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**COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT**

**Education and Training Monitor 2022**

*Accompanying the document*

**Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the  
European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions**

**on progress towards the achievement of the European Education Area**

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# **Education and Training Monitor 2022**

IRELAND



The Education and Training Monitor's country reports present and assess the main recent and ongoing policy development at all education levels in EU Member States. They provide the reader with more in-depth insight of the performance of countries with regard to the EU level targets agreed within the EEA. They are based on the most up-to-date quantitative and qualitative evidence available.

Section 1 presents a statistical overview of the main education and training indicators. Section 2 focuses on how the Member State has addressed or is addressing one of its education challenges. Section 3 covers early childhood education and care. Section 4 deals with school education policies. Section 5 covers vocational education and training and adult learning. Finally, Section 6 discusses measures in higher education.

The Education and Training Monitor's country reports were prepared by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), with contributions from the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL).

The document was completed on 30 September 2022

More background data at:

<https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2022/en/>



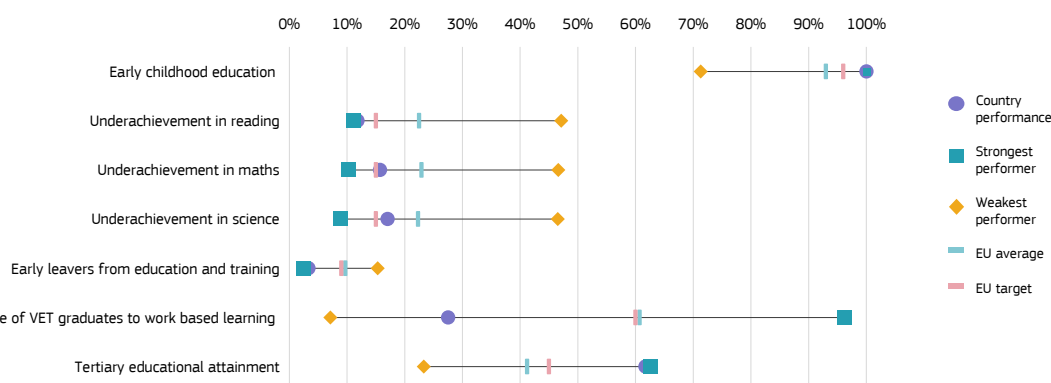
# 1. Key indicators

**Figure 1: Key indicators overview**

			Ireland		EU	
			2011	2021	2011	2021
<b>EU-level targets</b>			<b>2030 target</b>			
Participation in early childhood education (from age 3 to starting age of compulsory primary education)	≥ 96 %		82.4% <sup>13</sup>	100.0% <sup>20</sup>	91.8% <sup>13</sup>	93.0% <sup>20</sup>
Low achieving eighth-graders in digital skills	< 15%		:	:	:	:
Low achieving 15-year-olds in:	Reading	< 15%	17.2% <sup>09</sup>	11.8% <sup>18</sup>	19.7% <sup>09</sup>	22.5% <sup>18</sup>
	Maths	< 15%	20.8% <sup>09</sup>	15.7% <sup>18</sup>	22.7% <sup>09</sup>	22.9% <sup>18</sup>
	Science	< 15%	15.2% <sup>09</sup>	17.0% <sup>18</sup>	18.2% <sup>09</sup>	22.3% <sup>18</sup>
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)	< 9 %		11.1%	3.3% <sup>b</sup>	13.2%	9.7% <sup>b</sup>
Exposure of VET graduates to work-based learning	≥ 60 % (2025)		:	27.5% <sup>u</sup>	:	60.7%
Tertiary educational attainment (age 25-34)	≥ 45 %		48.6%	61.7% <sup>b</sup>	33.0%	41.2% <sup>b</sup>
Participation of adults in learning (age 25-64)	≥ 47 % (2025)		:	:	:	:
<b>Other contextual indicators</b>						
Equity indicator (percentage points)			:	11.8 <sup>18</sup>	:	19.30 <sup>18</sup>
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)	Native		10.1%	3.4% <sup>b</sup>	11.9%	8.5% <sup>b</sup>
	EU-born		19.7% <sup>u</sup>	:	25.3%	21.4% <sup>b</sup>
	Non EU-born		13.9%	:	31.4%	21.6% <sup>b</sup>
Upper secondary level attainment (age 20-24, ISCED 3-8)			87.1%	96.1% <sup>b</sup>	79.6%	84.6% <sup>b</sup>
Tertiary educational attainment (age 25-34)	Native		47.9%	58.7% <sup>b</sup>	34.3%	42.1% <sup>b</sup>
	EU-born		43.7% <sup>u</sup>	57.5% <sup>b</sup>	28.8%	40.7% <sup>b</sup>
	Non EU-born		60.3%	74.1% <sup>b</sup>	23.4%	34.7% <sup>b</sup>
Education investment	Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP		5.3%	3.1% <sup>20</sup>	4.9%	5.0% <sup>20</sup>
	Public expenditure on education as a share of the total general government expenditure		11.2%	11.3% <sup>20</sup>	10.0%	9.4% <sup>20</sup>

