



National system overview on education systems in Europe

2011 Edition



IRELAND

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1. Education population and language of instruction

In 2009, 34.1 % of Ireland's population was aged below 25. There were 642 305 young people aged 6-16, the ages wherein education is compulsory. In 2008/09, there were approximately 501 000 people in full-time education at first level (4/5 -12/13 years old), 345 000 at second level (12/13 – 17/18 years old) and 153 000 at third level (17/18 – 21/22 years old).

The language of instruction depends on whether the school is located in an Irish (*Gaeltacht*) speaking or English-speaking district or where some schools provide Irish-medium education in an almost predominantly English-speaking community (*Gaelscoileanna*). In 2008/09, there were 33 991 first level pupils and 9 115 second level pupils receiving their education through the medium of Irish.

2. Administrative control and extent of public-sector funded education

In 2008, approximately 98 % of full-time pupils/students attended public-sector schools. 2 % attended private non-grant-aided schools which are provided and controlled by non-government bodies, and receiving none of their finance from the public sector.

Irish schools at the first and second level are, by and large, privately owned but State funded. While the schools remain in private ownership (largely owned by religious communities) and are locally managed (largely by representative boards of management), teachers' salaries and capital/operational costs are almost entirely met by the State. Schools termed as being 'private' in Ireland are those that charge annual fees to students as a condition of enrolment and attendance.

The Education Act (1998) provides a legal and administrative base for the education system at first and second levels. It legislates for an appropriate balance between the interdependent rights and obligations of the child, parents, the teachers, the church, the State and other agencies.

Universities and other higher education institutions are mainly autonomous statutory bodies. However, there is a small private sector which is not funded by the State, and legislation is in place which enables private providers to offer quality assured nationally accredited further and higher education and training awards.

The Department of Education and Skills sets down a broad regulatory framework within which schools in receipt of State funding are required to operate. The regulatory framework includes the curriculum to be followed by schools, the governance structures for individual schools and the timeframe within which schools are required to operate. The Department pays salaries directly to teachers, but schools are their legal employers, except in the vocational system where local education committees have a high degree of administrative control in local areas. Aside from the vocational system, grants are paid directly to schools by the Department of Education and Skills to meet their day-to-day running costs.

Schools largely determine their own enrolment policy, having regard to legislative requirements, they choose the textbooks to be used in the school and they have considerable autonomy in deciding on the teaching methods and assessment methods to be used. However, national externally set and marked examinations, run by the State Examinations Commission, apply to all students at the end of lower second level education and on completion of upper second level education.

The Inspectorate is responsible for the evaluation of first and second level schools and centres for education in accordance with Section 13 of the Education Act 1998. Its activities can be categorised broadly under four strands: (1) Operating an inspection and evaluation programme, (2) Assessing and advising on the implementation of legislation and Department regulations, (3) Advising schools, teachers and parents on educational provision, and (4) Contributing to and supporting policy development.

Through the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Department has established mechanisms for quality assurance in further and higher education.

3. Pre-primary education

Ireland operates a split system of governance whereby childcare provision for children aged from birth onwards is governed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) which regulates and inspects a diverse range of private, community and voluntary service provision. These crèches or pre-school services are required to register with the Health Service Executive (HSE) and comply with the 2006 Child Care (Pre-School Services) No 2 Regulations. The services are inspected by the HSE's pre-school inspectorate.

In January 2010, the DCYA introduced universal free pre-school provision for children aged 3 years and 2 months and 4 years and 7 months. Around 66 000 children or 94 % of the eligible cohort of children will benefit from the scheme in 2011/2012

While the scheme is funded through the DCYA, the Department of Education and Skills has funded two practice frameworks (Síolta and Aistear) to support the development of quality provision in participating services. Síolta (2006), developed by an agency under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills, is concerned with all areas of quality that impact on children's care and education. It includes early learning and development but also other standards such as Health and Welfare, Environments, Planning and Evaluation and Organisation.

Aistear (2009), developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is a curriculum framework which focuses specifically on supporting children's early learning and development from birth to six years. The two frameworks complement each other and Aistear can help practitioners work towards a number of the standards in Síolta such as curriculum, environments, identity and belonging, partnership with parents, interactions and play.

