

Spotlight on VET Ireland



Structure

The national framework of qualifications (NFQ), launched in 2003, is a system of 10 levels that describes the Irish qualifications system. Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence and reflects what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do following successful completion of a process of learning. Almost all awards made through the State-funded sector, and many in the private sector, have been placed on the NFQ. Most awards made to VET participants are made at NFQ levels 5 or 6, with a smaller share at NFQ 7. The NFQ was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in 2009.

Governance

In Ireland, the main providers of VET are the national Training and Employment Authority (FÁS – a non-commercial semi-State body, part of the public sector) and vocational education committees (VECs – public sector bodies at county level responsible for vocational and continuing education). Other statutory providers include BIM (seafood industry training) and Teagasc (agricultural training), among others. These bodies are funded from the exchequer and some programmes receive assistance from the European Social Fund. Most VET occurs within the State sector, although private providers also play a role.

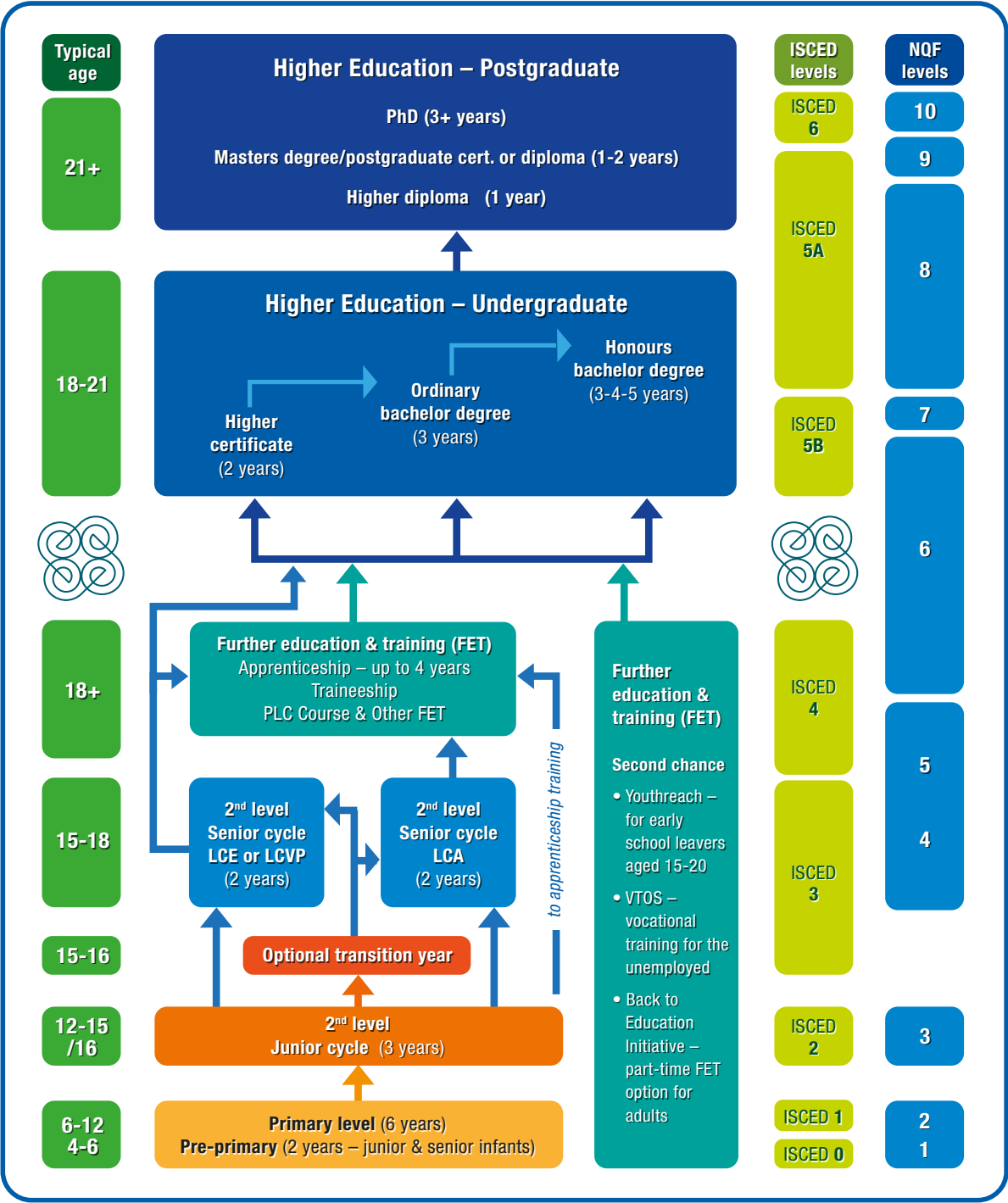
VET is provided at different levels, although the bulk occurs on completion of upper secondary level education. While it is possible to proceed to apprenticeship training following completion of lower secondary education (ISCED 2), most (around 90%) pupils continue to upper secondary education in Ireland.

Post-secondary non-tertiary programmes are primarily, although not exclusively, aimed at those who have completed upper secondary education. Training can take the form of:

- apprenticeships (2% of total first year enrolments): young people acquire craftsperson status by combining off-the-job training (in FÁS training centres and institutes of technology) and on-the-job training (with an employer); training leads to an NFQ 6 craft certificate; partial awards are also made;
- traineeships (4%): delivered by FÁS for a range of occupations (such as financial advisors assistant, pharmacy sales assistant); training leads to an NFQ 5 or 6 award; partial awards are also made;
- relatively short training courses (average 16 weeks) (47%) in a vocational skill (such as computer hardware maintenance, hairdressing) with a work-experience component delivered by FÁS;
- post-leaving certificate courses (PLCs) (47%): delivered in either further education/training (FET) colleges or secondary level schools; training is provided in areas that include technical knowledge, personal/core skills and work experience; this leads to an NFQ 5 or 6 award; partial awards are also made;
- training for other occupations (unknown): delivered by secondary level schools, FET colleges, private providers or sectoral providers (such as for tourism, agriculture or fishing); awards, full or partial, are made, usually at NFQ 5 or 6.

Third level (ISCED 5B with focus on practical, technical or occupational skills) VET is provided mostly by institutes of technology, but also, albeit to a lesser extent, by universities and other higher education providers. Courses (at ISCED 5b) are mainly in the areas of business, science and technology; successful completion leads to a higher certificate (NFQ 6) or an ordinary bachelor degree (NFQ 7).

The Irish education and training system



LCVP: leaving certificate vocational programme; LCE: LC established; LCA: LC applied.
Source: Author based on skills and labour market research unit (FAS).

Second-chance education

VET is also offered in the form of second-chance education; programmes include: VTOS (vocational training for the unemployed), youthreach (for early school-leavers aged 15 to 20) and the back to education initiative (part-time FET for adults). There are a range of awards, full and partial, at NQF levels 1-6.

Distinctive features of VET

There are only 27 trades which are part of the formal apprenticeship system in Ireland. Most initial vocational skill training in Ireland is provided either by FÁS or a VEC and is of relatively short duration. Several vocationally-orientated education courses are provided by the tertiary sector, mainly through institutes of technology.

Recent reforms in Ireland's VET, which were part of overall reforms, have focused on:

- improving transparency and progression opportunities of VET by aligning almost all State-sponsored training, and much in the private sector, with the national framework of qualifications;
- improving relevance of VET training by aligning provision with labour market needs.

Challenges

Early school-leavers: although Ireland has made steady progress in improving its early school-leaver rate (declining from 14.6% in 2002 to 10.6% in 2011) and compares favourably with many other EU countries, it lags behind the top performing countries (such as the Czech Republic). Further, at 12.5%, the proportion of male early school-leavers remains considerably above that of females (8.7%). The challenge in Ireland is to address the gender gap and to continue to reduce the early school-leaving rate, particularly as those with lower education attainment are at greatest risk of unemployment.

Unemployment: in 2011 the unemployment rate in Ireland stood at 14.3% (quarter 4); however, unemployment rates were considerably greater for those with less than upper secondary education (24.7%) (Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data). One of the most significant challenges over the next few years will centre on funding effective labour market activation measures against a background of declining public expenditure.

Lifelong learning (LLL): while the State funds a range of industry initiatives designed to upgrade the skills of those in employment, Ireland lags considerably behind leading countries in LLL participation rates. Increasing LLL participation in the coming years is recognised as a key measure for Ireland to continue to compete internationally as a knowledge economy (Expert group on future skills needs, 2007).

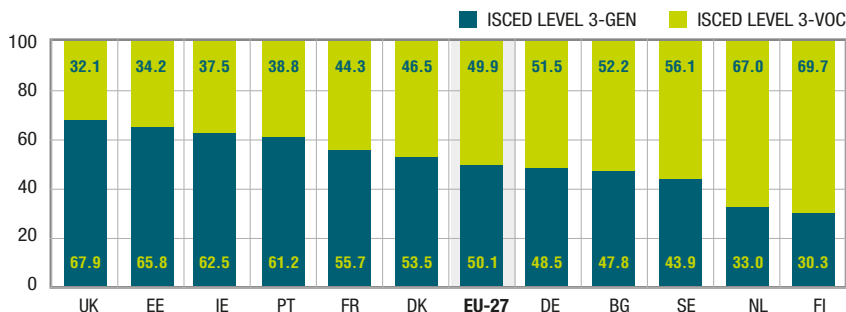
Restructuring: almost all vocational education and training in Ireland is delivered by FÁS or by one of a network of 33 vocational education committees (VECs). Invariably, existence of so many different deliverers of further education and training has created some duplication and confusion. The existing structure is about to undergo a profound change. The 33 VECs are to be reduced to 16 and will form local education and training boards (LETBs). The resources of FÁS, which are involved in delivery of VET courses, are to be transferred to the 16 LETBs and FÁS is to be dissolved. A new education and training authority, SOLAS, is being established to replace FÁS. SOLAS will be responsible for funding further education and training and for monitoring efficacy of VET courses provided by LETBs.

It is hoped the new agency will bring a more integrated approach to provision of VET in Ireland which has been subject to a high degree of fragmentation. SOLAS will operate under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills. It is envisaged that the new structure will ensure provision of improved, relevant, high-quality training for learners.

Education and training in figures

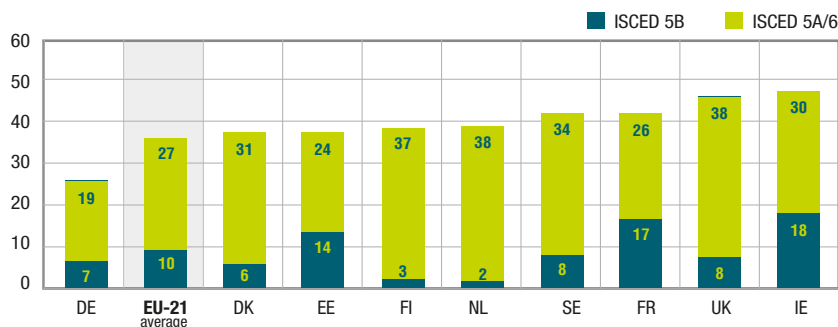
Participation in IVET

Students at ISCED 3 by vocational or general programme orientation (%), 2010



Source: Eurostat, Unesco/OECD/Eurostat data collection, date of extraction, 5.11.2012.

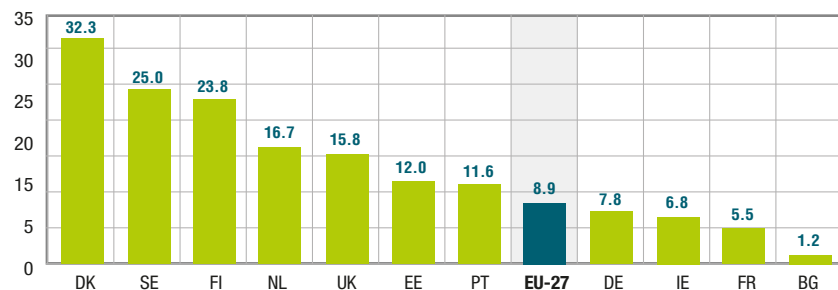
Percentage of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary education by type



Source: OECD, 2012.

Lifelong learning

% of population aged 25-64 participating in education and training in the four weeks prior to the survey, 2011



Source: Eurostat, labour force survey, date of extraction, 5.11.2012.

Youth employment by education level

Employment rate of population aged 15-24 by highest level of education attained in Ireland and selected Member States (2011)

Country	ISCED 0-2	ISCED 3-4	ISCED 5-6
Finland	21.4	60.8	80.6
Germany	46.0	64.9	78.5
Netherlands	54.2	71.7	76.9
Denmark	50.1	69.3	72.0
UK	34.5	53.3	70.0
Ireland	7.7	39.9	63.7
Estonia	13.6	44.1	62.0
Bulgaria	3.8	33.7	58.8
Sweden	18.5	61.2	56.5
Portugal	22.2	30.5	49.9
France	14.1	39.4	48.9
EU-27	21.6	44.4	55.5

ISCED International standard classification of education
ISCED 0-2 Pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education
ISCED 3-4 Upper secondary education and post-secondary education
ISCED 5-6 Higher education
 Countries listed by the percentage of their population educated at least to level 3.

Source: Eurostat, labour force survey, date of extraction 5.11.2012.



Further information

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www.education.ie	Department of Education and Skills
www.erc.ie	Education Research Centre
www.skillsireland.ie	Expert group on future skills needs
www.fetac.ie	Further Education and Training Awards Council
www.hea.ie	Higher Education Authority
www.nqai.ie	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
www.examinations.ie	State Examinations Commission



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