Sources: Eurostat (UOE, LFS, COFOG); OECD (PISA). Further information can be found in Annex I and at *Monitor Toolbox*. Notes: The 2018 EU average on PISA reading performance does not include ES; the indicator used (ECE) refers to early-childhood education and care programmes which are considered by the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) to be 'educational' and therefore constitute the first level of education in education and training systems – ISCED level 0; for Ireland, the ECE rate includes participation in ECEC centres, and also in primary schools, which are attended by many 4-5 year olds; the equity indicator shows the gap in the share of underachievement in reading, mathematics and science (combined) among 15-year-olds between the lowest and highest quarters of socio-economic status; b = break in time series, u = low reliability, : = not available, 09 = 2009, 13 = 2013, 18 = 2018, 20 = 2020.

**Figure 2: Position in relation to strongest and weakest performers**



Source: DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, based on data from Eurostat (LFS 2021, UOE 2020) and OECD (PISA 2018).

## 2. A focus on key competences

**Ireland has placed the focus on key competences and skills at the core of the lower secondary education reform.** Bringing in a new 'Framework for Junior Cycle' (2015)<sup>1</sup> was the most significant development in school education implemented in Ireland over the last decade. The rationale behind the reform was to remedy the overall insufficient focus on skills, and how state examinations affected teaching (European Commission, 2022). The findings from the study commissioned to provide the evidence base for the reform highlighted a range of challenges. These included a mismatch between the types of active learning valued by students and the more teacher-centred methodologies they experienced at school, which also affected the school climate (Smyth, et al. 2007). Negative experiences at lower-secondary level subsequently affected student engagement and achievement in upper secondary education and post-school progression (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; McCoy et al., 2014).

**The multi-layered reform introduced targeted changes to the curriculum and assessment, with an emphasis on skills, learning outcomes-based curricula, classroom-based assessment, and encouraging more learner-centred teaching and learning approaches.** The six key skills that the reform brought in include: managing myself, staying well, communicating, being creative, working with others, and managing information and thinking. Working with digital technology forms part of each skill. Literacy and numeracy, which were first boosted by the 2011 literacy and numeracy strategy<sup>2</sup>, are seen as foundation skills, developed horizontally across the curriculum<sup>3-4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/aed00b-framework-for-junior-cycle/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Home/Literacy-and-Numeracy/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle/>

The reform was underpinned by significant investment in the professional development of teachers and school leaders<sup>5</sup>, as well as school self-evaluation. The reform also aimed to give schools greater autonomy over curriculum development and assessments to encourage creativity and their ability to respond to their needs. This result has so far been proven for the new English curriculum focused on developing students' communication skills and critical thinking (the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment - NCCA, 2019; Marcus-Quinn, A. 2019). The lockdown due to COVID-19 reportedly gave greater recognition and validity to the value of key competences among some groups of stakeholders in Ireland (European Commission, 2022).

**Ireland continues to modernise its curricula, ensuring a sound evidence base and evaluation of policy reforms.** The main changes proposed for the new primary school curricula<sup>6</sup> are framed around: (i) greater autonomy and flexibility for schools as 'curriculum makers'; (ii) stronger connections between children's experiences from pre-school to post-primary school; (iii) an updated set of priorities for children's learning and development; and (iv) new pedagogical approaches and strategies, with assessment central to teaching. Following stakeholder consultations, the new primary curriculum framework is expected to be published in 2023.

**In 2022, the Minister announced a vision for the redevelopment of upper-secondary education curriculum ('senior cycle').** The key changes will include new curriculum specifications embedding 21st century competences, enhanced teacher assessment, new subjects (e.g. climate action and sustainable development), and a greater emphasis on well-being (see Section 3). The proposal to reform the junior cycle was underpinned by research carried out by the

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/def48e3f-68f9-42e4-95de-f30086321fd0/JSEC\\_Key\\_Skills\\_of-JC\\_English\).pdf](https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/def48e3f-68f9-42e4-95de-f30086321fd0/JSEC_Key_Skills_of-JC_English).pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://jct.ie/home/home.php>

<sup>6</sup> <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/primary-developments/primary-curriculum-review-and-redevelopment/>

Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)<sup>7</sup> and the NCCA, and practice observations in schools made by the inspectorate (European Commission, 2022). A large-scale evaluation of the junior cycle from 2020 to 2024 is currently being conducted. The European Commission supports a pilot project to improve local community engagement in education policy development in Ireland through the Technical Support Instrument<sup>8</sup>.

