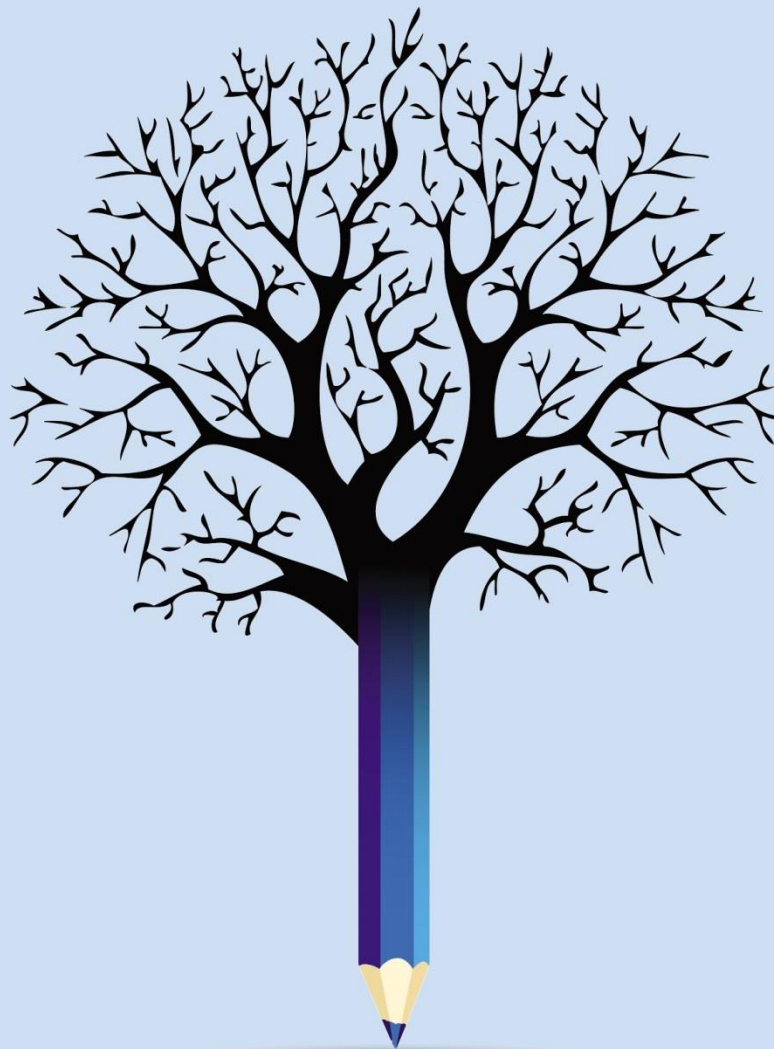EDUCATION POLICY OUTLOOK

IRELAND

June 2020

EDUCATION POLICY OUTLOOK

This **policy profile on education** in Ireland is part of the *Education Policy Outlook* series, which presents comparative analysis of education policies and reforms across OECD countries. Building on the OECD's substantial comparative and sectoral policy knowledge base, the series offers a comparative outlook on education policy. This country policy profile is an update of the first policy profile of Ireland (2013) and provides: analysis of the educational context, strengths, challenges and policies; analysis of international trends; and insight into policies and reforms on selected topics. It is an opportunity to take stock of progress and where the education system stands today from the perspective of the OECD through synthetic, evidence-based and comparable analysis.

In addition to country-specific profiles, the series also includes a recurring publication. The first volume, *Education Policy Outlook 2015: Making Reforms Happen,* was released in 2015. The second volume, *Education Policy Outlook 2018: Putting Student Learning at the Centre* was released in 2018. Its complement, *Education Policy Outlook 2019: Working Together to Help Students Achieve their Potential* was released in autumn 2019. Designed **for policy makers, analysts and practitioners** who seek information and analysis of education policy taking into account the importance of national context, the country policy profiles offer constructive analysis of education policy in a comparative format. Each profile reviews the current context and situation of a country's education system and examines its challenges and policy responses, according to six policy levers that support improvement:

- Students: How to raise outcomes for all in terms of 1) equity and quality and 2) preparing students for the future;
- Institutions: How to raise quality through 3) school improvement and 4) evaluation and assessment;
- System: How the system is organised to deliver education policy in terms of 5) governance and 6) funding.

Some country policy profiles contain Spotlight boxes on selected policy issues. They are meant to draw attention to specific policies that are promising or showing positive results and may be relevant for other countries.

Special thanks to the Government of Ireland and, in particular, the Department of Education and Skills, for its active input during consultations and constructive feedback on this report. We also thank the European Commission for its valuable analytical and financial support for the update of this country policy profile.

Authors: This country policy profile was prepared by Gillian Golden, Christa Rawkins, Diana Toledo Figueroa and Clément Dumont in the Policy Advice and Implementation Division, led by Paulo Santiago. Editorial support was provided by Stephen Flynn and Rachel Linden. This profile builds on the knowledge and expertise of many project teams across the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills, to whom we are grateful. Sylwia Sitka contributed on behalf of the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture.

Sources: Subject to country participation, this country policy profile draws on OECD indicators from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) and the annual publication Education at a Glance, and refers to country and thematic studies such as OECD work on early childhood education and care, teachers, school leadership, evaluation and assessment for improving school outcomes, equity and quality in education, governing complex education systems, school resources, vocational education and training, and tertiary education. This profile also draws on information in the OECD Education Policy Outlook National Survey for Comparative Policy Analysis completed in 2016 by the Government of Ireland, as well as information provided by the Department of Education and Skills between 2018 and 2020 as part of the Education Policy Outlook's activities with countries.

Most of the figures quoted in the different sections refer to Annex B, which presents a table of the main indicators for the sources used throughout the country policy profile. Hyperlinks to the reference publications are included throughout the text for ease of reading, and also in the References and further reading section, which lists both OECD and non-OECD sources.

More information is available from the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills (www.oecd.org/edu) and its web pages on the Education Policy Outlook (www.oecd.org/edu/policyoutlook.htm).

In the context of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, some information is provided about initial responses.

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HIGHLIGHTS

Note: Most of the content in this profile was written before the COVID-19 outbreak. As such, this document offers insight into pre-existing conditions that may influence the system's responsiveness in the context of the crisis and help inform longer-term efforts to strengthen resilience. Spotlight 1 summarises Ireland's initial responses to the crisis. Its structure is based on work by the Education Policy Outlook in 2020 to support countries in these efforts.

Ireland's educational context

Students: Ireland performed above the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science in PISA[1] 2018. Socio-economic status had a similar impact on student outcomes in Ireland as seen on average across OECD countries in PISA 2018, and the performance gap between students of an immigrant background and their native-born peers was significantly narrower than in most other OECD countries. Further evidence from PISA 2018 suggests Irish schools are more socially inclusive than elsewhere in the OECD. In Ireland, both secondary (known as post-primary education)[2] and tertiary attainment are above the OECD average, although vocational education appears to be less widespread than general education.

Institutions: In PISA 2018, Ireland's students perceived their teachers to be supportive but also reported a lower sense of belonging at school and a higher rate of truancy than on average across the OECD. School leaders reported engaging in leadership activities related to teaching and learning more frequently than on average across the OECD, in PISA 2015. Salaries for teachers and school leaders in primary and post-primary education have been higher than the respective OECD averages. Ireland has a comprehensive school evaluation infrastructure for compulsory education combining external inspection and self-evaluation. At system level, policy monitoring and evaluation are employed systematically and inform decision-making. Standardised student assessments and state examinations are administered at regular intervals in primary and post-primary schools, and information is reported to parents, school boards of management and the Department for Education and Skills (DES).

System: Ireland's education system balances strong central oversight with a high level of autonomy for schools and higher education institutions. Previously absent, more recently there has been a growing layer of regional governance approaches including informal school clustering for innovation and formal clustering among higher education institutions, as well as regional mechanisms for Further Education and Training (FET)[3]. Private organisations play a significant role in the provision of education: state-funded schools are owned and managed privately, and early childhood education and care (ECEC) is offered by private providers with government subsidies. Ireland invests a smaller share of national wealth in education than on average across the OECD.

Key pre-existing policy issues

Although there is evidence of equity and inclusiveness in the system, with growing diversity within the school population, school patronage and admissions policies had been high on the policy agenda before the pandemic. Enrolment in FET programmes among both youth and adults was below OECD averages and the sector suffered from a lack of parity of esteem. Addressing this is important for improving skills matching and increasing the active labour participation of vulnerable groups. It has also been identified that a formal system of teacher and school leader professional development and appraisal, tied to career progression and professional development, could help improve both learner outcomes and satisfaction among the educational workforce. Although teaching appears to have high social status, Ireland has faced teacher shortages. At the system level, as regional initiatives develop, ensuring cohesion and clearly assigned responsibilities will be crucial, particularly within higher education. Finally, changing demographics have been putting increasing pressure on post-primary and tertiary institutions, requiring careful financial planning. In particular, there have been calls to agree on a new funding model for higher education.

Strengthening adaptability and resilience in the context of COVID-19 (see Spotlight 1)

Initial evidence suggests that pre-existing resources in the education system facilitated areas of Ireland's early response to the pandemic. A well-established evaluation culture seems to have enabled the DES to mobilise a rapid initial survey of school-level actions and help ascertain needs. Furthermore, the promotion of student wellbeing over recent years may have helped schools direct needed attention to this area during the crisis. Through the Digital Strategy for Schools (2015-20) (see "School Improvement"), online learning support tools were already in place, yet survey responses and PISA 2018 evidence suggest more support will be needed, especially for teachers' digital skills. As Ireland works to balance short-term responsiveness with longer-term strategic aims, priorities evolve. As elsewhere, disruption to student assessment has been considerable, prompting more reliance on teacher assessment of student learning. This forces an acceleration of ongoing efforts to balance continuous and summative assessment. Ireland should continue to engage stakeholders on the topic, drawing out lessons from this experience to inform the future implementation of assessment reforms.