The Department of Education and Skills also provides for a targeted programme for 3 – 4 year old children at risk of educational disadvantage (the Early Start Programme) and for the Infant Classes in primary schools catering for children aged 4-6 years. Although the compulsory school age is 6, 44.4 % of 4 year olds and 100 % of all 5 year olds are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (Annual Statistical Report 2008/09: Department of Education and Skills).

4. Compulsory education

(i) Phases

First level (compulsory education) <i>Primary schools</i>	6-12 years of age
Second level (compulsory education) <i>Community / Comprehensive / Vocational / Voluntary secondary schools</i>	12-16 years of age

(ii) Admission criteria

The Education Welfare Act (2002) provides for compulsory education between the ages of 6 and 16. Most children attending schools recognised under the terms of the Education Act (1998) start school at either 4 or 5 years of age. A child must be at least 4 years of age at the start of the school year (September) to enrol in primary school. When pupils complete primary education (at the age of 12), they are admitted to the junior cycle (for pupils aged 12 to 15 years old) of secondary level schooling. Parents may choose the school. Schooling is free except in privately funded schools.

(iii) Length of the school day/week/year

The school year comprises 183 days (September to the end of June) for primary pupils, and 167 days (September to the end of May) for second level students. Schools open on five days a week. The minimum annual lesson time at primary level is 915 hours. There is no fixed number of lessons which must be taught. Lessons generally last 30 minutes and schools follow general guidelines in regard to the amount of time per week allocated to each aspect of the curriculum. At second level, class periods normally last between 35-45 minutes, and there may be 35-42 classes in a week.

(iv) Class size/student grouping

The overall maximum average class size in primary schools by reference to the staffing schedule has been set to 27 in the 2008/09 school year. DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) continues to provide intensive and targeted support for literacy and numeracy in schools with disadvantaged status: it is a government initiative introduced in 2005 to combat educational disadvantage. Primary pupils are generally grouped by age, although there are some mixed-age groups in smaller schools. In certain categories of DEIS schools, the maximum class size can be as low as 15.

Primary classes typically have one teacher for all subjects; second level students have separate subject teachers.

(v) Curricular control and content

The Primary School Curriculum (1999), determined at national level, comprises seven curriculum areas: Language (Irish, English); Mathematics; Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (history, geography, science); Arts Education (visual arts, music and drama); Physical Education; Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Religious Education. It is an integrated curriculum and promotes the child as an active agent in his/her learning.

Students spend three years in the junior cycle of second level schools. They follow the Junior Certificate course the purpose of which is to provide a well-balanced, general education. The core

curriculum for the junior cycle (determined at national level) in all second level schools includes Irish, English, Mathematics, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Physical Education should also form part of the curriculum. There are twenty six subjects approved for the junior cycle curriculum of which schools offer a selection to students. Students generally study a minimum of 7 subjects for examination purposes.

(vi) Assessment, progression and qualifications

There is no formal state examination at the end of primary education. National assessments of the reading and mathematics achievements of Irish primary school pupils are conducted every five years in a representative sample of schools. In addition, since 2007, all primary schools are required to administer standardised tests in literacy and numeracy to pupils at two points of the primary school cycle and report the results of these tests to their parents. At second level, the Junior Certificate examination is an externally set and externally assessed state examination taken by students at the end of the three-year junior cycle programme. Assessment in the examinations is mainly through written terminal assessment, but it is policy in recent years to include additional assessment components in the form of oral, practical, project or portfolio requirements, as syllabuses are revised or as new subjects come on stream.

Pupils progress from year to year automatically. In very exceptional circumstances, a school may retain a pupil at a grade level for a second year.

Otherwise, assessment is promoted as an intrinsic part of the learning process in primary and post-primary schools where the teacher and the learner can evaluate ongoing progress or achievement using a range of locally based assessment approaches.

5. Post-compulsory education/upper secondary, post-secondary and further education

(i) Types of education

Second level education (senior cycle) <i>Community / comprehensive / vocational / Voluntary secondary schools</i> ⁽¹⁾	15/16-17/19 years of age
Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Community / comprehensive / vocational / voluntary secondary schools	Over 16 years of age
Further Education	Over 16 years of age

The senior cycle in second level schools is two or three years in duration depending on whether students take the optional Transition Year first before starting their 2 year Leaving Certificate programme. During the Transition Year, which is offered in 72 % of schools, a school-designed curriculum is delivered, within a framework set out by the Department of Education and Skills. The emphasis in Transition Year is on personal and social development as well as promoting general, technical and academic skills. Many schools offer work experience programmes as part of Transition Year. During their last two years in second level schools students take a Leaving Certificate programme. Three forms of Leaving Certificate are available: the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme. All are assessed by externally set and marked examinations run by the State Examinations Commission. Policy in recent years is to strengthen practical, project and portfolio assessment, in addition to written terminal examinations.

