CEDEFOP REFERNET IRELAND

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE

IRELAND

SYSTEM DESCRIPTION

VET IN EUROPE 2023

Cedefop, & Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS). (2023). Vocational education and training in Europe – Ireland: system description. In Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2024). *Vocational education and training in Europe: VET in Europe database – detailed VET system descriptions* [Database]. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/ireland-u3

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  - Higher certificate programmes. EQF Level 5. 2 years. ISCED 544, 554.
  - Apprenticeship: EQF 6-8. 2-4 years. ISCED 665, 667, 767, 864.
  - Undergraduate Programmes: EQF Level 6. ISCED 665, 666.
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  - Pathways: Youth Provision Youthreach programme for learners aged 16-21. EQF 2-4. ISCED 244, 254, 343. 353, 354.
  - Pathways: Back to Education Initiative (BTEI). EQF 1-5. ISCED 443, 451, 453, 454.
  - Pathways: Adult Literacy for Life, English for Speakers of Other Languages and Community Education. ISCED 443, 451, 453, 454.
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CHAPTER 1.
Summary of main elements and distinctive features of VET

Summary of main elements

Ireland's education and training system is divided into four sectors: primary, secondary, further education and training (FET), and higher education (HE). FET covers EQF levels 1-5 (NFQ levels 1-6) with some higher apprenticeships at EQF Levels 6-8 (NFQ levels 6-10).

SOLAS is the Government agency responsible for funding, planning and coordinating FET provision. The tertiary education system comprises FET and HE under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), which is responsible for policy, funding and governance of Higher and Further Education. The main providers are 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The national strategy, Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-24, outlines the vision for the system to 2024 and sets the agenda for the next National Strategy 2025-2029.

FET programmes range from full time and/or flexible or part time provision for apprenticeships, progression to the labour market and to HE, learning in employment, pathways, youth provision, community education, adult literacy for life and agile programmes to meet learner or local or regional community or enterprise needs.

Having undergone several years of reform, FET is making a valuable contribution to a more collaborative and cohesive tertiary education system. A new National Tertiary Office (NTO) was established in 2023 in a joint initiative between the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and SOLAS. The NTO is tasked with the development of new progressive pathways through FET to HE.

Apprenticeship

- During 2023, the National Apprenticeship Office, set up in 2022, became well established, further strengthening the partnership between the enterprise and education communities. This office acts as a single point of contact for employers, apprentices and providers in accessing information and guidance on apprenticeship. The range of apprenticeship opportunities has diversified in recent years. There are currently 73 apprenticeships available, with more in development.

Workforce transformation: learning for employment, employment progression and progression to higher education

- Traineeship is a programme of structured training which combines learning in an education and training setting and in the workplace, aiming to improve recruitment and employment outcomes. The PLC programme (EQF levels 4/5) has two overarching aims: to enhance their employment outcomes of learners or to facilitate their progression to Higher Education through dedicated tertiary programmes at EQF level 6/7.
- Specific skills training (SST) courses are designed to meet the needs of industry and business across a range of occupations at EQF levels 2-5 (NFQ levels 3-6).

Workforce transformation: learning in employment

- Courses respond to the specific skills needs of employees and/or the employer or industry who require certified training or education to assist career progression, upskilling and

reskilling, such as the Skills to Advance programme. This provision also includes eCollege, a national online learning platform.

Pathways, including youth provision/youth reach, community education and adult literacy for life

- These are courses designed to meet the needs of the most educationally, socially or economically disadvantaged learners and empower individuals and communities to achieve personal, educational, employment or other goals.

Discretionary targeted provision to meet the needs of specific cohorts in context.

Distinctive features

VET in Ireland (usually referred to as Further Education and Training - FET) is not offered within the second level system (neither lower secondary (NFQ 3, EQF 2, ISCED 244) nor upper secondary (NFQ 4/5, EQF3/4, ISCED 343/344)). Therefore, most learners are aged at least 16 or over. Active inclusion and community development have always been central tenets of the work of Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other FET providers, with an extensive reach into and across local communities. FET balances the needs of skills for the economy with the just-as-critical lifelong learning, supporting citizenship and inclusion for individuals, their communities and developing social capital.

The National Skills Strategy 2025 outlines several key objectives, placing a stronger focus on providing skills development opportunities that are relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy. The strategy also aims to engage employers to participate actively in the development of skills and make effective use of skills in their organisations to improve productivity and competitiveness.

The Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and each of the 16 ETBs sets out the context, strategic priorities and individual ETB contributions to the achievement of key national FET sector targets.

In 2021 Adult Literacy for Life Strategy was launched. This is a new 10-year literacy, numeracy and digital skills strategy, which is a key commitment in the governmental programme, a holistic societal approach to unmet needs in literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

The development of flexible and agile qualifications is a priority for the sector, particularly to deliver the Green Skills agenda. To date, twenty-three (23) micro-qualifications have been validated by Quality and Qualifications Ireland including: green skills for sustainability; digital skills; robotics; aquafarming; business innovation; market development.

CHAPTER 2.
Main challenges and policy responses

Current challenges facing the FET sector include addressing the backlog in craft apprenticeships off the job training phases which was caused by the closure of training centres during the pandemic. This backlog has been amplified because of a huge demand in those apprenticeships to address the current shortage of housing crisis. Additional sectoral resources and supports have been employed to address this challenge. There is also the issue of recruitment of staff into the FET sector with a very high demand for labour and a low unemployment rate. In more general terms, the Irish labour market has a shortage of skills in different sectors. Skill requirements are also changing for roles affected by technological change and the transition to a low carbon economy.

The creation of a unified tertiary system is one of the priorities of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Crucial to the achievement of this goal is the provision of diverse and progressive pathways for learners, enabling progression across and between different institutions. 2023 saw the piloting of the first joint Tertiary Degrees co-designed and co-delivered by Higher Education Institutions and the Education and Training Boards to provide seamless transitioning pathways from FET to HE.

All key national FET stakeholders, including SOLAS, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and DFHERIS, are in the phased implementation phase of the new outcomes-based FET funding model. The challenge to date has been programme-based rigidity around the deployment of resources and operational regulations. The funding model was reformed to move away from approaches that reinforce programme silos, to reflect the outcomes and performance of ETBs, and to facilitate strategic investment in long-term priorities. The implementation plan will consolidate and streamline the number of FET programmes, and ultimately align the funding with the national system targets.

CHAPTER 3.

External factors influencing VET

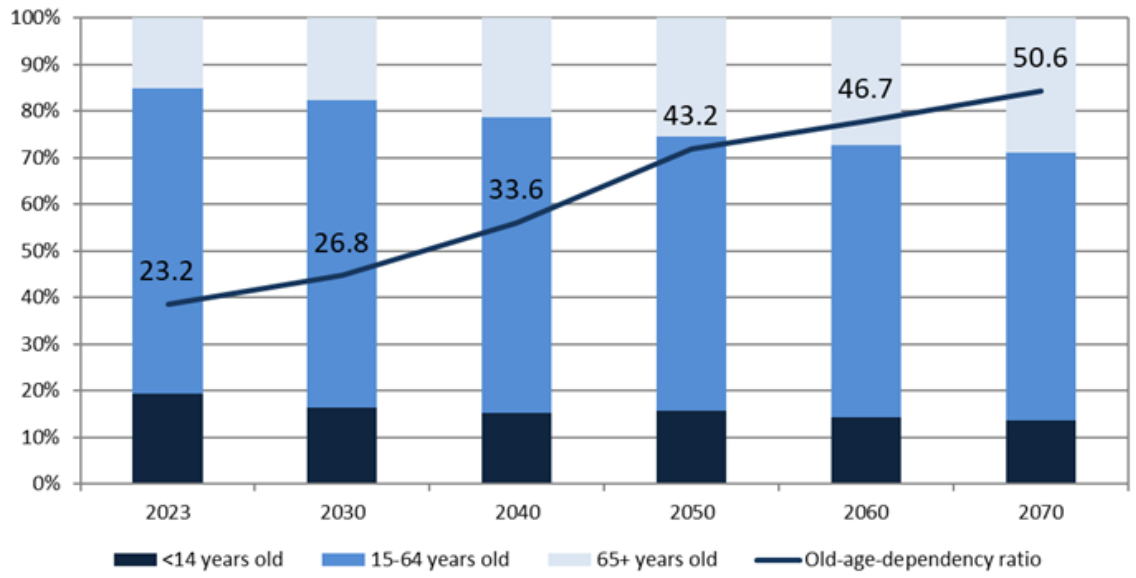
3.1 Demographics

Population in 2022: 5 060 004 (1).

It increased by 5.8% since 2017. This is due to the combined effect of positive net migration and natural increase (where the number of births was greater than the number of deaths).

As in many other EU countries, the population is ageing. The old-age-dependency ratio is expected to increase from 23.2 in 2023 to 47.9 in 2070 (2).

Population forecast by age group and old-age-dependency ratio



Source: Eurostat, tps00001 and proj_23ndbi [extracted 12.6.2023].

The cohort of those aged 15 to 19 years and those aged 20-24 years continued to grow, increasing by 7.4% and 14.7% between 2017 and 2022, due mainly to an increase in the number of births in recent years (3). As many learners enter the VET system from the age of 18 onwards, and remain in the system for 2-4 years, it is likely that the increase in this cohort will impact on the number of upper secondary school graduates entering the VET system and will contribute to further growth in the demand for places across the education system, including VET.

3.2 Economics

In 2021 (latest data available), micro enterprises made up 93% of the total enterprise population in Ireland. In terms of individuals engaged, however, 23.7% were in micro enterprises, 19.2% were in other small enterprises, 17.3% were in medium enterprises, and 39.8% were in large enterprises (4).

By the end of Q4 2022, half of the workforce was employed in five key sectors: health and social work, industry, wholesale and retail, education, and professional activities.

Employment by sector (000s), Q4 2022

Source: SOLAS. (2023). *National Skills Bulletin*. (p. 31).

The main sectors associated with VET qualifications are construction, industry, and more recently and to a lesser extent, ICT, transportation, accommodation and food (i.e., hospitality), and finance.

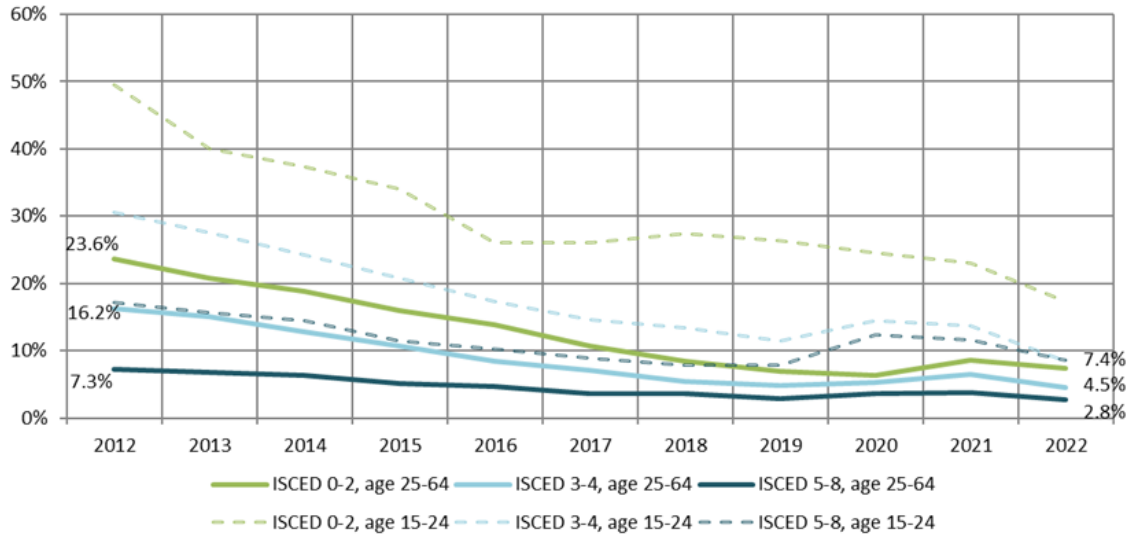
3.3 Labour market

In terms of labour market regulation (5), Ireland's regulatory framework has more in common with other flexible labour markets such as those of the United Kingdom or Denmark than with labour markets such as France and Germany. There are comparatively few occupations for which a VET qualification is a prerequisite for employment (notable exceptions include electrician, gas installer).

Total unemployment for those aged 25-74 years in (2022) (6) was 3.7% (5.4% in EU-27), one percentage point lower than in 2018, and well below the rate of 11.9% observed in 2013 following the financial crisis (7).

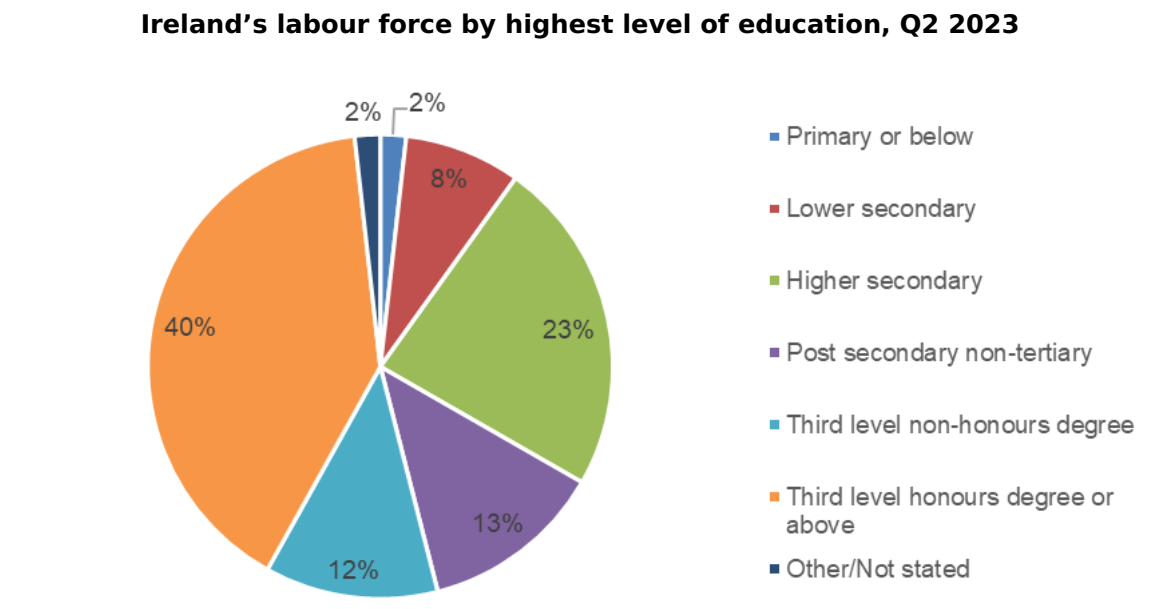
Official unemployment estimates for Ireland show that the higher the education level, the lower the unemployment level, regardless of age. At 23% in 2022, those aged 15-24 with, at most, lower secondary education had the highest unemployment rate, while those aged 25-64 years with tertiary education had the lowest unemployment rate, at 2.8% (8).