Spotlight 1. The Irish education system's initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. Education systems across the world have felt the force of the crisis as confinement measures triggered widespread closures of education institutions. On 12 March, Ireland announced the closure of all schools, preschools, and further and higher education settings, with immediate effect. In light of the work of the *Education Policy Outlook* in 2020 in the context of this pandemic, this spotlight offers an insight into system readiness and immediate responses across five key areas.

1. **Ensuring continued access to learning and smooth educational pathways:** To support digital learning, schools and families received free access to Scoilnet (1998), the DES' online portal with over 20 000 educational resources. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) created a resource bank including online courses, reliable websites and tools to support online teaching. The Junior Cycle for Teachers expanded its bank of online webinars and resources for teachers. In FET, the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) provided resources, tools and support for educators and some online learning. Leaving Certificate written examinations were postponed to late summer and Junior Cycle examinations were cancelled and replaced with school-based assessment at the end of the school year and a State certificate of completion. Practical and oral examinations scheduled during closures were cancelled and candidates awarded full marks; others were postponed. At tertiary level, teaching continued online and alternative examination arrangements were introduced - including online assessment, remote assessment or postponement - in line with guidance from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2020). At both levels, these decisions were taken following ongoing discussions with relevant stakeholders.

2. **Strengthening the internal world of the student:** In line with Ireland's previous efforts to value student wellbeing, the DES promoted tailored support offered to students, families and teachers by the National Educational Psychological Service. This included guidance and advice for staying well during confinement, tools to help establish daily routines and techniques for relaxation. Student counselling services in the tertiary sector remained available on a remote basis, as did adult guidance counselling.

3. **Providing targeted support and interventions for vulnerable children and families:** Schools continued to provide free school meals (breakfast and lunch) to children already receiving them, including during the Easter school holidays. To respect confinement measures, many delivered weekly food packages to families. Through the Temporary Assignment programme (2020), special educational needs staff no longer required for direct instruction were redistributed to a priority area suited to their skills, principally, community services for disabled and other vulnerable children. Ireland committed EUR 10 million to enable schools to purchase digital equipment for disadvantaged students, initially targeting examination candidates. Higher education institutions had full flexibility to allocate their Student Assistance Fund as necessary, to support specific students. Also, a multi-stakeholder working group on Mitigating Educational Disadvantage in higher education was established to inform responses in three key areas: financial support to students, ensuring access to technology and maintaining counselling.

4. **Harnessing wider support and engagement at local and central level:** A national, multi-sectoral stakeholder forum of representatives from over 120 organisations has been meeting regularly to discuss government responses to the pandemic, offer sector-level insights and assist the communication of key messages. Local authorities coordinated Community Support Network Programmes to bring together local volunteer efforts; county-level Community Champions would oversee this work. They mainly act in the health and social care sectors, but the DES directed schools to access these groups for support where relevant.

5. **Collecting, disseminating and improving the use of information about students:** Ireland coordinated an initial data collection of school-level responses and needs. The DES Inspectorate conducted a telephone survey of school principals, while the ETBs surveyed the post-primary sector and Maynooth University surveyed primary schools. Informed by these responses, the DES published official Guidance on the Continuity of Schooling (2020) for educators. The DES also proceeded to collate information from tertiary institutions. The ETBs were surveyed regarding contingency plans for the FET sector.

Selected indicators of system readiness (OECD)	Ireland	Average	Min	Max
Students' readiness (according to students' self-reports in PISA 2018)				
1 Index of self-efficacy	-0.04	0.01	-0.61	0.36
2 Percentage of students in disadvantaged schools with access to a computer at home that they can use for school work	80.1%	81.5%	23.5%	96.5%
Schools' readiness (according to principals' reports in PISA 2018)				
3 Percentage of students in schools with an effective online learning support platform available	45.4%	54.1%	23.9%	90.9%
4 Percentage of students in schools whose teachers have the technical and pedagogical skills to teach with digital devices	49.3%	64.6%	27.3%	84.1%

Note: The information presented in this spotlight covers key measures announced or introduced **before 03 May 2020**.

Key trends in performance and attainment

In PISA 2018, Ireland's mean performance was above the OECD average in reading, with 518 points, compared to the average of 487 points. On average, across PISA cycles, Ireland's performance has remained unchanged in reading. Literacy skills among adults (16-65 year-olds) in Ireland were similar to the OECD average in the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) 2012, at 267 points compared to 268 points.

Figure 1. Trends and comparative performance of 15-year-olds in reading, PISA

Note: "Min"/"Max" refer to OECD countries with the lowest/highest values.
Source: OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en.

At 92%, attainment of at least upper secondary education among 25-34 year-olds in Ireland in 2018 was above the OECD average of 85%. The same is true for tertiary attainment (56%, compared to the average of 44%), where Irish men outperformed their OECD counterparts by 14 percentage points, although they continued to have lower attainment than Irish women (52%, compared to 60%). However, this gender gap has been narrowing: the share of 25-34 year-old men with a tertiary qualification in 2018 was 14 percentage points larger than in 2008, whereas the share of female tertiary graduates grew by 8 percentage points over the same period.

Figure 2. Evolution of secondary and tertiary attainment among 25-34 year-olds, 2000-18
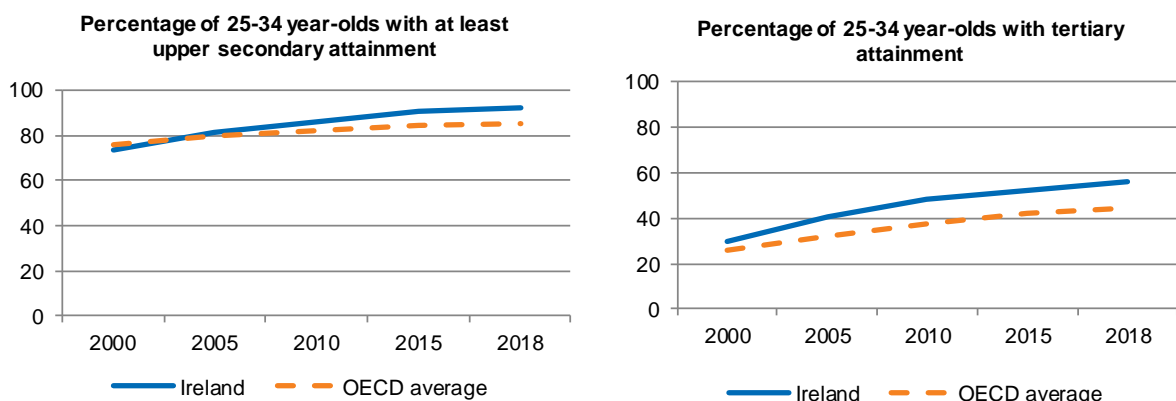
Source: OECD (2019), *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en.

Spotlight 2. Key policies, challenges and previous OECD recommendations for Ireland

Main policies from Ireland included in this country policy profile	Key challenges identified and recommendations previously provided by the OECD to Ireland
STUDENTS	
• The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) (2010) • Access and Inclusion Model (2016) • First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (2018) • Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) (2005); DEIS Plan 2017 • National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy (2011- 2020) • Education (Admission to Schools) Act (2018) • STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-26 • Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) (2013) • Education and Training Boards Bill (2012) • Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-19) • Apprenticeship Council (2014) • National Plan for Equity of Access 2015-19 • Human Capital Initiative 2020-24 (2019) • Action Plan for Jobs 2012 • Springboard (2011), ICT Conversion (2012), Springboard+ (2014), Momentum (2012)	**Key challenges identified [2013, 2015, 2018]:** In 2013, the OECD identified mismatches between the supply and demand of skills, as well as low educational attainment among the adult population and a need to make vocational education more attractive. A growing concentration of children with immigrant backgrounds in certain schools was highlighted in 2015 and Ireland identified ongoing academic challenges for socio-economically disadvantaged students. Educational attainment, particularly at tertiary level, was found to be dependent on social background and there is a need to reduce inequalities in access to higher education. Policies addressing human capital development were identified as requiring upgrading, with too little adult education and training and high unemployment rates among the low-skilled and the young. In 2018, stimulating labour market participation for women and the long-term unemployed was highlighted as a focus. **Summary of previous related OECD recommendations:** To address equity issues, the OECD recommended providing disadvantaged schools with more support, such as attracting better teachers, additional tutoring and avoiding excessive concentration of immigrants in disadvantaged schools. Improving the alignment of vocational and further education and training programmes with participants' backgrounds and labour market needs and providing more information on post-school educational options were also recommended. The OECD called for an expansion of apprenticeships and more emphasis on getting young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) back into education or employment. Finally, to upskill the long-term unemployed, the OECD proposed improving both the quantity and quality of training either via public employment services or private providers.
INSTITUTIONS	
• Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 and the Digital Learning Framework (2017) • An integrated professional induction framework (Droichead, 2016) • Centre for School Leadership (2015) • Teacher Supply Action Plan (2018) • Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (2015)	**Key challenges identified [2013, 2015, 2017]:** In 2013, the OECD identified a need for Ireland to better monitor the performance of the system as a whole through improved performance indicators and historical data in order to determine performance trends. The challenge of ensuring that resources are channelled towards the most effective programmes and schemes for getting people back into employment was also highlighted by the OECD.

- National Professional Development Framework for higher education (2016)

- School Self-Evaluation Guidelines - Primary and Post-Primary schools (2012, 2016)

- Wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice 2018-2023 (2018; updated 2019)

- Fitness-to-teach procedure (2017)

- Early Years Services Regulations (2016) and education inspection in settings delivering the ECCE programme (2016)

- Wellbeing and Lifeskills Survey (2018)

Summary of previous related OECD recommendations: In 2013, the OECD recommended that Ireland establish a systematic and rigorous evaluation of all policies and schemes, reviewing the need for extensions at regular intervals to inform future policy decisions. This recommendation has since been reiterated, specifically for the further education and training system. In 2015, the OECD recommended that, within the education sector, a performance narrative could accompany indicators, linking outputs with the Government's desired outcomes. The OECD also recommended that post-programme evaluation become more rigorous, leading to the termination of ineffective programmes.

