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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018

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EN BOOK	ISBN 978-92-79-89710-8	ISSN 2466-9989	doi: 10.2766/228542	NC-AN-18-015-EN-C
EN PDF	ISBN 978-92-79-89709-2	ISSN 2466-9997	doi: 10.2766/218608	NC-AN-18-015-EN-N

Education and Training Monitor 2018

Ireland

Volume 2 of the Education and Training Monitor 2018 includes twenty-eight individual country reports. It builds on the most up-to-date quantitative and qualitative evidence to present and assess the main recent and ongoing policy measures in each EU Member State, with a focus on developments since mid-2017. It therefore complements other sources of information which offer descriptions of national education and training systems.

Section 1 presents a statistical overview of the main education and training indicators. Section 2 briefly identifies the main strengths and challenges of the country's education and training system. Section 3 looks at investment in education and training. Section 4 focuses on citizenship education. Section 5 deals with policies to modernise school education. Section 6 discusses measures to modernise higher education. Finally, section 7 covers vocational education and training, while section 8 covers adult learning.

The manuscript was completed on 1 September 2018.

Additional contextual data can be found online (ec.europa.eu/education/monitor)

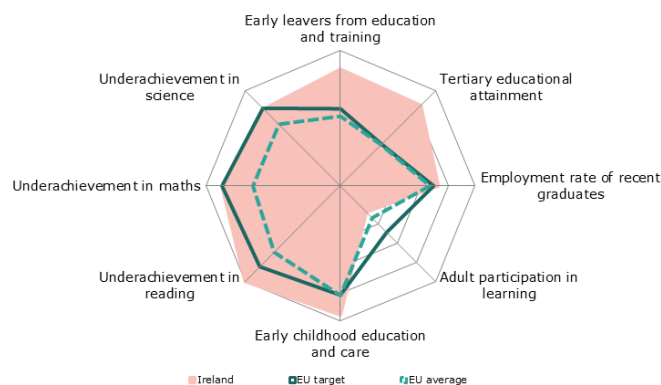
1. Key indicators

			Ireland		EU average	
			2014	2017	2014	2017
Education and training 2020 benchmarks						
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)			6.9%	5.1%	11.2%	10.6%
Tertiary educational attainment (age 30-34)			52.2%	53.5% ^b	37.9%	39.9%
Early childhood education and care (from age 4 to starting age of compulsory primary education)			99.7% ¹³	98.8% ¹⁶	94.2% ¹³	95.3% ¹⁶
Proportion of 15 year-olds underachieving in:	Reading		9.6% ¹²	10.2% ¹⁵	17.8% ¹²	19.7% ¹⁵
	Maths		16.9% ¹²	15.0% ¹⁵	22.1% ¹²	22.2% ¹⁵
	Science		11.1% ¹²	15.3% ¹⁵	16.6% ¹²	20.6% ¹⁵
Employment rate of recent graduates by educational attainment (age 20-34 having left education 1-3 years before reference year)	ISCED 3-8 (total)		75.7%	83.6%	76.0%	80.2%
Adult participation in learning (age 25-64)	ISCED 0-8 (total)		6.8%	8.9%	10.8%	10.9%
Learning mobility	Degree mobile graduates (ISCED 5-8)		:	6.9% ¹⁶	:	3.1% ¹⁶
	Credit mobile graduates (ISCED 5-8)		:	: ¹⁶	:	7.6% ¹⁶
Other contextual indicators						
Education investment	Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP		4.3%	3.3% ¹⁶	4.9%	4.7% ¹⁶
	Expenditure on public and private institutions per student in € PPS	ISCED 1-2	€6 356	: ¹⁵	€6 494 ^d	: ¹⁵
		ISCED 3-4	€8 064	: ¹⁵	€7 741 ^d	: ¹⁵
		ISCED 5-8	€10 376	: ¹⁵	€11 187 ^d	: ¹⁵
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)	Native-born		7.0%	5.3%	10.4%	9.6%
	Foreign-born		6.2%	4.0%	20.2%	19.4%
Tertiary educational attainment (age 30-34)	Native-born		52.0%	52.1%	38.6%	40.6%
	Foreign-born		52.8%	56.6%	34.3%	36.3%
Employment rate of recent graduates by educational attainment (age 20-34 having left education 1-3 years before reference year)	ISCED 3-4		60.4%	72.6%	70.7%	74.1%
	ISCED 5-8		84.5%	89.5%	80.5%	84.9%

Sources: Eurostat (see section 10 for more details); OECD (PISA).

Notes: data refer to weighted EU averages, covering different numbers of Member States depending on the source; b = break in time series, d = definition differs, 12 = 2012, 13 = 2013, 15 = 2015, 16 = 2016. On credit graduate mobility, the EU average is calculated by DG EAC on the available countries; on degree graduate mobility, the EU average is calculated by JRC over Eurostat and OECD data. The calculation of the ECEC benchmark includes ISCED 0 and ISCED 1 as in Ireland primary education starts before compulsory education. Further information can be found in the relevant section of Volume 1 (ec.europa.eu/education/monitor).

Figure 1. Position in relation to strongest (outer ring) and weakest performers (centre)



Source: DG Education and Culture calculations, based on data from Eurostat (LFS 2017, UOE 2016) and OECD (PISA 2015). Note: all scores are set between a maximum (the strongest performers represented by the outer ring) and a minimum (the weakest performers represented by the centre of the figure).

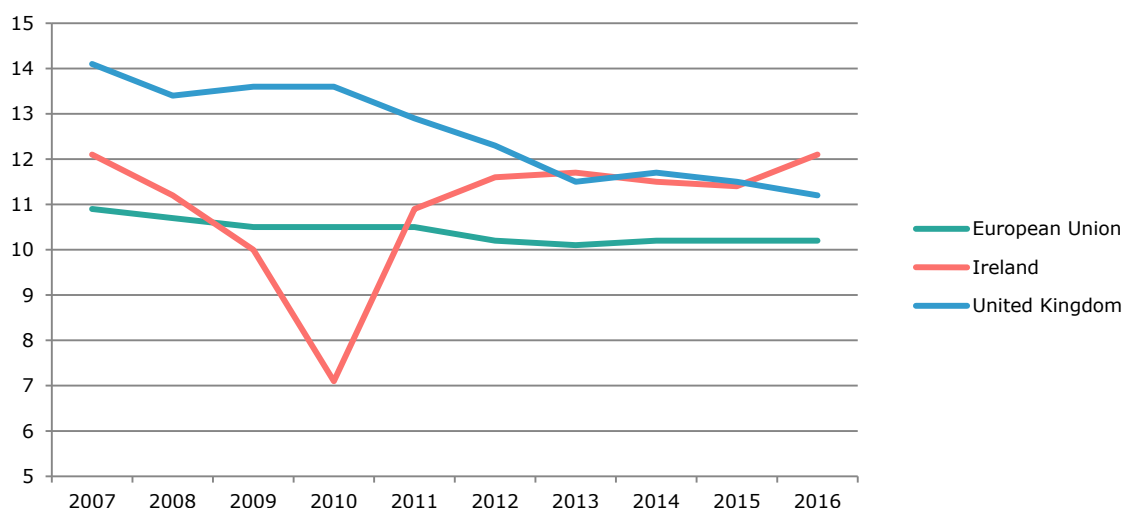
2. Highlights

- Ireland is undertaking reforms to increase quality, relevance and achievement at every level of its education system. There is also significantly increased investment on education and training.
- The country maintains a very good overall performance in the provision of basic skills.
- Ireland is seeking to adapt its education system to the challenges of the digital transformation and pursue the key higher education reform.
- Ireland is seeking to upskill and reskill its adult population to better meet the needs of the business sector and match education with the future labour market evolution.
- Ireland is running two key programmes fostering civic education in schools.

3. Investing in education and training

Expenditure on education has recovered recently, recording a sharp increase. Public expenditure on education as a proportion of GDP is not a fully reliable indicator in Ireland, given the specific structure of the Irish GDP and its recent significant shifts¹. Measured as a percentage of total public budget, Ireland spent 12.1 % on education in 2016, against 10.2 % for the EU-28 average (see Figure 2 for changes over time). This indicates that the sector is once again a budgetary priority. New funding has gone in particular to the recruitment of a sizeable number of new teachers and special needs assistants (Irish Government, 2018). These expansionary measures have been highly welcomed by stakeholders (ESRI, 2018).

Figure 2. Education as % of total general government expenditure in 2007-2016



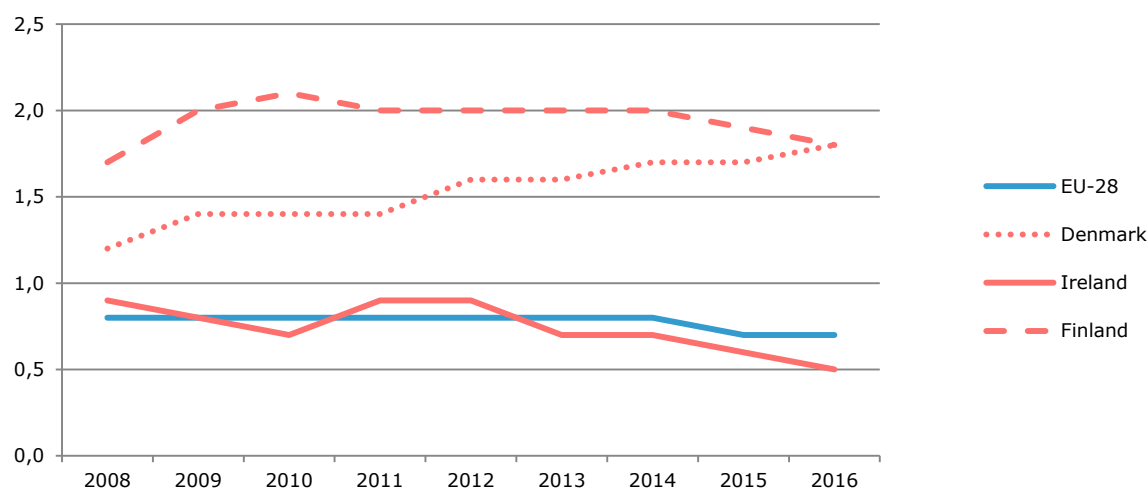
Source: Eurostat, 2018. Online data code: [gov_10a_exp](#).

Capital and infrastructure investment are also on a renewed positive trend. In February 2018 a EUR 30 million investment in ICT infrastructure for primary and post-primary schools was announced, enabling a large number of schools to purchase equipment and integrate digital technology into teaching and learning (Eurydice, 2018).. This is set to be complemented by additional supports for the introduction of Computer Science as a new subject in schools from

¹ Using gross domestic product (GDP) the figure would be 3.3 % in 2016, whereas using gross national income (GNI*) specifically adapted to Ireland, it would be c. 4.7 %.

September 2018. There is a particular focus on physical capital needs, concentrating on the institute of technology sector, with the aim being to expand capacity and upgrade campus infrastructure in the 2018-2021 period (Eurydice, 2018). In this context, EUR 21 million has been earmarked to increase the number of researchers across all disciplines, plus EUR 200 million for public-private partnerships. Public investment in early childhood education and care has also risen significantly in recent years, from EUR 260 million in 2015 to EUR 486 million in 2018. Finally, major investments on education are planned under the National Development Plan 2018-2027².

Figure 3. Higher education (ISCED 5) expenditure as share of GDP in 2008-2016



Source: Eurostat, 2018. Online data code: [gocv_10a_exp](#).

Third-level spending is still considered insufficient by international standards. The 2017 OECD *'Education at A Glance'* report highlights that Ireland spends a much lower proportion of its GDP on third-level education than other OECD countries on average (Graph 3). Overall funding for higher education has increased in recent years, but a decision on the future financing mechanisms, including the possible introduction of an income-contingent loan system, is still awaited (OECD, 2017). These decisions are even more pressing in the context of Brexit, as increases in non-EU applications to Irish higher education institutions are already being felt. A new reform was tabled on 15 January 2018 with the publication by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) of the *'Review of the Allocation Model for Funding of Higher Education Institutions'* and the *'Higher Education System Performance Framework for 2018-2020'*, paving the way for a new and ambitious tertiary sector agenda for Ireland³.

4. Citizenship education

Two key programmes are now in place to foster civic education. These prompt students to consider the social, political, cultural and economic factors affecting individual and collective relations. A new area of learning entitled *'Wellbeing'* was introduced in Ireland for first-year students in secondary education as of September 2017. Key components include: social, personal and health education (SPHE); and civic, social and political education. Students' performance will be recorded for the first time under the junior-cycle profile of achievement in autumn 2020. Students also take courses in SPHE at primary level, fostering their personal development, health and wellbeing (Eurydice, 2017). Civic education will also be a key component of further curricular reforms for the senior cycle in the future. Experts recommend that there should be an explicit reference to human rights in the planned new framework and that education on religious beliefs and ethics should be incorporated into the new reform (Ruane and Waldron, 2017).

² See pages 86-88 on <https://www.per.gov.ie/en/national-development-plan-2018-2027/>

³ More on <https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/PR18-01-15.html>

5. Modernising school education

Ireland performs quite well on participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and on early school leaving. The ECEC participation rate in Ireland was slightly above the EU average at 98.8 % in 2016⁴. The proportion of early school leavers in Ireland fell to 6.1 % in 2017, substantially below both the 8 % national target and the EU-28 average. The 2018 Irish national reform programme highlights a number of recent policy initiatives to support learners at risk, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged students and pupils with special educational needs. Recent policy changes in this area will need to be monitored in terms of their impact. Meanwhile, reviews of non-school programmes currently under way, including Youthreach and Out of School Provision, will focus on how to ensure effective inclusion for those who do not succeed in the mainstream school system (Irish Government, 2018).

The provision of accessible, affordable and quality full-time childcare is still insufficient. The universal free pre-school provision scheme will be further extended in September 2018, allowing all children to have 2 full years of pre-school education, broken down into two 38-week programme years. The Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS) is currently under development. Legislation to underpin the scheme was passed on 26 June 2018⁵. The ACS will include both universal and targeted subsidies, and will replace all existing targeted childcare schemes, providing financial support for both pre-school and school age childcare. In advance of the rollout of the ACS, subsidies under a number of childcare schemes, both universal and means-tested, have been increased (Irish Government, 2018).

More is being done to ensure better service delivery in ECEC. A minimum qualification requirement (NFQ Level 5) for ECEC staff came into force in 2017. In addition, the Irish Government has incentivised professionalization through providing higher rates of payment to pre-school rooms with a graduate leader and through a bursary scheme for staff working in the sector who acquire a degree-level qualification at their own expense. In 2017, 20% of ECEC staff working directly with children had a graduate qualification (NFQ Level 7 or higher). In addition, the quality of ECEC is supported through mentoring and training, including the Better Start Quality Development Service and the National Síolta-Aistear Initiative. The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) provides a continuum of universal and targeted supports to enable the meaningful participation of children with disabilities in pre-school provision. A childminding action plan, to support the wider regulation and quality of home-based ECEC, is planned for the end of 2018 (Irish Government, 2018). Since 2016, the National Síolta Aistear Initiative is funding the development of materials, resources and CPD opportunities for the ECEC workforce in the two frameworks.

Box 1: an ESF-funded project in County Donegal is helping students who recently dropped out of school to gain employment skills

The 'Support, Training and Enterprise Programme' (STEP) is organised by the YMCA in the northern town of Letterkenny (County Donegal).

The project targets unemployed young people who have been out of school for over 6 months. STEP courses include training in communications, career planning, and customer service and information technology.

Participants complete two work placements over 6 weeks during the course. They are awarded a certificate on completion. Training, transport and food allowances are also provided.

The project is co-financed by the European Social Fund and the DES.

<https://www.donegalnow.com/news/donegal-step-programme-currently-recruiting-2017-18-classes/160231>

⁴ ECEC participation includes participation in both primary schools as well as ECEC centres.

⁵ https://www.dcy.gov.ie/docs/26.06.2018_Childcare_Support_Bill_is_passed_by_the_Oireachta/4722.htm

Compared with other countries, Ireland achieves a high level of basic skills. The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) report shows that Ireland's primary school children are one of the best performing in Europe and are in the top tier of OECD countries for reading skills⁶. The reading achievement scores of fourth graders improved by 15 score points since the last survey in 2011. The number of students with only basic reading skills has dropped significantly, while the percentage of those with advanced reading skills rose from 16 % in 2011 to 21 % in 2016 (Eivers et al. 2019). Recent international tests place Ireland in a strong position in terms of how students perform in English and maths in an international context (OECD, 2017), but, a deterioration has been visible in the teaching and learning of the Irish language in the primary and secondary school systems (ESRI, 2018). Performance in foreign languages is still insufficient by international standards (Chief Inspector's Report, 2018).

Box 2: New and ambitious foreign languages strategy for Ireland

In December 2017, the DES launched the government's 'Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026'.

The plan sets out a roadmap to put Ireland in the top 10 countries in Europe for the teaching and learning of foreign languages and includes actions to ensure a steady supply of language teachers.

It also sets out targeted measures for increasing the number of languages taught, improving proficiency, fostering diversity and increasing immersion programmes. The number of post-primary schools offering two or more foreign languages will be increased by 25 % and the number of foreign language assistants in schools will be doubled in the years to come.

The implementation of such an ambitious plan will require significant changes to how foreign languages are taught in Ireland and will require extra resources.

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/Foreign-Languages-Strategy.html>

Student performance is benefiting from Ireland's literacy and numeracy strategy, from investment in disadvantage and special educational needs support, and from curricular reforms. DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), remains the policy instrument for addressing educational disadvantage: its central strands are enhancing attendance, progression, retention and attainment. Policy actions focus on a school action plan for literacy and numeracy from an early stage, with strong links between the home, school and community. The action also focuses on schools working cooperatively and on cooperation between education and other services. The plan prioritises the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities from early childhood through second-level education. 825 schools are included in the programme in the 2016/17 school year. These comprise 640 primary schools (328 urban/town schools and 312 rural primary schools) and 185 second level schools.

There is more strategic steering of education from the authorities. On 7 February 2018, the DES published its 2018 action plan for education, with over 370 actions and sub-actions to be implemented during the year. The plan recognises the importance of changing demographics, inclusion and the role of teachers and sets out to further tackle disadvantage, strengthen inclusion and support transitions between different education levels (DES, 2018). The 'End of Year Review' 2017, the first full-year review published under the 2016-2019 action plan, concluded that 86 % of the actions for 2017 had been fully or partially carried out. In February 2018, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment announced a review of senior-cycle education, to commence in September 2018, which will feed into a possible future reform of this sector.

Measures have been taken to support teacher supply. A number of measures have been introduced to support the supply of teachers, particularly in specific subject areas at post primary

⁶ More on <http://pirls2016.org/pirls/student-achievement/pirls-achievement-results/>

level. In March 2018 the DES, following discussions with the universities, announced an expansion in the number of places on initial teacher education programmes in 2018 at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, including additional places in STEM, Irish and modern foreign language programmes. The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Fund supports the implementation of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019. This Fund comprises dedicated funding to support access to higher education allocated on a competitive basis to higher education institutions to support particular priority areas as determined by the DES. PATH 1 in line with a priority in the National Access Plan provides €2.7m over 3 years to support the objective in the National Access Plan to increase access to initial teacher education for 120 students from the target groups identified in the National Access Plan such as Lone Parents and Travellers (DES, 2017).

Ireland is currently developing its 2018-2022 ICT action plan to address skills shortages in this sector. OECD PISA survey results show that Irish 15- and 16 year-old students engaged significantly less often with ICT at school and with ICT use outside of school, highlighting the need for policy focus on this area (OECD, 2017). A new computer science subject is being introduced in secondary schools from September 2018. Meanwhile, significant teacher supply and infrastructural deficits are set to be addressed via recently announced new measures (DES, 2017). Irish schools have been invited to apply to form clusters of 'digital savvy' schools. In December 2017, the DES announced the 'School Excellence Fund — Digital'. Primary and secondary schools are invited to apply to form clusters of schools, working together on innovative projects in teaching and learning with digital technologies. The project seeks to demonstrate the use of digital technologies and to include it into curricula. Finally, in January 2018 it was announced that 40 post-primary schools around the country will start teaching computer science for the Leaving Certificate from this September, with the first students sitting an exam in this subject in 2020 (Eurydice, 2018).

6. Modernising higher education

Ireland has a very high tertiary attainment rate and has set ambitious goals for the future. In 2017 as much as 53 % of 30-34 year-olds had tertiary qualifications, compared to an EU average of just below 40 %. Enrolment in higher education has been traditionally high in Ireland, reflecting at least in part the lack of alternatives and the relative undervaluing of vocational pathways (McCoy et al., 2014, McGuinness et al., 2018). While the 2018 national reform programme identifies a target of 60 % of 30-34 year-olds with tertiary attainment, the further education and training sector's potential to provide pathways to sought-after qualifications is not yet fully exploited. The national reform programme highlights areas where the dropout rate from higher education is particularly high; it acknowledges that more work is needed to support students to complete their studies (Irish Government, 2018). By the end of 2018, a review of career guidance tools and career information will be completed for post-primary, further education and higher education students, as well as for adults. The aim is to ensure that Ireland is providing high quality, relevant career guidance support service to all students from post-primary level up to further and higher education (Eurydice, 2018).

Tracking of students and graduates is well developed in Ireland. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) reports on 'Retention and Progression in Higher Education' and shows that 86% of new entrants to full-time undergraduate degrees in 2014/2015 progressed to their second year of study in 2015/16. Further work will be done to see how students can best be supported to continue on their course or transfer to another programme (HEA, 2018). Graduate tracking and labour market pathways are also on the agenda in Ireland: 'What Do Graduates Do? - The Class of 2016' was published in January 2018. This study shows that 70% of recent graduates progressed to employment, and 10% went overseas. 81% of Masters and Doctorate level graduates are in employment nine months after graduation, up one percentage point from 2015 (80%) (HEA, 2018).

There is increased long-term investment in Irish higher education. Additional funding of EUR 36.5 million was provided for higher education in the 2017 budget and a further EUR 60 million was announced in the 2018 budget. This additional funding will support targeted initiatives including skills programmes, performance and innovation funding, technological university development and apprenticeships in the sector. The DES has recently announced a new EUR 5.7 million 'Higher Education Access Fund' to help students from under-represented groups to access higher education. Funding will be given to regional clusters of institutions to support approved access initiatives and will support places for 2 100 additional students in 2018. Finally,

higher education was highlighted as a key area for investment under 'Project Ireland 2040'. An investment programme is planned, including a EUR 200 million public-private partnership in 11 institutes of technology and a comprehensive capital investment programme with additional cumulative investment of EUR 2.2 billion up until 2027. This will also be accompanied by the new role of technological universities, which will have a new mandate to underpin and drive regional economic development.

The applied sciences sector is being upgraded in Ireland. The new Technological Universities Act came into force in March 2018. Applications for technical university status are submitted to the HEA for assessment by an international panel of experts. These are put forward by consortia of existing institutes of technology, which come together to seek future technical university status. The first application was submitted and approved earlier this year, and the first Technological University will be established in Dublin in early 2019. Further applications are anticipated later in 2018 and in subsequent years. A €220m project, being delivered via PPP, will benefit the new TU for Dublin. This is in addition to the forthcoming PPP programme for the wider Institute of Technology sector as 8 of the 11 institutes benefitting from this scheme are in TU consortia. This latest initiative confirms the strong focus on STEM, including ICT, engineering and life sciences to drive regional development in Ireland. Finally, quality assurance is becoming an area of growing strategic importance to Irish higher education institutions. In December 2017, two Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) reports were published, with the aim of making higher education more relevant for both students and the future labour market (QQI, 2017).

7. Modernising vocational education and training

Ireland continued to expand its apprenticeship system to higher qualification levels and to new sectors. This action is part of the 2025 national skills strategy, published in 2016, and aims to significantly increase work-based learning opportunities for school graduates who choose not to go to general higher education, as well as for employees (DES, 2016). Steps were taken to develop new apprenticeships, up to European qualifications framework (EQF) level 8; previously apprenticeship qualifications were only at EQF level 5, covering a wider range of sectors. It is also expected that the new apprenticeship fields will increase female participation. The National Women's Council of Ireland and the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) have been working together to identify the reasons for, and obstacles to, low female participation in apprenticeships. Approximately 40 new apprenticeship areas will be introduced over the next few years, including in ICT and other STEM occupations. Despite reforms, the employment rate of recent vocational education and training graduates, at 72.3 % in 2017, was still below the EU average of 76.6 %. In 2018, the National Skills Council is continuing its work to identify and prioritise skills demands and pinpoint how the education and training sector and other relevant stakeholders can best respond to this challenge. Finally, a survey of businesses that have worked with the regional skills fora will be held to measure satisfaction with their engagement with the fora so that the Education and Training system can continue to improve the service that is offered in each region.

8. Promoting adult learning

Adult participation in learning increased by 2.7 pps in 2017 to 8.9%, as against an EU average of 10.9%, suggesting that recent reforms in the field of Further Education and Training (FET) are beginning to show results. The Action Plan for Education 2018 foresees the creation of better career pathways through strengthening the apprenticeship and traineeship systems, supporting the development of an Upskilling Pathways Plan, and continuing to work with Skillnets to deliver enterprise-led training, including the establishment of four new Skillnets in sectors and regions highlighted in national workforce and sectoral policy, creating greater diversity of opportunity in learning beyond school. In-depth analysis of the potential target group of Upskilling Pathways has been undertaken. 'Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland', a new policy framework for the FET sector focuses on up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities for those already in employment, with a particular emphasis on groups furthest from the education system, e.g. those with lower education attainment. The policy was published in July 2018, and will be followed by initiatives to support FET actors in providing adult learners with the skills necessary for work. In 2018 the Council addressed to Ireland the following country-specific recommendation under the European Semester: "Prioritise the upskilling of the adult working-age population, with a focus on digital skills" (Council of the European Union, 2018).

A comprehensive review of the National Training Fund was published in August 2018. This review will guide strategic decisions on the Fund's structure and future direction.

Other developments outlined in the 2018 Action Plan include: developing a national policy on the recognition of prior learning; implementation of the FET Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019; completion of the Mid-Term review of the Further Education and Training Strategy; improving the impact of the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC), Youthreach, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Specific Skills Training (SST) schemes, to ensure relevance to the labour market and effective progression for learners; completing a review of career guidance services; and the implementation of actions from the ICT Skills 2014-2018 Action Plan.

Digital skills levels of the population are improving but still remain relatively low. In 2017, only 48% of the population possessed at least basic digital skills, as compared with the EU average of 57 %. In 2017, a Strategy for Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) in Further Education and Training (FET) was published. It aims to establish TEL as an intrinsic element of FET. Implementation will improve access to FET, equip learners with the skills and confidence to use technology as part of their work, and enhance overall learner engagement in FET. SOLAS will work closely with the DES to implement this strategy.

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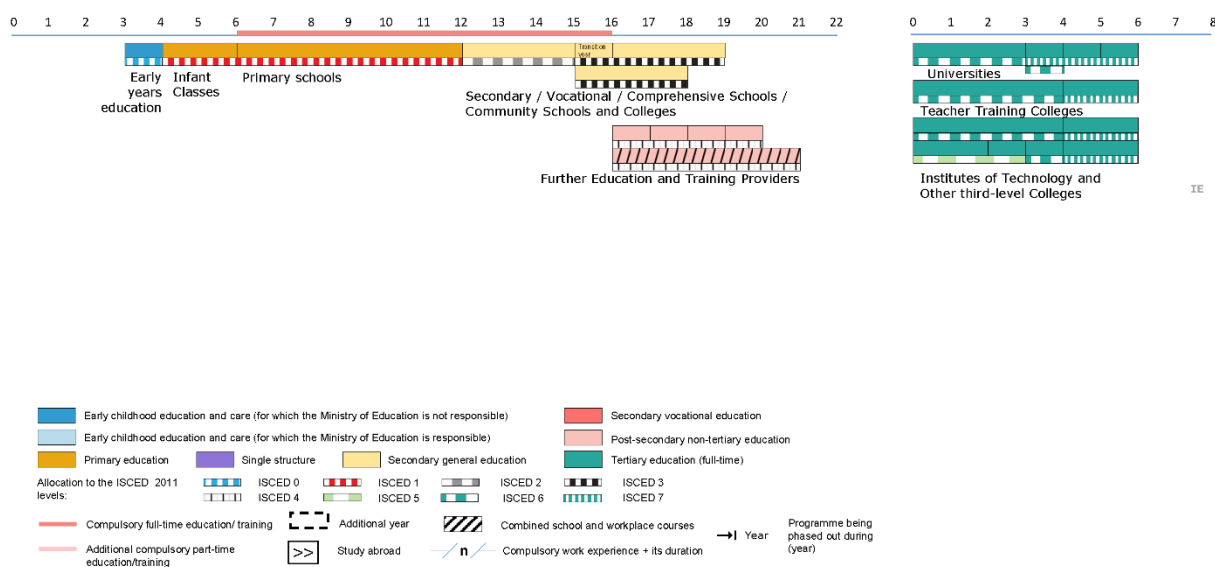
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10. Annex I: Key indicator sources

Indicator	Eurostat online data code
Early leavers from education and training	edat_lfse_14 + edat_lfse_02
Tertiary educational attainment	edat_lfse_03 + edat_lfs_9912
Early childhood education and care	educ_uoe_enra10
Underachievement in reading, maths, science	OECD (PISA)
Employment rate of recent graduates	edat_lfse_24
Adult participation in learning	trng_lfse_03
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP	gov_10a_exp
Expenditure on public and private institutions per student	educ_uoe_fini04
Learning mobility: Degree mobile graduates	Eurostat / UIS / OECD
Credit mobile graduates	educ_uoe_mobc02

11. Annex II: Structure of the education system



Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017. *The Structure of the European Education Systems 2017/18: Schematic Diagrams*. Eurydice Facts and Figures. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Comments and questions on this report are welcome and can be sent by email to:

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