with greater access to education, are more likely to continue in or return to education.

We need policies that specifically address factors relevant to people from groups that have been underserved through a failure to recognise and legislate for injustice, inequality, and biases based on social class, intellectual ability, ethnicity, gender, or race. Without policies that take a holistic approach to human experiences and needs, the “skills”-based agenda risks continuing to serve only the educational needs of people who already live in relative comfort and with a relatively high level of education. The European Association for the Education of Adults recently called for a wider perspective to be included in European policy, urging institutions and policymakers to “use the remaining months of the European Year of Skills to promote a holistic understanding of skills that empowers all citizens, regardless of their status on the labour market”.

Moving to this broader understanding of “skills” would be more than a linguistic shift. How we use language shapes our society. When it comes to public policy and education, the words we use are central to how people perceive

“Given the diversity of social and cultural roles needed for our society to function, it is less helpful to classify people as having higher or lower levels of skills, than to see people as having different strengths.”

themselves and others. The use of terms such as “low-skilled workers” often suggests a personal, individual failure or disinterest, rather than recognition that not all people are born with the same opportunities and privileges. Given the diversity of social and cultural roles needed for our society to function, it is less helpful to classify people as having higher or lower levels of skills, than to see people as having different strengths.

This issue has been observed for years. In 2016, David Mallows wrote that “a focus on what adults cannot do is likely to further stigmatise those with poor literacy, numeracy or digital skills and make it less likely that they will either seek or accept support in improving those skills”. It was reflected in a keynote speech by Kathleen Lynch at the 2023 AONTAS Adult Education Summit, who highlighted the growing “tendency to reduce students, and citizens, to customers”.

In Ireland, we still see frequent use of “educationally-disadvantaged adults” and “marginalised people”, without reference to social and political causal factors that contribute to this. Recognition of these factors is especially urgent now, given the homelessness and cost-of-living crises and the increase of disenfranchisement and far-right activity in Ireland.

There are signs of progress, and moves towards a more inclusive approach to education. These include the new Unified Tertiary Education System, launched last

year which allows people to move from adult education to higher education through a joint course. There is also an increased focus on the target groups identified in the National Access Plan; annual funding through the Reach Fund (for which AONTAS was a key advocate); and new funding for participants in online and part-time courses. This means that, for the first time, adults from under-resourced communities can benefit from specific support in accessing education.

These measures show gradual changes are happening to meet different needs, and perhaps to recognise the (often unconscious) socio-economic discrimination embedded in current structures. A pertinent change to the way we use terms such as skills, disadvantage, and educational success should accompany them. We in AONTAS are committed to advocating and lobbying for these kinds of changes, and raising awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society.

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Significant change in Senior Cycle

An updated programme for Senior Cycle redevelopment will see the shelving of plans for teacher-based assessment.

Teacher assessments shelved

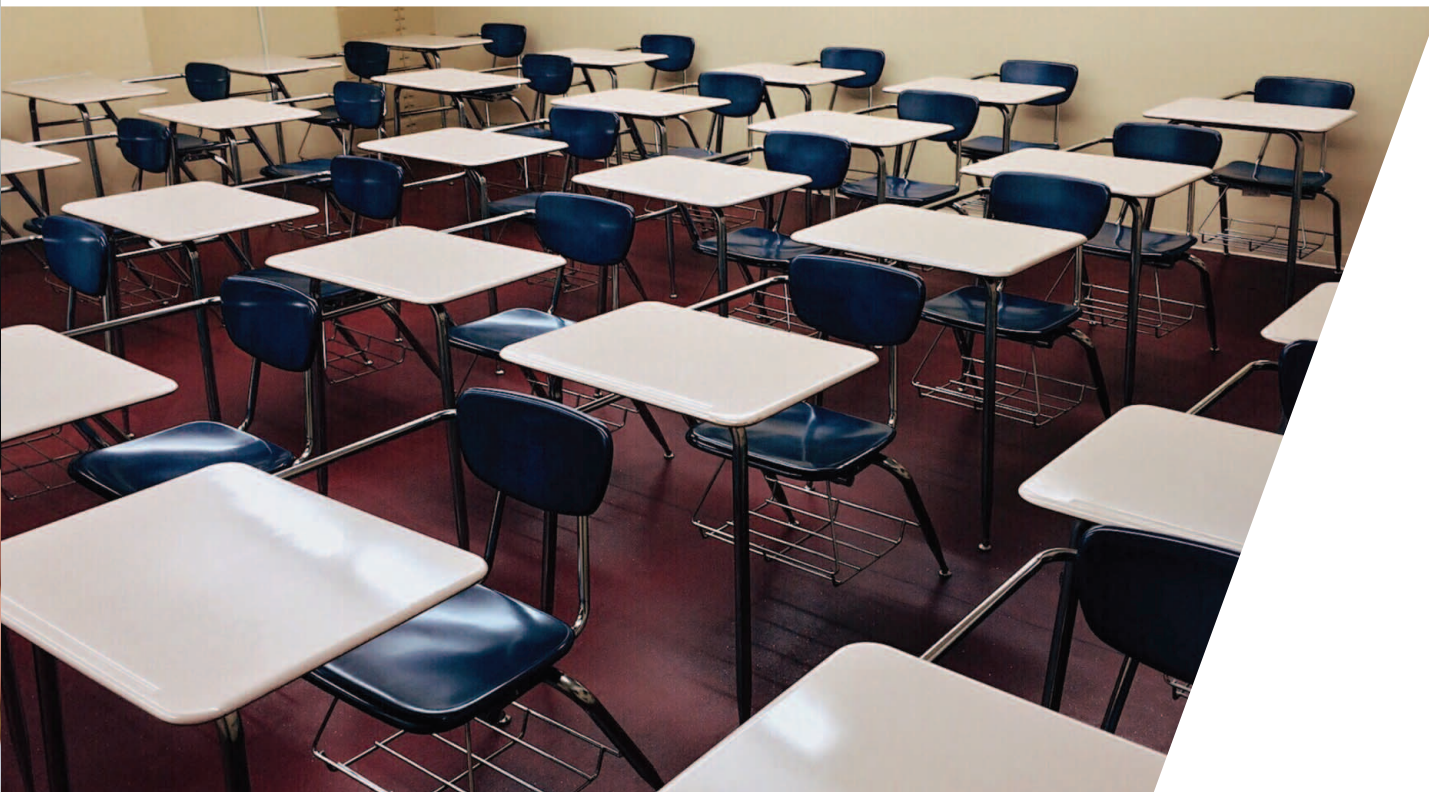
Minister for Education Norma Foley TD announced the update to the Senior Cycle redevelopment programme in September 2023, with plans for teacher-based assessment shelved. Long a source of friction between secondary teachers and government, Foley has backtracked on plans she had touted as recently as February 2023 to introduce teacher-based assessment components worth 40 per cent of final marks into every Leaving Certificate subject, citing the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) technology as her reason for doing so. Fears that students could use AI technologies such as ChatGPT to generate essays on their behalf have previously been raised.

On 4 November 2023, Foley told *eolas Magazine* at the *Fianna Fáil ard fheis* that that there remains a “learning

curve” to be overcome among decision-makers as to better understand AI.

“I am particularly conscious of the more recent accelerated evolution and growth in generative AI, and I understand there is a need to explore the opportunities afforded by these developments in an educational context, as well as the challenges they might present,” the Minister said when announcing the new assessment model. “With that in mind I have asked the SEC that further research would be commissioned on the potential role and impact of generative artificial intelligence in teacher-based assessment in particular. While this work is ongoing, I have decided to progress additional and practical components that will be externally assessed by the State Examinations Commission (SEC).”

Practically, this means that revised



curricula across seven subjects – including biology, physics, chemistry, and business – will now include non-exam assessment elements such as essays or project work, as in subjects such as history before them, these new components will be marked by the SEC rather than by the examined students’ teachers. The change in plans marks another reversal of course in Foley’s attempts to reform the Senior Cycle examinations following her abandonment of plans to move Paper 1 of both Irish and English to the end of fifth year.

Welcoming the decision to revert assessments to the SEC, the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) said that the decision was “both sensible and inevitable”. ASTI President Geraldine O’Brien said: “The ASTI had expressed its serious concerns to the Minister that her announcement in March 2022 contained significant change proposals which were not part of the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report to the Minister. Specifically, teacher-based assessment was not contained in the NCCA’s recommendations to the Minister.

“The ASTI also emphasised to the Minister the need to protect the integrity of the Leaving Cert and to ensure assessment of students for state

certification purposes is based on fairness for all students and trust in exams system. Today’s announcement by the Minister validates these concerns. In this regard, it is clear that meaningful and continuing collaboration with the second-level teacher unions, that recognises and acknowledges the voice of classroom practitioners, is vital to ensure that future Senior Cycle change is educationally sound.”

New subjects

Also notable within Foley’s statement is the accelerated roll out of new and revised Leaving Cert subjects. Chief among the revised subjects will be biology, physics, chemistry, and business, while two new subjects will be introduced into the Senior Cycle: drama, film and theatre studies and climate action and sustainable development. Originally due to be rolled out at the beginning of the 2027/28 academic year, these new and revised subjects will instead now begin at the beginning of the 2025/26 academic year. A second tranche of revised subjects will then begin with the 2026/27 academic years, with further tranches set to be introduced annually from then on.

Central to the revision of these already existing subjects will be the introduction of coursework and non-exam-based assessment elements such as essays

and research projects, meaning that students will no longer sit exams that account for 100 per cent of their overall mark, an area within the Senior Cycle structure that has long been criticised. Initially due to be piloted in seven schools before its wider rollout in 2027/28, Foley has now taken the decision to skip the pilot phase and introduce the changes throughout the Senior Cycle.

Speaking upon the launch of the update programme of reform, Foley said: “The student experience has always been central to the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle. Over the past two years, I have visited hundreds of schools and listened to the experiences and feedback from Leaving Certificate classes, and it was unanimous that what our students want, and need is for broader choice, reduced pressure and they want it now...

“In this new phase of the programme, there will be an accelerated national roll out of the revised subject specifications for the seven existing Leaving Certificate established subjects within tranche one in September 2025, two years sooner than previously announced. Each tranche that follows will be rolled out nationally on an annual basis, ensuring further renewal at a greater pace.”



Colleen Dube, Chief Executive Officer,
The National Adult Literacy Agency

Creating a literacy-friendly Ireland

The National Adult Literacy Agency Chief Executive Officer, Colleen Dube, speaks about adapting their services to meet learners' needs, collaborating with a wide range of public sector organisations on their plain English requirements and advocating to government on behalf of literacy learners.

Learn with NALA

In 2023, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) shared its knowledge and expertise with a wide range of adult learners and public sector organisations to enhance literacy skills and awareness in Ireland.

We are proud to say that since 2000, NALA has provided personalised, confidential one-to-one tuition, flexible independent learning opportunities with recognition of prior learning (RPL) and national certification options to adult literacy learners. Over the last two decades, we have supported 5,050 learners with 42,637 one-to-one personalised over-the-phone tuition sessions and 14,428 learners to achieve 48,327 Quality and Qualifications Ireland minor awards in literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy at level 2 and 3.

In March 2020, we launched, *Learn with NALA*, our new website and brand, which continues to offer adults the opportunity to develop their skills and gain national qualifications on a state-of-the-art learning management system.

A key aspect of *Learn with NALA* is our tutoring service which provides personalised one-to-one tuition in literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy to adult learners. Our aim is to accommodate the learner as best we can, so tuition is delivered by NALA's adult literacy educators through 30-minute calls once a week over the phone or virtually through Zoom. Learners receive materials after each session by post or email which they can review and work through in their own time.

The *Learn with NALA* service is entirely free, confidential, and designed to give

adult literacy learners a positive educational experience, build their confidence and motivate them to continue their learning journey.

We are currently completing a research report analysing the profile, activity, progression, and feedback from *Learn with NALA* users between March 2020 and November 2022. Some key findings are that 62 per cent of our online learners are between 18-45 years of age, 54 per cent are women, and 56 per cent are independent learners rather than learners in educational settings.

Learner feedback allows us to adjust and improve *Learn with NALA* as needed. The following quote from one learner is an example of positive feedback we receive:

"When I was isolated, I saw NALA online and I went for it. It has given me great

confidence and I work on it through the iPad. I just felt it was something I was doing for myself as I fell through the cracks in school and probably at home as well. I really did enjoy it and got so much from it. I did Level 2 computers and I think it is a wonderful course.”

It is evident from these findings and feedback that *Learn with NALA* is making a valuable contribution to Ireland’s ambitions for life-long learning, social inclusion, and upskilling.

Plain English editing and training

One in six people in Ireland has difficulty understanding written text such as publications and websites. Our plain English editing and training service is delivered collaboratively so that organisations can make their information and services more accessible to people with these literacy needs.

As Angela Denning, CEO of the Courts Service, stated plain English lifts “unseen access barriers to justice”. Throughout 2023 we worked very closely with the Courts Service as part of its Modernisation Programme to make their web and other content more accessible. We also contributed to its Civil Forum on projects such as the Four Courts video and met their network of plain English champions regularly during the year.

We also collaborated with the Department of Education in 2023, who said the following: “We pride ourselves on our commitment to plain English. This year we worked with NALA’s Plain English Editing Service to further improve how we communicate with our stakeholders. Our subject matter expertise combined with NALA’s input greatly helped us improve the quality and clarity of our information. Our team learned a lot from this collaboration and continue to apply these learnings in all our communications.”

Plain English training is also a key focus of our work by offering a culture change approach in a mix of bespoke training days and mentoring sessions. In 2023, we trained over 1,300 staff from over 50 organisations such as the Pensions Authority, the European Commission, and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland.

We have worked with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications to train over 80 staff in using plain language. We also have a

“When I was isolated, I saw NALA online and I went for it. It has given me great confidence and I work on it through the iPad. I just felt it was something I was doing for myself as I fell through the cracks in school and probably at home as well. I really did enjoy it and got so much from it. I did Level 2 computers and I think it is a wonderful course.”

Learn With NALA, Learner

close relationship with the Citizens Information Board and their Digital Content team. In 2023, we led over 20 training sessions and content critiques where those team members review each other’s work in a collaborative setting.

Our LinkedIn Plain English Network now has close to 400 members from across the public and private sector. It is a vibrant community of practice where you can learn from your peers, share resources, and learn about what is new in the world of plain English and clear communication.

One recent participant on a plain English training course said:

“[It was] very helpful to have the course online as I could participate while working from home and there were no office distractions, it was a lot to take in so two sessions was ideal. The exercises were very helpful and useful to complete them in a group setting. The facilitator was excellent and approachable.”

Policy submissions to government

In 2023, NALA drafted over 23 policy submissions and survey responses to the Irish Government’s calls for consultation. Policy submissions are essential to maintain the profile of literacy at national level, to advocate on behalf of literacy learners and apply our expertise to relevant policy areas. Our evidence-based submissions draw on our own and international research. They are intended to have impact by reminding policy makers of the extent of literacy needs in Ireland and recommending actions to address unmet literacy, numeracy and

digital literacy needs in the design and delivery of public services.

Some key submissions from 2023 include, the *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy Consultation*, *QQI Broad Standards*, *QQI Online and Blended Learning Guidelines*, *Financial Literacy Strategy*, the *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy*, and the *Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science examination of the Future of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) in Irish Education*.

Our recent submission to the consultation for a new *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy* was informed by our outreach work with Traveller organisations. These kinds of relationships enhance our understanding of certain communities’ experiences and help us to advocate effectively in solidarity with them. This submission highlighted the connection between discrimination and disadvantage in school settings and literacy challenges in adult life. It was based on the principle of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, that policy must address the needs of the “furthest behind first”.

In 2024, we will continue this work along with collaborating on the Government’s *Adult Literacy for Life* strategy to create a literacy friendly Ireland. Please do not hesitate to get in touch for more information.

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Irish students best performers in reading literacy in OECD and EU

The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report has found that Ireland's 15-year-olds rank first in both the EU and the OECD for reading literacy and second among the 81 states surveyed.

Reading literacy

Students in Ireland achieved a mean reading literacy score of 516 from PISA, an OECD education project. This score exceeds the OECD average by 40 points and only one country – Singapore, noted as “significantly higher” – recorded a higher score. Four states – Japan, the Republic of Korea, Chinese Taipei (Taiwan), and Estonia – recorded scores that “did not differ significantly” from Ireland’s and 75 states recorded scores significantly lower than Ireland’s.

Ireland’s 2022 mean reading score is 2.1 points lower than its 2018 score, although this is said to be “not statistically significant”, especially set against an OECD average of a 10.3-point decline in the same period. The percentage of students in Ireland performing at the lowest levels of reading literacy (11.4 per cent) is less

than half of the OECD average of 26.3 per cent, while the proportion performing at the highest level (10.3 per cent) also outperforms the OECD average of 7.2 per cent.

Female students “significantly outperformed” their male counterparts in reading literacy testing, a pattern that was repeated in all but two (China and Costa Rica) of the states surveyed. However, the gender difference in Ireland was reduced from 23.2 point in 2018 to 18.3 points in 2022, meaning that Ireland once again outperforms the OECD average of 24.2 points. Ireland’s gender gap in reading literacy is more pronounced at the lower rung of scores; 14 per cent of males perform below baseline level compared to 8 per cent of females, while 11.2 per cent of females achieve the highest proficiency levels, in comparison with 9.4 per cent of males.

Mathematics

Students in Ireland ranked 11th overall in mathematics, a placement 10 places higher than 2018. Ireland also ranks seventh among OECD member states, and third among EU member states. The mean score of 491.6 achieved outperformed the OECD average of 472.4, with nine states said to have performed significantly higher than Ireland, eight states said to have not differed significantly from Ireland in their performance, and 63 states said to have performed significantly less well.

The mean score of 491.6 is “a significant” 8.0 points lower than Ireland’s 2018 score, although even this significant decrease is less than the decrease of 14.9 points in the OECD mean score; 41 of the 72 states surveyed that can compare 2018 and 2022 results showed decreases in their mean mathematics score, with “many

cases” showing drops of over 20 points. 19 per cent of students in Ireland performed at the lowest levels of proficiency in mathematics, a rate significantly lower than the OECD average of 31.1 per cent and only bettered by seven states. However, just 7.2 per cent of Irish students performed at the highest levels, a proportion lower than the OECD average of 8.7 per cent that is bettered by 28 states.

Male students outperformed their female counterparts by almost 13 points in Ireland, a rate that is larger than the OECD average, with males outperforming females by 9.1 points internationally. The results show little difference between males and females performing below baseline proficiency – 18.5 per cent and 19.6 per cent respectively – but males are significantly more likely than females to reach the highest level of proficiency, with the OECD recording a rate of 9.6 per cent in comparison with the female rate of 4.7 per cent.

Science

Ireland’s students rank 12th overall in their performance in science, an improvement that sees them climb the rankings by 10 places when compared to 2018. Ireland also ranks eighth among OECD member states and third among EU member states. The mean score of 503.8 recorded by Ireland is significantly higher than the OECD average of 484.6. Nine states are said to have performed significantly higher than Ireland, eight did not significantly differ, and 63 performed significantly worse.

The mean score of 503.8 is 7.7 points higher than Ireland’s score in 2018; while science scores were said to have remained broadly stable, the OECD average did record a drop of 2.4 points. Ireland recorded 15.6 per cent of student performing beneath baseline proficiency in science, a rate much lower than the OECD average of 24.5 per cent and one only bettered by eight states. Ireland’s rate of students performing at the highest level in science was exactly in line with the OECD average, 7.5 per cent. This rate shows improvement from 2018, when a decrease from 2015 was recorded, meaning that Ireland’s 2022 rate has now realigned with its 2015 rate.

There was no significant gender difference recorded in overall science performance in Ireland. Although male students achieved a higher mean science score than their female counterparts, the gap of 5.6 points is deemed “not statistically significant”. In its report, *Education in a Dynamic World: the performance of students in Ireland in PISA 2022*, the Educational Research Centre states that it is “noteworthy” that there was an increase of about 11 points for males in science on average, but no significant change among females. 16.1 per cent of males and 15 per cent of females were found to be performing under baseline proficiency, while 9.5 per cent of males and 5.5 of females reached the top levels of proficiency.

Reading proficiency

Overall (81 countries)	OECD (37)	EU (26)
1. Singapore	1. Ireland	1. Ireland
2. Ireland	2. Japan	2. Estonia
3. Japan	3. Republic of Korea	3. Finland
4. Republic of Korea	4. Estonia	4. Denmark
5. Chinese Taipei	5. Canada	5. Poland
6. Estonia	6. United States	
7. Macao (China)	7. New Zealand	
8. Canada	8. Australia	
Ireland up from 8th in 2018	Ireland up from 4th in 2018	Ireland up from 3rd in 2018

Science proficiency

Overall	OECD	EU
1. Singapore	1. Japan	1. Estonia
2. Japan	2. Republic of Korea	2. Finland
3. Macao (China)	3. Estonia	3. Ireland
4. Chinese Taipei	4. Canada	
5. Republic of Korea	5. Finland	
6. Estonia	6. Australia	
7. Hong Kong (China)	7. New Zealand	
8. Canada	8. Ireland	
9. Finland		
10. Australia		
11. New Zealand		
12. Ireland		
Ireland up from 12th in 2018	Ireland up from 17th in 2018	Ireland up from 11th in 2018

Mathematics proficiency

Overall	OECD	EU
1. Singapore	1. Japan	1. Estonia
2. Macao (China)	2. Korea	2. The Netherlands
3. Chinese Taipei	3. Estonia	3. Ireland
4. Hong Kong (China)	4. Switzerland	
5. Japan	5. Canada	
6. Republic of Korea	6. The Netherlands	
7. Estonia	7. Ireland	
8. Switzerland		
9. Canada		
10. The Netherlands		
11. Ireland		
Ireland up from 21st in 2018	Ireland up from 16th in 2018	Ireland up from 11th in 2018



#eTwinning

Léargas: Opportunities in education

Léargas, Ireland's national agency for Erasmus+ and other EU programmes, supports organisations and individuals to access funding and to engage in European initiatives like eTwinning, EPALE, and training and cooperation activities (TCAs).

Erasmus+ funding opportunities

There are two main funding avenues available across school, adult education and VET sectors. Both avenues that enable teachers, facilitators, learners, and staff to participate in international exchanges, share best practices, and develop impactful projects that benefit communities.

Key Action 1: Mobility projects (international learning exchanges)

Mobility projects are essentially learning exchanges where participants travel to another country to train, job shadow, or learn. The organisation or school applies for funding to prepare and manage the project, including costs of travel and participation.

Key Action 2: Partnership projects (collaboration with international partners)

A partnership project is where an organisation works with other relevant groups in different countries to exchange ideas or to develop, transfer or implement innovative practices.

Funding is available for Irish organisations, institutions, companies, and research organisations that are active in adult education, school education, vocational education and training, or youth.

Visit the Léargas website at www.leargas.ie to find out more about each key action and the possibilities for your specific sector. The next application round closes on 20 February 2024.



Exploring pathways to Erasmus+ and building capacities

Léargas also manage other European initiatives which can serve as a pathway to Erasmus+, allowing participants to dip their toe into European programmes and exchanges before undertaking an E+ project.

These initiatives are also great for building capacity and enhancing ongoing Erasmus+ projects. They provide valuable forums, innovative ideas, and educational resources that enrich learning experiences and enable networking and partner finding. Participation in any of the below will help organisations develop the skills and competencies to deliver an impactful Erasmus+ project.

EPALE – Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe

EPALE (Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe) is an initiative funded by the European Commission that serves as an online platform for professionals and stakeholders in the field of adult education. EPALE aims to facilitate knowledge sharing, networking, and collaboration among individuals and organisations involved in adult learning across Europe.

This platform provides a space for adult educators, trainers, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to access and share resources, best practices, and insights related to adult education. EPALE promotes the exchange of ideas, promotes professional development, and supports the continuous improvement of adult learning practices. It plays a pivotal role in enhancing the quality and effectiveness of adult education efforts throughout Europe.

To learn more visit www.leargas.ie/epale/

eTwinning – the digital platform connecting schools in Europe

eTwinning is funded by the European Union and is a free online platform connecting

more than one million teachers across Europe. It supports primary and post-primary schools to foster digital collaboration and partnerships among schools across Europe. It provides a safe and secure online platform for educators and students to connect and work together on educational projects in any curricular area, using information and communication technology.

The programme aims to promote cross-cultural understanding, innovative teaching practices, and the exchange of knowledge and experiences. It serves as a valuable tool for schools to initiate and develop international collaborations, enriching the educational experience for students and educators alike.

To learn more visit www.leargas.ie/etwinning/

Training and cooperation activities

Across sectors, Léargas organise short training courses and cooperation activities, both in Ireland and in other countries. Many are open to newcomers, so you do not need to be part of an existing Erasmus+ project. Activities cover a range of themes, from mental health and anti-racism to digital innovation, inclusion practices and more.

To learn more visit www.leargas.ie/training-and-events/

Léargas is the Irish agency that manages national and international programmes in youth work, education, and training, including Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps and eTwinning.

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Education attainment in Ireland

Statistics have been compiled from the *Education Attainment Thematic Report 2023*, released by the CSO on 13 December 2023.

The **25-34-year-old** age group has the highest level of third level attainment at **61%**, followed by the **35-44-year-old** group at **60%**.

In Q2 2023, **females aged 25-64** years old with a third level qualification were nearly **three times more likely (85%)** to be employed compared with females with a primary education or no formal education (**30%**).

Females across **all age groupings** (25-64 years) had higher levels of third level attainment than males.

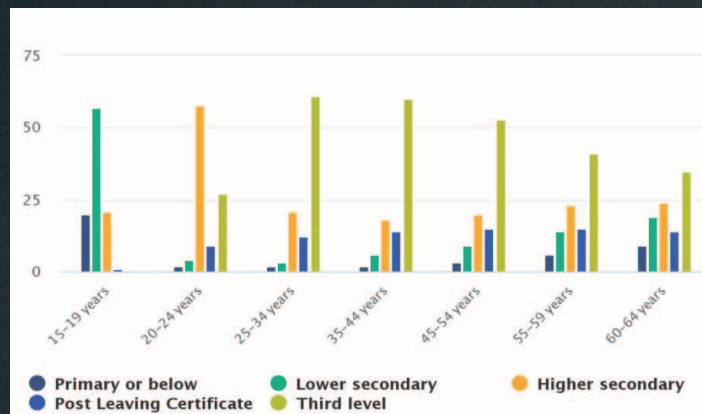
Males aged 25-64 years old with a third level education had an employment rate of **92%** compared with males with a primary education only or no formal education at **49%**.

In Dublin, **62%** of those aged between **25-64** had a third level qualification compared with **45%** in the south-east.

Around **3%** of people aged between **25-64** had only a primary school education or no formal education.

In 2022, Ireland was well **above the EU-27** average for third level attainment across **all age groupings** (20% difference in each), except for the 55-64 year old grouping showing a difference of **12%**.

Highest level of education attained by persons aged 15-64, classified by age group, Q2 2023



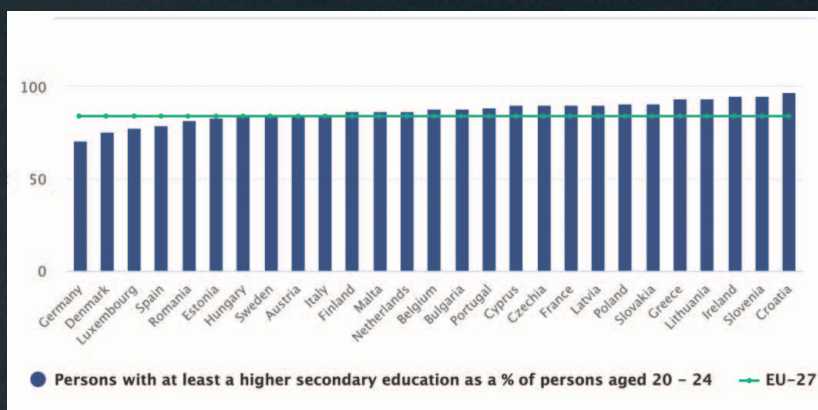
Education level and labour force

Employment rates increased as level of educational attainment **increased**, with this relationship evident in both sexes.

Over eight in 10 (**85%**) females aged 25-64 years old with a **third level qualification** were **employed**, compared to three in 10 (30%) females with a **primary education only or no formal education**.

Males aged 25-64 years old with a third level qualification had an employment rate of **92%**, dropping to **49%** for those with a primary education only or no formal education.

Percentage of persons aged 20-24 with at least a higher secondary education in EU member states, 2022

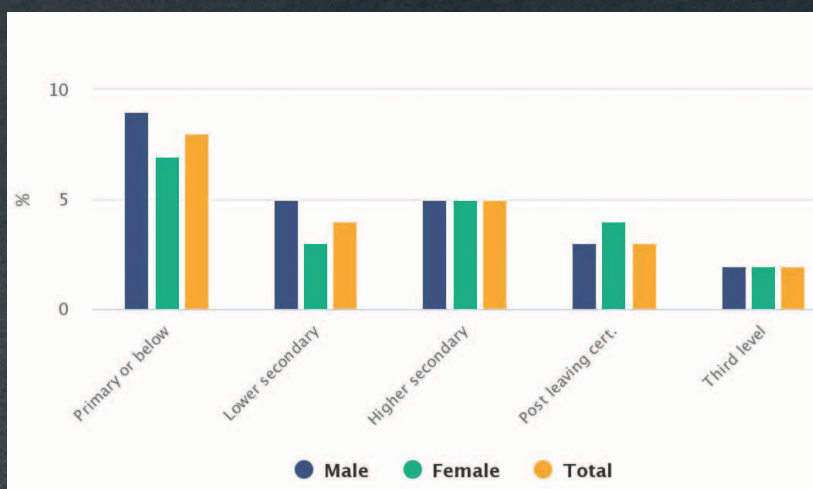


Education level and labour force

In 2022, **84%** of all **20-24 year olds** in the EU27 member states had attained at least a higher secondary level of education.

Ireland had a rate of **95%** of **20-24 year olds** with at least higher secondary level of education, ranking the country second behind Croatia among EU member states.

Unemployment rates of persons aged 25-64, classified by sex and highest level of education attained, Q2 2023





Supporting students all the way

Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) is Ireland's national awarding authority for further and higher education grants.

A business unit of City of Dublin ETB, SUSI administers student funding in line with legislation set out by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in the Student Support Act 2011 and annual Student Grant Schemes and Student Support Regulations. Established in 2012 to replace 66 regional awarding authorities, SUSI delivered a centralised, single, awarding authority for student funding. SUSI's mission is to empower students to transform their lives through tertiary education and since 2012, has processed over 1.16 million applications, awarded over 880,000 grants to students and paid almost €3.5 billion in funding.

In recent years, as well as implementing the most legislative changes in over a decade, SUSI's commitment to students increased further as its remit expanded beyond the Student Grant Scheme. SUSI now administers the PLC Bursary for Displaced Persons Ukraine Scheme and the International Protection Student Scheme. In addition, SUSI provides assistance to the higher education institutions in delivering the 1916 Bursary and processes applications for funding for

the new tertiary education programmes. SUSI is also the paying authority for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's scholarships and bursaries including the All-Ireland Scholarship.

Commenting on SUSI's evolution over the past 12 years Philip Connolly, SUSI's Director of Services says: "SUSI is committed to delivering continuous service improvements for students. We are always exploring ways to innovate and enhance our service so that students can quickly and easily access funding. These improvements are achieved through a focus on our people, our systems, our processes, and our provision of accessible information."

Connolly adds: "The development of our people is key to delivering a quality service to our students." As a people-focused organisation, SUSI identified the need for a dedicated unit to support staff development, tailor training programmes, and recruit new team members. This resulted in the establishment of an organisation development unit in 2019, which has helped ensure SUSI has a



strong team fully enabled with the skills and knowledge required to support its students. The organisation's work in this area was highlighted last year when SUSI received gold certification in the National Standards Authority of Ireland's (NSAI) Excellence Through People scheme.

Connolly continues: "Consistent development of our systems has supported both the delivery of an online application system as well as a centralised system for the swift assessment of grant applications."

Recognising students as predominantly digital natives, SUSI created an online student portal. The portal provides students with a convenient way to submit their application as well as enabling them to view correspondence, track the progress of their application and where applicable, view the status of their grant payments.

SUSI also created a centralised online system for the swift and consistent assessment of grant applications. This system drives efficiency in the assessment process improving the time it takes for a student to receive a decision on their application. In academic year 2023/24, the mean time for the initial assessment of an application was just under one week with the time being just over one week for assessment of returned documentation.

Data sharing agreements with government bodies such as the Department of Social Protection, Revenue Commissioners and CAO have also supported the delivery of a streamlined application process by reducing the need for students to send documentation to SUSI.

In 2022, SUSI embarked on a pilot project to explore the benefits of robotic process automation (RPA). As a result, the number of manual tasks within SUSI processes has decreased allowing team members to focus on other tasks which support the student.

Securing the direct payment of the grant to students' bank accounts via electronic fund transfers has removed the need for cheques and helped ensure eligible students receive their payment as quickly as possible.

"As the work we do is based on legislation, we understand the need to make information about funding readily available to students in a format that is easy to access and understand," says Connolly.

SUSI redeveloped its website last year with a design that has user experience at its core. This new website has helped to drive awareness of student funding by giving students access to key information including eligibility criteria, income thresholds, payment schedules, and more. The addition of the eligibility indicator means students can quickly check if they might be eligible for funding.

SUSI's responsive support desk has ensured that students and the public can contact SUSI with any questions they have about student funding and the application process. SUSI's team of access officers provide assistance and guidance to persons with disabilities throughout the SUSI application process and act as the direct point of contact for the applicant during their time as a SUSI service user. While the dedicated Stakeholder Helpdesk and annual stakeholder training enables

SUSI to support students through a number of key stakeholders including public representatives, HEI access officers, and students union representatives.

As well as meeting students and parents in person at events such as college open days and career fairs, SUSI also hosts its own virtual event for students and their families. Here students can find out information about student funding as well as share any questions they have with the SUSI team.

Looking ahead to the future, SUSI's commitment to students is stronger than ever. Connolly concludes: "Our five-year strategy places the student at the centre of everything we do through building an agile organisation and harnessing cutting-edge digital systems. We will proactively lead the advances necessary to further develop service delivery for students in the form of enhanced user experience, increased self-service, and improved responsiveness. We look forward to broadening our supports to more students in the years to come."

Student Support Desk

T: 0818 888 777

E: support@susi.ie

W: www.susi.ie





Stuart Hobbs, SSE Airtricity; Marion Jammet, Irish Green Building Council; Ciaran Byrne, SEAI; and Clive Ahern, Dublin City Council.

The Irish Retrofitting Conference 2023, in partnership with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland and sponsored by SSE Airtricity, took place on Thursday 26 October at the Dunboyne Castle Hotel, County Meath.

Over 150 delegates met for the third annual get-together to discuss the Government’s new area-based and one-stop-shop approach to retrofitting at least 500,000 homes to a B2 energy rating by 2030. The conference discussed key points such as progress to date and any learning from the implementation of the programme.

Delegates in attendance heard from speakers, both visiting and local, from organisations including the Irish Green Building Council; Dublin City Council; Clúid Housing; University College Dublin; Connect Housing; Arthur Cox; and the Health Service Executive.



Terry Boyle and Helen Williams from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland.



Shane Toye, Mitsubishi Electric Ireland with David Calt and Austin Nevin, Chadwicks.



A delegate visits the Mount Lucas exhibition stand.



Philip Coleman, Fingal County Council tries WWETB virtual reality experience.



Lisa Ryan, University College Dublin; Paul O'Brien, Solar Energy Solutions; Clare O'Connor, Friends of the Earth; and Paul O'Donnell, Heat Pump Association of Ireland take part in the panel discussion.



Ciara Dooley from Arthur Cox speaks at the conference.