Unemployment rate (aged 15-24 and 25-64) by education attainment level in 2012-22



NB: data based on ISCED 2011; breaks in time series
ISCED 0-2 = less than primary, primary and lower secondary education
ISCED 3-4 = upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education
ISCED 5-8 = tertiary education
Source: Eurostat, lfsa_urgaed [extracted 12.10.2023].

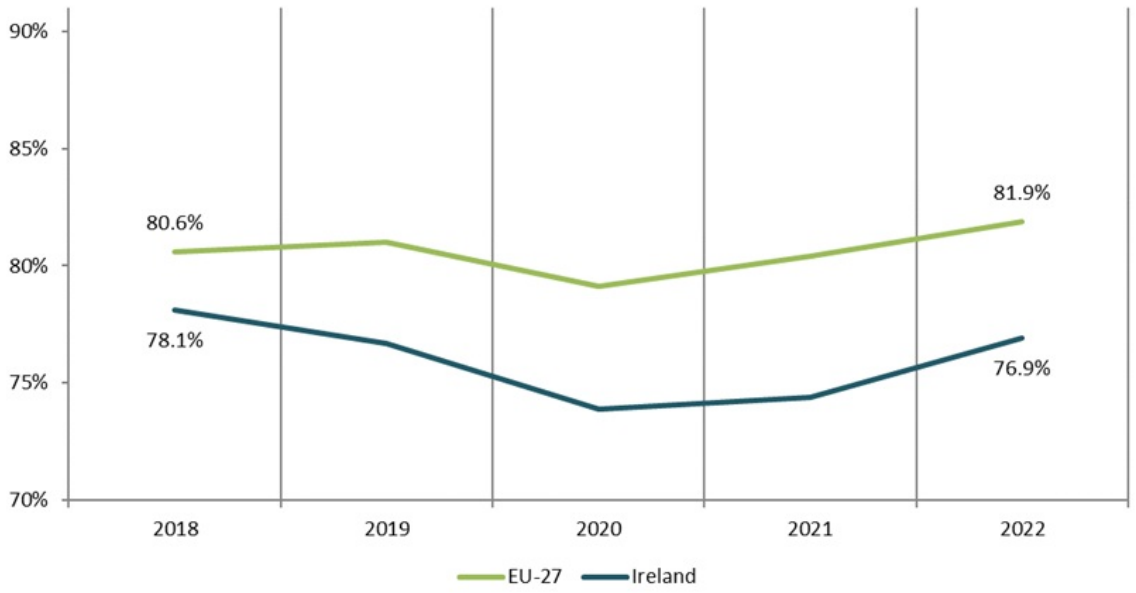
In quarter 2 2023, those with post-secondary non-tertiary education attainment (where most VET graduates are classified) at 13% are one of the smallest groups in Ireland's labour force, as the figure below demonstrates (9). Just over half (52%) of the labour force holds a tertiary (or third) level qualification (EQF 5-8/ NFQ 6-10, ISCED 544-864), which is amongst the highest shares observed across the EU-27 countries.



Source: CSO (lfs) supplementary tables.

Employment rate of VET graduates aged 20 to 34 declined from 78.1% in 2018 to 76.9% in 2022, although a break in time series occurred in 2021.

Employment rate of VET graduates (20 to 34 years old, ISCED levels 3 and 4)



NB: Data based on ISCED 2011; breaks in time series.
ISCED 3-4 = upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education
Source: Eurostat, edat_lfse_24 [extracted 12.6.2023].

The fall (-1.2 pp) in the employment rate for VET graduates aged 20 to 34 (ISCED levels 3 and 4) is contrary to the increase in employment observed across the EU-27 countries on average (1.3 pp) in the same period (10).

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[1] NB: Data for population as of 1 January Source: Eurostat, tps00001 and[proj_23ndbi [Extracted 12.6.2023]

[2] Old-age-dependency ratio is defined as the ratio between the number of persons aged 65 and more over the number of working-age persons (15-64). The value is expressed per 100 persons of working age (15-64).

[3] https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-plfp/populationandlabourforceprojections2017-2051/populationprojectionsresults/

[4] Business Demography (Persons engaged): Source: CSO, https://data.cso.ie/table/BRA30 [Extracted 17.11.2023]

[5] In terms of the FET sector as a whole (general and VET), 84% of employers have indicated that they are happy with the quality of FET graduates. Source: HEA; SOLAS; QQI (2019). Irish national employer survey: final report, January 2019.

[6] Percentage of active population, 25 to 74 years old.

[7] Source: Eurostat, une_rt_a [Extracted 12.6.2023]

[9] Source: CSO (LFS) Suplementary tables. In Ireland, there are two types of bachelor degree: an honours bachelor degree (NFQ 8) or an ordinary bachelor degree (NFQ 7). Both honours and ordinary bachelor degrees have been referenced to the European

qualifications framework at EQF level 6.

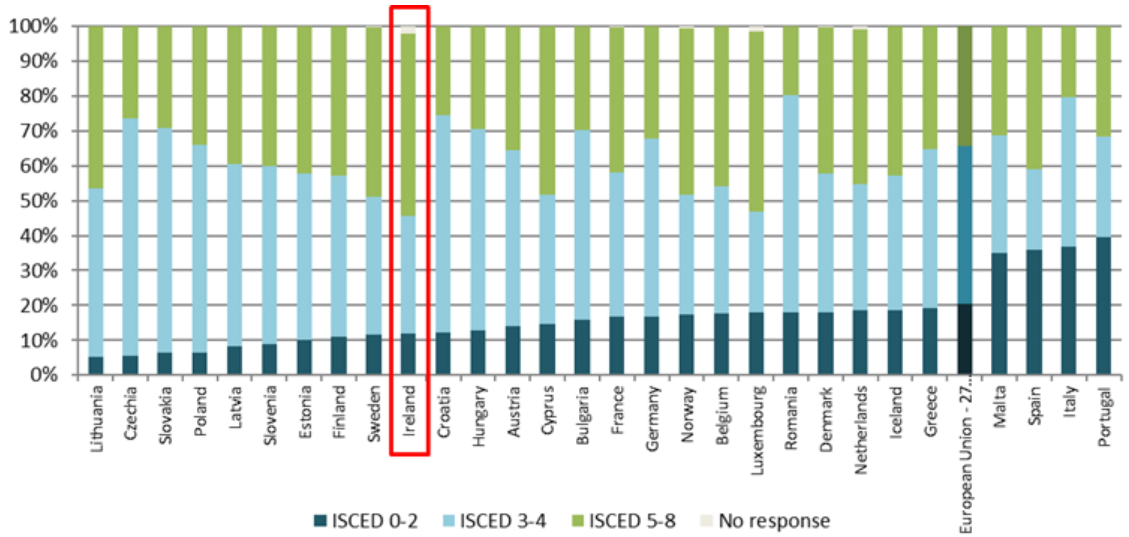
[10] NB: breaks in time series. Source: Eurostat, edat_lfse_24 [Extracted 6.5.2021]

CHAPTER 4.
Education attainment

4.1 Share of high, medium and low level qualifications

The share of population aged up to 64 with higher education (52.3%) is higher than in any other EU Member State and above the EU-27 average (34.2%). The share of those with, at most, a lower secondary qualification, or without a qualification, is 11.9%, well below the EU-27 average of 20.5%; Amongst EU-27 countries, Ireland had the 4th lowest share of persons with upper secondary/post-secondary non-tertiary education).

Population (aged 25 to 64) by highest education level attained in 2022



NB: Data based on ISCED 2011. Low reliability for 'No response' in Czechia and Latvia
ISCED 0-2 = less than primary, primary and lower secondary education
ISCED 3-4 = upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education
ISCED 5-8 = tertiary education
Source: Eurostat, lfsa_pgaed [extracted 12.6.2023].

4.3 VET learners by level

Upper secondary education programmes in the formal second level system in Ireland are classified as general programmes only. However, some programmes in the further education and training (FET) sector offer opportunities to adults; while most of these programmes occur at ISCED level 4 (i.e., post-secondary non-tertiary), a share is also provided at ISCED level 3 (i.e.,

upper secondary). In 2021, the share of students at ISCED level 2 who were following VET-oriented programmes was 4.9%; most of these were aged 18 years or over, given the theoretical starting age for learners on these programmes.

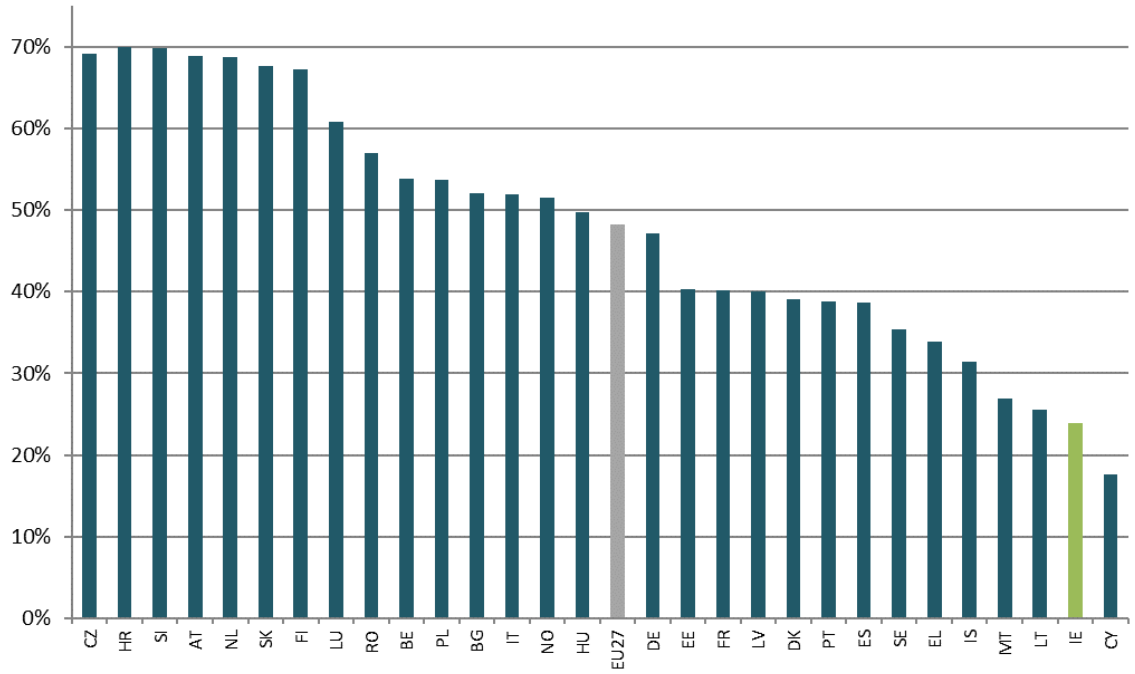
Share of learners in VET by level in 2021

lower secondary	upper secondary	post-secondary
4.9%	23.9%	100%

NB: Data based on ISCED 2011.

Source: Eurostat, educ_uoe_enrs01, educ_uoe_enrs04 and educ_uoe_enrs07 [extracted 19.1.2024].

Share of initial VET learners from total learners at upper secondary level (ISCED level 3), 2019



NB: Data based on ISCED 2011.
Source: Eurostat, educ_uoe_enrs04 [extracted 1.11.2023].

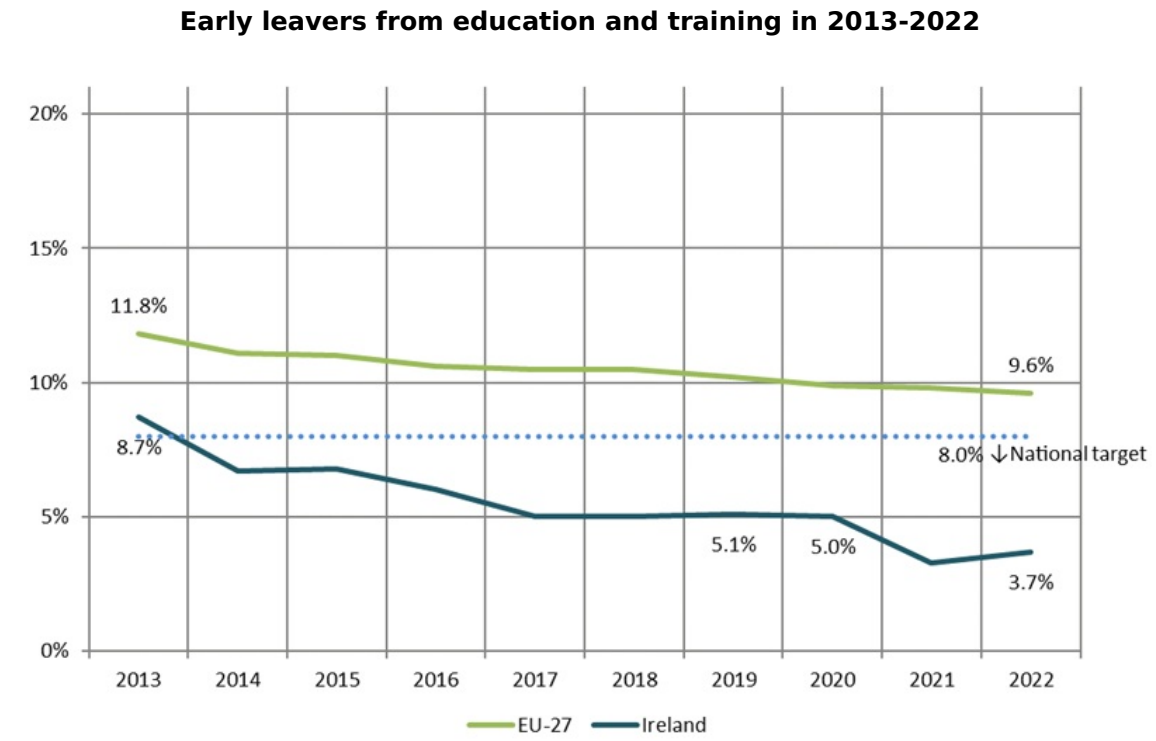
4.4 Female share

Information not available

4.5 Early leavers from education and training

The share of early leavers from education and training has decreased from nearly 9% in 2013 to 3.7%% in 2022. This places Ireland below the EU-27 average of 9.6% and marks a success as this percentage is also below the national objective for 2020 (no more than 8%).

In general, males in Ireland have had higher rates of early leavers from education. In 2022, the rate for males was 4.7% compared to 2.8% for females.

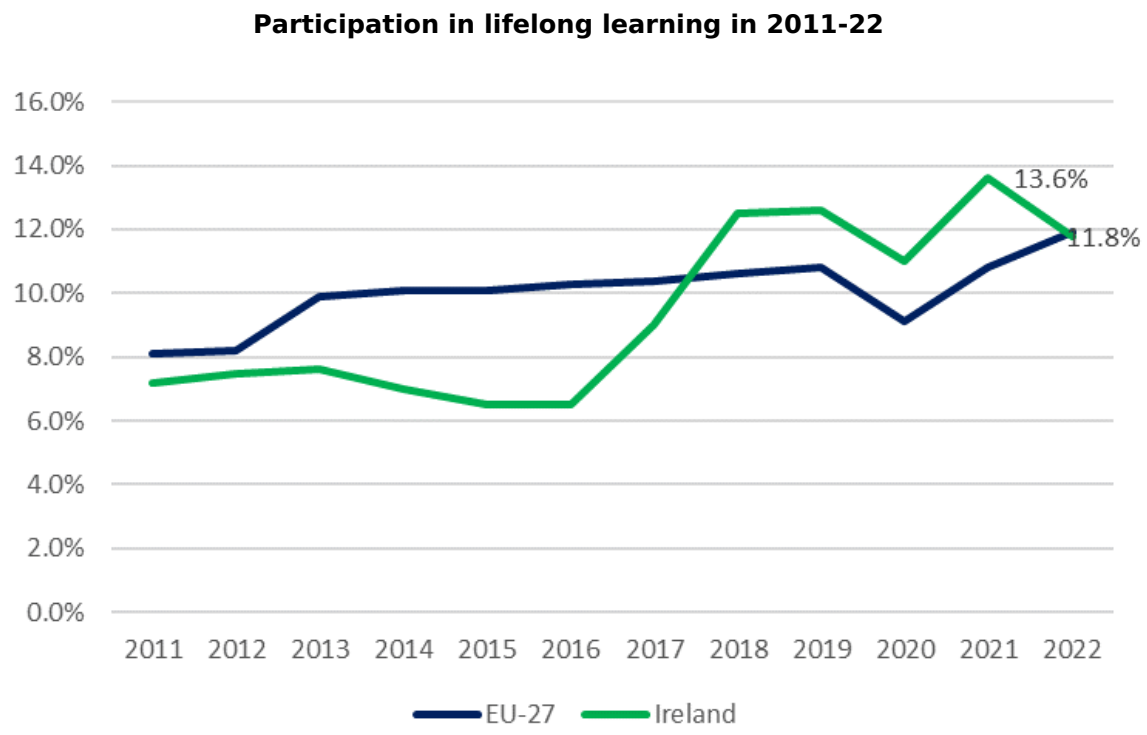


NB: Share of the population aged 18 to 24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training. *Source:* Eurostat, edat_lfse_14 [extracted 6.5.2021] and European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/info/2018-european-semester-national-reform-programmes-and-stability-convergence-programmes_en [extracted 12.6.2023].

For more information visit Cedefop project page on tackling early leaving and our interactive toolkits: Cedefop VET toolkit for tackling early leaving and Cedefop VET toolkit for empowering NEETs.

4.6 Participation in lifelong learning

Lifelong learning offers training opportunities for adults, including early leavers from education. Ireland's lifelong learning rate reached its highest level to date (13.6%) in 2021 as it recovered from the effects of COVID-19 (and the concomitant school closures) in 2020. However, the rate declined slightly in 2022, and is now at the EU-27 average of 11.9%.

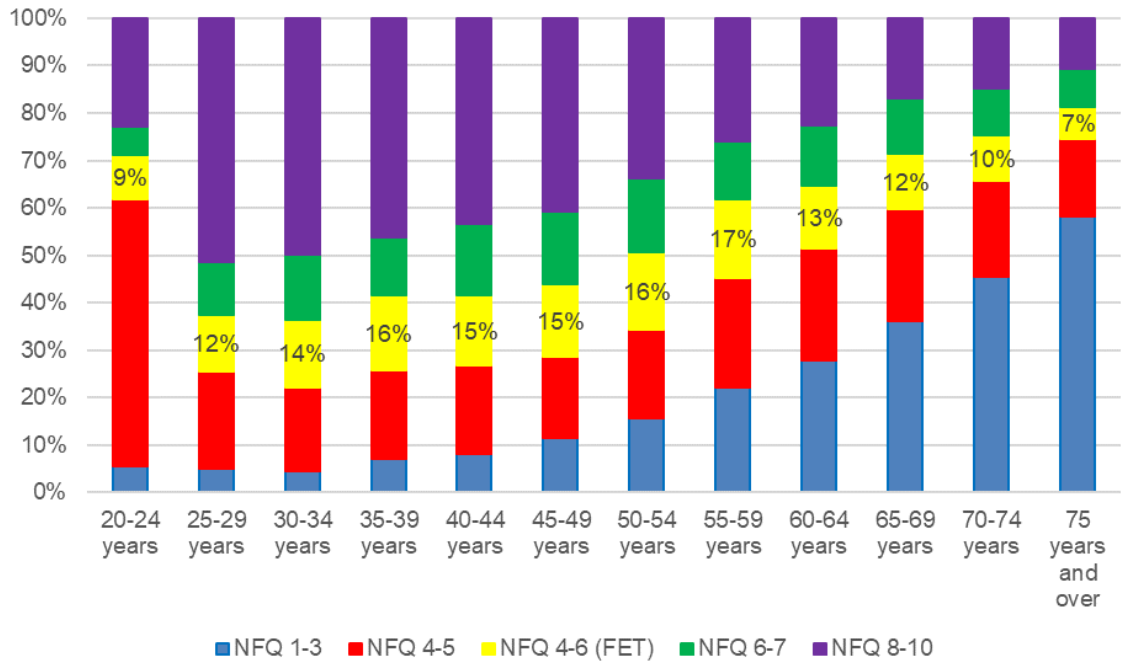


NB: Share of adult population aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training; break in series.
Source: Eurostat, trng_lfse_01 [extracted 12.6.2023].

4.7 VET learners by age

Information on VET learners, as distinct from other further education and training learners (where most VET occurs), is not available. However, in Ireland, most VET learners follow programmes in the FET (Further Education and Training) sector, typically gaining qualifications at NFQ levels 4-6 (corresponding to post-secondary education with qualifications at EQF levels 3-5). Less than a fifth of the population in Ireland holds, at most, a FET qualification. However, the share varies slightly by age group, with 17% of those aged 55-59 years holding FET qualifications, while the corresponding share for those aged 25-29 years was just 12%.

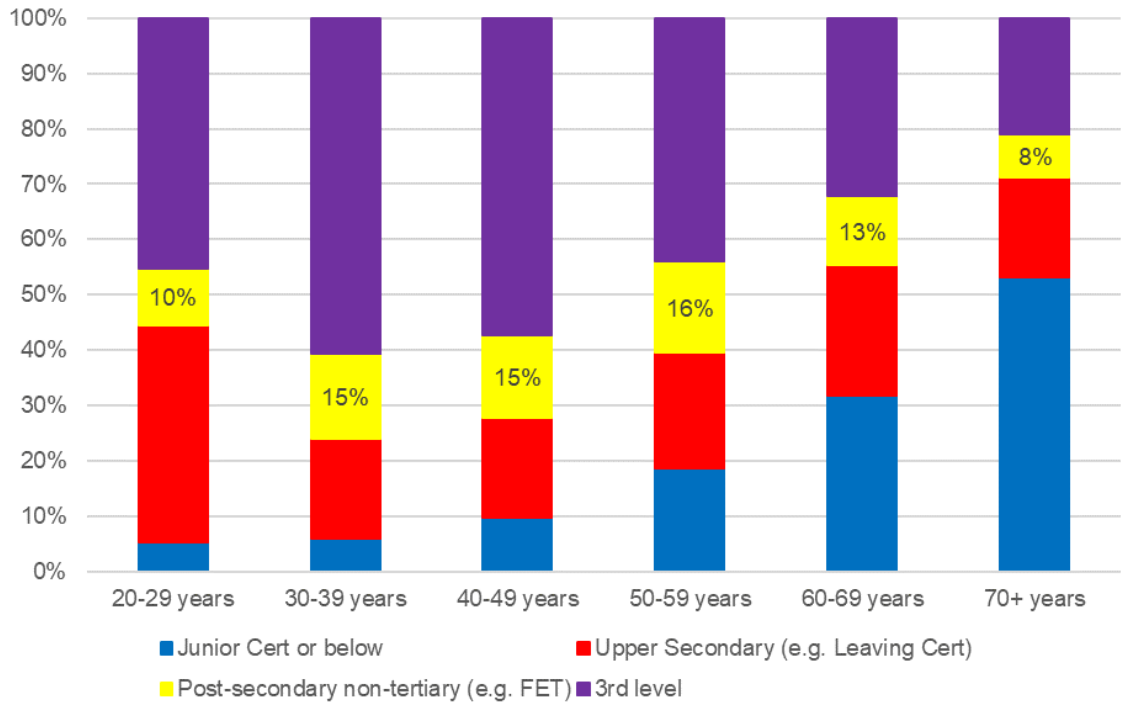
Population (20+) by age group and education attainment level, Q2 2022.



Source: SOLAS. (2022). *Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2022*. (p. 56).

The education attainment profile of Ireland's population varies considerably by age group, with more than 50% of those aged 20-29 years, 30-39 years and 40-49 years holding third level qualifications; this contrasts with older age cohorts, where the majority hold less than third level qualifications.

Population (age 20+) by age group and education attainment level, Q2 2022.



Source: SLMRU analysis of labour force survey data.

CHAPTER 5.
VET within education and training system

The education and training system comprises:

- primary education;
- secondary education, divided into lower secondary education (EQF 2) and upper secondary (EQF 3-4);
- further education and training (FET) non-tertiary education;
- tertiary education.

Primary education is compulsory from the age of 6 years, although the vast majority of pupils enrol between the ages of 4 and 5 years. It consists of an 8-year cycle: junior infants, senior infants, and first to sixth classes. Most learners have completed primary education by the age of 12.

Secondary education usually lasts 5 to 6 years and is divided into lower secondary education (3 years) and upper secondary (2 years). Some pupils may also undertake the Transition Year Programme: a 1-year programme that acts as a bridge between lower and upper secondary education.

- Lower secondary education: the junior cycle is a generally oriented programme of approximately 3 years' duration and leads to the Junior Certificate examination, which students usually take at the age of 15 or 16.
- Upper secondary: the senior cycle (i.e. upper secondary education) takes 2 years and leads to the leaving certificate examination which students usually sit at the age of 17 or 18.

Further education and training in Ireland comprises post-secondary, as well as second chance education/training. The sector is characterised by a high degree of diversity in terms of the type of programme, level and learner:

- further education and training programmes can be general, vocational or mixed;
- they lead to awards across several levels on the EQF (levels 1-5 on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), or levels 1-6 on Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ));
- target groups include young people who have recently completed upper secondary education, adult learners, early school leavers, the employed, the unemployed, asylum seekers, learners with special needs;
- post leaving certificate (PLC) programmes are aimed primarily at those completing upper secondary education, but are also open to older learners; programmes are often general in nature, but also include VET programmes such as motor technology;
- second chance learning opportunities within the further education and training sector.

Over a half of those who complete upper secondary school transfer directly to third level education. Students can opt for higher education in a university, institute of technology or college of education (EQF levels 5-6, ISCED levels 544-554, 665, 666). There are also a small number of private, independent providers of tertiary (or third) level education (mostly business and related disciplines).

Undergraduate higher education courses are of various durations, ranging from 2 years for a

higher certificate (NFQ 6; EQF 5, ISCED 544, 554) to 3-4 years for an honour bachelor's degree (NFQ 8; EQF 6; ISCED 665,666). Some programmes, such as medicine or architecture, require up to 5 years. Postgraduate programmes range from 1 year (e.g., taught masters (NFQ 9; EQF 7; ISCED 667,767)) to 3 years or more for doctoral programmes (NFQ 10; EQF 8; ISCED 864).

VET is provided primarily within the further education and training sector (comprising post-secondary non-tertiary and second chance education). However, since 2016, the apprenticeship system has been expanded and includes new programmes which are delivered not only within the further education and training sector, but also in tertiary level institutions.

Like the apprenticeship system, the traineeship system has undergone substantial change in recent years in Ireland. Traineeships, unlike apprenticeships, are not regulated by law (there is no occupation profile); they tend to be developed in response to local employers' needs, and curriculum content may vary according to local demand. Traineeships must have a work-based learning component of at least 30%.

Most of the development of the traineeship system has been the result of recognising the need to develop the skills of the employed, as outlined in the national skills strategy. Consequently, while most traineeships programmes had previously been available only to the unemployed, they have, since 2017, also been open to school leavers and the employed. There are no age restrictions for trainees, and they are free of charge to participants. Some unemployed trainees may also receive a training allowance.

Specific skills training courses allow people who have lost their job to learn new job-related skills. The courses on offer vary from year to year with different levels of certification. The training content and occupational standards are based on the consultation process involving employers. Certification achieved on course completion ranges from levels 3-6 on the National Qualification Framework (NQF) (or levels 2-5 on the EQF). The courses differ from traineeships in that they tend to be shorter (4 to 5 months), with a shorter on-the-job phase; in addition, the employer does not play a role in recruitment.

Post leaving certificate courses (PLC) are aimed at learners who have completed the leaving certificate examination at the end of upper secondary education. They are full-time courses which last up to 2 years. These courses provide integrated general education, vocational training and work experience for young people; however, post leaving certificate courses are also an option for mature learners. They provide, therefore, important lifelong learning opportunities for adult learners.

While some post leaving certificate courses are vocational in nature (e.g., training in beauty therapy, healthcare, security studies), others are general (e.g., general studies, art, design, etc.). Most post leaving certificate courses have a work experience component, although there is no prescribed minimum duration for most courses.

Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) courses consist of a range of full-time courses designed to meet the education and training needs of unemployed people aged 21 or over. It is offered by the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) throughout the country. Participation in vocational training opportunities scheme courses is in two modes as follows:

- as a 'core' vocational training opportunities scheme; students participate in a group of up to 20 other vocational training opportunities scheme students in a vocational training opportunities scheme centre or adult education centre;
- as a 'dispersed' vocational training opportunities scheme; students participate in a group of students, some of whom may be vocational training opportunities scheme students and some of whom will be studying through other schemes/programmes (e.g. post leaving certificate course).

Vocational training opportunities scheme programmes offer a wide choice of subjects and learning activities. Certification is available at a range of levels.

Traditionally, programmes at tertiary level are not officially designated as being VET or General, although many programmes at higher education level are designed to qualify learners for work in specific occupations (e.g., teacher, architect, doctor, engineer). In this regard, tertiary education in Ireland does lead to VET related qualifications.

In 2016, for the first time in Ireland, apprenticeship programmes became available at higher education level. Apprenticeships introduced from 2016 onward lead to an award between EQF levels 4-8 (levels 5-10 on the national framework of qualifications (NFQ)). Each apprenticeship programme can last for between 2 and 4 years.

New apprenticeships in ICT, finance and hospitality include software development, accounting technician and commis chef. Learners must be in employment.

Other Initiatives available in Ireland include:

Skills to Advance is a focused upskilling initiative for enterprises and employees, run through Education and Training Boards and coordinated through SOLAS. In 2023, Skills to Advance created a new process to develop and validate micro qualifications in key areas like green skills, digital business and manufacturing.

Retrofitting and NZEB. The 5th and 6th Centres of Excellence for Nearly zero-emission building (NZEB)/retrofitting were launched in 2023 to showcase the latest technologies and methods in the field. Planning a Modern Methods of Construction Demonstration Park began, led by the FET sector through SOLAS and the Laois/Offaly Education and Training Board. This aims to support the Irish Government’s commitment to high-quality, affordable homes for all citizens.

Green Skills. The Irish FET (VET) sector plays a crucial role in the green transformation of the economy and society, delivering the requisite skills to guarantee a greener future for all. The online module ‘Energy and you: Reduce your Use’ was made available in 2023 via eCollege, the national online learning service for further education and training. New Level 4 and Level 5 micro qualifications in environmental sustainability awareness were also developed.

CHAPTER 6.
Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship in Ireland is defined as a structured programme of education and training which formally combines and alternates learning in the workplace with learning in an education or training centre. It is a dual system, a blended combination of on-the-job employer-based training and off-the-job training.

A structured *Craft* model of apprenticeship has been in operation in Ireland since the 1980s, and, following publication of a review of apprenticeship training in Ireland in 2013, a new model was introduced in 2015. Both models are currently operational, with 25 *Craft* apprenticeships primarily in areas such as construction, electrical, motor and engineering, and 48 new apprenticeships in a range of areas including biopharma, ICT, finance, property service, hospitality and food, logistics, and sales.

The national apprenticeship system is governed by legislation, principally the 1967 Industrial Training Act, which sets out the overall structure of the national system and the protections for, as well the responsibilities of, apprentices, employers and education and training providers. The 2012 Quality Assurance Act also underpins apprenticeship, supporting validation and quality assurance arrangements for apprenticeship programmes nationally.

SOLAS is the statutory authority for apprenticeship in Ireland. Its responsibilities include maintenance of a register of employers approved (by SOLAS) to take on apprentices, and a register of apprentices. A condition of employer approval and apprentice registration is an agreement to abide by the Apprenticeship code of practice for employers and apprentices.

Apprenticeship in Ireland is open to all above the statutory school leaving age (16) including young adults leaving education and training and those already in employment. The minimum educational entry requirement is the *junior certificate* or equivalent, though some apprenticeships and employers have differing minimum entry requirements. Different apprenticeships may also be particularly targeted at different groups; for example, some are targeted primarily at people leaving school and some at people already in employment.

Apprenticeship in Ireland is delivered by both further and higher education and training providers and leads to awards from EQF levels 4-8 (level 5 to level 10 on the national framework of qualifications (NFQ)). Apprenticeships are between 2 and 4 years. All craft apprenticeships are currently 4 years. New apprenticeships vary between 2 and 4, the majority being 2 years. All apprenticeships are expected to offer progression pathways.

Apprenticeships lead to educational and, in some cases, also occupational/sector qualifications, depending on the apprenticeship. The insurance practice apprenticeship, for example, leads to an EQF Level 6 (NQF Level 8 BA Hons.) degree in insurance practice and to a range of professional industry qualifications such as accredited product adviser and certified insurance practitioner. All Craft apprenticeships lead to an EQF Level 5 (NQF Level 6) advanced certificate that specifies the occupation (e.g. craft - electrical, craft - carpentry & joinery).

In terms of alternation of on-the-job work-based and off-the-job elements of apprenticeship, apprenticeships must include a minimum of 50% on-the-job learning, though different apprenticeships have different arrangements in place. For example, all Craft apprenticeships have a specified series of on-the-job and block-release off-the-job phases. Some new apprenticeships include block release of varying durations, some include day release of varying durations, with durations also differing within some individual apprenticeships according to the stage in the apprenticeship and /or the industry context.

The national apprenticeship system is funded through the National Training Fund (11) and from the Exchequer.

An apprentice is considered an employee and is employed and paid under a contract of apprenticeship. The employer provides the on-the-job employer-based element of training and pays the apprentice's salary during this time. In new apprenticeships developed from 2016 onwards, the employer pays the apprentice's salary for the full duration of the apprenticeship, that is, during both the on-the-job and off-the-job elements. The State also pays the training allowances to apprentices during the off-the-job phases of Craft apprenticeship.

The national Action plan for apprenticeship 2021-25 sets out a 5-year strategy to deliver on the Programme for Government commitment of reaching 10 000 new apprentice registrations per year by 2025.

The need for sectoral engagement and collaboration among enterprises and other stakeholders in the relevant industry has been a critical factor in the development, delivery and ongoing review and adaptation of apprenticeships; one of the key features of new apprenticeships is that they are developed and overseen by an enterprise-led consortium involving industry and education partners. The action plan, which was published in April 2021, commits to further embedding this well-established industry-focused approach to developing and delivering apprenticeship. This means that the synergy between employers, employee representatives, learners, and the further and higher education system is enhanced, delivering an apprenticeship system that is well positioned to leverage the close relationship between enterprise and education.

The action plan provides a roadmap to a single apprenticeship system and the provision of new supports for employers and apprentices; it also forms the basis for:

- the National Apprenticeship Office to drive reforms;
- a new grant for employers, with a top-up grant for areas of identified national skills needs and/or targeted recruitment of underrepresented groups;
- non-financial supports targeted to SMEs in areas such as recruitment and supervision of apprentices;
- setting targets for the public sector to take on apprentices and to create cross-sector apprentices;
- examining the potential development of new cross-border apprentice programmes and support for apprentice engagement in international programmes such as Erasmus.

During 2023, the National Apprenticeship Office (set up in 2022) became well established, further strengthening the partnership between the enterprise and education communities. This office acts as a single point of contact for employers, apprentices and providers in accessing information and guidance on apprenticeship.

This office is jointly managed between SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority. It exists to drive reform in the national apprenticeship system under the auspices of the Generation Apprenticeship banner, spearheading a range of new initiatives to support both employers and apprentices. During 2022, there were over 25 000 apprentices training in Ireland, with around 9 000 employers on board. Two new Apprenticeship grants were also introduced during 2022 including an employer grant for apprenticeships introduced since 2016, and a new gender-based bursary for apprenticeship employers. In July 2022, the rollout of EUR 17.2 million in capital funding to respond to the growing demand for apprenticeships was announced.

The National Apprenticeship Alliance has an advisory role in developing the apprenticeship system, bringing together education providers, learners, industry partners and trade unions.

One More Job was launched in April 2023 by the Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science ministry. It aims to encourage small employers to create 'one more job' via apprenticeship. It includes free online mentoring for employers new to training apprentices, grants towards training costs and guidance from the One More Job team (based in the National

Apprenticeship Office) during the first year of training.

A first national survey of apprenticeship employers was conducted by the National Apprenticeship Office, with a strong response from over 2 500 employers covering the full range of the employer community. The survey findings show that most employers of apprentices are micro-enterprises, with only 7% being large employers (over 250 employees). A remarkable 94% of employers employ fewer than 10 apprentices, with 42% having only one apprentice and the remaining 52% employing 2-9 apprentices. For small employers, additional financial support is more important, while larger employers prioritise business growth and greater relevance of training.

The Workplace Champions Initiative was launched by the National Apprenticeship Office on May 2023. These awards recognise and celebrate all those apprenticeship champions in the workplace who show commitment to the development and success of apprentices and apprenticeships as a whole.

A new bursary managed by National Apprenticeship Office was launched in 2023, to support learners from underrepresented groups who wish to access apprenticeships. The bursary is now up and running. Successful applicants on ‘access to apprenticeship’ courses are eligible to receive up to EUR 3 000 each to help with travel, accommodation and other costs associated with participation in the course.

Learn more about apprenticeships in the national context from the European database on apprenticeship schemes by Cedefop: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-visualisations/apprenticeship-schemes/scheme-fiches.

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[11] The national training fund supports the training of those seeking to take up employment, those in employment seeking to upskill and facilitate lifelong learning. It is financed by a levy on employers.

CHAPTER 7.
VET governance

Responsibility for taking decisions and implementing further education and training, which includes most VET provision in Ireland, lies with the Further Education and Training Authority of Ireland (SOLAS), in conjunction with 16 education and training boards (ETBs), who are the VET providers. Both SOLAS and the ETBs are agencies of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). This remit was established under the Further Education and Training Act 2013, which was signed into law in July 2013. The act required SOLAS to submit a five-year strategy for further education and training (FET) provision in Ireland. The FET strategy guides the provision of FET in Ireland (including VET, such as apprenticeship and upskilling initiatives for the employed). The planning, coordination and funding is overseen by SOLAS, in conjunction with FET providers. Strategic performance agreements are concluded between providers and SOLAS and an annual services plan is drawn up setting out the provision by programme type, learner cohort, skills areas, at local and national level.

The FET strategy complements other government strategies such as the National skills strategy 2025, the Economic Recovery Plan and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021.

Since 2016, and the reform of apprenticeship, Ireland's Higher Education Authority also plays a role in the oversight of VET programmes that are delivered in higher education institutions (namely institutes of technology). Recently most of these institutes have become technological universities.

CHAPTER 8.
VET financing mechanisms

In 2022, further education and training (FET) funding was EUR 948.8 million, processed through the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) for the provision of FET programmes. Included within the funding allocated for further education and training is the funding for VET programmes. The funding is received from two main sources, the Exchequer and the National Training Fund. Most of the funding is allocated through SOLAS to the education and training boards (ETBs).

In 2020, post- leaving certificate (PLC) and Co-operation hours programme grants under the State funded education vote were added to relevant SOLAS sub-heads. Previously, the PLC and Co-operation hours funding was transferred directly to ETBs by the Department of Education as part of the *post primary allocation*.

Midway through 2022, SOLAS published its review of the FET funding model, following close, extensive consultation by an independent expert panel over the last number of years, with ongoing collaboration from DFHERIS, SOLAS, the Education and Training Boards, and other key stakeholders, which also included industry, staff, and learner representation. The review sets out a new vision for the approach to the funding of Education and Training Boards, involving a welcome simplification of the process into what can be described as a “five pot” structure for outcomes-based funding. This more flexible “five pot” model will allow each ETB to realise its unique potential to be an effective and strategic provider of FET, delivering on the needs of their specific regions, while also recognising the individual circumstances and characteristics experienced around the country. There will be phased approach to the implementation of the FET funding model, with pilot phases commencing in 2024.

CHAPTER 9.
Teachers and trainers

9.1 VET teacher types

Given the diverse nature of further education and training and VET programmes offered to learners in Ireland, there are several categories of teaching and training professionals working in VET.

In general, VET teacher/trainer categories are distinguished by the programmes they deliver, their technical and pedagogical qualifications required, and the funding mechanisms.

- Teachers work in Education and Training Boards in colleges of further education or centres that deliver post-leaving certificate courses and/or vocational training opportunities scheme programmes. Although further education and training teachers deliver their programmes (including VET) at ISCED level 4 (leading to awards at national framework of qualifications levels 5-6 and European qualifications framework levels 4-5), they are registered with the teaching council as second level teachers. To register, teachers must hold an honours bachelor degree (at national framework of qualifications level 8; European qualifications framework level 6; ISCED 665, 666) and an approved initial teacher education qualification (postgraduate diploma at national framework of qualifications levels 8 or 9 (European qualifications framework levels 6 or 7); alternatively, a teacher may hold a concurrent degree qualification in post-primary initial teacher education (national framework of qualifications level 8; European qualifications framework level 6), which combines the study of one or more curricular subjects with teacher education studies.
- Apprenticeship instructors work in education and training boards in training centres which deliver the first off-the-job phase of apprenticeship (phase 2). At present, there is no requirement for instructors on classroom-based apprenticeship programmes to hold a pedagogical qualification, but they must hold a craft certificate (NQF level 6; EQF level 5), plus 5 years' experience.
- Apprenticeship lecturers work in institutes of technology, which are third level institutions, delivering training on the remaining two phases (4 and 7) of the apprenticeship programme. Apprenticeship lecturers must hold a degree (NQF levels 7-8; EQF level 6) or equivalent in the subject area, or hold a craft certificate (EQF level 5) and have 3 years' postgraduate experience.
- Work based tutors are employed, in both private and public sectors, in craft occupations. They are responsible for overseeing the work and training of apprentices during the on-the-job phases of the apprenticeship programme (phases 1, 3, 5 and 7).

Employers must employ a suitably qualified and relevant craftsperson who has been approved by the further education and training authority (SOLAS) to act as:

- workplace assessor. The assessor must have completed the SOLAS assessor and verifier programme provided by the education and training boards. This course lasts approximately 1 day and is not aligned with the national framework of qualifications;
- workplace tutor. The tutor must be competent and qualified (a holder of a national craft certificate (European qualifications framework level 5) to train apprentices.

The tutor and assessor can be the same person provided they hold the relevant qualification.

Tutors/trainers work on VET programmes or on general learning programmes in ETBs. They deliver training (other than apprenticeship) or education (e.g., adult literacy), often on

programmes aimed at the unemployed (e.g., specific skills training or other VET programmes), or early school leavers (general education).

For other types of VET training in the further education and training sector the qualifications and professional standards of trainers vary. In general, programmes leading to a Quality and Qualifications Ireland award require a subject matter qualification (usually one level higher than that of the course being taught), a pedagogical qualification (usually at third level) and 5 years' industry experience. For all other training, such as computing or accounting, trainer profiles tend to vary depending on the awarding body, the subject matter being taught and the provider. However pedagogical qualifications are increasingly in demand for these types of courses.

Trainers in other types of training programmes are generally required to hold a technical qualification at a level that is one step above the programme being delivered. In addition, they must also hold a minimum amount of relevant work experience. Increasingly, however, there is a demand for these trainers to hold a pedagogical qualification.

Other trainers work in a variety of further education and training settings, including education and training boards, Skillnets (12) (mostly providing training, although not exclusively, to the employed) and private sector providers.

9.2 Continuing professional development of teachers/trainers

The emerging trends within learning and development in Ireland are reflected within the sphere of professional development, both commercially and within further education and training (FET) systems. Within FET, professional development (PD) moves away from classic learning systems and 'pure' online learning towards a blended approach incorporating many ways to learn and access learning. PD is becoming more individualised where FET staff access learning as and when they need it, both individually and through shared networks and collaboration.

FET practitioners also need to update their skills on a continuous basis as there is a definite shift towards lifelong and work-based learning where upskilling and reskilling in ICT and industry required skills is crucial for FET to maintain its standing within industry. While there is a move in FET towards alternative forms of accreditation such as digital badges, it is at an early stage and will not replace a FET qualification in the near future.

The FET professional learning & development statement of strategy 2020-24 will continue to develop the record of success accomplished by the FET professional development strategy 2017-19. These achievements include:

- clear strategic priorities agreed and actioned;
- nationally consistent approach to planning professional learning and development in ETBs progressed;
- awareness and recognition of the importance of targeted, relevant and strategic professional learning and development increased;
- range of delivery methods expanded to include online and blended learning
- capability and confidence in critical areas such as technology-enhanced-learning, management and enterprise engagement increased;
- new approach to the funding model and structures established to facilitate ongoing development and delivery of high quality, relevant professional development for the FET sector;
- investment in the development of FET practitioners increased through targeted funding;
- strategic professional development supported and implemented at a local level through the creation of professional development coordinator posts.

Professional learning & development high-level actions 2020-24

In consultation with the sector, a set of high-level actions has been identified to achieve the three strategic goals:

Goal 1: improve infrastructure

Expand access to learning and strengthen the delivery infrastructure for effective professional learning and development, including learning networks for sharing good practice nationally.

High level actions

- design and implement flexible delivery methods;
- create learning networks to leverage professional learning and development impacts;
- develop and implement policies and procedures at education and training board (ETB) level to support professional learning and development;
- provide a central professional learning and development delivery facility.

Goal 2: build capability

Build the capability of those who work in the FET sector through the identification and deployment of strategic professional learning and development initiatives in priority areas.

High level actions

- support the implementation of the FET practice framework to consistently identify and address development needs;
- identify ongoing needs to develop the confidence and capability of FET practitioners;
- develop and roll out strategic initiatives in priority areas;
- identify, share and cascade best practice in professional learning and development across ETBs.

Goal 3: enhance systems

Develop sustainable systems to meet the planning, funding, resourcing and evaluation requirements of professional learning and development in the FET sector.

High level actions

- optimise an integrated approach to planning at local and national levels;
- utilise tracking and recording system to support planning and benchmarking;
- target investment to ensure relevant professional learning and development across the sector;
- develop effective communication systems to promote the value of professional learning and development;
- implement consistent review and evaluation across the sector to support continuous improvement in practice;
- develop a professional learning and development portal facility to create shared access to learning resources.

Enabling themes for the Strategy

At the heart of the strategy is the ambition to foster a culture of excellence in professional learning and development. Five enabling themes will propel the actions identified as necessary to achieve the strategic goals.

Integrated planning and coordination

The implementation of an effective infrastructure for professional learning and development has been progressed over the past few years and will continue as an integral part of the new

strategy.

Integrated planning and coordination will assist in the execution of the three strategic goals through infrastructure mapping and implementing a series of well thought out and planned operational tasks. It will focus on the implementation of a strategic approach to the allocation of the professional learning and development budget in line with service priorities. While each ETB is an independent entity, a joined-up and collaborative approach in integrating planning and coordination will greatly enhance and support the overall success of the strategy in driving transformational learning.

Individualised learning

Enthusiasm and motivation to learn at an individual level are central in creating and nurturing the new transformational learning culture that is envisaged. Informal learning networks are a means to support individualised and peer learning across professional areas and ETBs. Increased participation in learning networks will encourage practitioners to reflect, share and sustain the original learning experience and apply it in their practice. It will also stimulate them to avail of new development opportunities.

Flexible delivery systems

Learning opportunities need to be consistently offered in a more flexible way to enable greater access. Access constraints highlighted during the consultation process for this strategy relate to geographic location, preferred learning methods, work schedules, local professional learning and development arrangements and personal commitments. Both the research and the consultative process for this strategy reinforced the need to expand access by offering a wider range of learning delivery methods. These include formal and informal, face-to-face, online, blended, peer and incremental learning, coaching and mentoring, cascading and recognition of prior learning.

Transparency

The new strategy has been developed to benefit everyone in the FET sector. Transparency is a key enabler in providing professional learning and development that is visible to everyone, clear and comprehensible. Associated action plans and communications will be a key mechanism in promoting transparency, fostering real and meaningful exchanges between practitioners and promoting peer learning.

Access to professional learning and development must be fair and transparent and is dependent on a strong governance structure. It also needs to be targeted towards the needs of the organisation at a point in time. At the same time, practitioners engaging in professional learning and development have a responsibility to transfer their learning back into the organisation through mentoring other staff and building enhanced capability.

Impact

It is vital for the success of the strategy to achieve impact in professional learning and development at the level of the FET practitioner, the learner and the sector as a whole. While the FET professional development strategy 2017-19 achieved positive and meaningful results for the FET sector, the ambition now is to develop an improved and consistent approach to reviewing, measuring and assessing the impact of learning.

Measuring the impact of the strategy will involve consideration of the effects on:

- professional practice;
- the FET learner experience;
- improving the FET service;
- the culture of learning in the sector.

To assess the return on investment, there is a need to see the benefits of how practitioners are using their learning to provide better services for the learner and their respective organisations.

It is envisaged that professional learning and development will be integrated within everyday practice, assisting staff to build their capacity, confidence and flexibility in providing responsive services.

For more information visit Cedefop project page on Teachers' and Trainers' professional development and our interactive toolkits for VET practitioners: Cedefop VET toolkit for tackling early leaving and Cedefop VET toolkit for empowering NEETs. You may also read Cedefop/ReferNet country reports on Teachers and Trainers in a Changing World and Cedefop comparative analysis.

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[12] Skillnet Ireland is a national agency dedicated to the promotion and facilitation of workforce learning in Ireland. The organisation was established in 1999 and works with businesses and their employees to address their current and future skills needs by providing high quality, subsidised training through a series of enterprise-led training networks which operate across a range of sectors and regions. Skillnet Ireland receives public funding through the National Training Fund (NTF), a dedicated fund to support the training of those in employment, and those seeking employment. In addition to NTF funding, Skillnet Ireland channels funding into its training programmes via matching funding provided by its network member enterprises. Skillnets training interventions comprise mostly short courses (days rather than weeks or months). More information available at: https://www.skillnetireland.ie/

CHAPTER 10.
Shaping VET qualifications

10.1 Anticipating skill needs

Following publication of the National skills strategy 2025 (in 2016), the system for the identification of skills needs in Ireland was reconfigured. Skills needs identification is now overseen by a National Skills Council (NSC), which was established in 2017. The NSC is made up of representatives (usually senior civil servants or chief executive officers) from a number of government departments (ministries), their agencies, education/training providers, and employers.

More specifically, the NSC includes representatives from the following:

- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment;
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform;
- Department of Social Protection;
- Employers.

The NSC oversees the process of skills needs identification in Ireland. It is informed by the work of:

- an expert group on future skills needs, which provides advice on sectoral developments in terms of employment;
- regional skills fora: a network of nine fora that forms a direct link between education and training providers and employers at local level;
- the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU), which monitors the supply and demand for skills and occupational labour. Every year, the skills and labour market research unit publishes the national skills bulletin, a summary of the various supply and demand indicators for skills and labour in Ireland. The national skills bulletin also provides a list of the occupations for which a shortage has been identified, distinguishing between a skills shortage, a labour shortage, or a possible future (within the next 5 years) shortage.

Following a review of Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2016-2025, and the associated skills architecture, the OECD published its report OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations in 2023.

Governance of the skills ecosystem was one of four priority areas examined in the OECD Report. The report recommends revising the National Skills Council (NSC), as a result of the National Skills Strategy. A revised NSC could be positioned as a 'platform for strategic engagement with non-governmental stakeholders', such as, employer representative bodies, trade unions, civil society and others, while at the same time seeking to bring about strengthened cross-Departmental coordination and collaboration via a different set of policy levers (OECD Skills Strategy Ireland Report).

Reforming of the NSC is currently in progress with a new structure, membership and terms of reference to be finalised in 2024.

See also Cedefop's skills forecast and European Skills Index.

10.2 Designing qualifications

Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, the government established Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Quality and Qualifications Ireland operates under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. It is both an awarding and a quality assurance body. While the remit of QQI extends to both general and vocational education and training awards, it plays a key role in setting standards and qualifications in VET (a significant share of VET-related awards are made by QQI).

The specific statutory functions of QQI include, for example:

- establishing the standards of knowledge, skills or competences to be acquired by learners before an award can be made by QQI, or by an education and training provider to which authority to make an award has been delegated;
- making awards or delegating authority to make an award where it considers it appropriate; reviewing and monitoring the operation of the authority so delegated.

QQI sets standards for further education and training awards (including VET) and tertiary education awards made outside the university sector (13).

QQI awards' standards are determined within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which comprises a grid of indicators, award-type descriptors and other policies, criteria, standards and guidelines that may be issued to support it. QQI determines awards' standards for the education and training awards that it makes itself and that are made by providers to whom it has delegated authority to make an award. Such standards are determined to be consistent with the NFQ award types.

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[13] The awards at tertiary level are made to learners at a variety of tertiary institutions including private independent colleges. Third level institutions such as most institutes of technology have received delegated authority from Quality and Qualifications Ireland make their own awards. Universities and Dublin Institute of Technology act as their own awarding bodies.

CHAPTER 11.
Quality assurance

Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is required to develop and publish guidelines for providers for the quality assurance of their programmes and services. Providers are required by legislation to have regard to QQI guidelines in developing their own procedures for quality assurance. In some instances, such as programme validation, providers' quality assurance procedures must be approved by QQI as fit for purpose. Therefore, providers are responsible for assuring the quality of their own programmes with reference to the guidelines and criteria issued by QQI. Given the variety of providers in Ireland, QQI has developed guidelines for a number of sectors, including the further education and training (FET) sector. QQI guidelines for further education and training providers are directed to the EQAVET framework, the European initiative for quality assurance in VET, designed to provide tools for the management of quality in vocational education and training. QQI is an active contributor to EQAVET's work on a European level and these guidelines are designed to complement EQAVET guidelines.

Programme validation is a key quality assurance process that QQI uses to approve new programmes proposed by providers of education and training. Validation in this context means that a programme meets minimum standards in terms of learning outcomes and national framework of qualifications levels. Programme validation, therefore, can assure providers and learners that successful completion of a programme validated by QQI will lead to a specific national framework of qualifications (NFQ) awards.

Programme validation is a two-stage process:

- approval of the provider's ability to quality assure its programmes;
- validation by QQI of a specific programme(s).

QQI does this by appointing independent expert(s) to compare provider proposals against the requirements of the particular NFQ award(s).

If the proposed programme meets QQI criteria, it can be validated for up to 5 years. If the criteria are not met, then the programme cannot be offered as proposed.

In 2020 QQI commenced the inaugural reviews of quality assurance in education and training boards (ETBs). The inaugural review is an historic event - both for QQI and the ETBs - as it is the first review process of its kind to be conducted within the sector. It seeks to further encourage the development of the quality culture within ETBs and improve public confidence in the quality of further education and training (FET) provision by promoting transparency and public awareness. The implementation of this review process is a collaborative effort, with support from Further Education and Training Authority of Ireland (SOLAS) in briefing the review teams on the FET system in Ireland as well as an overview of the particular ETB. The process was concluded in 2023.

CHAPTER 12.
Validation of prior learning

Under an EU Council Recommendation, Member States should have arrangements in place for the validation of non-formal and informal learning no later than 2018. Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is required to establish policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression (ATP) for providers. On the basis of these policies, providers then establish ATP procedures which they implement, including policies on credit accumulation, credit transfer and identification and for the formal assessment of the knowledge, skill and competence previously acquired by learners, including for the purposes of awards.

QQI has published an ATP policy restatement in 2015. Following consultation on approaches to policy development, the principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in further and higher education and training were also republished. ATP has been fundamental to enabling learners to engage with the NFQ and benefit from it, providing an essential architecture of specified entry arrangements, transfer and progression routes; the accumulation of credits; information for learners; and the recognition of prior learning.

In 2023, a review was commissioned by QQI as Ireland marks the 20th anniversary of the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the national access, transfer and progression policy (ATP) that informs how learners and education providers engage with the framework.

QQI monitors the effectiveness of policies and procedures and their implementation through cyclical review and annual dialogue meetings.

Significant collaborative work is undertaken nationally with stakeholders across higher, further and community sectors to support the sustainable development of revised, innovative RPL policies that continue to be informed by dynamic practice nationally and internationally.

For more information about validation arrangements, please visit Cedefop’s European database on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

CHAPTER 13.
Incentives for learners

Funding

In common with other sections of the Irish education sector, the provision of public VET is largely funded by the Exchequer; consequently, VET programmes are provided free or at a minimal charge. As an example, the post-leaving certificate (PLC) programme is an important element of VET provision to young people who have completed their leaving certificate and to adults returning to education.

Since the 2011/12 academic year, learners on PLC courses paid a participant contribution of EUR 200 (prior to this, learners did not have to pay any fees). However, the PLC participant contribution fee of EUR 200 was abolished in 2022. Students continue to face various charges such as student services charges, application fees, exam fees and professional registration fees.

The cost of taking up further education and training courses is much less expensive than attending higher education courses in Ireland.

Grants, allowances, support

There are numerous grants and incentives available to support individuals intending to take up courses in the further education and training sector:

- the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is available to carers, people with disabilities, unemployed people and lone parents. This allowance provides these individuals with the opportunity to study at second level (both lower secondary (NFQ 3/EQF 2, ISCED 244) and upper secondary (NFQ 4/5, EQF 3/4, ISCED 343, 344) or further (NFQ 1-6/EQF 1-5) and tertiary (third level) (NFQ 6-10, EQF 5-8, ISCED 544-864) education, while keeping their existing social welfare payments;
- the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) is targeted at people over the age of 16 who have not completed their leaving certificate and allows participants to combine family and work with a part-time further education programme;
- the CETS (Childcare Employment and Training Support) scheme provides subsidised childcare places for some applicants to further education and training courses including VET (specific skills training, vocational training opportunities scheme, and traineeships).

Initiatives available to trainees include:

- a training allowance which may be paid for the duration of the course;
- an accommodation allowance should the individual live away from home in order to attend the course;
- a travel allowance should the trainee live more than 3 miles from the education and training board (14).

Apprenticeships

A new bursary managed by the National Apprenticeship Office was launched in 2023, to support learners from underrepresented groups who wish to access apprenticeships. The bursary is now up and running. Successful applicants on ‘access to apprenticeship’ courses are eligible to receive up to EUR 3 000 each to help with travel, accommodation and other costs associated with participation in the course.

Positive employability outcomes

By striving to ensure positive employability outcomes for those undertaking FET (including VET) programmes, SOLAS aims to increase the attractiveness of FET among school leavers and other learners in Ireland. To this end, monitoring learner outcomes from FET courses is a key function of SOLAS. This data, along with local labour market intelligence (also provided by SOLAS), informs the FET planning agreements SOLAS makes with education and training boards (ETBs) as the basis for receipt of funding. These activities help to ensure that courses provided by ETBs are up-to-date and in conjunction with employers' needs and that learners from VET-oriented courses will be job ready. System performance and outcomes are monitored using a suite of tools available to SOLAS: Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) research, on behalf of both SOLAS and the National Skills Council.

The process to establish new Strategic Performance Agreements (SPAs) commenced in Q3 2021, with an aim to agree plans and commitments through to 2024, in line with the timeline for the ultimate delivery of the Future FET: Transforming Learning strategy. The framework developed included the proposed new national system target areas, a review of the inaugural Strategic Performance Agreements 2018-2020, themes for innovation and expansion and a suggested enabling infrastructure for ongoing review. It included three distinct components of strategic dialogue, national targets and strategic ambition and enabling infrastructure and design. The national system targets proposed included 5 themes; supporting jobs; learning pathways; facilitating inclusion; upskilling through life and careers; and targeting key skills needs. Each theme referenced up to a potential 10% growth from the baseline established in 2019.

2022 bore witness to the rolling out of new Strategic Performance Agreements with each of the 16 ETBs. These will run over the period 2022-24, and each one is specifically tailored to the respective ETB, coherently setting out individual strengths, characteristics, and mutually agreed commitments of each ETB towards a range of national FET system targets. These national system targets were collaborated on and agreed at Department level, building on the vision set out in the original Strategic Performance Agreements in 2018-20, with renewed focus on policy and skills imperatives. These new Strategic Performance Agreements, launched in the final quarter of 2022, embed clear annual ETB contributions to these national targets, including clear objectives around employment outcomes, pathways within FET, progression to HE, NZEB and retrofitting, green skills, and adult literacy, among others.

Integral to the successful attainment of these important national targets, and the wider transformation of the FET system as a whole, will be both the above-mentioned FET funding model reform and also delivery on strategic investment related to planned capital infrastructure projects. Several major capital funding calls were launched in 2022 to support the delivery of the ambitious FET College of the Future vision, with considerable investment committed towards this shared national project and future for FET provision. New single integrated FET College of the Future structures have, as of 2022, been announced in Kerry, Cork, Limerick, Clare, Galway, Mayo, and Wicklow, with more to come in 2023 and beyond.

Management of the national skills database

- annual national skills bulletin and the annual vacancy overview and quarterly skills bulletins in specific fields e.g. women, older workers and the unemployed;
- FET independent evaluations including in provision such as PLC and Youthreach;
- FET system overall reports and specific studies reflecting reach of the FET sector and the diversity of learners;
- SOLAS-Central Statistics Office (CSO) statistical collaboration reports to track the national sectorial and ETB-specific targets established as well as reports on graduate tracking and PLC learner outcomes.

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[14] The allowances paid depend on a number of factors including the programme type. Depending on the programme, the allowances paid to trainees can be the equivalent of the payment made to the unemployed. Travel and accommodation allowances depend on the programme and the distance the learner lives from the training centre (e.g. EUR

32.60 per week for somebody living at a distance of 64 kilometres or more. An accommodation allowance is typically EUR 69.90 per week.

CHAPTER 14.
Incentives for enterprises to boost their participation in VET provision

Further education and training development framework for employees

In October 2018, the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) published its further education and training (FET) employee development framework, which aims to upskill and reskill vulnerable workers. FET provision for these workers includes digital skills training, technical, socio-emotional and cognitive training. The target cohorts are older workers, those with low education attainment (less than national framework of qualifications level 5/European qualifications framework level 4), those working in vulnerable occupations/sectors (e.g., elementary and operatives working in some low-tech manufacturing). Continuing efforts concentrate on developing education and training board capacity, rolling out a promotional campaign and monitoring metrics (15).

The policy also supports small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in investing in their workforces. While responsibility for skills development of employees will continue to remain with employers, this policy aims to complement existing employer-based and State initiatives through targeted support and investment by government.

Skills to advance gives upskilling and reskilling opportunities to employees in jobs going through change, and to people employed in vulnerable sectors. It aims to give employees the skills to progress in their current job, or to take advantage of new job opportunities. The courses cover a wide range of part-time evening study: national framework of qualifications (NFQ) levels 4-6 (EQF levels 3-5) and non-accredited courses. Courses are generally delivered through a combination of online teaching and classroom-based learning.

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[15] Enterprises do not receive direct funding. The funding goes to the provider.

CHAPTER 15.
Guidance and counselling

Guidance and counselling takes different forms throughout the VET sector. Learners generally access courses and services through self-referral or having been referred to courses and services through the department of social protection. For example, with regard to post-leaving certificate (PLC) courses, school leavers or adults generally choose the course and apply directly by letter or online to the school or college offering that course. In some instances, they will be called for an interview before final selection. PLC courses' participants may receive in-house education and career guidance on the issue of vocational area choice, on progression to work and progression through a special links programme to an institute of technology.

For young learners who join the Youthreach programme on leaving school at the age of 16 (or younger), counselling and psychological services are available as well as a guidance service, in recognition of the social and personal challenges experienced by many Youthreach participants. The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) has a role in the support and development of guidance in Youthreach and similar programmes. The remit of NCGE, which is an agency of the education ministry, is to develop and support quality guidance provision in the education sector as part of lifelong learning in accordance with national and international best practice. The NCGE has collaborated with the Youthreach programme in the development of the web wheel model, a core element of which includes the use of mentoring techniques to develop and guide one-to-one relationships between students and staff. This process uses a specific profiling tool, the wheel, to assess student needs, to structure and guide the mentoring conversations and to review and monitor progress.

SOLAS is working with NCGE to coordinate the adult education guidance initiative within the education and training boards (ETBs), which provides nationwide guidance for learners before and after they participate in vocational training opportunities schemes programmes.

The institutes of technology provide higher education and some VET and further education and training (FET) programmes. Most of the institutes of technology offer a careers service to students. The main provision is targeted at final year students and recent graduates, though some careers services have started to provide careers education in the curriculum of undergraduate courses. The careers advisory/appointments office provides information on education and employment opportunities. Universities and the institutes of technology are not statutorily required to offer careers services and the provision can differ across the sector. At present, many of the careers services are involved in programmes promoting student retention in higher education and training.

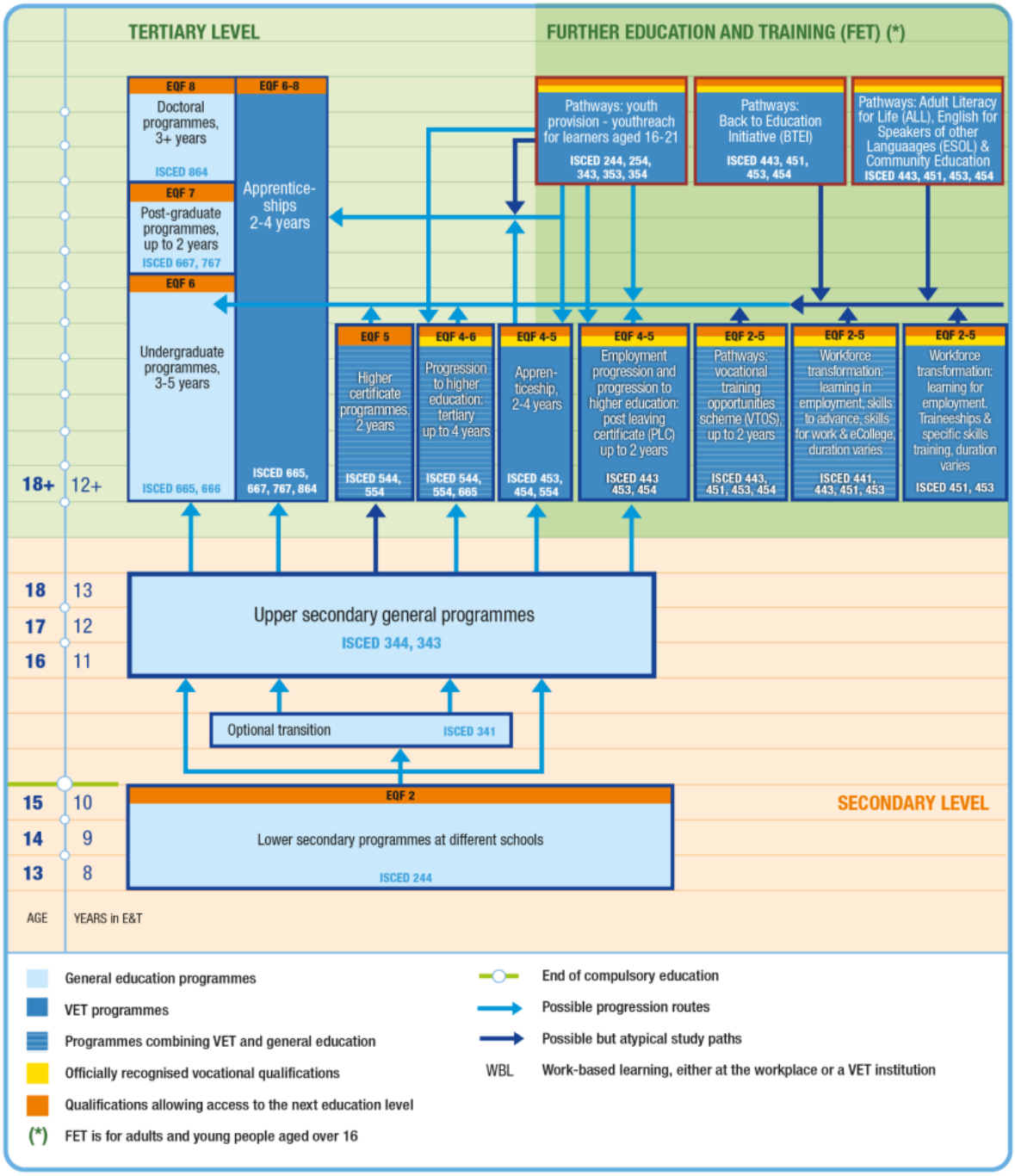
Regarding apprenticeship, each person must first obtain employment as an apprentice in their chosen trade. The employer must be approved to train apprentices and must register the person with SOLAS as an apprentice within 2 weeks of recruitment. The registered apprentice is then called for training by SOLAS.

FET practitioners require reskilling throughout their careers to meet the changing needs of learners in FET. There are a number of organisations and agencies that are already providing development opportunities to FET practitioners: the further education and support service in programme development and quality assurance; the NCGE for FET guidance personnel; the National Learning Network and the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) for disability awareness, etc.

Please also see:

- Guidance and outreach. Ireland national report;
- Cedefop’s labour market intelligence toolkit;
- Cedefop’s inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices;
- National guidance system.

Vocational education and training system chart



NB: ISCED-P 2011.