⁽¹⁾ Until 1994, some voluntary secondary schools were selective by having entrance examinations for the purpose of screening intake.

The Department of Education and Skills also funds a range of Further and Adult Education programmes which offer access, transfer and progression opportunities to learners over 16 years of age. These programmes are provided mainly by Vocational Education Committees (VECs). Courses are open to all but the main purpose is to provide a range of supports to people who have left school early or who need further vocational education and training to enhance their employment prospects and to enable them to progress their education up to a standard equivalent to upper secondary level. This facilitates the re-entry of jobseekers in to the workforce. For those within employment, adult education and training enhances their skills and improves their ability to improve their skills in a competitive environment and, thus, to advance their career prospects.

Full-time programmes include:

- Youthreach, which is a programme for early school leavers aged 16 – 20 years;
- the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) for adults who are over 21 years and are unemployed;
- Senior Traveller Training Centres (STTCs) for Travellers over 18 years of age;
- Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses which offer accreditation at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 5 and 6.

Part-time provision includes:

- community education (CE), particularly for adults who are marginalised and are accessing non-formal education as a first return step on the lifelong learning ladder;
- literacy and numeracy for adults with specific needs in this area, including catering for the English language needs of migrants who wish to learn the language or improve their proficiency in English;
- the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), which enables adults to access part-time education options;
- and Self-financed ALE, usually through evening classes held in public or private colleges and training establishments.

Support services include the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) and the provision of childcare support for participants on Youthreach, STTC, VTOS and BTEI.

(ii) Admission criteria

The vast majority of students automatically progress from the junior cycle to the senior cycle in the same institution. In 2007, 81 % of pupils transferred from Junior to Senior Cycle in public sector second level schools. There is no standard application process for Post Leaving Certificate Courses. Applicants for places apply directly to the centre they wish to attend and are generally interviewed by the centre to assess their suitability for the programme. Admission to Further Education courses is open to all those who have not completed upper second level education.

(iii) Curricular control and content

There are three separate Leaving Certificate programmes determined at national level: the established Leaving Certificate (LC), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Students taking the established Leaving Certificate must study not less than five approved subjects, one of which one must be Irish. Students usually select seven subjects from a range of thirty three subjects approved for the senior cycle curriculum. The curriculum in schools at primary and second level is developed by a statutory body, the National

Council for Curriculum and Assessment, subject to approval by the Minister for Education and Skills

Further and Adult Education programmes offer nationally accredited awards which are approved by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) as well as other internationally accredited awards.

(iv) Assessment, progression and qualifications

Teachers administer tests to senior cycle students during the year and students progress automatically in other than exceptional circumstances. External examinations are taken at the end of lower second level education (The Junior Certificate) and at the end of upper second level education (The Leaving Certificate) The State Examinations Commission is responsible for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of these second-level examinations. The State Examinations Commission is a non-departmental public body under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills. For students following the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, assessment takes place at various stages during the two-year programme, and there are also written terminal examinations. Assessment for the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is based on written and, where appropriate, oral, aural and practical examinations, or project or portfolio work.

Students who complete the Leaving Certificate Applied programme may access further education, and can progress from there to higher education Students who successfully complete the established Leaving Certificate or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme may enter higher education directly The Leaving Certificate is used widely by employers for selection purposes and it is the basis upon which places in third level education are allocated.

Assessment of learners in Further and Adult Education is undertaken by providers in accordance with national and international quality assured standards, and leads to awards which are nationally accredited by the Further Education and Training Awards Council at level 5 and 6 of the National Qualifications Framework as well as internationally accredited awards.

6. Higher education

(i) Types of institution

Higher Education in Ireland consists of seven universities (with associated colleges of education), fourteen institutes of technology, and a number of private independent colleges. The universities and institutes of technology are autonomous and self-governing, but are substantially state-funded.

(ii) Access

The minimum academic entry requirements for the majority of third-level courses are determined at individual institution level and are generally based on national examination performance⁽²⁾. A National Access Plan has been developed to support greater access to third level education, particularly for under-represented groups, including students facing social and economic barriers, students with a disability and mature students. These target groups also receive significant financial support through grant schemes funded by the Department.