**Ireland has placed greater emphasis on foreign languages in school curricula, including in special schools.** Under the strategy for foreign languages in education (2017-2026)<sup>9</sup>, primary school classes from third to sixth grade and special schools could participate in a new language sampler programme, enabling the teaching of either a modern foreign language or Irish Sign Language<sup>10</sup>. The government has also extended 'Say Yes to Languages', a primary languages sampler module for a further year, increasing the length of the module in 2022/23 from 6 to 8 weeks<sup>11</sup>. The lower-secondary programme incorporates new specifications for language teaching, focusing on students' communication skills and cultural awareness. Schools can also introduce short courses in other languages. The draft primary curriculum framework also emphasises the teaching of foreign languages (NCCA, 2020). The new approach is expected to improve the comparatively poor foreign language skills of Irish students (McCoy et al., 2014).

**Ireland promotes key competences and skills in lifelong learning also.** The 2017-2026 STEM

education policy statement<sup>12</sup> aims to nurture STEM in learners from early years to post-primary. In 2021, Ireland adopted a 10-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills (Government, 2021c). In 2022, the OECD will review the national skills strategy for 2016-2025<sup>13</sup> to examine how Ireland is equipped to meet current and future skills needs (Section 4).

### 3. Early childhood education and care

**Participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) remains high.** In 2020, the estimated participation rate for children aged 3 and over continued to be 100%. The public pre-school programme<sup>14</sup> is provided for free for 3 hours per day. Since 2019, the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) has granted significantly higher benefits to low-income parents towards the cost of ECEC and school-age childcare. In 2022, the age limit for the universal NCS benefits was raised from 3 to 15. Consequently, between 2019 and 2021, the net cost of childcare fell by over 20 pps for a two-earner couple and close to 30 pps for single parents (as counted for two children in full-time care). This is the steepest decrease in the EU (OECD, 2022). However, issues around parent participation and uptake in the NCS have been found among some vulnerable families (Frontier Economics, 2021).

**Ireland has launched substantial reforms to improve the affordability and quality of ECEC.** The 'First 5' (2019-2028) is the overarching strategy to improve ECEC quality, accessibility and affordability. The OECD review showed that the market-driven nature of the sector and the low level of public funding have resulted in low wages, poor working conditions for staff and high fees for parents (OECD, 2021b). In December 2021, Ireland published two reports on the funding model (Government, 2021a) and on the workforce

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.esri.ie/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/news-events/latest-news/2021/eu-support-granted-for-ireland-to-develop-a-model-of-local-community-engagement-led-by-the-teaching-council.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/52f94d-framework-for-consultation-on-a-foreign-languages-in-education-strat/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/50f5e-minister-foley-announces-new-language-sampler-module-for-third-to-sixth-class-pupils-in-primary-and-special-schools/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/0e6c1-minister-foley-announces-extension-of-the-say-yes-to-languages-primary-languages-sampler-module-for-202223-and-invites-applications-from-primary-schools/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4d40d5-stem-education-policy/#stem-education-policy-statement-2017-2026>

<sup>13</sup> <https://assets.gov.ie/24412/0f5f058feec641bbb92d34a0a8e3daff.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/childcare-search/the-ecce-scheme/>

(Government, 2021b), the fundamental building blocks of the sector. They outline the key reform proposals that aim to transform the relationship between the state, the services and workers, shifting away from a predominantly private-sector model to a new hybrid model that will increasingly be publicly funded and managed. The workforce is to be gradually professionalised. In September 2022, Ireland launched the new funding model<sup>15</sup>, which is a step change in public management for the ECEC sector. The public investment will increase to EUR 221 million per year and the providers who have signed the contract with the state will freeze fees. The employment regulation orders aim to improve pay for 70% of ECEC workers, establishing a wage structure for staff, recognising their different qualifications and roles. Under a building blocks capital programme EUR 70 million will support ECEC and childcare infrastructure needs with an allocation of over 2023-2025. In the first half of 2022, the pandemic aggravated pre-existing ECEC staff retention issues.

**An evaluation by the Department of Education Inspectorate has found that, overall, the quality of ECEC settings is good, however the individual needs of children should be better addressed.** Following the evaluations conducted from September 2016 to December 2020 in settings delivering the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, the chief inspector's report<sup>16</sup> concluded that the overall quality of provision for education in almost all settings is good or has improved. It suggests that there should be greater emphasis on children's individual strengths, needs, and interests, with particular attention for children with additional needs (DE, 2022a).