SYSTEM

- Strategy statement 2019-2021 (Cumasú – Empowering through Learning) and annual Action Plans for Education

- School Excellence Fund (2017)

- National Skills Strategy 2025 and Regional Skills Fora (2017)

- Regional clusters of higher education institutions (2013)

- Higher Education System Performance Framework (2017-2021)

- Technological Universities Act (2018)

- Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)

- School Building Programme 2016-2021

- System Performance Framework for Higher Education (2018-2020)

- Future Funding for Higher Education (2014)

- Innovation 2020 (2015) and the Innovation and Transformation Fund (2018)

Key challenges identified [2013, 2015, 2017, 2018]: Ensuring that those working at school and local level respond to national education objectives is a challenge identified by Ireland. The need to improve the quality of individual tertiary institutions was highlighted in 2013. Also, the challenge of ensuring that skills gained at tertiary level can be efficiently transferred to the labour market was identified. Finally, the internationalisation of the higher education sector and supporting tertiary level institutions to become drivers of economic, social and community development are other key challenges. Across education, Ireland needs to ensure that resources are maximised so that budget cuts do not affect quality and equity.

Summary of previous related OECD recommendations: In 2013, the OECD recommended making a significant portion of funding for higher education institutions performance-related. The OECD also proposed introducing targeted state investment in internationalisation initiatives. Finally, the OECD recently recommended enhancing the collaboration between policy structures and state agencies involved in supporting entrepreneurship and innovation in higher education institutions.

Note: The information on key challenges and recommendations contained in this spotlight draws from a desk-based compilation from previous OECD publications (subject to country participation). The spotlight is intended for exploratory purposes to promote policy dialogue and should not be considered an evaluation of the country's progress on these recommendations. Causality should not be inferred either: while some actions taken by a country could correspond to previous OECD recommendations, the OECD acknowledges the value of internal and other external dynamics to promote change in education systems.

Main sources: 2013, 2015, 2018: *The Economic Survey of Ireland*; 2017: *Supporting Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Higher Education in Ireland.*

Spotlight 3. The European Union perspective:

Ireland's education and training system and the Europe 2020 Strategy

In the European Union's growth and employment strategy, _Europe 2020_, education and training is recognised as a key policy area in contributing to Europe's economic growth and social inclusion. The European Union set a twofold target in education by 2020: reducing the rates of early school leaving below 10%, and reaching at least 40% of 30-34 year-olds completing tertiary or equivalent education. Countries set their own related national targets. The Europe 2020 goals are monitored through the European Union's yearly assessment of the main economic and growth issues.

The _European Semester Country Report 2020_ identified a number of key issues for Ireland in education and training:

- Participation in early childhood education and care* (ECEC) from age four reached 100% in 2017, and the participation of children below three years of age in formal ECEC (34.4% in 2018) was at around the EU average. The costs of formal ECEC in Ireland affect low-income families to a greater extent. Several measures have been launched to address the affordability, accessibility and quality of ECEC provision. The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme provides two years of preschool without charge to all children within the eligible age range. The National Childcare Scheme is a new national scheme of financial support encompassing both universal and targeted subsidies. In November 2018, Ireland launched 'First 5' (2019-2028), its first ever strategy for early childhood, which is aimed at improving access to affordable and high-quality ECEC. This ten-year strategy aims to deliver a broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring, a new model of parenting support, new developments in child health and a package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty.

- Students' performance in basic skills as measured by PISA 2018 was above the EU average in mathematics, reading and science. For all three domains, the shares of low achievers remained among the lowest in the EU: reading (12%), maths (16%) and science (17%). The education system became more equitable as Ireland had one of the lowest shares of low performers among students from disadvantaged backgrounds (21% compared to 35% in the EU) and among students with a migrant background (14% compared to 35% in the EU). To address teacher shortages, the Teacher Supply Action Plan (see "School Improvement") has been adopted and a workforce planning model is to be developed in 2020.

- The rate of early leavers from education and training, standing at 5.1% (2019), was one of the lowest in the EU. The early leaving rate gap between people with and without disabilities narrowed down from 22.5 percentage points in 2016 to 17.9 in 2017. However, certain groups, including Irish Travellers, still have faced high shares of early leavers. This calls for further efforts to close existing educational gaps.

- The tertiary education attainment rate for 30-34 year-olds was 55.4%, above the EU average of 41.6% in 2019. Demand for higher education continues to increase, well above the increase in spending. Between 2007-2009 and 2014-2016, the number of higher education students increased by 15.5%, while real public expenditure on higher education decreased by 12.5%. Potential funding constraints may act as a barrier for higher quality education and addressing the future skills needs of the population. Plans to reform the funding model for higher education have been under discussion since 2018.

- The employment rate of recent vocational education and training graduates at 75.9% in 2019 was below the EU average of 80.4%. The efforts to extend the apprenticeship system continue, with additional programmes and more apprentices. In 2018, 10.3% of upper secondary graduates enrolled in vocational education and training programmes, all of them combining training with work experience. The action plan to expand apprenticeship and traineeship aims to increase apprenticeship places (from 12 000 to 31 000) and programmes (from 27 to over 70) by 2020.

- Adult participation in learning, at 12.6%, was above the EU average of 11.3% in 2019. In 2019, 53% of the adult population had an overall basic or above-basic level of digital skills, still below the EU average (58%). The Government has approved the Third ICT Skills Action Plan ("Technology Skills 2022") with the aim of increasing by 65% its number of Information and Communication Technology graduates by 2022. The Future Jobs framework foresees closing the gap with the EU in terms of digital skills with a dedicated target deadline of 2025. Progress in the share of people with basic and above-basic digital skills requires close monitoring.

In May 2020, the Council of the European Union proposed the following country-specific recommendation to Ireland, with regard to education and training: "support employment through developing skills" and "address the risk of digital divide, including in the education sector". Subject to its endorsement, this recommendation will be formally adopted in July 2020.

* ECEC participation includes participation in both primary schools and ECEC centres.

EQUITY AND QUALITY: A HIGH-PERFORMING SYSTEM WITH SEVERAL PRACTICES IN PLACE THAT HAVE FAVOURED EQUITY

Ireland has combined strong performance in reading, mathematics and science with average **PISA equity indicators**. In PISA 2018, only 11.8% of students scored below the baseline level in reading (PISA Level 2), which was close to half the OECD average share of 22.6%. Furthermore, some 12.1% of students were classed as high performers in reading (scoring at PISA Level 5 or above), which was above the OECD average share of 8.8%. In PISA 2018, socio-economic status in Ireland explained a similar level of the variance in reading performance as on average across the OECD (12%) (see Figure 1). Ireland was one of only six OECD countries where more than 5% of disadvantaged students reached Level 5 or above in reading. Despite experiencing notable growth in the number of students with an immigrant background since 2009, Ireland's average score deficit in reading performance between students with an immigrant background and their non-immigrant peers, after accounting for socio-economic status, was comparatively small, at just 9 points, compared to an OECD average deficit of 24. Furthermore, between PISA 2009 and PISA 2018, improvements in the reading performance of students with an immigrant background in Ireland outpaced improvements in the performance of their non-immigrant peers, which was a rare trend among OECD countries.

In **early childhood education and care** (ECEC), Ireland offers integrated programmes that include education and care services. In 2017, nearly all children in Ireland enrolled at this level attended private institutions, compared to the OECD average of around one-third, although private providers receive government subsidies. There has also been a considerable reliance on unregulated childminders. A small number of state-provided ECEC settings exist for children in disadvantaged areas (Early Start programme). Previously an underdeveloped sector in Ireland, ECEC enrolments for 3-5 year-olds have grown from 74.5% in 2015 to 98.4% in 2017, which was above the average of 86.7%. Enrolment of 3-year-olds in ECEC was also above the OECD average in 2017, at 92.1%, compared to 79.3%. However, coverage has remained low among the younger cohort: in 2017, only 7.8% of Irish children under the age of 3 attended formal ECEC in programmes at International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 0, compared to 26.3% on average across the OECD[4]. In 2014, children of this age with tertiary-educated mothers were twice as likely to attend ECEC as their peers with less well-educated parents. Further access issues exist for immigrant and Traveller children.

According to OECD evidence, some **system-level policies** can favour equity, such as a longer period of compulsory education, delayed tracking, limited ability grouping and low grade repetition. Compulsory education in Ireland begins at age 6 and ends at age 16. Students are first tracked into different educational pathways at 15 years old, one year before the most common age among OECD countries. However, evidence from PISA 2015 suggests that ability grouping was standard practice in certain subject areas: 94% of 15-year-olds were grouped by ability for some subjects, compared to an OECD average of 38%. Grade repetition rates have been low and in decline: in 2015, 7.2% of 15-year-olds reported repeating a grade, compared to the OECD average of 11.3%, a decline of 4.6 percentage points from 2009. School choice levels are high in Ireland: Irish students are among the few within OECD countries not to be assigned to school according to geographical location and families are responsible for accessing school-choice related information. This system appears to have been conducive to social and academic inclusion: in PISA 2018, variance in reading performance was modest between schools (11%, compared to an average of 29%) and, at 83%, Ireland's index of social inclusion was among the highest in the OECD (the average was 76%). Nevertheless, as the school population becomes more diverse and school management, particularly at the primary level, remains dominated by the Catholic Church, school patronage and admission policies have been high on the policy agenda (see "Recent policies and practices").

Ireland faces equity concerns regarding the Traveller community. A research paper from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (2017) found that Irish **Travellers** continued to be severely educationally disadvantaged: just 8% had completed upper secondary education and 1% had attained a tertiary (or third-level, as known in Ireland) qualification, compared to 92% and 54% of the general population in 2011. A further concern for Ireland exists regarding science, where general performance has declined since 2006 at one of the fastest rates among OECD countries. Although Ireland's share of low achievers in science remains smaller than the OECD average share, that of high achievers is also smaller than average and has reduced markedly since 2006.

Key strengths and challenges in equity and quality (pre-crisis analysis)	
Key strengths	**Key challenges**
▪ Ireland performed above average across reading, mathematics and science in PISA 2018. ▪ Students with an immigrant background performed similarly to their non-immigrant peers in Ireland. ▪ Schools showed high social inclusion and low between-school performance gaps in PISA 2018.	▪ Enrolment levels in ECEC services among children under three have been low in international comparison. ▪ Ireland's performance in science is in decline, particularly among high performers.