Source: Cedefop, & Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS). (2023). Vocational education and training in Europe – Ireland: system description. In Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2024). *Vocational education and training in Europe: VET in Europe database – detailed VET system descriptions* [Database]. www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/ireland-u3

VET Programme Types

EQF 2-5

Workforce Transformation: Learning for Employment. Traineeships and specific skills training

Duration and WBL vary

EQF 2 - 5, ISCED: 451, 453

Employment Progression and Learning in Employment - Traineeships and Specific Skills Training. Duration and WBL vary. EQF: 2-5. ISCED: 451, 453

EQF level	2-5	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	451, 453
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	16+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	Varies according to certification requirements or learner or employer needs		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✓ Unemployed participants on training courses are paid a training allowance by the provider, based on their Social Welfare payment.	**Is it available for adults?**	✓
ECVET or other credits	Information not available		
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	• Full time • Flexible courses including online or blended learning or short courses		

Main providers	• Education and Training Boards - Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges • Enterprises
Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	This varies according to the requirements of the certification
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	In-company
Main target groups	Adults, including include school leavers, older learners, those in employment and those who are unemployed. Particular target groups include those with lower skills who are in employment and those wishing to return to paid employment following a period of working in the home.
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	• A qualification at EQF level 2 is usually the minimum. • Adults who may not have completed secondary education but are deemed by the provider to have the necessary competencies and capacity to undertake the programme will meet the entry requirements.
Assessment of learning outcomes	Methods of assessment can typically include continuous/formative and summative assessment: • assignments; • projects; • skills demonstrations; • test based assessment or examinations.
Diplomas/certificates provided	Learners may receive a full or partial award (partial awards are being recognised as part fulfilment of the requirements for a full award). Awards span levels 2-5 on the EQF. Relevant or specialist industry certification from other awarding bodies recognised by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) may be delivered in response to the needs of the labour market/specific industry.
Examples of qualifications	Software developer(16)
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	• labour market including career progression; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other Further Education and Training (VET).
Destination of graduates	Information not available

Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available
General education subjects	✗
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Approximately 6% based on the Further Education and Training (FET) Facts and Figures 2022 report

[16] As described in national context.

EQF 2-5

Workforce Transformation: Learning in Employment

Skills to Advance, Skills for Work, e-College

EQF Levels 2 - 5

ISCED 441, 443, 451, 453

Workforce Transformation: Learning in Employment - Skills to Advance, Skills for Work, e-College. EQF Levels 2-5, ISCED 441, 443, 451, 453

EQF level	2-5	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	ISCED 441, 443, 451, 453
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	18+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	Duration depends on learner or employer needs		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✓ Courses are highly subsidised, depending on skill level.	**Is it available for adults?**	✓

ECVET or other credits	Information not available
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	• part time or full-time learning; • remote or blended learning options; • in-company practice option (practical training in a company).
Main providers	Education and Training Boards - Further Education and Training Colleges e-College

Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	This varies according to the requirements of the certification.
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	In-company practice
Main target groups	These programmes are primarily aimed at those who are: • currently working in a lower-skilled job; • low skilled including those with less than upper second level education; • aged 50 or over; • currently working in a job undergoing changes or employed in a sector vulnerable to a downturn. e-College courses are aimed at a variety of learners: • those already doing an FET course who would like to augment their learning; • those who have recently become unemployed or had their hours reduced; • those wishing to upskill and reskill in digital, ICT and business skills related areas.
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	Learners must be aged 16 or over and be • currently working in a lower-skilled job; • aged 50 or over; • currently working in a job undergoing changes or employed in a sector vulnerable to a downturn.
Assessment of learning outcomes	Methods of assessment typically include: • assignments; • projects; • demonstrations of skills; • exams.
Diplomas/certificates provided	Full or partial certification at EQF Levels 2-5. Industry relevant certification not aligned to the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ).
Examples of qualifications	Not applicable
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	• Labour market/career progression • Higher Education (VET) • Higher Education (academic) • Other Further Education and Training (VET)
Destination of graduates	Information not available
Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available

General education subjects	✓
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓ A learning outcome, competence-based approach is applied.
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Approximately 7% of all learners, based on the SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Facts and Figures 2022 report

EQF 2-5

Pathways: Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)

EQF 2 - 5

Up to 2 years

ISCED 443, 451, 453, 454

Pathways: Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). EQF 2-5. Up to 2 years. ISCED 443, 451, 453, 454

EQF level	2-5	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	443, 451, 453, 454
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	21+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	2 (up to)		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✓	**Is it available for adults?**	✓

ECVET or other credits	Information not available
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	• Full time • In-company practice option (practical training in a company).
Main providers	Education and Training Boards
Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	This varies according to the requirements of the certification
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	In-company practice
Main target groups	Adults over 21 who are long-term unemployed/made redundant, particularly learners with less than upper second level education

Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	Learners must be aged 21 or over to participate in VTOS. Learners should also receive a specific social welfare payment for at least 6 months. If a learner doesn't receive any of the above social welfare payments, he/she still qualify for VTOS if: • dependent spouse, civil partner or cohabitant of an eligible person status applies; • the leaners receives statutory redundancy
Assessment of learning outcomes	Methods of assessment typically include: • assignments; • projects; • skills demonstrations; • test based assessment and/or exams.
Diplomas/certificates provided	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) component (minor) award at EQF levels 2 -5 (National Framework of Qualifications - NFQ) Levels 3- 6. A full QQI award at EQF levels 2-5 (NFQ Levels 3 - 6)
Examples of qualifications	Not Applicable
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	• labour market; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other further education and training (VET).
Destination of graduates	Information not available
Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available
General education subjects	✓
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓ Most VTOS awards are on the national framework of qualifications, so a learning outcomes approach is applied.
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	VTOS Core is approx. 2%, based on the Further Education and Training (FET) Facts and Figures 2022 report.

EQF 4-5

Employment Progression and Progression to Higer Education: Post-leaving certificate courses (PLC)

EQF Levels 4 - 5

Up to 2 years

ISCED 443, 453, 454

Employment Progression and Progression to Higher Education: Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC). EQF Levels 4-5. Up to 2 years. ISCED 443, 453, 454

EQF level	4-5	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	443, 453, 454
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	12+
Usual entry age	18+, but eligible aged 16	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	2 years (up to)		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✓	**Is it available for adults?**	✓

ECVET or other credits	Not applicable Credits accumulated, if any, on the basis of certifying bodies, which can vary.
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	Full-time
Main providers	Education and Training Boards - Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges
Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	<30% (17) This varies according to the requirements of the certification
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	Work experience in a company.

Main target groups	• Young people who have completed upper secondary education. • Adults.
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	• The usual requirement is that the applicant holds a Leaving Certificate qualification or equivalent (EQF 4/5). • Adults who may not have completed secondary education but are deemed by the provider to have the necessary competences and capacity to undertake the programme will meet the entry requirements. • In addition, for those opting for qualifications at childcare and/or healthcare sectors (especially when they will be dealing with children or vulnerable adults) a police vetting (18) is also required for work placement in a company.
Assessment of learning outcomes	Methods of assessment can typically include continuous and summative assessment: • assignments; • projects; • skills demonstrations; • test based assessment or examinations.
Diplomas/certificates provided	The certification received depends on the course followed. Usually, courses lead to awards that have been placed at level 4 or 5 on the EQF. Depending on the curriculum and learning outcomes of the certification, they are recognised for entry to the labour market/career progression, progression to other VET courses or to higher education through the Higher Education Links Scheme in Ireland or to higher education courses in the UK. Not all programmes lead to an award made by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (industry relevant or specialist certification from other awarding bodies recognised by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) may be delivered).
Examples of qualifications	Beauty Therapist(19) Pre University Law - Level 5 (EQF Level 4) Certificate in Legal Studies Childcare Practitioner Level 6 (EQF Level 5) Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	• labour market; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other Further Education and Training (VET).

Destination of graduates	According to an evaluation of the post-leaving certificate sector published in 2018: • 33% of post-leaving certificate course completers progressed to employment (a breakdown of VET versus general learning is not possible); • Almost 21% progressed to further studies within the further education and training (FET) system; • 27% progressed to higher education; • 12% were unemployed. In 2019, a detailed analysis of PLC outcomes was conducted by SOLAS. The results from this research indicate: • 48% of 2014-15 post-leaving certificate graduates were in substantial employment only after 1 year, representing a 7 percentage point increase *vis-a-vis* the 2012/13 cohort. If we include those graduates who are in employment and in higher education, the rates increase from 54% to 64%; • for the same cohorts, we find a fall in the proportion of those graduates who continue their education and those neither in higher education or substantial employment 1 year after completion; • a significantly large proportion (almost 27%) of those in substantial employment work in the wholesale and retail sector, accommodation and food service (16%) and in human health and social work activities (15%); • the median weekly wage of a post-leaving certificate graduate in substantial employment within a year of completion was EUR 253.6 increasing to EUR 431.5 within 6 years. Considering that the sample of post-leaving certificate graduates in our analysis mainly include those under 25 years of age who are mainly employed in the wholesale and retail sector, this median weekly wage is comparable to the Central Statistics Office figures reported at a national level; • in terms of progression outcomes, we find that a significant proportion of post-leaving certificate graduates progress onto a HE course at a higher level within the same year of completion of their post-leaving certificate course. Most progressions take place between cognate disciplines; • another significant finding from our analysis is that those post-leaving certificate graduates who enrol in a higher education course have a high progression rate within the higher education, therefore suggesting high completion rates in subsequent years.
Awards through validation of prior learning	✗
General education subjects	✓
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓

Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Approximately 19% of all learners, based on the Further Education and Training (FET) Facts and Figures 2022 report

[17] For post- leaving certificate courses with a work-based learning component.

[18] The police vetting process is about criminal history checks and other relevant information on potential and current employees, volunteers and vocational trainees to approved agencies that provide care to children and vulnerable members of society.

[19] As described in national context.

EQF 4-5

Apprenticeship

EFQ 4 - 5

2-4 years

ISCED 453, 454, 554

Apprenticeship (post-secondary and tertiary). EFQ 4-5. 2-4 years. ISCED 453, 454, 554

EQF level	4-5	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	ISCED 453, 454, 554,
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	16+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	Typically, between 2-4 years, but it may vary		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✓ In the initial phases. However, any part of the training that takes place in a university (EQF level 5/ NQF level 6) will incur fees.	**Is it available for adults?**	✓

ECVET or other credits	Information not available
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	• In-company practice/on-the-job training; • Phased full time block release or part time/day release for off-the-job training, including remote or blended learning.
Main providers	• Enterprises • Education and Training Boards - Training Centres and Further Education Colleges • Universities(EQF level 5 / NQF level 6)

Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	>= 50% <=80%
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	• in-company practice/on the job training • practical training in a classroom or workshop
Main target groups	• young people who have completed lower or higher secondary education • adults
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	To begin an apprenticeship, an applicant must be employed by an approved employer. To be eligible, the applicant must be at least 16 years of age. There are two types of programmes at this level: • Pre-2016 craft apprenticeship training for which the formal minimum entry requirement is the junior certificate or equivalent (EQF 2 qualification). In practice, however, the vast majority (three quarters) of new apprentices hold higher levels of education, typically a Leaving Certificate (EQF level 3/4); • Post 2016 apprenticeship for which the entry requirements vary, depending on the specific apprenticeship programme, although a leaving certificate (EQF level 3/4) is generally the minimum.
Assessment of learning outcomes	To complete apprenticeship training, apprentices are assessed at various stages of the programme, both on and off the job. They are based on learning outcomes and include a practical component(s).
Diplomas/certificates provided	Learners who complete the traditional pre-2016 type apprenticeships receive a craft certificate. There are different certification levels for apprenticeship, including: Level 5 certificate (EQF 4), Level 6 certificate (EQF 5),
Examples of qualifications	Pre-2016 apprenticeships: Advanced Certificate Craft – Electrical/Plumbing/Brick and Stonelaying/Plastering, e.g Electrician/Plumber/Bricklayer/Plasterer (as described in national context; see also most current listing of apprenticeship) Post-2016 apprenticeship: EQF Level 5 (NQF Level 6) Farm Technician/Laboratory Technician/Civil Engineering Technician

Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	All apprentices must hold an employment contract prior to commencing the apprenticeship programme. Therefore, destination is by default to employment, but can include: • further apprenticeship qualifications (EQF 6-8); • labour market/career progression; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other further education and training (VET).
Destination of graduates	All apprentices must hold an employment contract prior to commencing the apprenticeship programme. Therefore, destination is by default to employment.
Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available
General education subjects	✓ General subjects such as mathematics are taught for some apprenticeships
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓ All apprenticeship awards are on the national framework of qualifications, so a learning outcomes approach is applied.
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Information not available

EQF 4 - 6

Progression to higher education - tertiary programmes,

Up to 4 years

EQF Levels 4 - 6

ISCED 544, 554, 665

Progression to higher education - tertiary programmes. Up to 4 years. EQF Levels 4-6. ISCED 544,554,665

EQF level	4 - 6	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	ISCED 544, 554, 665 (20)
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	16+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	Up to 4 years		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	For the tertiary programme phase delivered by Education and Training Boards there is no tuition fee or student contribution fee for the duration of their tuition. The Free Fees Initiative and student contribution arrangements will apply to the agreed duration of the tuition delivered by the universities on the tertiary programme. Tertiary students are eligible to apply for maintenance and fee grants, subject to eligibility criteria.	**Is it available for adults?**	✓
ECVET or other credits	Usually, 240 - 120 ECTs are earned on completion of the 4 years (21).		

Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	Full time
Main providers	• For EQF Levels 4 - 5 - Education and Training Boards - Further Education and Training Colleges; • For EQF Level 5 -6- Universities.
Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	Information not available
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	Information not available
Main target groups	Young people who have completed upper secondary education. Adults
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	Upper secondary certificate (Leaving Certificate) - EQF Level 3 - 4 Adults who may not have completed secondary education but are deemed by the provider to have the necessary competencies and capacity to undertake the programme will meet the entry requirements.
Assessment of learning outcomes	Methods of assessment can typically include continuous/formative and summative assessment: • assignments; • projects; • skills demonstrations; • test based assessment or examinations
Diplomas/certificates provided	Learners receive an ordinary or honours bachelor’s degree on completion of their course. “Step-back” awards are built into the programmes' design, meaning that if a learner leaves the programme before completing the final award, they have formal recognition of the learning they have already completed. This may include full or modular certification at EQF Levels 4 - 5.
Examples of qualifications	• Bachelor of Arts; • Bachelor of Science; • Bachelor of Engineering.
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	• labour market; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other further education and training (VET).

Destination of graduates	Information not available
Awards through validation of prior learning	✗
General education subjects	✓
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Information not available

[21] Credits are decided individually by the higher education institutions.

EQF 5

Higher certificate programmes

EQF Level 5

2 years

ISCED 544, 554

Higher certificate programmes. EQF Level 5. 2 years. ISCED 544, 554

EQF level	5	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	ISCED 544, 554
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	18+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	2 years		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	All learners must pay fees, unless they are in receipt of a means-tested grant	**Is it available for adults?**	✓

ECVET or other credits	Usually, 120 ECTs are earned on completion of the 2 years. Credits are decided individually by the higher education institutions.
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	Full time
Main providers	Universities
Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	Information not available
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	Information not available

Main target groups	Young people who have completed upper secondary education. Adults
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	Upper secondary certificate (Leaving Certificate) - EQF Level 3 - 4 Adults who may not have completed secondary education but are deemed by the provider to have the necessary competencies and capacity to undertake the programme will meet the entry requirements.
Assessment of learning outcomes	To complete programmes at this level, learners need to pass a final examination (part of the grade may be earned through continuous assessment). Assessment is typically based on learning outcomes.
Diplomas/certificates provided	Higher Certificate
Examples of qualifications	Higher Certificate in Equine Science
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	• labour market; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other further education and training (VET).
Destination of graduates	Information not available
Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available
General education subjects	✓
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Information not available

EQF 4-8

Apprenticeship

EFQ 6-8

2-4 years

ISCED: 665, 667, 767, 864

Apprenticeship: EQF 6-8. 2-4 years. ISCED 665, 667, 767, 864

EQF level	4-8	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	ISCED, 665, 667, 767, 864
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	16+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	Typically, between 2-4 years, but it may vary		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✓ In the initial phases. However, any part of the training that takes place in a university will incur fees.	**Is it available for adults?**	✓

ECVET or other credits	Information not available
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	• in-company practice/on-the-job training; • Phased full time block release or part time/day release for off-the-job training, including remote or blended learning.
Main providers	• Enterprises • Education and Training Boards - Training Centres and Further Education Colleges • Universities
Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	>= 50% <=80%

Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	• in-company practice/on the job training • practical training in a classroom or workshop
Main target groups	• young people who have completed lower or higher secondary education • adults
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	To begin an apprenticeship, an applicant must be employed by an approved employer. To be eligible, the applicant must be at least 16 years of age. There are two types of programmes at this level: • Pre-2016 craft apprenticeship training for which the formal minimum entry requirement is the junior certificate or equivalent (EQF 2 qualification). In practice, however, the vast majority (three quarters) of new apprentices hold higher levels of education, typically a Leaving Certificate (EQF level 3/4); • Post 2016 apprenticeship for which the entry requirements vary, depending on the specific apprenticeship programme, although a leaving certificate (EQF level 3/4) is generally the minimum. Applicants with qualifications significantly lower than the EQF level of study applied for may also be considered by the provider if they have adequate industrial experience in the relevant field. This is usually assessed on a case by case basis.
Assessment of learning outcomes	To complete apprenticeship training, apprentices are assessed at various stages of the programme, both on and off the job. They are based on learning outcomes and include a practical component(s).
Diplomas/certificates provided	There are different certification levels for apprenticeship, including: • Ordinary degree (EQF 6); • Honours degree (EQF 6); • Master’s degree (EQF 7); • Professional doctoral degree (EQF 8).
Examples of qualifications	Pre-2016 apprenticeships: EQF Level 6 (NQF Level 7) Industrial electrician Engineer/Engineering Services Management (as described in national context; see also most current listing of Apprenticeship) Post-2016 apprenticeship: : EQF Level 6 (NQF Level 7) Farm Manager/Laboratory Analyst/Chef de partie
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	All apprentices must hold an employment contract prior to commencing the apprenticeship programme. Therefore, destination is by default to employment, but can include: • labour market/career progression; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other further education and training (VET).

Destination of graduates	All apprentices must hold an employment contract prior to commencing the apprenticeship programme. Therefore, destination is by default to employment.
Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available
General education subjects	✓ General subjects such as mathematics are taught for some apprenticeships
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓ All apprenticeship awards are on the national framework of qualifications, so a learning outcomes approach is applied.
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Information not available

EQF 5-6

Undergraduate programmes

3-5 years

EQF Level 6

ISCED 665, 666

Undergraduate Programmes: EQF Level 6. ISCED 665, 666

EQF level	5-6	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	665, 666
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	18+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	3-5		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✗
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✗
Is it offered free of charge?	✗	**Is it available for adults?**	✓

ECVET or other credits	180 - 240 ECTS, depending on the programme (22).
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	• Full time • Apprenticeship
Main providers	• Universities • In apprenticeships, companies too.
Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	Information not available
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	Information not available
Main target groups	Adults, including young people

Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	A Leaving Certificate award is the minimum requirement for school leavers. Adults without the Leaving Certificate may apply as mature students if aged over 23 and providers will consider the learner's educational background, work history, community involvement and other achievements and interests and are then deemed by the provider to have the necessary competencies and capacity to undertake the programme to meet the entry requirements.
Assessment of learning outcomes	To complete programmes at this level, learners need to pass a final examination (part of the grade may be earned through continuous assessment). Assessment is typically based on learning outcomes.
Diplomas/certificates provided	Learners receive an ordinary or honours bachelor's degree.
Examples of qualifications	• Bachelor of Arts; • Bachelor of Science (23)
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	Labour market Higher education - postgraduate Further education and training
Destination of graduates	Information not available.
Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available
General education subjects	Information not available
Key competences	Information not available
Application of learning outcomes approach	Information not available
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Not applicable

[22] Credits are decided individually by the higher education institutions.

[23] As described in national context.

EQF 7

Post-graduate programmes,

EQF 7

Up to 2 years

ISCED 667, 767

Post-graduate programmes: EQF 7. Up to 2 years. ISCED 667, 767

EQF level	7	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	667, 767
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	18+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	2 (up to)		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✗
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✗ Learners must pay fees in most instances	**Is it available for adults?**	✓

ECVET or other credits	60-120 ECTS credits depending on the programme Credits are decided individually by the higher education institutions.
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	Postgraduate programmes can take various learning forms, from full-time to part-time and distance education. They can also be taken as part of an apprenticeship.
Main providers	• Universities • In apprenticeships, companies too.
Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	Information not available
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	Information not available
Main target groups	Adults

Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	The minimum requirement for entry to postgraduate education is an honour bachelor's degree (EQF 6) or equivalent.
Assessment of learning outcomes	To complete a programme at this level, learners need to pass a final examination (part of the final grade may be composed of continuous assessment). Also, depending on the programme, submission of a thesis may also be required.
Diplomas/certificates provided	Depending on the programme a learner may receive a higher diploma, a postgraduate certificate, a postgraduate diploma or a master's degree.
Examples of qualifications	Master's degree in education(24)
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	Those who complete education and training at this level may enter the labour market or continue their studies at the same or higher level (EQF 7 or EQF 8).
Destination of graduates	Information not available
Awards through validation of prior learning	✓
General education subjects	✗
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Not applicable

[24] As described in national context.

EQF 2-4

Pathways; Youth Provision.

Youthreach programme for learners aged 16-21

EQF 2 - 4

ISCED 244, 254, 343. 353, 354

Pathways: Youth Provision Youthreach programme for learners aged 16-21. EQF 2-4. ISCED 244, 254, 343. 353, 354

EQF level	2-4	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	244, 254, 343. 353, 354.
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	16-21	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	Varies according to learner needs		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✓	**Is it available for adults?**	✓ Aged up to 21

ECVET or other credits	Information not available
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	• full time learning; • in-company practice option (practical training in a company).
Main providers	• Education and Training Boards - Designated Centres for Education (Youthreach Centres) • Community Training Centres
Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	>=30%
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	• practical training at a further education and training provider; • in-company practice

Main target groups	Programmes are available for young people aged between 16-21 years.
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	To enrol in Youthreach, the following requirements apply: learners must be between 16 and 21 who have not completed the Leaving Certificate (upper secondary education)
Assessment of learning outcomes	Learners are assessed at various stages of the programme. Assessment is based on learning outcomes and may include a practical component or skills demonstration.
Diplomas/certificates provided	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) component (minor) award at EQF levels 2 -5 (National Framework of Qualifications - NFQ) Levels 3- 6. A full QQI award at EQF levels 1-5 (NFQ Levels 3 - 6)
Examples of qualifications	Information not available.
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	• labour market; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other further education and training (VET).
Destination of graduates	According to an evaluation of the post-leaving certificate sector published in 2019 (latest data available) (25): • 27% of Youthreach course completers progressed to employment; • 38% progressed to further studies within the further education and training (FET) system; • 35% were unemployed or unknown outcomes.
Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available
General education subjects	✓
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓ Most Youthreach awards are included in the national framework of qualifications (NFQ), so a learning outcomes approach is applied.
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Approximately 3%, based on the SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Facts and Figures 2022 report.

[25] Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme | ESRI. Also: https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/7c40b8c35f/14990_solas_youthreach_june_web.pdf

EQF 1-5

Pathways - Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)

EQF 1 - 5, ISCED 443, 451, 453, 454

Pathways: Back to Education Initiative (BTEI). EQF 1-5. ISCED 443, 451, 453, 454

EQF level	1-5	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	ISCED 443, 451, 453, 454
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	16+	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	Not applicable		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✓ The participants eligible for free tuition are people who (or their dependants): • have qualifications lower than upper-secondary level education or • receive a jobseeker's payment or means-tested social welfare payment - • have a medical card	**Is it available for adults?**	✓
ECVET or other credits	Information not available		
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	• Part time; • in-company practice option (practical training in a company).		
Main providers	Education and Training Board providers such as Adult Education Centres, College of Further Education and Training		

Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	This varies according to the requirements of the certification
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	In-company practice
Main target groups	• the unemployed, particularly the priority groups identified as part of the Government's activation agenda; • the long-term unemployed and those at risk of becoming long-term unemployed, especially those in the older age groups; • those not in work but not eligible to be on the Live Register; • those in the workplace with basic skills needs; • disadvantaged women who have particular experience of barriers to participation; • disadvantaged men, including those experiencing rural isolation; • lone Parents and others with caring responsibilities that may prohibit their participation in full time courses; • travellers; • homeless people; • substance misusers; • ex-offenders; • people with disabilities; • people for whom English is not the native language, who require language and literacy supports.
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	Learners must be aged 16 or over. The groups prioritised for participation in the BTEI are listed in the *BTEI operational guidelines* (26). Within these groups, priority is given to those most educationally disadvantaged.
Assessment of learning outcomes	Methods of assessment typically include: • assignments; • projects; • skills demonstrations; • test based assessment or exams.
Diplomas/certificates provided	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) component (minor) award at EQF levels 1-5 (National Framework of Qualifications - NFQ) Levels 1- 6. A full QQI award at EQF levels 1-5 (NFQ Levels 1 - 6)
Examples of qualifications	Not Applicable
Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	• labour market; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other further education and training (VET).

Destination of graduates	Information not available.
Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available
General education subjects	✓
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓ Most awards are on the national framework of qualifications, so a learning outcomes approach is applied.
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Approximately 9%, based on the Further Education and Training (FET) Facts and Figures 2022 report.

[26] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5afe0f-operational-guidelines-back-to-education-allowance/

EQF 1-5

Pathways: Adult Literacy for Life (ALL), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Community Education

EQF 1- 5

ISCED 443, 451, 453, 454

Pathways: Adult Literacy for Life, English for Speakers of Other Languages and Community Education. ISCED 443, 451, 453, 454

EQF level	1-5	**ISCED-P 2011 level**	443, 451, 453, 454
Usual entry grade	Not applicable	**Usual completion grade**	Not applicable
Usual entry age	18 +	**Usual completion age**	Not applicable
Length of a programme (years)	There is not maximum upper limit to programme durations. Learners may enrol for courses where the individual is deemed by the provider to have an unmet educational need and/or the necessary competencies and capacity to undertake the programme.		
Is it part of compulsory education and training?	✗	**Is it part of formal education and training system?**	✓
Is it initial VET?	✓	**Is it continuing VET?**	✓
Is it offered free of charge?	✓ but a small fee may be charged for some community education courses.	**Is it available for adults?**	✓

ECVET or other credits	Information not available
Learning forms (e.g. dual, part-time, distance)	Part time
Main providers	Education and Training Boards - Adult Literacy and Community Education services. Community Education is delivered in partnership with community groups or other statutory and non-statutory agencies.

Share of work-based learning provided by schools and companies	This varies according to the requirements of the certification
Work-based learning type (workshops at schools, in-company training / apprenticeships)	In-company practice
Main target groups	• Adults with educational needs in literacy, numeracy and digital skills; • Adults with few or no formal qualifications; • Adults with less than upper secondary education; • The unemployed and in particular, the long term unemployed; • Lone parents; • Travellers; • Migrants; • Older people; • Adults with a disability; • Disadvantaged women and men, particularly those living in rural isolation; • Adults in homelessness; • Ex-offenders; • Substance misusers; • International protection applicants; • Underemployed/sessional and seasonal workers; • Dependents of those who are unemployed; • Low skilled adults outside the labour force.
Entry requirements for learners (qualification/education level, age)	18+ The programme is provided based on learners' educational needs, therefore no previous qualifications required
Assessment of learning outcomes	Many courses do not offer certification as they are targeted towards individual or group educational needs and therefore assessment is formative. For course that offer certification, the assessment includes: • assignments; • projects; • demonstrations of skills; • test based assessment.
Diplomas/certificates provided	The certification depends on the learner needs and interests and include • Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) component (minor) award at EQF levels 1-5 (National Framework of Qualifications - NFQ) Levels 1- 6; • A full QQI award at EQF levels 1-5 (NFQ Levels 1 - 6)
Examples of qualifications	Information not available

Progression opportunities for learners after graduation	• labour market; • higher education (VET); • higher education (academic); • other further education and training (VET).
Destination of graduates	Information not available
Awards through validation of prior learning	Information not available
General education subjects	✓
Key competences	✓
Application of learning outcomes approach	✓
Share of learners in this programme type compared with the total number of VET learners	Approximately 45%, based on the SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Facts and Figures 2022 report.

References

[8] [THEMATIC 3] Source: Eurostat, une_rt_a [Extracted 12.6.2023