**Though COVID-19 restricted ECEC activities, it also inspired solutions that may bring longer-term benefits.** The periods when ECEC settings were closed and the stress associated

with their reopening constrained a wide range of pedagogical activities, and this had an impact on children's learning (Duignan and Kelly, 2021). Positively, it showed that the sector has a strong capacity for resilience and creativity, and outdoor activities increased thanks to the upgraded outdoor spaces. It is also expected that the increased use of online learning methods for educators will remain a feature of future continuing professional development resources (Wolfe and O'Byrne, 2021).

## 4. School education

**Overall, Ireland performs well on basic skills, however widening inequality due to COVID-19 remains a concern for schools.** According to the OECD's PISA results for 2018, Ireland scores above the EU average in student performance in maths and science, and close to the top in reading. Ireland has one of the lowest proportions of low achievers in the EU. The PISA results have shown for years the relatively strong performance of Ireland's lower-achieving students (Volante, et al., 2022). The proportion of students achieving scores at or below proficiency level 1 is significantly lower in Ireland than the EU average: at Level 1a<sup>17</sup>: 9.47% vs EU average of 12.98%.

**Due to COVID-19, between January 2020 and mid-May 2021, pre-primary and primary schools in Ireland were shut for longer than the international average; secondary schools closed for fewer days (OECD, 2021c).** Evidence from Ireland highlights that the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students and that it affected more strongly their mental health, school engagement and social skills due to less favourable home learning environments (Hilliard, M., 2021; Ombudsman for Children<sup>18</sup>; Mohan et al, 2021; Murray et al., 2021). The efficiency of support measures, in particular the COVID-19 Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS) (INTO, 2021) is not yet known.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/61ae8-minister-ogorman-launches-together-for-better-new-funding-model-for-early-learning-and-care-and-school-age-childcare-as-core-funding-contracts-begin-for-4000-services/>

<sup>16</sup> The ECEC sector in Ireland is also inspected by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

<sup>17</sup> Level 1a: from 334.75 to less than 407.47 score points.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.oco.ie/news/the-ombudsman-for-children-publishes-annual-report-2021-resilience-tested/>

**The low rate of early leavers from education and training dropped further in 2021, proving the effectiveness of Ireland's long-standing and recent policy measures.**

Following the consistently low rate at around 5%, in 2021, it dropped to 3.3%. This is substantially below the EU-level target of 9% and around a third of the EU average (9.7%)<sup>19</sup>. Since 2011, the overall rate fell by 7.8 pps, more than at EU-level (3.5 pps). The decrease was particularly high among men (9.4 pps), and among women it fell by 3.6 pps in 2020, but then the rate has slightly increased recently (Figure 3). The rate among persons with disabilities is comparatively high at 10.7% (2018)<sup>20</sup>. Ireland implements two well-established schemes to prevent early school leaving, which also proved valuable during the pandemic. Youthreach, co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) since its launch in 1988<sup>21</sup>,

provides vulnerable young people with opportunities for basic education, personal development, vocational training and work experience. The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme provides additional resources and staff to schools to support students with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. From September 2022, the programme will include an additional 273 primary and 37 post-primary schools. This entails an increase of EUR 32 million in spending, the biggest single investment in DEIS<sup>22</sup>.

**Furthermore, national evidence shows that the transition rates from post-primary to higher education jumped from 62.1% in 2019 to 66.1% in 2020 (DE, 2021).** This is most likely the result of additional places created in higher education during the pandemic, and the

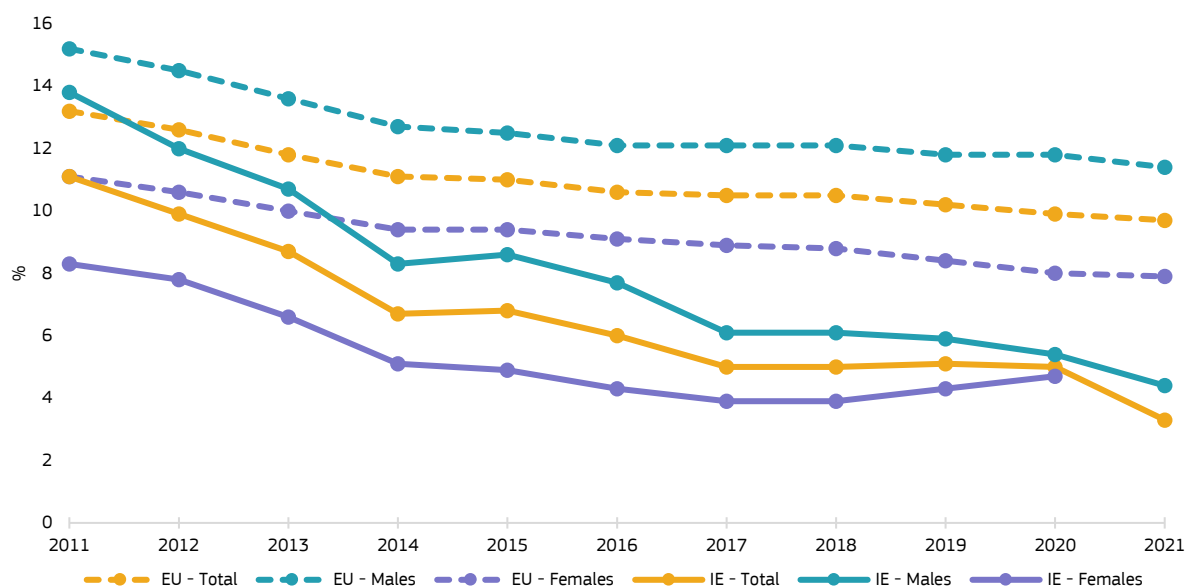
<sup>19</sup> Eurostat, UOE: edat\_ifse\_02.

<sup>20</sup> EU-SILC UDB 2018, release 2020, version 1

<sup>21</sup> <https://eufunds.ie/european-social-fund/what-do-we-fund/youthreach/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a3c9e-extension-of-deis-to-further-schools/>

**Figure 3: Early leavers from education and training in Ireland by sex, 2011-2021 (%)**



Source: Eurostat (LFS), [edat\_ifse\_14].



lack of jobs. In addition, 24.2% of school leavers progressed to further education and training in 2019.

**The reform of the upper secondary education ‘senior cycle’ will give students a wider range of pathways.** Following research commenced in 2016<sup>23</sup> and a public consultation, the Minister for Education announced on 29 March a vision to reform post-primary education – ‘Equity and Excellence for All’<sup>24</sup>. The reform, which will be a key development for Ireland, is based on three tenets:

- i. empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century;
- ii. enrich the student experience and build on the strengths of the current system; and
- iii. embed well-being and reduce student stress levels.

The new approach should provide a more diverse curriculum and a final assessment process, which will better support students in choosing a suitable path forward in academia, training or work. It also aims to reduce the traditional final written exams and introduce a minimum of 40% class-based continuous assessments. However, teachers’ representatives have raised concerns over the system’s capability to run these assessments<sup>25</sup>.



**Box 1: A new digital strategy for schools to 2027<sup>26</sup>.**

The new strategy, published in April, builds on the previous strategy (2015–2020), taking into account

<sup>23</sup> <https://ncca.ie/en/resources/senior-cycle-review-advisory-report/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f53c6-senior-cycle-reform/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.tui.ie/press-releases/tui-reiterates-its-insistence-on-state-certification-and-external-assessment-for-all-components-of-senior-cycle%20a0.14424.html>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fb88-digital-strategy-for-schools/>

the progress made, new developments in digital technologies and emerging priorities. The strategy will comprise a total investment of EUR 200 million for the primary and secondary school sectors. The main objectives have centred around three pillars:

- i) support to embed digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment;
- ii) ii) ICT infrastructure; and
- iii) iii) policy, research and digital leadership. The objectives also cover inclusion, supporting curricular reform, online safety, technical support and work in areas, particularly emerging technologies, where further research is required. The first implementation plan will run from 2022–2024 and following a mid-term review, the second implementation plan will run from 2025–2027.

To support the digital inclusion of disadvantaged students, DEIS schools will receive double the amount of funding provided to non-DEIS schools for ICT infrastructure under the scheme via Ireland’s national recovery and resilience plan<sup>27</sup>. The plan also supports the connectivity of schools.

## 5. Vocational education and training and adult learning

**The review of Ireland’s national skills strategy 2016–2025 has been launched.** The project run by the OECD<sup>28</sup> is examining how Ireland is equipped to meet current and future demand for skills. It looks at how the higher education and further education and training and skills ecosystem as a whole is responsive to current and future labour market needs; how to strengthen lifelong learning, and how skills can drive innovation. Additionally, to pursue quality in

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/d9805-minister-foley-announces-issue-of-50-million-funding-to-primary-and-post-primary-schools-to-address-the-digital-divide-under-irelands-national-recovery-and-resilience-plan/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/36423-minister-harris-and-oecd-secretary-general-mathias-cormann-announce-plans-for-an-examination-of-irelands-skills-strategy/>

further education and training, since January 2021, Ireland has carried out a review of its Education and Training Boards, including a review of the main providers.

**The SOLAS recovery skills response programme, co-funded by the Recovery and Resilience Facility, is a key investment in the social and economic recovery.** The programme will roll out additional educational and training programmes under the ‘Skills to Compete’ initiative. The SOLAS green skills action programme will provide training on climate and low-carbon economy. The government launched the green skills for further education and training roadmap in March 2022, incorporating the green skills action programme with a commitment to providing 60 000 places to train in green skills and 4 550 places to train in retrofits and near zero energy buildings. Additionally, the new online portal (<https://www.smartchoices.ie/>) by SOLAS provides career and training guidance, including for early school leavers.

**Ireland continues to invest in ongoing skills measures and in boosting adult learning.** In 2021, participation in adult learning in the last four weeks was 13.6%, slightly above the EU average. The national adult literacy programme helped over 100 000 beneficiaries return to education and training or gain new qualifications over 2014-2019 (Box 2). In the 2022 budget, it allocated EUR 9 million to achieve the strategic priorities in further education and training, including implementing the 10-year adult literacy strategy (Government, 2021c). It allocated EUR 78 million for reskilling and upskilling, including a EUR 22 million green skills action programme, and the ‘Building Bridges’ project to improve pathways and outcomes for prisoners (70% of inmates have insufficient literacy skills). Furthermore, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Bill 2022 includes a provision for the HEA to promote and support higher education institutions (HEIs) in providing lifelong and flexible learning. Ireland set the 2030 target of 64.2% of adults in training every year, above the EU target of 60%.

**Ireland allocates additional funding to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19.** It committed EUR 34 million in its 2022 budget to continue supporting apprenticeships, including EUR 17 million to remedy the backlogs caused by COVID-19. Ireland also allocated EUR 6.85 million in funding for 2022 to mitigate educational disadvantages (launched in 2020). The fund places a strong focus on community education as a mechanism to continue to support and engage with disadvantaged learners.



#### Box 2: Adult literacy programme

The adult literacy programme aims to improve equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups in formal, non-formal, and informal settings. It also promotes flexible learning pathways by providing career guidance and validating acquired competencies. The investment is primarily aimed at the unemployed, particularly the long-term unemployed, disadvantaged groups, the under 35, people formerly employed in declining sectors, and adults with low literacy and numeracy skills.

It offers basic education programmes for adults, including:

- reading and writing
- communication skills
- applying numbers and tackling maths problems in everyday life
- creative thinking and problem-solving
- study skills.

Number of beneficiaries (2014-2019): 116 103.

Budget: EUR 52 953 352.23 from the European Social Fund + EUR 47 489 348.16 from national funding.

Results so far: 40% of participants went back to education or training, 23% gained a qualification and 2% were directly employed.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/90adb6-adult-literacy/>

## 6. Higher education

**The tertiary educational attainment rate rose sharply again and the employment rate of recent graduates is catching up.** In 2021, the tertiary attainment rate rose by 3.3 pps compared to 2020, reaching 61.7%, the second highest rate in the EU (average: 41.2%)<sup>29</sup>. The proportion of STEM graduates is above the EU average (26.4% vs EU 24.9%), and the proportion of ICT graduates is the highest in the EU (8.6%)<sup>30</sup>. Overall, during the pandemic, the higher education attainment rate rose by 6.3 pps since 2019. As the increase was slightly higher among women (by 1 pp.), the gender gap increased to 8.7 pps, reversing the positive trend recorded in the last 4 years but remained well under the EU average (11.1 pps) (Figure 4). The attainment rate among men at 57.4% remains the second highest in the EU. In 2021, the employment rate of recent graduates was 90%, marking a sharp increase by 2.6 pps compared to 2020 (EU 84.9%, an increase by 1.3 pps), but still lower than in 2019 (91%).

<sup>29</sup> Eurostat, UOE: edat\_ifse\_03.

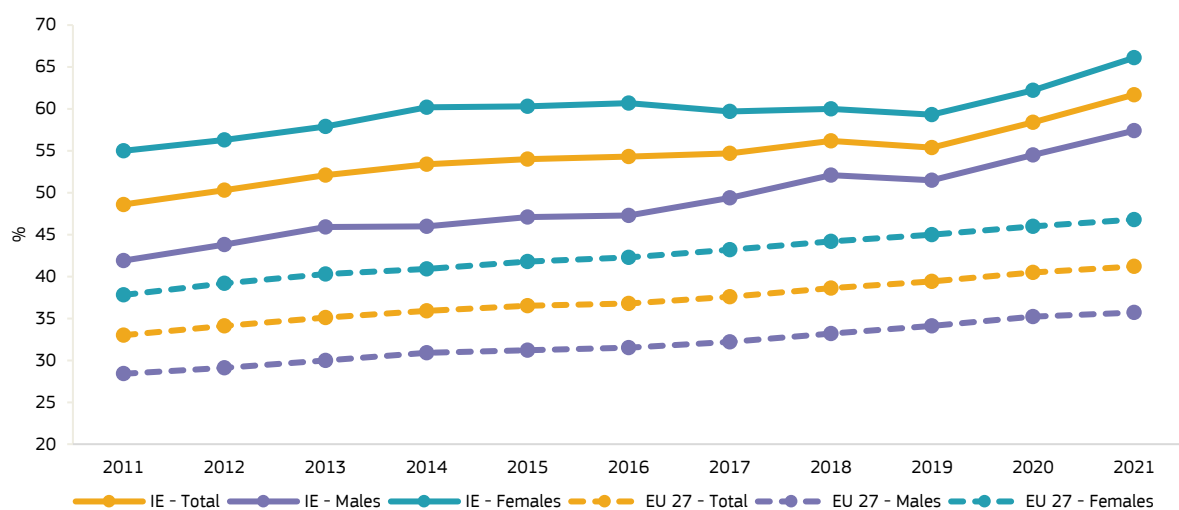
<sup>30</sup> Eurostat, UOE: educ\_uae\_grad02.

**To foster equity in higher education, Ireland makes increasing the participation of disadvantaged groups a priority.** Drawing on Census data, the percentage of 20-year-olds in disadvantaged areas who are students increased from 27% in 2006 to 44% in 2011, and to 47% in 2016. The number of students studying on a flexible basis (part-time and remote) continues to rise steadily, while the number of mature students (aged 23 and older) is dropping (DE, 2021). However, Irish persons with disabilities still have a 20% higher chance of having a low education than their non-disabled peers, and the disability education gap is large in Ireland (OECD, 2021d). In 2018, only 39.9% of persons with disabilities aged 30-34 held a higher education diploma<sup>31</sup>. The newly proposed funding framework<sup>32</sup> cuts costs for students and families. In June, the Minister announced two initiatives, worth in total EUR 6 million, to support students with autism and students with an intellectual disability in accessing

<sup>31</sup> EU-SILC UDB 2018, release 2020, version 1

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/11787-landmark-policy-funding-higher-education-reducing-cost-for-families/>.

**Figure 4: Tertiary education attainment (25-34) in Ireland and in the EU by sex, 2011-2021 (%)**



Source: Eurostat (EU-LFS), [edat\_ifse\_03].

third-level education. The national access plan (2022-2026)<sup>33</sup> (forthcoming) contains funding and support for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, mature students, Irish travellers, Roma and students with special educational needs, including for the first time, students with intellectual disabilities.

**The government has announced a policy to introduce a sustainable funding system and improve the quality and accessibility of higher education.** The 'Funding the Future' framework (DFHERIS, 2022b) prioritises increased funding for student support, sets out options to make higher education funding sustainable and improve the quality of higher education, addresses skills gaps, and fosters the participation of under-represented groups. Under the new framework, student fees will be gradually reduced and student grants<sup>34</sup> will be increased; student loans have been ruled out to avoid indebting students. Investment will be increased by EUR 307 million coming from state investment, student contributions and employer contributions via the National Training Fund. This should fill a major funding gap, as identified by the government. Decreasing the student-to-academic staff ratio<sup>35</sup>, improving staff employment conditions and rolling out a more robust and evidence-informed system strengthening accountability and performance measurement (a revised performance framework) should improve the educational outcomes of HEIs in Ireland. The government will address skills shortages, prioritising the skills for public services (healthcare workers, teachers, and staff working on implementation of the housing and climate policies). Greater links are planned between further and higher education and research sectors to provide a wider range of choices for learners, including adults. Some stakeholders, however, doubt that the proposed reforms will achieve the stated goals (University Times, 2022b). This policy

is in response to the Cassells report (2016), the report on funding higher education carried out under the European Commission's Technical

Support Instrument (2021), and an Independent Review of the Student Grant Scheme (Indecon, 2022)<sup>36</sup>.

**The new Bill aims to reform the legislative framework for higher education sector, providing a more defined role for the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and strengthening the institutional governance in higher education institutions.** The Higher Education Authority Bill (Oireachtas, 2022) is going through the legislative process before enactment. Its overall aim is to provide a high quality, student-focused higher education system with appropriate oversight and accountability by the higher education institutions to the HEA and the State. The Bill also aims to improve policy development and planning in the sector. To strengthen institutional governance, the legislation reduces the size of the governing bodies of universities, provides for competency-based membership and a majority of external members and an external chairperson. It also provides for oversight by the HEA of higher education institutions and intervention if good governance is not implemented. Regarding the original version of the Bill, some stakeholders expressed concerns about limiting the autonomy of institutions, placing undue emphasis on monetary value, degrees and outputs (University Times, 2022a), and reduced student representation<sup>37</sup>. The amendments to the Bill have sought to allay stakeholders' concerns about the changes.