(iii) Qualifications

Universities have full authority to devise and conduct their own examinations and to confer academic awards. In addition to offering degrees at Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate levels over

⁽²⁾ Details in relation to minimum academic entry requirements can be found on the Department of Education and Science website at www.education.ie at Home > Students & Trainees > Higher Education > FAQ.

a full range of disciplines, universities are involved in robust research programmes, often supported by government and with strong links to business and industry.

The institutes of technology offer programmes in technology, science, engineering and humanities at all levels from Higher Certificate to PhD, as well as providing craft and professional level programmes. Each institute, following agreement of its quality assurance procedures with the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), validates its own programmes. Additionally each institute, under delegated authority under the Qualifications and Training Act 1999, grants its own awards. Most institutes have delegated awarding powers up to Level 9 (Masters) on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and about half of them have delegated awarding powers up to Level 10 (Doctorate). PhD degrees for the remainder are granted by HETAC. In recent years, the institutes have greatly expanded their research portfolios.

Independent colleges offer courses covering a wide spectrum including business programmes; law; humanities; hotel, catering and tourism studies; science and art and design. Many of the programmes offered by these colleges are validated by HETAC and some have links with universities and/or professional associations through which the courses on offer are accredited. Many of the independent colleges also offer courses leading to the awards of overseas universities or other awarding bodies.

7. Special needs

The current policy of the Department of Education and Skills is to secure the maximum possible level of inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, while ensuring that specialist facilities continue to be provided for students whose needs are such that they need to be placed in special schools or in special classes attached to mainstream schools.

8. Teachers

With the introduction of universal pre-school provision in January 2010, the pre-school year leaders must hold a nationally certified major award in childcare/early education at a minimum of Level 5 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) or an equivalent nationally recognised qualification or a higher award in the childcare/early education field. During the first full 2 years of the scheme, i.e., up until August 2012, the qualification requirement will be considered to be met where a person can demonstrate that he or she has achieved a certification for an award in ECCE that includes significant content covering the core knowledge areas, child development, early learning, health and welfare and has at least 2 years experience of working in a position of responsibility with children in the 0-6 age range.

Courses in childcare leading to the minimum standard qualification vary in length from 1 to 2 years. The student requires 8 to 9 modules to obtain the qualification and these modules can be taken on a part-time basis. For courses at Level 5, supervised work experience of four weeks is a usual requirement.

Primary-level teachers are generalists and post-primary teachers are subject specialists. Teachers are employed by the school but are paid by the State and classed as public servants.

The main path for entry to primary teaching is the Bachelor of Education in Primary Teaching after a three or four year course in a college of education. An 18-month Post-graduate Programme in Primary Teaching is also available.

Teachers at post-primary level usually hold a Bachelor degree in their specialist subject and complete a one-year Higher Diploma in Education. There is also a small number of four-year undergraduate degrees recognised for post-primary teaching.

Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life, The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 aims to ensure that teachers and schools maintain a strong focus on literacy and numeracy skills, within a broad and balanced curriculum. It sets out a wide-ranging programme of reforms in initial teacher education courses, in professional development for teachers and school principals, and in the content of the curriculum at primary and post-primary levels in order to achieve these vital skills.

The main changes include:

- improvements to initial teacher education courses including the setting of new higher entry requirements for teacher education courses and the reconfiguring of the content to ensure the development of teachers' skills in literacy and numeracy teaching as well as an increased emphasis on the other key strategic priorities such as ICT and inclusion;
- the extension of the Primary Bachelor of Education programme to four years (by 2012/13) and the postgraduate diploma teaching qualification (for primary and post-primary teachers) to two years by 2014/15.

The Teaching Council was established on a statutory basis in 2006 to regulate the teaching profession and the professional conduct of teachers. Since its establishment, the Teaching Council, as the professional body for teaching in Ireland, has taken a lead role in drafting policy on teacher education in consultation with the relevant stakeholders and the Minister for Education & Skills.

The Council's functions span the entire teaching career – from entry to initial teacher education programmes; accreditation of such programmes; induction of newly qualified teachers into the profession; and the continuing professional development of teachers throughout their careers.

Information provided by the Irish Eurydice unit.

For more detailed information on education systems in Europe, you may consult EURYPEDIA which provides descriptions of educational systems and policies in the Eurydice network countries: <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurypedia>