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A large, dark purple circle with a white border, centered on the page. Inside the circle, the words "Education" and "report" are written in white, stacked vertically.

Education report

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Education has an opportunity to shape a more inclusive and competitive future



Ali O'Sullivan, Consulting Director and Head of Education for Grant Thornton Ireland.

Ireland's education system is changing, shaped by forces that extend far beyond the classroom.

The country operates in an open, globally connected economy that is being disrupted by artificial intelligence, shifting demographics, evolving labour markets, and growing demands on public services. These shifts are no longer abstract. They show up in how workplaces are organised, in the skills employers look for, and in the

expectations people have of public services.

The Government's *Future Forty* analysis clearly highlights these trends, noting the need for a workforce that can adapt quickly and contribute confidently in a world where technology and global competition will influence almost every sector.

At the same time, Irish society is becoming more diverse. Young people present with a broader mix of learning profiles. Adults return to education at different stages of their lives. Families bring a wider range of cultural and educational backgrounds. This evolution reflects a society that is more open, more complex and more ambitious about ensuring that education works for everyone.

Policy has begun to shift to match this reality. The Department of Education and Youth's Strategy for 2025 to 2028 places inclusion, digital competence and flexible pathways at its core. These ambitions are backed by €7.55 billion in capital investment between 2026 and 2030, which will modernise buildings, broaden provision and deliver more than 14,000 additional places in special classes and special schools.

Policy, investment, and population change are pushing the system to evolve. The direction is there; delivery is the test. The challenge and opportunity are in turning these ambitions into the everyday lived experience of students and teachers.

A different kind of classroom

Ireland's learner profile has changed in ways that reflect wider positive shifts in society. There is more recognition that many children need tailored support. More families expect a broader set of options. More adults see learning as something that happens across a lifetime rather than at a single stage.

National data reinforces this. More than 972,000 children and young people are enrolled in primary and post-primary schools, supported by almost 3,000 special classes and a steady increase in specialist staff. The demand for accessible, well-designed educational environments is rising because more

children are being identified, supported and included than ever before.

Further education has also expanded. Colleges and training providers now offer flexible routes, shorter courses and skills-focused programmes that fit around work and family life. People move in and out of education as modern careers require. This broader approach values practical, applied and community-based education alongside traditional academic routes, helping Ireland remain competitive while providing real choices.

Technology is also reshaping what learners need. AI is not only transforming how people work and the skills they require, but it is also prompting educational institutions to adapt their programmes. This raises questions about how to responsibly integrate new tools and content, and how best to support staff. How education responds to AI matters. Learners are preparing for jobs that will look very different from today's.

Designing for everyone

Inclusion is now a design principle for a modern, competitive system, not a separate strand. The Department's strategy links inclusion to decisions on curriculum, buildings, teacher support, wellbeing and data, shaping how the system grows and how resources are prioritised.

This is not about "accommodating" diverse needs. It is about recognising that diversity is part of Ireland's present and future. A more inclusive system is also more effective and economically resilient. When learners see themselves reflected in the system, they participate more confidently. When supports are joined up, they achieve more. When pathways are clear, people stay engaged throughout their lives.

The practical steps that create inclusion are often small and very concrete: admissions processes that are easy to follow; assessments that happen early enough to be useful; clear communication between schools, families and services; buildings designed for accessibility; support services that talk to one another; and data that follows the learner rather than sitting in separate systems. These details create a system that feels navigable rather than overwhelming. When they are in place,



the impact shows up in confidence, attendance and progression.

Meanwhile, the nature of work is shifting. AI is automating routine tasks, changing job profiles and requiring new forms of digital fluency. At the same time, the skills that matter most are the ones humans do best: critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration and curiosity.

Curriculum reform is moving in this direction. Digital competence is a priority, and higher education is updating programmes for emerging industries. Ireland's current capital investment aligns physical spaces with modern learning. When buildings are designed for actual teaching and learning needs, supportive, flexible and digital-first environments follow.

How change becomes real

Policy speaks to ambition. Investment shows commitment. But change becomes real only when people experience the system as it is meant to work.

That happens when a child moves between supports without delay. When a parent understands their options without needing to navigate a maze. When a

teacher uses digital tools naturally, without extra administrative strain. These moments often look small from the outside. They feel significant to the people living them.

I did not begin my career expecting to work in education. What changed was a pivotal project that exposed me to the realities faced by learners, families and staff striving to succeed within complex systems. The delivery of this project was not a minor task, it was a meaningful initiative that demonstrated how clear processes, accurate information and coordinated support can transform experiences and outcomes. That project shaped my understanding of the sector and its potential for impact. It opened a door into a sector that felt purposeful in a very tangible way, and that experience has stayed with me.

Over time, my work has spanned schools, colleges, universities, public agencies and government departments. That breadth has shown me how decisions in one area affect many others. Curriculum reform relies on digital tools that need to function reliably. Support models depend on funding and staffing. The implications of national policies are felt at the local level, in busy offices and classrooms. Large ambitions only succeed when small details align.





“Education has an opportunity to shape a more inclusive and competitive future.”

Educational work is now multidisciplinary. Teaching relies on digital infrastructure, inclusion in coordinated support, and digital transformation in understanding behaviour as much as technology. Finance, HR, operations and design are all essential.

What becomes obvious across the system is that real change depends on the operational spine of education. Consistent processes, good information, clear decision-making and strong communication are the daily mechanics that determine whether a system feels supportive or complicated. When operations are strong, reform becomes achievable. When they are unclear, even well-designed policies can falter.

Thinking bigger

Education reform now requires broader skills. Curriculum, digital infrastructure, staffing, wellbeing and investment all interact. Organisations and advisers must expand their expertise to address these interconnected shifts.

At Grant Thornton, integrating specialists across education, finance, technology, and organisational design has created a more rounded approach. Solutions have to address funding, digital tools, the workforce, the learner experience, and community impact together if they are to last.

One of the biggest shifts in our work over the past year has been the move towards deeper international collaboration. Since Grant Thornton Ireland became part of a wider multinational platform, there is more opportunity to work alongside colleagues whose perspectives are shaped by other systems and contexts. That has changed how I think about reform and what I see as possible.

Every country is wrestling with its own version of similar questions. How do you prepare learners for an economy shaped by AI? How do you build capacity fast enough to keep pace with demographic change? How do you consistently design supports that reach a more diverse population? How do you stay competitive while keeping education human and accessible?

These international approaches underscore a key point: the ability to adapt, learn from others, and make thoughtful, locally tailored decisions will define Ireland's educational future. As reform progresses, the task is to stay open to new ideas while ensuring the system remains responsive, inclusive and competitive. The road ahead is complex, but through collective effort, practical focus and innovative thinking, the promise of a stronger, more accessible education system can become a lasting reality for all.

Being part of a multinational platform also influences how we work as a team. It has brought together people with expertise in technology, finance, organisational design, behavioural insight and public-sector delivery. That mix has made our approach more practical and more grounded. It reflects the direction in which education itself is moving. No single discipline can carry the weight of modern reform. Solutions now need to account for funding, data flows, digital tools, workforce capacity and learner experience, all at the same time.

What I value most in this global work is the shared ambition. Everywhere, people

want education systems that are more inclusive, more flexible and more resilient in the face of change. Being part of an international platform means learning from those efforts, sharing our own experience and supporting Irish organisations with a view that is both local and global. It gives me confidence that Ireland can not only respond to change, but shape its own future in a way that matches who we are becoming as a society.

Ireland's next step

Ireland is more diverse, more connected and more dynamic than at any point in recent memory. The economy demands flexibility and innovation. Learners need confidence, curiosity and digital fluency. Families expect a system that works for them. Policy and investment reflect these expectations.

The next step is to ensure that delivery keeps pace. That means creating learning environments that reflect modern needs, designing pathways that feel navigable and supporting teachers through change.

It means building systems that value people's time and help them focus on what matters. And it means continuing to see diversity not as a pressure but as a strength that enriches education, makes it fairer and better able to meet future challenges.

Ireland has a strong foundation. It also has a clear sense of direction. The task now is to build a system that reflects the country we are becoming, not just the one we have been.

Education shapes futures and communities. That is why the details and delivery matter. The way the next phase of the system is built will determine not only what education looks like, but how it feels for the people who rely on it every day.

Ali O'Sullivan is a Consulting Director and Head of Education for Grant Thornton Ireland
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Grant Thornton

QS World University Rankings 2026



Trinity College Dublin.



Queen's University Belfast.

2025 was a positive year for Irish universities in a global context, as eight universities increased their global ranking, while two – the University of Galway and Ulster University – recorded a decline in QS World University Rankings.

University College Dublin had another successful year, rising by eight places, and is now close to being ranked as one of the 100 top universities in the world, while Trinity College

Dublin remains the top-ranked university in the country. After rising by seven places, Queen's University Belfast is now in the top 200 universities 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: 75 ↑ 12

Status: Public

Research output: Very high

Academic faculty staff: 1,589

Total students: 18,325

2. University College Dublin

Rank: 118 ↑ 8

Status: Public

Research output: Very high

Academic faculty staff: 1,818

Total students: 24,177

3. Queen's University Belfast

Rank: 199 ↑ 7

Status: Public

Research output: Very high

Academic faculty staff: 1,775

Total Students: 21,045

4. University College Cork

Rank: 246 ↑ 30

Status: Public

Research output: Very high

Academic faculty staff: 950

Total students: 16,972

5. University of Galway

Rank: 284 ↓ 8

Status: Public

Research output: High

Academic faculty staff: 1,984

Total students: 15,533

6. University of Limerick

Rank: 401 ↑ 20

Status: Public

Research output: High

Academic faculty staff: 987

Total students: 12,017

7. Dublin City University

Rank: 410 ↑ 11

Status: Public

Research output: High

Academic faculty staff: 1,290

Total students: 15,503

8. Ulster University

Rank: 609 ↓ 50

Status: Public

Research output: High

Academic faculty staff: 1,215

Total students: 19,775

9. Maynooth University

Rank: 771-780 ↑ 21-79

Status: Public

Research output: Very high

Academic faculty staff: 814

Total students: 12,272

10. Technological University Dublin

Rank: 781-790 ↑ 61-119

Status: Public

Research output: High

Academic faculty staff: 1,387

Total students: 19,088



The Government's priorities for education

In the Programme for Government (PfG), the Government sets out a vision for education which emphasises system reform, inclusion, capital investment, and workforce expansion, with a particular focus on special education and tackling educational disadvantage.

A central strand of policy is the modernisation of the student learning experience. Senior cycle reform continues, involving updated curricula, alternative assessment methods, and work to reduce examination-related stress.

Literacy and numeracy remain priority areas. The Government plans to increase ICT investment in schools, integrate digital skills and coding into teaching, and support online safety education. Policies also aim to expand foreign language uptake, progress the SPHE/RSE curriculum, and provide enhanced access to music education, creative programmes, Gaelscoileanna, and Gaelcholáistí.

A significant focus is placed on school supports and staffing. Commitments include increasing capitation funding, lowering the primary pupil-teacher ratio to 19:1 over the Government's term, and trialling administrative supports for school leaders to reduce non-teaching workload.

Additional measures include a national project for small schools, expanded childcare and after school provision on school sites, and workforce planning to ensure adequate teacher supply. Digital learning and professional development supports will continue to be updated, particularly in the context of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

The Government also intends to increase capital investment in school infrastructure. Plans include supporting over 300 school building projects currently under construction and progressing approximately 80 additional projects across 2026 and 2027. Capital investment is to prioritise demographic growth areas, special education capacity, refurbishment, ICT and climate-action upgrades, and sports facilities. The PfG states that annualisation of the Minor Works Scheme and continuation of the Summer Works Scheme form part of this approach.

A substantial portion of policy relates to educational inclusion and disadvantage. A new DEIS Plus scheme, due to begin in September 2026, will target schools with the highest levels of need, aimed at narrowing performance gaps and introducing new interventions.

Additional proposals include strengthening school attendance strategies, expanding the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, extending the JCSP Library Project, and improving guidance services. The free hot school meals and free schoolbooks programmes will continue and expand. Broader participation measures include actions relating to the Transition Year programme, uniform swap initiatives, and additional supports for Traveller and Roma students.

The special education area remains one of the largest policy and funding priorities. Budget 2026 allocates funding for 1,717 additional special needs assistants and 860 additional special education teachers, bringing total dedicated staff to more than 46,500 in 2026.

Commitments include further increasing special class and special school places, providing modular accommodation in advance of each school year, and promoting collaboration between mainstream and special schools.

A national therapy service is to be developed to provide in-school access to speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and other professional supports, with an associated expansion in relevant higher education places. Additional measures include admissions reform, more structured transition planning for students with additional needs, enhanced teacher training, expansion of summer programmes, and updates to legislation such as the EPSEN Act.

On student wellbeing and safety, policies include extending mental health pilots, implementing anti-bullying initiatives such as the FUSE programme, and developing a holistic wellness programme centred on

physical activity, nutrition, and social behaviour. The Government also outlines its ambitions to make schools smartphone-free and to strengthen digital literacy and online safety education.

Further and higher education

In further and higher education, the Government's priorities are focussed on closing the core funding gap by using the National Training Fund and providing a clearer financial framework for technological universities, including borrowing capacity for capital projects. Actions to widen access include increasing further education places, reducing student contribution fees, increasing SUSI maintenance, exploring placement grants, expanding free part-time courses, and improving financial support for postgraduate students.

Work is also underway to simplify entry routes, including the introduction of a single application process for apprenticeships, further education and higher education, and reforms to the CAO system.

Research and innovation policy includes commitments to increase research funding across disciplines, encourage greater collaboration between higher education institutions and industry, expand PhD and postdoctoral supports, and enhance participation in EU programmes.

The Government also proposes expanding micro credential provision, increasing STEM uptake, strengthening north-south academic collaboration, and supporting the development of technological universities, including new academic career structures.

Student accommodation forms a separate policy area, with the PfG outlining plans for a multi-annual programme to deliver new purpose-built student accommodation, enabling TUs to borrow for on-campus construction, and aligning leases with the academic year. Measures to increase uptake of the Rent-a-Room scheme are also being examined.

New Minister Hildegarde Naughton TD

In November 2025, Hildegarde Naughton TD was appointed Minister for Education and Youth, replacing Helen McEntee TD who was promoted to the roles of Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Minister for Defence. Naughton, a TD for Galway West, has previously served as Government Chief Whip and as Minister of State with responsibility for Transport, Broadband and Communications.

Speaking on RTÉ's *Morning Ireland* upon her appointment, the Minister said that from her work in the Department of Disability and previously as a minister with responsibility for special education, "I have a 360 degree understanding of disability in particular". Naughton, a former schoolteacher, added that progress has been made in reducing the teacher/student ratio and said she believed that teachers are being paid enough.

"I know there is extra pressures [sic]... right across every single sector, but I know from my own time as a teacher, yes they are [paid enough] and we need to make sure that we are continuing to educate our teachers... and preparing for the needs of our students coming down the track and that includes special education as well."



NCCA

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

A redeveloped primary curriculum for a changing Ireland

Ireland's classrooms are at the heart of a society that is changing faster than ever before. Children attending our primary and special schools are growing up in a world shaped by climate change, the ubiquity of social media and streaming services, transformative technologies like AI, and rapid geopolitical shifts, and they have lived through a pandemic.

At the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), we have been asking: What is the purpose of a primary school education in today's world? What knowledge, skills, dispositions, and values will help children thrive and flourish? And what then are the types of experiences children will need in schools?

As part of our statutory role in advising the Minister for Education and Youth on curriculum and assessment, we have recently completed a major redevelopment of the curriculum for all primary and special schools. This marks a significant moment in Irish education, shaping what children learn, and how they learn, for a new generation of learners.

Why change?

Since the 1990s, research into children's learning has developed significantly. We now have a deeper understanding of how children experience the world, how they learn most effectively, and the factors that help them reach their full potential. The redeveloped curriculum reflects these insights and responds to the realities of a modern, diverse, and rapidly changing society, ensuring that children are supported to thrive in today's world.

The redevelopment was undertaken by the NCCA through years of extensive research, consultation, and collaboration with education partners and stakeholders including teachers, and school leaders. Through citizen-centred policy design, children, their parents and the general public were able to have their say. Importantly, the voices of children played a central role, highlighting the need for a curriculum that responds to their lives today while preparing them for the future.

Launching the curriculum on 22 September 2025, the then-Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee TD said: "This new curriculum is designed for the children of today and tomorrow. It reflects the world they are growing up in; one that is fast-changing, interconnected, and full of opportunity. Our goal is to ensure every child in Ireland receives an education that is inclusive, empowering, and deeply relevant to their lives."

What is changing?

The redeveloped curriculum aims to provide a strong foundation for every child to thrive and flourish, supporting them in realising their full potential as individuals and as members of communities and society. The curriculum

includes the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and new specifications for five curriculum areas. The framework sets out the nature, structure and content for the curriculum. It forms the basis for high-quality learning, teaching and assessment for all children.

One of the most visible changes is in the structure of the curriculum. The first four years of primary school will now focus on five broad curriculum areas rather than 11 separate subjects. From third class onwards, these areas will gradually become more subject-based to reflect children's growing understanding and interests. Building on the strengths of the previous curriculum, the five curriculum areas respond directly to today's challenges, changing priorities, and the evolving needs of children. New aspects of learning are also being introduced. These include engineering, modern foreign languages (from third class), a broader approach to arts education, and learning about religions, beliefs and worldviews within history and geography. Digital learning will also feature more prominently across the curriculum:

- **Language:** English, Irish, and modern foreign languages (from third class)
- **STEM education:** Science,

technology, engineering; and mathematics

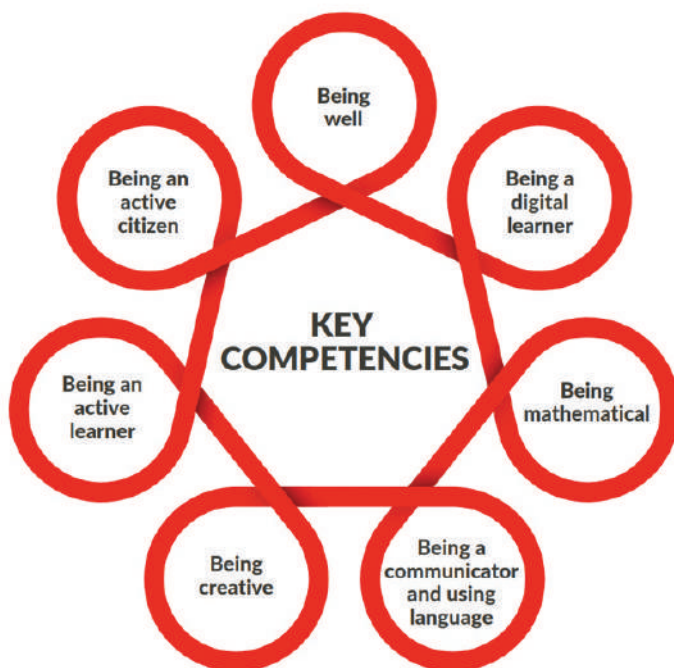
- **Wellbeing:** Social, personal and health education (SPHE); and physical education (PE)
- **Arts education:** Music; drama; and art
- **Social and environmental education:** History; and geography incorporating learning about religions, beliefs and worldviews

Amongst the priorities for children's learning are a set of seven key competencies. These refer to the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that children develop as they progress through school. They include being an active citizen; being an active learner; and being creative. These competencies will support children to grow and develop intellectually, personally, socially, morally and physically.

The redeveloped curriculum has strong connections with *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and with the *Framework for Junior Cycle*. This will help to ensure better progression in what children learn, and a smoother and a more positive journey for them from early childhood settings through to post-primary school. This helps create a smoother, more positive learning journey from early childhood right through to secondary school.

"Curriculum, the story one generation tells to the next."

Anne Looney



Key competencies.



Curriculum areas and subjects.

Supporting schools

The NCCA will provide comprehensive online curriculum toolkits to support schools and teachers as they work with the redeveloped curriculum. The toolkits will be available at www.curriculumonline.ie and contain:

- guidance on important aspects of primary education such as assessment, and school and classroom planning;
- examples of children's learning across the curriculum areas and subjects; and
- examples of effective teaching approaches, to foster rich learning experiences and encourage connections with the home and community.

The Department of Education and Youth has developed an extensive and phased plan to support schools as they introduce and enact the curriculum, supported by guidance and resources. This phased approach will allow teachers and school leaders to familiarise themselves and begin working with the curriculum's content and approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, at a pace that is manageable for them.

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Education at a glance

The OECD reports that Ireland performs strongly in higher education attainment and adult skills participation. However, challenges remain in learner progression, skill proficiency, and equal access to educational opportunity.

The OECD publication *Education at a Glance 2025* examines education systems across member and partner countries. The report identifies Ireland as a high attainment country, particularly among younger adults, while also drawing attention to areas where performance and access remain uneven.

Ireland's tertiary education participation is above the OECD average. Almost half of young adults across the OECD hold a tertiary qualification. The OECD says that Ireland continues to rank ahead of many comparable systems. Growth in tertiary attainment has slowed internationally since 2021 and Ireland reflects this trend. Between 2000 and 2021, tertiary education attainment increased by roughly 1 per cent point per year on average across the OECD. Since 2021, annual gains have averaged 0.3 percentage points.

Education at a Glance 2025 also states that qualification levels do not always correspond with proficiency. The OECD indicates that 13 per cent of tertiary educated adults internationally did not reach baseline literacy skills in 2023. Baseline proficiency refers to the ability to understand and interpret short texts. The report says that this disconnect appears across many countries and cannot be measured by attainment alone.

Educational outcomes

The OECD continues to highlight differences linked to socioeconomic background. Across member countries, 26 per cent of young adults whose parents did not complete upper secondary education have a tertiary qualification. This

compares to 70 per cent of young adults with at least one tertiary educated parent. The OECD notes that this gap has changed little in recent years. It also identifies jurisdictions where progress has been made. Denmark, England, and the Flemish Community of Belgium have recorded improvements in tertiary attainment among young adults from lower educational backgrounds.

Education at a Glance 2025 states that equitable access remains central to improving long-term outcomes. The OECD links higher attainment to higher earnings, stronger labour market participation, and greater lifetime income. Adults with tertiary qualifications earn on average 54 per cent more than those with upper secondary education. The OECD calculates that the average lifetime financial return from tertiary attainment exceeds US\$300,000. Earnings premiums are highest for those with masters and doctoral qualifications, averaging 83 per cent above upper secondary.

Completion rates

The OECD states that entry to tertiary education is no longer sufficient to ensure successful outcomes. New completion data from *Education at a Glance 2025* shows that 43 per cent of bachelor's students finish within the expected programme duration. Completion rises to 59 per cent after one additional year and 70 per cent after three. The report also highlights gender variation. Across the OECD, 63 per cent of men complete within three years beyond the scheduled duration. The equivalent figure for women is 75 per cent.

The OECD identifies several factors associated with completion. These include academic preparation, student support structures, programme sequencing, and financial barriers. The report notes that recognition of skills earned during partially completed programmes may increase labour market transparency. It states that micro credentials can enable learners to document knowledge obtained without degree completion.

Adult skills proficiency

Education at a Glance 2025 incorporates data from the OECD *Survey of Adult Skills*. Adult skill performance is measured in literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem solving. The report finds that literacy and numeracy levels have stagnated or declined in many countries since 2012.

Across the OECD, 61 per cent of adults with below upper secondary education score at or below level one literacy. Level one corresponds to understanding short and simple texts. Among adults with upper secondary or post-secondary/non-tertiary education, 30 per cent score at or below this level. Among tertiary educated adults, 13 per cent score at or below level one. The OECD classifies level three and above as a threshold for interpreting more complex written material.

The report states that skill levels differ significantly between countries. Finland, Japan, Norway, and Sweden record the highest literacy proficiency. Chile and Portugal record the lowest. Ireland performs above average for literacy proficiency among tertiary educated adults, though the OECD outlines that there is variation across educational groups.

Teacher workforce and staffing

Education at a Glance 2025 reports that teacher shortages are a growing challenge across multiple education systems. The OECD states that around 7 per cent of secondary teachers internationally are not fully qualified. Availability of qualified teachers varies by region and school context. Some jurisdictions report more unfilled teaching posts than others.

The report identifies the age profile of teaching workforces as an important metric. Retirement rates, mid-career exits, and recruitment patterns influence staffing continuity. Among OECD countries with available data, annual teacher resignation ranges between 1 and 10 per cent. Lower resignation rates increase workforce stability. Higher resignation rates require increased recruitment.

Sixteen countries offer alternative pathways to teaching for career changers. The OECD asserts that these programmes increase entry routes into the profession. It states that structured professional development contributes to teacher effectiveness and retention. The report also references workload, career progression, and support systems as factors affecting staffing.

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Developing a long-term education strategy

A National Convention on Education is to be established to develop a long-term education strategy informed by stakeholders from across the sector.

The Convention will mainly focus on primary and post-primary education. It will also explore the transition from early childhood to primary education, and from post-primary to further and higher education.

An agenda for the convention is due to be approved by the Government in 2026 following a national conversation and consultation between the public, early childhood education and school communities, and other stakeholders. The Government committed to the convention's establishment in the 2025 Programme for Government, *Securing Ireland's Future*.

Former executive dean of Dublin City University's Institute of Education, Anne Looney, will chair the convention. The Convention's secretariat was appointed in November 2025. Deputy chairs were also appointed in the areas of children and young

people; parents and guardians; school staff and early childhood educators; and education stakeholders.

As part of the next steps, an inter department group chaired by the Department of Education and Youth will be established. It will also comprise the Department of Children, Equality and Disability, and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

The convention was due to begin with a plenary session in mid-November 2025, but this session has not taken place as of early December 2025. Sessions will be held during 2026 and the convention's findings are expected to be concluded in early 2027. Budget 2026 allocated €2 million to the convention.



“As we face new challenges and opportunities in today’s world, it is vital that as many voices as possible are heard and have the chance to help shape a world-class education system.”

Former Minister for Education and Youth Helen McEntee TD

Upon announcement of the convention, then-Minister for Education Helen McEntee TD said: “I am delighted to announce that this Convention on Education will commence later this year.

“It will be a truly inclusive process engaging with children, young people and their parents, school communities, education stakeholders, along with other stakeholders from within and outside the education system. All of the views gathered will be of great value in helping to inform and shape education policy now and into the future.”

National Education Convention of 1993

This is only the second National Education Convention in the history of the State. The first convention took place from 11 to 21 October 1993 at Dublin Castle and followed a period of significant momentum for education policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In January 1994, the report following the convention was published, after which a white paper titled *Charting Our Education Future* was published in April 1995. These contributed to the passing of the Universities (Ireland) Act in 1997, and the Education (Ireland) Act in 1998.

Subsequently, the Universities Act 1997 outlined universities’ objects and functions, and provides for key aspects of governance and accountability. It establishes the rights of universities to decide and charge fees, along with requirements for universities regarding budgeting and financial reporting. The Act also provides for the protection of academic freedom.

The Education Act 1998 aims to enable a child-centred education system. It affirmed the importance of meeting the needs of children and young people including those with SEN, those at risk of educational disengagement, and those who may struggle to access education. Additionally, the Act provides for delivery of “a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities” of people resident in the State.

Commenting on the 1993 convention and outlining how the upcoming event can be a catalyst for change, Minister McEntee said: “The last National Education Convention happened in 1993 and resulted in a number of significant reforms and developments.

“As we face new challenges and opportunities in today’s world, it is vital that as many voices as possible are heard and have the chance to help shape a world-class education system that breaks down barriers and supports every child and young person to thrive.”

Speaking to *eolas magazine*, Áine Hyland, emeritus professor of education at University College Cork, outlines the three outcomes from the 1993 convention she deems most significant:

1. the Department’s recognition of Educate Together and An Foras Pátrúnachta as patrons of national schools;
2. recognition of the rights of all children including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities; and
3. acknowledgement of the opinions of parents and citizens.

Regarding the differences between the education and policy climate between 1993 and today, Hyland states: “A re-reading of the report of the National Education Convention 1994 shows that many of the issues and concerns that existed in 1993 still exist, and many of the recommendations of the 1993 convention were never implemented.”

The creation of regional education structures was one proposed measure arising from the convention that was not implemented. These were to be an intermediate tier between the Department of Education and schools. This was envisioned to free the Department up to concentrate on policy formation, strategic planning, and research.

Hyland says: “The Department of Education and Youth continues to be involved in minutiae and in details relating to individual schools, instead of focusing on broad policy formulation, and longer-term planning.”



Supporting more students than ever

Philip Connolly, Director of Services with Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) tells *eolas Magazine* how SUSI is broadening its remit to support more higher education students than ever.

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 Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

Established in 2012 to replace 66 regional awarding authorities, SUSI created, for the first time, a single, centralised awarding authority for student funding in Ireland. SUSI's mission is to empower students to transform their lives through tertiary education and since 2012, has processed over 1.37 million applications, awarded over one million grants to students, and paid over €4 billion in funding.

Now in its 14th year of operations, SUSI's commitment to supporting students in further and higher education has strengthened as its remit expands beyond the Student Grant Scheme. SUSI administers funding for specified part-time courses, tertiary education programmes, the PLC Bursary for Displaced Persons Ukraine Scheme and the International Protection Student Scheme

and is the paying authority for DFHERIS scholarships and bursaries including the All Ireland Scholarship. SUSI also assists in the delivery of the 1916 Bursary following receipt in 2023 of Ministerial consent under the Education and Training Boards Act 2013.

The 1916 Bursary is a key element of the National Access Plan. This plan sets out a strategy to achieve equity of access, participation and success in higher education with the aim to increase the diversity of the student body and support student success.

Co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union through DFHERIS, the 1916 Bursary aims to encourage participation and success by students from the most socio-economically disadvantaged and most under-represented groups in higher education.

The Bursary is a financial award to support a student's undergraduate study on either a full or part-time basis. Each participating college has a limited number of bursaries which are awarded to the eligible applicants that present the greatest

“By building an agile organisation and harnessing cutting-edge digital systems, we are proactively leading the advances necessary to further improve service delivery for students.”

need. Applicants are required to meet financial, target group and college entry eligibility to be considered for a Bursary.

Commenting on SUSI's involvement in the 1916 Bursary Philip Connolly, Director of Services with SUSI says: “We are always exploring ways to innovate and enhance our service so that students can quickly and easily access funding and are delighted to expand our services by supporting more students in higher education through the 1916 Bursary. By collaborating with DFHERIS, the HEA and the higher education institutions (HEIs), we share our unique experience and insights on the administration of student grant funding and together deliver an excellent service for applicants across Ireland.”

By harnessing its wealth of experience and knowledge in the administration of student grant funding, SUSI has helped to enhance the Bursary's end to end application process. Connolly adds: “Placing the student at the heart of our service, we have streamlined the application process and implemented procedures that help to ensure students receive their supports as early as possible.”

He continues: “We understand the need to create an application process for students in a format that is sustainable, inclusive, accessible and easy to understand. To do this we drew on our expertise across a number of key areas including grant operations, payments, ICT, governance, training and customer care.”

SUSI worked collaboratively with all stakeholders to ensure the successful operational planning and execution of the timelines which resulted in an efficient and student focused service delivery.

Recognising the students' need for an accessible and convenient way to submit an application, SUSI collaborated with a technology partner to develop a solution which enables the student to complete the application process digitally. From the beginning, this collaboration required innovative thinking to quickly test ideas and gather early feedback. This approach saved time and resources by allowing SUSI to quickly identify a solution with prebuilt components as the preferred solution. Designed with user experience at its core, the solution enables self-service functionality. This reduces the

administrative burden on the applicant by enabling them to directly upload documents to support their application.

The solution also enables the management of the end-to-end processing of all applications and payments swiftly and consistently through a centralised system. This brings further benefits as by being fully integrated, detailed reporting and analyses are readily available capabilities.

“As a public service, digital by default design is a core element of our strategic approach and this was fully adopted in our design of the 1916 Bursary application solution. We also utilised our strong governance procedures to ensure the security of all information shared with us. This was underpinned by the implementation of data sharing agreements and technical information sessions with the HEIs,” says Connolly.

SUSI processes have secured the direct payment of the grant to students' bank accounts via electronic fund transfers to ensure eligible students receive their payment as quickly as possible.

The addition of a responsive customer care team highlights SUSI's commitment to providing an applicant focused service. Applicants can contact the team with any queries regarding their application and receive information and updates in a timely manner.

Planning is now underway for academic year 2026/27 and as he looks ahead to the future Connolly concludes: “By building an agile organisation and harnessing cutting-edge digital systems, we are proactively leading the advances necessary to further improve service delivery for students. We look forward to building on these in the years to come and supporting more students in their education.”

W: www.susi.ie





Addressing teacher supply shortages

A Department of Education review of teacher payroll in March 2025 found that there were 1,847 vacant posts across schools in the State.

Of this figure, 1,228 posts were at primary level, and 619 were at secondary level. This is an increase from November 2024 when a similar review found that there were approximately vacant 1,600 posts.

An October 2025 survey by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) found that 43 per cent of Gaelscoileanna, 35 per cent of Deis band two, and 32 per cent of Deis band one schools reported long-term vacancies. This compares with 10 per cent of mainstream schools.

Of 565 schools that responded to the survey, 19 per cent stated that they had been unable to fill all vacant permanent, temporary, and long-term substitute positions. Additionally, 60 per cent reported that they had been unable to source a substitute for an absence.

The INTO also finds that the practice of splitting classes to cover for absent colleagues "remains wide spread".

Of responding schools, 215 reported splitting classes, resulting in 735 days of disruption to children's learning in the first six weeks of the school year.

The INTO asserts: "The shortage of teachers continues to disproportionately impact children with special educational needs. In addition to unfilled posts in special schools, children in special schools are more likely to be taught by unqualified substitutes."

INTO General Secretary John Boyle criticised the Department of Education and Youth for the teacher supply shortage: "They have failed miserably to back up their claim that this Government is 'committed' to ensuring that every child has access to qualified and engaged teachers who are dedicated to supporting their learning."

To address teacher supply shortages, the revised Teaching Council Registration Regulations were signed into law in October 2025. The revised regulations reinstate a mechanism

whereby those who have completed teaching qualifications outside the State but have not completed any mandated period of induction of post-qualification induction in that jurisdiction, can complete their induction in the Republic of Ireland up to 31 December 2027.

The revised regulations also formally incorporate the mechanism enabling student teachers to register with the Teaching Council, a measure first introduced in 2023. This allows student teachers in the third or fourth year of their programmes to undertake limited substitute teaching work.

Upon announcing the measures, then-Minister for Education and Youth Helen McEntee TD said: "These measures ensure that we continue to maintain high professional standards while also addressing supply challenges in our schools.

"They represent a practical and balanced approach to supporting our teaching workforce and ensuring that appropriately qualified teachers remain available to students across the country."

Designing organisations that help education thrive



These pressures show up in how decisions are made; how fast issues move and how well teams work together. In this environment, organisational design is not a side project. It is the structure that helps people solve problems with pace and clarity.

When the design is unclear, everyday work becomes harder. Decisions bounce between teams. Tasks are duplicated. Legacy structures slow down digital or blended delivery. Roles blur, making it tougher to build and keep the right skills. These gaps drain time and attention from the core task of supporting learners.

A clear organisational design steadies the system. It links structure, governance and people so that accountability is understood and resources are used where they matter most. When these basics are in place, teams can respond to shocks such as funding changes or new regulations without losing focus on long-term goals. For education providers working under scrutiny and constrained budgets, this clarity supports better learner experience and greater resilience.

Our work with Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) shows this in practice. We examined how governance worked day to day, how responsibilities were shared and how future technology might alter the flow of work. We spoke with staff, compared structures with leading practice and modelled possible workforce needs.

Education organisations are working through rapid change. Funding is tighter, learner needs are shifting, and digital expectations are rising.

The result was a clearer governance model, a capability framework that sharpens role clarity and a phased plan to embed changes at a manageable pace. These shifts give SUSI a structure that can adapt as demands evolve.

We have also used tools such as Anaplan to support strategic workforce planning, helping teams make evidence-based decisions about staffing and resources. Used well, these tools give leaders a sharper view of where demand is rising and how to deploy people effectively.

Forces shaping future design

Across the sector, several trends are shaping how organisational design is evolving. Digital-first models are becoming standard, with automation reducing manual tasks and analytics helping to anticipate enrolment patterns and plan resources. Cloud platforms are making collaboration easier for dispersed teams.

Workforces are also becoming more flexible. Hybrid learning and uneven demand mean organisations need the ability to test scenarios, plan for multiple outcomes and access specialist skills without long-term commitments.

Culture and capability remain central. Structure alone cannot deliver change. Leaders need support to think adaptively, staff need space to learn and teams need shared habits that build resilience. Continuous learning, micro-credentials and joined-up support systems all play a part.

Governance is shifting too. With closer regulatory scrutiny, organisations need data that is accurate, accessible and able to show performance in real time. Predictive tools can flag risks early so that issues are dealt with before they affect learners.

Sustainability and social impact are also shaping design choices. Many organisations are embedding ESG considerations into decision-making and building structures that support fair access to education.

Design that supports people

Our work across education and other public services reflects these shifts. The organisations that adapt best are the ones that consider structure, technology, workforce, and culture together. Each element shapes the others.

Organisational design is not simply about reporting lines. It affects how people experience their work, how decisions are made and how quickly services improve. When the design is clear, teams feel supported and can focus on learners rather than navigating internal complexity.

As the pace of change accelerates, education providers need structures that help them stay steady and responsive. Rethinking governance, planning future workforce needs and adopting digital-first models all play a part.

With the right design, organisations can move through change with confidence and stay focused on what matters: delivering for learners today while preparing for tomorrow.

Áine Logan serves as an Advisory Partner at Grant Thornton, where she leads the firm's Transformation Excellence service line and heads the People and Change team.

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Improving school attendance

The Department of Education and Youth has launched a multimedia campaign to improve school attendance, following the publication of data showing that over one-in-five students miss more than 20 days in a school year.

The campaign, developed in partnership with the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), aims to reduce absenteeism by providing schools, families, and communities with resources to support consistent attendance.

According to the *TESS Annual Attendance Report for 2023/24*, primary schools recorded 6,247,325 days lost, down from 8,689,829 in 2021/22, representing 8 per cent of total school days. Chronic absenteeism, defined as students missing 20 or more days, fell from 25.1 per cent in 2022/23 to 22.1 per cent in 2023/24. However, rates remain above pre-pandemic levels.

At post-primary level, the total number of days lost rose slightly to 6,029,243, largely due to an increase of 24,000 students in the overall post-primary population. Chronic absenteeism affected 21.2 per cent of students, compared with 22.3 per cent in 2022/23. A significant proportion of absences at post-primary level remain unexplained, while illness continues to be the main cause of absence at primary level.

The campaign also includes a phased rollout of the *Anseo Framework*, a school-based programme designed to identify attendance patterns and implement targeted interventions. The

framework is initially being introduced in 60 schools, with potential expansion to all schools in the State by 2028.

While attendance rates have improved for a second consecutive year, gaps remain, particularly in DEIS primary schools, where 11 per cent of school days were lost in 2023/24.

Overall, the data indicates that absenteeism continues to be a significant challenge across Ireland and highlights the need for coordinated efforts to ensure that students can access the full benefits of education, both academically and socially.

Launching the campaign prior to being reshuffled as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Minister for Defence, then-Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee TD, said: "Children and young people in communities across Ireland are missing a concerning number of school days each year. These days add up quickly, and as a result, there is a real risk that many students will not achieve their full potential from education.

"Regular school attendance is essential not just for academic achievement, but also for wellbeing, social development, and long-term life outcomes."

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- na cúrsaí is fearr leat a shábháil agus comparáid a dhéanamh eatarthu
- riachtanais ábhair CAO a shainithint
- na pointí a bheidh uait a ríomh

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