**A National Student and Researcher Helpdesk will support students and researchers**

<sup>33</sup> <https://hea.ie/policy/consultation-new-national-plan-for-equity-of-access-to-higher-education-2022-2026/>.

<sup>34</sup> <https://susi.ie/>.

<sup>35</sup> Current student-staff ratio: 19.1 IE vs 15.3 EU (OECD, 2021a).

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/49e56-future-funding-in-higher-education/>.

<sup>37</sup> <https://usi.ie/heabill/>;  
<https://universitytimes.ie/2022/09/independent-senators-urge-harris-to-amend-hea-bill/>

**fleeing the war in Ukraine**<sup>38</sup>. The helpdesk, which was created in May 2022, assisted Ukrainian third-level students and researchers who wished to continue their studies or research in Ireland. The helpdesk, hosted by Maynooth University, is funded by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/3bc36-central-helpdesk-for-ukrainian-people-seeking-access-to-third-level-education-announced-by-minister-harris/>



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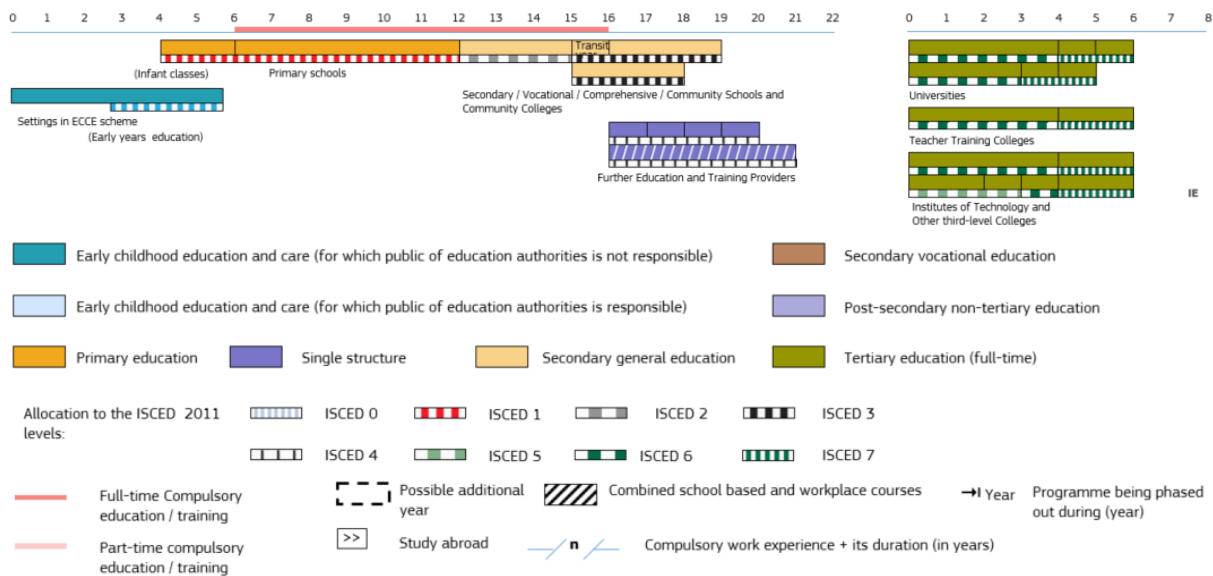
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## Annex I: Key indicators sources

Indicator	Source
Participation in early childhood education	Eurostat (UOE), educ_uae_enra21
Low achieving eighth-graders in digital skills	IEA, ICILS
Low achieving 15-year-olds in reading, maths and science	OECD (PISA)
Early leavers from education and training	Main data: Eurostat (LFS), edat_lfse_14 Data by country of birth: Eurostat (LFS), edat_lfse_02
Exposure of VET graduates to work based learning	Eurostat (LFS), edat_lfs_9919
Tertiary educational attainment	Main data: Eurostat (LFS), edat_lfse_03 Data by country of birth: Eurostat (LFS), edat_lfse_9912
Participation of adults in learning	Data for this EU-level target is not available. Data collection starts in 2022. Source: EU LFS.
Equity indicator	European Commission (Joint Research Centre) calculations based on OECD's PISA 2018 data
Upper secondary level attainment	Eurostat (LFS), edat_lfse_03
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP	Eurostat (COFOG), gov_10a_exp
Public expenditure on education as a share of the total general government expenditure	Eurostat (COFOG), gov_10a_exp

## Annex II: Structure of the education system



Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022. The Structure of the European Education Systems 2022/2023: Schematic Diagrams. Eurydice Facts and Figures. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Please email any comments or questions to:  
EAC-UNITE-A2@ec.europa.eu