Recent policies and practices

The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (2010, expanded 2016, 2018), has been increasing participation in formal early learning. For two years, children can avail of 15 hours' preschool a week, 38 weeks a year, without charge, from the age of 56 months until entering primary school. The Access and Inclusion Model (2016) helps those with disabilities participate. Enrolments for 3-year-olds increased from 38% in 2015 to 92% in 2017. The OECD (2020) highlighted a need to also focus on quality by improving regulations and staff training; policy efforts are ongoing (see "Evaluation and Assessment" and "Funding"). Since 2018, First 5, a 10-year, whole-of-Government strategy, guides ECEC policy, to broaden parents' options for balancing care and work.
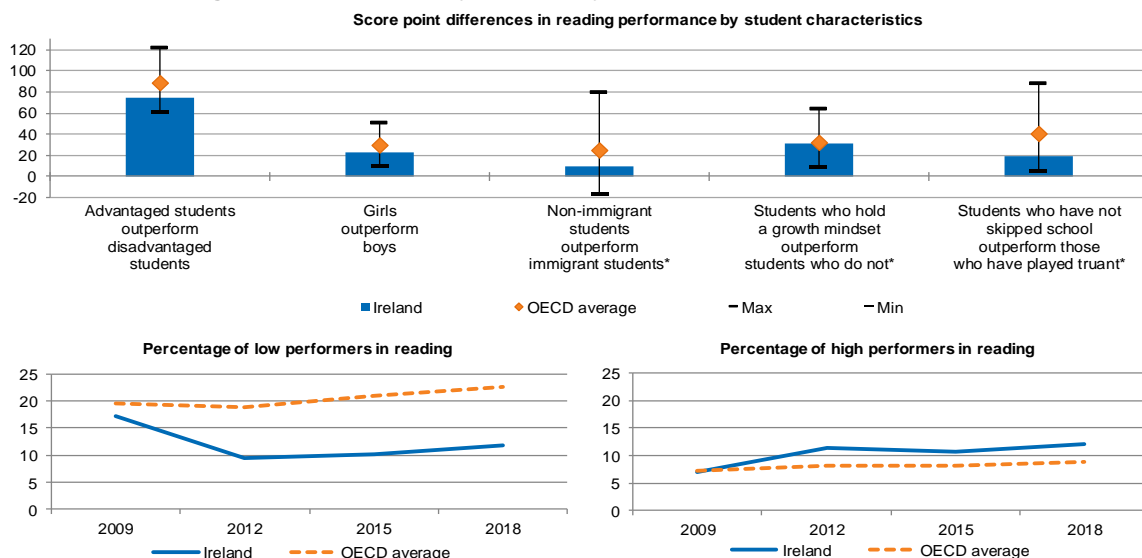
The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan 2017 has been the main policy initiative tackling educational disadvantage. It builds on the DEIS Plan for Educational Inclusion (2005), which provided a range of targeted support to the most disadvantaged schools. From 2017, 79 schools were added and 30 received enhanced support, including programmes targeting transition, wellbeing and teachers' professional development. New targets were also introduced for student retention and progression, as well as initiatives to improve adult and family literacy. The Educational Research Centre (2017; 2018) found that achievement and attainment gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools have generally narrowed at both primary and post-primary levels, but remain significant. In the same way, student retention, literacy and, to a lesser extent, numeracy, have improved.

The National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy (2011-2020) set out to raise standards in ECEC and compulsory education settings through mobilising six arms of action: teachers, school leaders, parents and communities, curriculum, assessment, and support for those with additional needs. An interim review (2017) found considerable progress, especially in literacy. As a result, strategic priorities were revised, reinforcing the numeracy focus and establishing discreet targets for DEIS schools.

To strengthen equity in school choice, new legislation (2018) removed identity-based entry criteria (including religion) for over-subscribed schools (except minority-faith schools) and admission fees. Expanding the Educate Together network and introducing Community National Schools (2008) has increased multi-denominational provision. However, efforts to remove primary schools from Catholic patronage have proved challenging.

The STEM Education Policy Statement, 2017-26 (2017) established a vision for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) policy. It was developed following stakeholder consultation, research and the publication of STEM Education in the Irish School System. The three implementation phases cover enhancing ongoing activity (2017-19), including professional development, quality assurance and curricular reform; embedding activity through capacity building and coherence (2020-22); and realising the vision (2023-26).

Figure 3. Selected equity and quality indicators for Ireland, PISA 2018

Score point differences in reading performance by student characteristics

Percentage of low performers in reading

Percentage of high performers in reading

Note: "Min"/"Max" refer to OECD countries with the lowest/highest values; [*] Score point difference after accounting for students' socio-economic status and language spoken at home.

Sources: OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en; OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en; OECD (2020), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/acd78851-en.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE: ONGOING REPOSITIONING FOR FUTURE LABOUR MARKET RELEVANCE

A country's capacity to effectively develop **skills and labour market perspectives** can play an important role in the educational decisions of the population. Irish adults have relatively high levels of qualification, with a smaller-than-average share of 25-64 year-olds with lower secondary education as the highest level of attainment (11.7% in 2018, compared to the OECD average of 14.4%). Ireland has also had high returns to education: in 2017, the wage premium for tertiary education credentials relative to upper secondary was 74%, compared to an OECD average of 57%. Having increased considerably in the aftermath of the financial crisis, by 2018, unemployment rates for 25-34 year-olds had fallen back in line with the OECD averages for each level of educational attainment. Employment among the younger cohort had similarly recovered: the share of 15-29 year-olds not in education, employment or training almost halved from 21.9% in 2011 to 11.7% in 2018. Despite above-average qualification levels and school outcomes, 16-65 year-olds' literacy and numeracy levels in the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) 2012 were slightly below OECD averages (267 compared to 268 points for literacy; 256 compared to 263 points, for numeracy).

In 2018, the share of 25-34 year-olds with at least **upper secondary** attainment was 92%, compared to the OECD average of 85%. The majority of students (about 70%) complete an optional transition year between lower and upper secondary education, in order to sample different subjects and undertake work experience to inform future education and career choices. At upper secondary level, students have three study options: the Leaving Certificate, with a focus on general subjects; the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), which includes vocationally-oriented subjects; and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), which prepares students for direct labour market entry or Post Leaving Certificate courses (see Annex A). These are currently under review.

Vocational education and training (VET) can ease entry into the labour market, yet across the OECD many VET programmes make insufficient use of workplace training. In Ireland, the share of 25-34 year-olds with vocational upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment was below the OECD average in 2017, at 15%, compared to 24%. According to ESRI (2017), the majority of students at upper secondary level choose the Leaving Certificate (Established), while just over one-quarter choose the LCVP and 5% choose the LCA. Furthermore, the LCA, which does not provide direct access to tertiary education, disproportionately attracts students from disadvantaged backgrounds and lower ability students. As well as the LCVP, VET opportunities at upper secondary level include apprenticeships and alternative or second-chance education. Having previously been limited to traditional sectors, particularly construction, and heavily male-dominated, apprenticeship schemes are expanding into new sectors such as hospitality, financial services and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (see "Recent policies and practices"). At post-secondary level, FET is delivered through various short-duration programmes, including Post Leaving Certificate courses, offering labour market qualifications and, in many cases, access to higher education.

Higher education is predominantly carried out through Universities, and Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology, which award qualifications up to doctoral level. Specialist institutions exist for teacher training, art and design, and medicine. In general, tertiary places are awarded according to Leaving Certificate results through the Central Applications Office and competition is high. Nevertheless, there are alternative entry routes for underrepresented groups - including those from the LCA - and for those progressing from FET. For example, the Higher Education Links Scheme (1998) connects some FET courses to the first year of selected tertiary courses, and universities offer places from a reserved quota for FET qualification holders. In 2018, a larger share of young adults in Ireland held a tertiary qualification than on average across the OECD (see Figure 2) and, in 2017, tertiary completion rates were among the highest in the OECD, with 63% of bachelor's candidates completing their degree within the theoretical duration, compared to 39% on average. However, the OECD (2020) recently reported growing skills shortages in Ireland. In 2016, 29.5% of total jobs were being performed by underqualified workers, the highest in the OECD; the rate of over-qualification was below average. To overcome this, recent efforts include increased investment (see "Recent policies and practices") and stronger collaboration between the worlds of work and education (see "Governance"). Ireland has also had relatively low labour market utilisation with high inactivity among women and the low-skilled: in 2018, 41% of 25-34 year-olds without upper secondary credentials were inactive, compared to 30% across the OECD.

Key strengths and challenges in preparing students for the future (pre-crisis analysis)	
Key strengths	**Key challenges**
▪ By 2018, there had been a significant reduction in NEET rates to levels below the OECD average. ▪ In recent years, Ireland has combined high tertiary attainment rates with high returns to education.	▪ Improving the relevance and attractiveness of VET to attract a wider variety of students. ▪ Upskilling and reskilling opportunities which match skills with demand need strengthening.

Recent policies and practices

Ireland undertook a reorganisation of its further education sector in 2013. A new central Further Education and Training Authority (*An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna* (SOLAS)) was established, bringing strategic direction to the sector. The 33 Vocational Education Committees were replaced by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to better integrate skills training and education, increase system responsiveness, and improve the quality of provision. Programmes implemented by SOLAS and the ETBs develop skills for both the employed and unemployed, facilitate transition to the workplace and allocate resources to vocational schools and community colleges. In 2018, more than 339 000 people benefitted from over 25 000 available FET courses.

The Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019, the first overarching vision for the sector, aims to provide focus for investment priorities and better integrate system components. An interim progress review (2018) identified as key achievements the development of strategic dialogue processes between SOLAS and the ETBs, improved data management systems and the introduction of a National FET Learner Forum bringing learners and policymakers together. Areas for further development included clarifying vision and responsibilities and shifting the focus from training for the unemployed to reskilling and lifelong learning.

Developing new apprenticeship and traineeship models was a key component of the FET strategy. Apprentices can now attain qualifications equivalent to a master's degree. The Apprenticeship Council (2014), supported by SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority, is tasked with expanding apprenticeships into new economic sectors; the number of schemes rose from 27 in 2016 to 54 in 2019. The national Traineeship programme is a short-term training offer developed and delivered by the ETBs, in collaboration with employers, with at least 30% on-the-job training for in-demand skills. As traineeships expanded nationally, eligibility requirements were extended to include a broader group of potential participants. Trainees may include school leavers, older learners, those in employment, and the unemployed. A new model, the Career Traineeship, was piloted in 2017, offering work-based learning initiatives to support career progression in high-demand sectors and occupations. An independent review of the pilot in 2018 reported a 70% completion rate, with 98% of those completing the training moving into employment. The report recommended extending the scheme nationally.

The National Plan for Equity of Access (2015-19) aimed to increase access to higher education for marginalised students through more coherent pathways, improved monitoring and partnerships. A progress review (2018) found high impact for socio-economically disadvantaged students and those with disabilities, but persistent low impact among students from low-skilled groups and Travellers. In response, Ireland extended the Plan to 2021 and introduced the Action Plan for increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-21.

The Human Capital Initiative (2019) aims to address key challenges for the Irish economy, including demographic change, Brexit and shifting skills requirements. From 2020-24, annual investments of EUR 60 million have been planned through the National Training Fund to increase tertiary provision in high-demand skills, provide graduates with industry-relevant skills for emerging technologies, embed transversal skills development across the sector and drive agility and innovation in higher education. Distribution of the fund is planned according to priorities identified through the framework developed by the National Skills Council (see "Governance"). The OECD (2020) also highlighted a need to improve flexibility, guidance and financial support in the adult learning system, and particularly for young Irish workers with lower secondary and tertiary education. In light of the intervening global pandemic, the focus on strategic skills development remains critical.

Figure 4. Percentage of 18-24 year-olds in education and not in education, by employment status, 2018
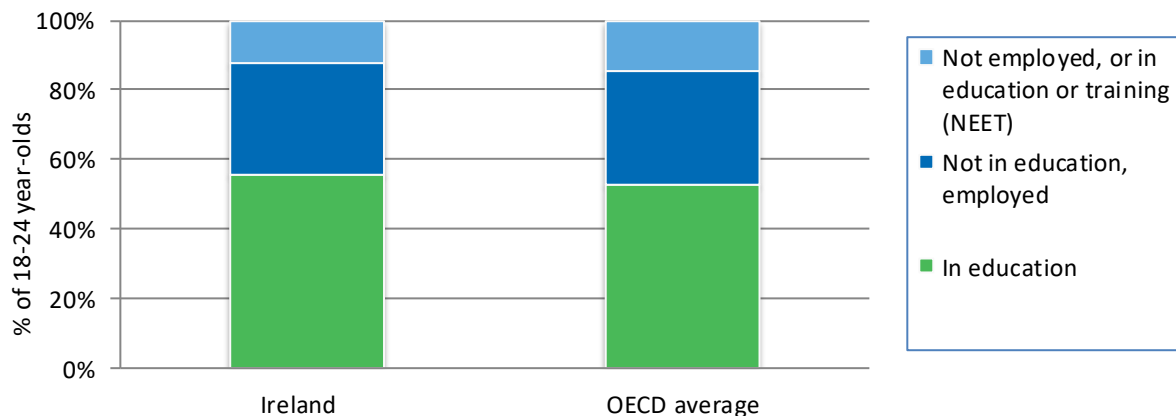
Source: OECD (2019), *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en.

Spotlight 4. Innovations in labour market activation policy following the economic crisis

Following the global economic crisis of the mid-2000s, unemployment increased rapidly in Ireland: the total unemployment rate* more than tripled between 2007 (4.7%) and 2011 (14.7%), peaking in 2016 (15.9%). As in other countries, younger people were severely impacted. To mitigate the crisis, the Irish government introduced a number of policy initiatives focused on reskilling and upskilling those affected and improving labour market outcomes.

In 2012, the government launched an integrated **Action Plan for Jobs** (APJ) which included over 270 actions by 15 government departments and 36 state agencies to increase the number of people in work in Ireland by 100 000 by 2016. In 2014, a preliminary report found that the APJ was on track to deliver beyond its targets: by 2017, more than 200 000 jobs had been created. A **Pathways to Work** plan outlined various reforms that would assist the unemployed to access the labour market. Initiatives included:

- **Springboard** (2011), launched with the main aim of reskilling those that had lost their jobs during the recession. Springboard offered free part-time intensive higher education conversion courses, with a focus on future growth areas, such as ICT, financial services and pharmaceuticals. Springboard graduates are awarded a higher education qualification which sits between higher certificate and postgraduate level. Participants maintain social protection payments while following the course.

- The **ICT Skills Conversion programme** (2012) provided intensive full-time study places to bachelor's level graduates, offering Information and Communication Technology (ICT) programming skills in direct response to the skill shortages in this sector. Ongoing evaluation found that, by 2015, the number of computer graduates in Ireland had doubled. Over 750 places are now offered each year. Since 2016, the ICT Skills Conversion programme is available on a two-year part-time basis, enabling those in employment to upskill or reskill in this area.

- From 2014 onwards, Springboard and the ICT skills conversion programme were combined into **Springboard+** and, since 2017, eligibility expanded beyond the unemployed to include both homemakers wishing to upskill before transitioning back to the workforce and employed people wishing to retrain in high-growth skills or upskill from a bachelor to an honours bachelor degree. Courses at ISCED level 4 (post-secondary non-tertiary) remain free to the unemployed, returners to the workforce or those in employment. Employed people undertaking courses at ISCED level 5 (short cycle tertiary) or above pay 10% of the course costs. Over 200 courses are offered on full-time, part-time, online or distance-learning bases. In total, over 52 000 people have participated in courses under these programmes since their inception. An evaluation of Springboard/Springboard+ 2011-2016 found that 80% of Springboard participants were no longer receiving jobseekers' benefits, and that 90% of participants credited the programme with having had a positive impact on their lives.

- **Momentum** (2012) created 6 500 education and training places for long-term jobseekers on labour market relevant courses for skills exhibiting strong demand or growth potential. The courses are both full- and part-time and are provided by the public and private sectors in areas such as healthcare, ICT, social services and the green economy. An evaluation of Momentum (2014) found that 24% of participants who finished the programme progressed to full-time employment and a further 6% achieved part-time employment. **Momentum 2** (2014), created an additional 6 000 places and added an induction period to the training, as well as greater focus on work placements. A Momentum 2 programme evaluation 2015-2016 found significant improvement: 34% of participants entered full-time employment, and a further 11% obtained part-time employment. However, at only 26% of total participants, women remained underrepresented.

A **Part-time Education Option** (1998) scheme allows unemployed people to access part-time and distance learning courses while maintaining social benefits, and an **Education, Training and Development Option** (2000) enables unemployed people to enrol on short courses of up to 10 weeks' study, full-time, while maintaining benefits.

The OECD (2020) recently reported that although long-term unemployment rates continue to fall in Ireland towards pre-crisis levels, labour market programmes should continue to strive towards further reducing the share of long-term unemployment. In particular, this involves shifting the focus from out-of-work income maintenance to increasing spending on training programmes and incentivising training and returning to work. As the economic impact of COVID-19 is revealed, Ireland may look to these examples of successful labour market activation initiatives to identify lessons for future efforts.

Data taken from Eurostat, which defines total unemployment rate as the percentage of the active population which is unemployed.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: GREATER FOCUS HAS BEEN PLACED ON STRUCTURED APPROACHES TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Developing positive **learning environments** for students which enable school leaders and teachers to succeed is essential. In PISA 2018, a similar share of students in Ireland to the average across the OECD (23%) reported being bullied at least a few times a month. Student truancy was higher in Ireland than elsewhere: 30% of 15-year-olds reported skipping at least one day of school in the two weeks prior to the PISA 2018 test, compared to an average of 21%. This was a 5 percentage-point increase from PISA 2015 and was most commonplace among disadvantaged students and, unusually, girls. Irish students also reported feeling like an outsider or lonely at school more commonly than their OECD peers, with an index of sense of belonging of -0.14 compared to an average of 0.00. Nevertheless, Irish students perceived their teachers to be more supportive and interested in their learning than elsewhere in the OECD, with an index of teacher support of 0.14 compared to the average index of 0.01. Ireland has been working to place the promotion of wellbeing at the core of the ethos of every school (see "Evaluation and Assessment").

Attracting, retaining and developing good-quality **school leaders** is key in improving the quality of learning environments and promoting effective school leadership. Ireland's school leaders do not require specific training to be appointed, but must have relevant teaching qualifications and at least five years of teaching experience. Optional professional development programmes are available throughout the career (see "Recent policies and practices"). Principals are generally selected by a school board of management following open competition. Ireland's PISA 2015 index of instructional leadership, measuring principals' engagement in the leadership of teaching and learning, was slightly higher than on average across the OECD at 0.06, compared to 0.01. In particular, in 2015, Irish school leaders reported engaging in consultative leadership practices more often than their OECD counterparts: in PISA 2015, 76% of leaders reported providing staff with opportunities to participate in school decision-making and 40% reported asking teachers to review management practices at least once a month, compared to OECD averages of 72% and 34%.

A strong supply of highly-qualified and engaged **teachers** is vital to the success of every education system. In Ireland, the Teaching Council reviews and accredits initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and handles teacher registration. The duration of ITE courses was extended in 2011, allowing for more time in schools: undergraduate routes increased from three to four years and postgraduate routes must now last at least two years (previously 1 year for post-primary and 18 months for primary). The Minister determines the number of study places on state-funded primary ITE programmes, but does not currently set quotas for post-primary programmes or private providers. According to principals' reports in PISA 2018, all Irish teachers are fully certified, compared to an OECD average share of 86%. Post-qualification, teachers in Ireland are not required to undertake professional development, but many choose to do so. Also, according to principals' reports in PISA 2018, 78% of teachers in Ireland had attended a professional development programme in the three months prior to the PISA test, which was well above the average of 53%. This may be partly a result of the implementation design of some recent reforms (see Spotlight 5). As part of efforts to raise quality, minimum qualification requirements (2016) are now in place for ECEC staff.

Teaching conditions in Ireland include above-average teaching hours, and close-to-average statutory salaries and class sizes. In 2018, Irish teachers annually taught 905 hours at primary level and 726 hours[5] at lower secondary, compared to OECD averages of 783 and 709 hours. Statutory salaries for teachers in Ireland rise quickly and considerably so that, while starting salaries in primary and secondary education are similar to the OECD average, after 15 years' experience, a lower secondary teacher in 2018, for example, earned 30% more than their average counterpart in the OECD. Teachers receive additional allowances for higher or specialist qualifications and for teaching through the Irish language or in an island school. Student-teacher ratios at primary (16) and secondary level (13) are comparable to the OECD averages of 15 and 13 students per teacher, respectively[6]. Teaching in Ireland has been an over-subscribed profession, but recent research (2018) reports teacher shortages at post-primary level. Also, in PISA 2018, based on principals' reports, Ireland had an index of school staff shortage of 0.08 (the OECD average was 0.01). This may be due to a longer study requirement at personal cost, an increase in casual contracts and easier access to teaching posts abroad, as well as a stronger economy at home, making other industries more attractive.

Key strengths and challenges in school improvement (pre-crisis analysis)	
Key strengths	**Key challenges**
- Irish students have reported finding their teachers to be very supportive. - The most experienced teachers are well-rewarded and the profession appears to be respected.	- Tackling student truancy and strengthening students' sense of belonging in school. - Despite positive conditions, there appear to be teacher shortage issues in certain areas.

Recent policies and practices

The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-20 aims to embed Information and Communication Technology (ICT) more deeply across the school system. Informed by results of the ICT Census in Schools (2013) and consultation with stakeholders, including students, it addresses four themes: teaching, learning and assessment through ICT; continuous professional development (CPD); leadership, research and policy; and ICT infrastructure. The DES developed a Digital Learning Framework (DLF) for schools, which acts as a roadmap to support planning, implementation and evaluation. The DLF was trialled in some primary and post-primary schools in 2017/18. An evaluation (2018) reported positive feedback and evidence of better ICT use in teaching, learning and assessment. Suggestions for improvement fed into a revised DLF, implemented nationally from 2018/19, with an extensive CPD programme. A more longitudinal study of the DLF and its implementation is underway; findings will help inform CPD requirements for schools and future policy. Research into the wider role of the Strategy in supporting the system's responsiveness to the COVID-19 crisis and its future resilience could also be valuable.

The Teaching Council launched Droichead (2013), a new model of school-based, non-evaluative teacher induction. Developed in consultation with the profession, this professional induction framework for newly-qualified teachers (NQTs) combines school support with external professional learning. An evaluation of the pilot (2016) found highly satisfied principals, mentors and NQTs, with some reporting more collaborative school cultures. In terms of challenges encountered, finding time for meetings and observations was commonly identified. Between 2016/17 and 2020/21, *Droichead,* is being implemented for all NQTs.

The Centre for School Leadership (CSL, 2015), a partnership arrangement of DES, the Irish Primary Principals' Network and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, has aimed to develop a coherent continuum of professional development for school leaders, initially focusing on coaching, mentoring and pre-service qualification. A postgraduate diploma in school leadership (2017) had 239 graduates in the first cohort and steadily larger annual intakes subsequently. An evaluation of the CSL (2018) found greater recognition of the profession, its role and importance. Beneficiaries of the services reported enhanced confidence, resilience and reflective thinking. Coaching is available for up to 400 principals and leadership teams a year, and every newly-appointed principal can receive mentoring.

As part of the Teacher Supply Action Plan (2018) the DES introduced a teacher-sharing scheme for high-demand subjects (mathematics, science and languages). For 2019/20, two schools had the right to jointly recruit a teacher, employing them on more hours than if recruited to a single school and thus optimising the workforce.

The National Professional Development Framework (2016) for all higher education teaching staff aims to encourage engagement in professional development, guide CPD choices and support quality assurance. An evaluation of the pilot (2018) commended the transformative potential of engaging with the framework and emphasised the importance of providing staff with space and time to engage in CPD, as well as strong leadership.

Figure 5. The learning environment according to students, PISA 2018
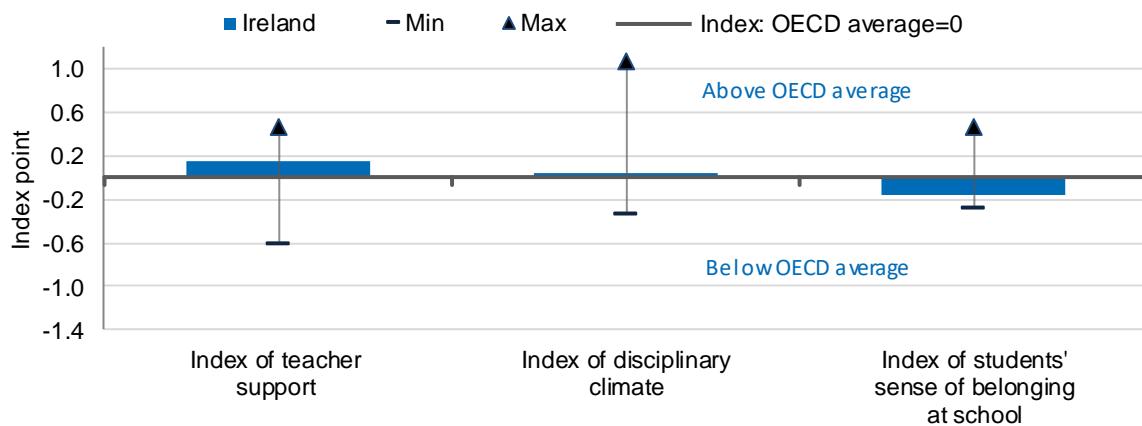
*Note: "*Min"/"Max" refer to OECD countries with the lowest/highest values.
Source: OECD (2020), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/acd78851-en.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT: A GROWING CULTURE OF IMPROVEMENT-FOCUSED EVALUATION

Defining strategies for evaluation and assessment is an important step towards improving student outcomes and developing a better and more equitable school system. **System evaluation** can provide evidence to help decision-makers craft informed policies and increase the transparency of education system outcomes. Ireland conducts system evaluation through Inspectorate evaluations, national and international assessments, and the quarterly monitoring of progress towards the targets contained in the Action Plan for Education framework (see "Governance"). The DES has also increasingly been commissioning research and policy evaluations from independent bodies. Higher education system performance is monitored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), which benchmarks sectors and institutions across a key set of performance indicators, annually publishing progress against the system objectives. SOLAS is responsible for monitoring the provision of FET.

Ireland has a comprehensive **school evaluation** infrastructure. According to PISA 2015, all school leaders in Ireland report that self-evaluation processes take place at their school, and 95% receive external evaluations, compared to OECD averages of 93% and 75%, respectively. The Inspectorate of the DES is responsible for the latter. According to national data, including both evaluation and advisory visits, the Inspectorate visited 39% of primary schools and 76% of post-primary schools in 2018. Inspections are planned at the central and regional level according to various criteria, including the selection of schools on a risk basis. Areas of enquiry include compliance with regulations, quality of instruction, implementation of the curriculum and the satisfaction levels of students, parents and staff. Outcomes are shared publicly, as well as with education authorities. School self-evaluation has received growing attention since 2012, becoming compulsory for all schools (see "Recent policies and practices"). The DES Inspectorate also conducts education-focused inspections in publicly funded ECEC settings. These inspections report on the quality of education in the ECCE programme, while the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA), the statutory regulator, inspects for compliance with education and care regulations in all ECEC settings.

According to OECD evidence, **teacher appraisal** can strengthen professionalism and performance, provided it emphasises developmental evaluation and facilitates progression across a career. Formal teacher appraisal is not used in Irish schools, other than for teachers where there is evidence of significant underperformance. The Droichead programme (see "School Improvement"), will become the sole route for teacher induction from September 2020. In Ireland, teacher observation by peers or school leaders, at 46% and 48% respectively, was less common than on average across the OECD (66% and 81%), according to principals' reports in PISA 2015. However, also in PISA 2015, 48% of students were in schools whose principal reported that standardised tests are used to make judgements about teachers' effectiveness, compared to an average of 37%. School leaders' performance is considered within school evaluations but there is no specific appraisal process for them. There is also no professional body or regulator for ECEC staff, although the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has a list of approved qualifications and TUSLA checks for compliance with minimum qualification requirements.

Strong **student assessment** practices can inform and shape effective initiatives for educational improvement. According to PISA 2015, 58% of students in Ireland attended schools where administrative authorities track achievement data over time, which was below the OECD average of 71%. However, according to principals' reports, 54% of post-primary schools in Ireland used standardised tests to make decisions on student promotion or retention, which was well above the OECD average of 31%. National monitoring assessments of literacy and numeracy skills occur every five years at primary level, and further standardised testing in literacy and numeracy occurs annually for three primary level year groups. Schools must report the results of the latter to parents, boards of management and the DES, and use the information for both summative and formative purposes. At secondary level, student knowledge is assessed through national examinations (Junior and Leaving Certificates) via centrally standardised assessments regulated by the State Exams Commission. The Leaving Certificate has been perceived as particularly high-stakes and has attracted a lot of media attention. However, most recently, Ireland appears to have been moving away from this largely exam-based model of assessment at secondary level through reforms to the Junior Cycle (see "Recent policies and practices"). Furthermore, according to students' reports in PISA 2018, 15-year-olds in Ireland receive improvement-focused feedback from their teachers more commonly than elsewhere in the OECD with an index of perceived feedback of 0.30 compared to an average of 0.01.

Key strengths and challenges in evaluation and assessment (pre-crisis analysis)	
Key strengths	**Key challenges**
▪ Ireland has a growing practice of regular performance monitoring and policy evaluation at system level. ▪ Schools appear well-supported to utilise external and internal school evaluation to improve outcomes.	▪ Carefully balancing high- and low-stakes approaches to student assessment is crucial. ▪ Further developing structures for appraisal that are conducive to motivating teachers and school leaders to develop.

Recent policies and practices

From 2015, the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) (first awarded in 2017) introduced a more holistic approach to student assessment as part of wider reforms to the Junior Cycle curriculum (see Spotlight 5). The JCPA incorporates classroom-based assessment and state examination results, as well as wider reporting on formal and informal learning, including wellbeing (as of 2020). Schools input assessment data across the cycle onto the DES' Post-Primary Online Database, which then generates end-of-cycle certificates.

Since 2009, a national Life Skills survey (revised in 2018 to become the Wellbeing and Lifeskills Survey 2018) takes place at 3-year intervals, for primary and post-primary students, and was extended to Youthreach and Community Training Centres from 2015. The survey yields information on school policies and practices related to student wellbeing, and provides insight as to the coverage of DES initiatives or areas requiring policy attention.

School self-evaluation (SSE) was formally introduced in 2012, with updated School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for primary and post-primary schools published in 2016. Schools must complete an annual collaborative and reflective review, leading to a brief report and school improvement plan; a summary is communicated to the school community. This occurs within a four-year cycle and complements external inspection. The first cycle (2012-16) worked explicitly to support implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. The second (2016-20) focused on a more systematic approach to understanding how to improve learner outcomes. Recognising the extra demands SSE places on school teams, the DES clarified new expectations in 2018, halving the number of curriculum areas covered by the evaluation and introducing an additional day of school closure for evaluation planning time. As part of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-23) schools have been integrating wellbeing promotion as a focus of SSE. To support this, the framework includes statements of effective practice in four key areas (culture and environment, curriculum, policy and planning, and relationships and partnerships) and professional development opportunities have been made available to school staff.

Since 2010, school boards can formally discipline and eventually dismiss teachers. The process may involve a review of a teacher's work by the Inspectorate. In 2016, a new Fitness to Teach inquiry process was launched through which anyone, including a member of the public, employer or a teacher, can make a complaint to the Teaching Council about a registered teacher. It proceeds where good and sufficient reasons are identified and school-based procedures have first been exhausted. According to severity, complaints may progress to fitness-to-teach hearings. A majority of the inquiry panel is made up of teachers, and inquiries may be held in public. Upheld complaints may result in teachers having to attend professional development courses, or temporary or permanent removal from the register of teachers, preventing further employment in a state-funded school.

New regulations for ECEC (2016) required all ECEC providers to formally register with TUSLA and strengthened quality requirements. At the same time, the DES Inspectorate began education-focused inspections for providers offering the state-funded Early Childhood Care and Education Programme. It is intended that these inspections will be expanded to all ECEC services from birth to school-starting age by the end of 2021.

A new Leaving Certificate grading scale was implemented (2017), after consultation with tertiary institutions and following recommendations from the Transitions Reform Steering Group. It aims to facilitate entry into higher education and strengthen skills through increasing enrolments in higher-level subject courses (as opposed to ordinary-level) in the Senior Cycle. An initial review (2019) found that, while students generally adjusted well to change, educators were slower, their role complicated by concurrent Junior Cycle reforms. Enrolments in higher-level courses have increased at Senior Cycle, but results have fallen, without clear impact on tertiary enrolments.

Figure 6. Percentage of students in schools where the principal reported assessments of students in national modal grade for 15-year-olds, PISA 2015
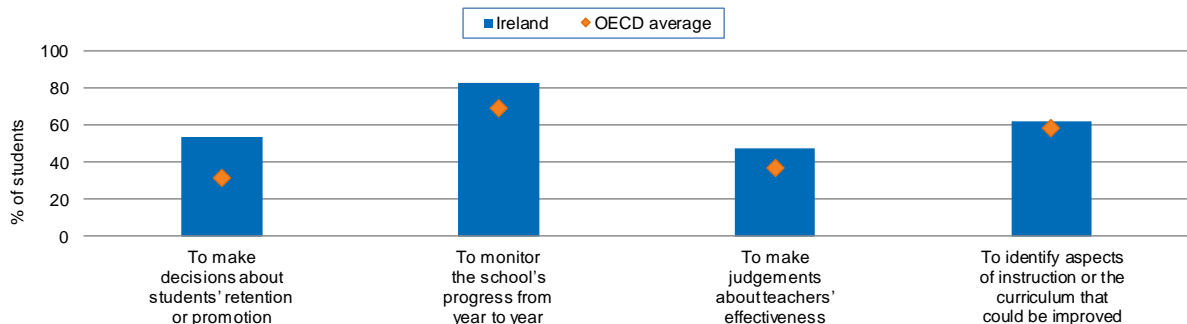
Source: OECD (2016), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume II): Policies and Practices for Successful Schools*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264267510-en.

GOVERNANCE: A SYSTEM WITH HIGH AUTONOMY FOR EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

In Ireland, schools and the central government take almost all educational decisions with only a very limited regional layer of educational administration. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) steers the school and higher education systems. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) has a remit to ensure access to high-quality, affordable ECEC, while the DES has responsibility for aspects of the quality of provision. Other bodies relevant to national education policy include:

- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises on curricular objectives.
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) maintains and develops the qualifications framework, based on standards, skills and competencies acquired by learners.
- The DES Inspectorate evaluates school quality and offers educational advice to actors across the system.
- The Teaching Council focuses on issues related to the teaching profession, including professional development and standards.
- The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) is a cross-sectoral support service within the DES offering professional development support to teachers and school leaders.
- Education and Training Boards (ETB) are the only regional administration for education; they manage primary and post-primary schooling and further education and training at the regional level.
- *An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna* (SOLAS), the Further Education and Training Authority, provides strategic direction and develops policy for further education and skills development.
- The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is a funding and advisory body to the Minister for Education and Skills in relation to the higher education sector.
- *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Galetachta agus Gaelscolaíochta* (COGG) (1998) supports *Gaeltacht* schools and the *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish-medium educational institutions). The complementary Gaeltacht Education Unit (2017) is overseeing the implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-22.

Consultation with education **stakeholders** is an important element of the Irish education system, as stated in the Education Act (1998). Most major policy developments and all those regarding curriculum and assessment are subject to national consultation processes with a range of stakeholders. These include national bodies representing school administrators and patrons, teachers' unions, school principals, parents and students, as well as non-governmental advocacy bodies. In recent years, school-level governance in Ireland has developed a greater diversity of ethos. Several fora and surveys took place from 2012-17 to assess demand for different types of school governance and management. The number of multi-denominational and non-denominational schools has since increased (see "Equity and Quality"), and several newly-opened primary schools are managed directly by ETBs.

Schooling decisions in Ireland are predominantly shared between the national government and schools. According to principals' reports in PISA 2015, in Ireland, schools took responsibility for 85% of decisions related to curriculum, compared to 73% on average; contrastingly, in resource-related matters, Irish schools had 51% of responsibility, which was slightly lower than the average share of 54%. Private organisations play a key role in educational provision in Ireland: state-funded schools are owned and managed by private organisations (mainly church authorities and religious organisations at the primary level, with greater diversity at secondary level) and run by boards of management, although diversity of school ownership at primary level is slowly increasing. Boards of management generally include a parents' representative but no student or local community representation.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have high levels of academic freedom and autonomy regarding their internal affairs despite accountability measures having been strengthened by the DES and the HEA in recent years. The HEA leads the strategic development of the Irish higher education and research system and is accountable for the achievement of national outcomes in the sector. The HEA is also responsible for oversight and monitoring of the expenditure and performance of most publicly funded HEIs. Other associations represent the interests of specific sectors within higher education, such as the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), which represents the Institutes of Technology, and the Irish Universities Association (IUA), which represents universities.

Key strengths and challenges in governance (pre-crisis analysis)	
Key strengths	**Key challenges**
▪ Systematic use of consultation processes for large-scale reform initiatives. ▪ Well-developed autonomy for schools and HEIs is conducive to fostering professionals and institutions which are responsive to the needs of their students and communities.	▪ Ensuring cohesion and clear responsibilities within the system, particularly higher education, and as regional initiatives develop. ▪ Given the broad reform activity, taking time to embed new structures, ensuring alignment of processes, structures and actors is crucial.

Recent policies and practices

The DES' Strategy Statement 2019-2021 (Cumasú – Empowering through Learning) outlines five system-level goals which are being delivered through annual Action Plans for Education. The Action Plan methodology provides a high-level overview of ongoing reforms across the education and training sector. These detailed annual plans set out structured activity towards achieving the goals, mapped against quarterly delivery dates. Monitoring is systematic: the 2018 end-of-year review identified an 85% achievement rate.

Schools can collaborate in local, cross-sectoral clusters through the School Excellence Fund (SEF, 2017). Clusters submit innovative proposals in government-defined target areas to receive funding of up to EUR 20 000 (EUR 55 000 for DEIS). As of 2018, specific funds included Digital (over 200 schools), STEM (30 schools), DEIS (over 69 schools), Creativity (over 65 schools) and Step-up, focused on the Junior Cycle reform (9 schools). A sixth was planned for Gaeltacht schools. In 2019, funding for SEF within the DES budget was EUR 2.6 million. The strands are evaluated individually (e.g. participant schools in SEF-DEIS self-evaluate progress, reporting to DES annually; the Education and Training Inspectorate for Northern Ireland is conducting an external evaluation).

The National Skills Strategy 2025 (2016) aims to promote inclusive and lifelong learning, strengthen employer participation in skills development, enhance teaching and learning, and ensure skills relevance. To help deliver the more than 140 planned actions, the government has worked to strengthen Ireland's skills architecture in charge of identifying skills needs and developing responses. The National Skills Council (2017), bringing together high-level officials from relevant public and private bodies, aims to improve coordination and cohesion within the sector and act as an advisory and a reporting body. A new unit in the DES supports the Council and oversees the nine new Regional Skills Fora (2017). These are intended to improve channels for ongoing dialogue between education and enterprise, improve collaboration and efficiency, and foster sustainable regional development.

Regional clusters of HEIs (2013) aim to foster greater collaboration and increase stakeholder engagement. Clustered HEIs are encouraged to work together to improve efficiency and raise the international profile of Irish higher education. The most recent evaluation of Higher Education System Performance 2014-2017 found mixed responses to the policy, with some HEIs actively engaged and others less so. Obstacles include geography, the top-down nature of the policy and levels of stakeholder support. The intersection between the regional clusters and the Regional Skills Fora also requires attention. The Technological Universities Act (2018) provides a new model, where consortia of Institutes of Technology come together through mergers to focus largely, though not exclusively, on vocationally- and professionally-oriented science and technology programmes, providing courses at all levels of the National Framework of Qualifications, and building research capacity and output. The first such institution, Technological University Dublin, was established in 2019; four further consortia are in development.

Major curricular reforms are ongoing. The Junior Cycle reform (see Spotlight 5) includes a wellbeing curriculum (2017) of 300 hours of physical and emotional wellbeing, sustainable living and active citizenship, rising to 400 hours from 2020. At primary level, NCCA published two proposals for consultation in 2016, a draft curriculum framework in 2019 (to be published for consultation in early 2020) and further research, as well as collaborating with 44 schools through the Schools Forum and 5 stakeholder seminars. For the Senior Cycle, after an initial research phase (2016-17), NCCA has run school-based reviews and national seminars to collect stakeholder views. Based on this consultation process, the NCCA will produce a report for the Minister.

Figure 7. Percentage of decisions taken at each level of government for public lower secondary schools (2017)
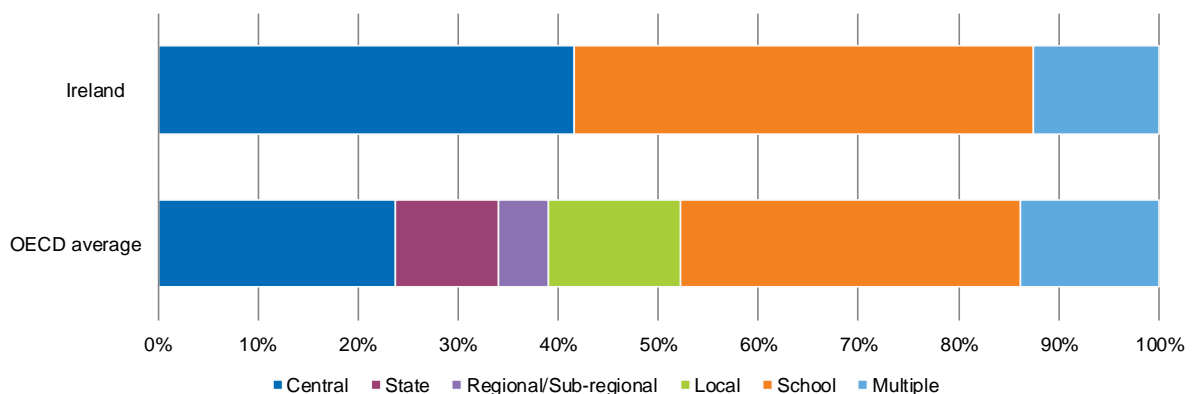
Note: This figure considers four domains of decision-making: 1) Organisation of instruction; 2) Personnel management; 3) Planning and structures, and; 4) Resources.
Source: OECD (2018), *Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2018-en.

Spotlight 5. Building capacities among teachers and school leaders to help them successfully implement curriculum reform

In 2012, the DES announced a major reform of the Junior Cycle curriculum and the Junior Certificate, which students receive on completion of the lower secondary cycle of education. As well as revised curricula for all subjects, the reform included new assessment arrangements aiming to shift the focus from the high-stakes end-of-cycle examination, which had come to dominate teaching and learning, to a more school-based model of assessment. Ireland introduced the first subject changes into schools in 2014, with first certification in 2017. The final group of new subject specifications were introduced in 2019, for first certification in 2022.

The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015), outlining the key elements of teaching and learning in lower secondary education, which includes the introduction of the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement, a reporting process for student achievement through both formative and summative assessment, introduced considerable changes to the lower secondary cycle of education in Ireland. Perhaps the most central has been the integration of teaching, learning, assessment and outcomes. By doing this, the reforms aimed to shift the focus from end-of-cycle examination, putting greater emphasis on ongoing assessment for and of learning, as well as continuous formative feedback to students. From the reform's inception, the government and the key actors consulted recognised that a greater focus on school-based assessment, particularly on classroom-based 'assessment for learning' and more comprehensive 'assessment of learning', would be challenging. Principals and teachers would thus need greater support to build capacity in order to succeed. Representatives of the profession also voiced concerns about the extra workload this could bring to teachers and school leaders, particularly during the implementation phase.

Planning for the implementation of the reform thus needed to consider these concerns. As the initial reform was announced in 2012, the DES committed to ring-fencing resources for CPD initiatives. In 2013, it established a dedicated Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) team to support the implementation of the new Framework for the Junior Cycle through the provision of a long-term national programme of CPD. This team is a specialist group within the DES comprised of full-time skilled teachers and school leaders on secondment from the classroom, as well as practicing teachers and leaders who act as part-time associates, supporting CPD delivery in their area. The JCT's vision is to inspire, support and empower teachers in the implementation of Junior Cycle education.

Careful implementation planning gained importance in the wake of reluctance voiced by teachers' unions towards the initial reform. Further to discussions with the unions, one of five immutable principles of the reform, mutually agreed by the DES and teachers' representatives, focused on strengthening professional collaboration between teachers as a leading feature of Irish schools. Also, the need for professionals to have structured and protected time to develop this desired collaborative culture within schools was formally recognised.

Implementation plans have since been revised annually in order to be responsive to the number and scope of changes being introduced each year. For 2018/19, schools were entitled to close for two full days for dedicated CPD and planning time connected to the implementation of the Junior Certificate reform. In addition, every full-time teacher was granted 22 hours' professional development time per year (constituting a reduction in class-contact time of 40 minutes a week); part-time teachers have the same entitlement on a pro-rata basis. This was made possible through the allocation of an additional 670 full-time equivalent posts to schools.

The JCT has developed a wide-ranging CPD offer and provides ongoing guidance focused on assisting teachers in interpreting and implementing the new curriculum specifications for each subject. It also supports leadership for whole-school implementation and specific guidance for those administering short courses and other special education arrangements. A variety of CPD delivery methods are employed, including in-school visits to support planning, evaluation and training, off-site workshops in local school clusters, online webinars and videos, and the curation of an online library of exemplar materials and resources through the dedicated JCT website. The JCT also captures and collates teacher feedback on the reform and its implementation, as well as any associated requests for clarification. This information is passed on to the DES.

There are around 120 teachers and school leaders working within the JCT. During the 2017/18 school year, the JCT engaged with nearly every teacher tasked with delivering the new Junior Cycle curriculum: specifically, this included 27 854 teachers through whole-school CPD days in schools and 26 162 teachers through subject-specific CPD school cluster days. During September and October 2018 alone, 8 760 teachers attended 421 subject-focused workshops facilitated by JCT staff; 45 leadership workshops also took place. Despite this positive level of coverage, some challenges remain. For example, turnover within the JCT team has been high, with many staff being recruited back into schools in leadership positions. This can pose a challenge for the JCT team to keep up with demand for in-service training. As a review of the Senior Cycle is now underway (see "Recent policies and practices"), the OECD (2020) has encouraged Ireland to continue reflecting upon the experiences of the Junior Cycle reform in order to facilitate a smooth process. This includes continuing to promote quality, targeted CPD for educators and ensuring a coherent shared vision of reform before seeking solutions.

FUNDING: DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND NATIONAL TARGETS HAVE PLACED MOUNTING PRESSURE ON RESOURCES

Ireland's **overall expenditure on education** has faced pressure following the economic crisis of 2008 and growing student numbers at all levels of education. Although at the time of writing consequences are unclear, the post-COVID-19 context may add to this pressure. Total education expenditure per student in 2016 was down on 2010 levels by 18% across primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education and, in 2015, by 29% in tertiary education. Expenditure rose on average across the OECD in the same period. Despite this, in 2016, annual expenditure per student at primary and secondary levels was close to OECD averages. Funding at tertiary level suffered most during the economic downturn following 2008, particularly capital expenditure, and although it has increased annually since 2014, in 2016 it remained lower than pre-2008 levels. Ireland spent USD 13 237 per student at tertiary level (including research and development [R&D]) in 2016, compared to an average of USD 15 556; the share allocated to R&D was similar to average. In 2016, expenditure on primary to tertiary education in Ireland as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP), at 3.5%, was one of the lowest rates in the OECD, where the average was 5%.

Most education services in Ireland rely predominantly on public funding, though the proportion varies. Publicly financed schools are generally not entitled to charge fees, although a small cohort of fee-paying, secondary-level schools receive some state funding. In 2016, 8.9% of spending on education institutions from primary to tertiary was privately sourced, including from international sources, compared to an OECD average share of 17.4%. The tertiary sector receives the largest share of private expenditure, although when calculated by the initial source of funds before transfers, this constituted only 9.6% of total spending on institutions in 2016, compared to an OECD average of 22.8%. At ECEC level, government subsidies to private institutions provide a certain number of hours a week (as for the ECCE Programme) or a needs-based subsidy towards overall costs (as for the National Childcare Scheme). Outside that, costs must be covered by households, often at high rates. Public funding for ECEC may not have kept pace with rapid expansion in coverage: in 2016, annual expenditure per child at this level was USD 3 705, compared to the OECD average of USD 8 605. Some measures to increase financial support have been introduced (see "Recent policies and practices"), however, the OECD (2020) has warned that positive effects may be offset by rising fees among providers.

In Ireland, most publicly funded **primary and post-primary schools** receive direct payments to cover the salaries of administrative and caretaker staff and grants to cover day-to-day running costs (e.g. heating, cleaning, and maintenance), while teachers and special needs assistants are paid directly by the DES. Schools can also undertake fundraising activities and these became increasingly important as demographic pressure on the primary system coincided with the economic crisis. In PISA 2018, school principals in Ireland reported similar levels of staff and material shortages to the respective OECD averages, but while 57% of disadvantaged students in Ireland attended schools where principals reported that staff shortages hinder instruction, only 37% of their disadvantaged peers across the OECD did. Vocational, community and comprehensive schools are financed from the national budget and may receive a higher proportion of state grants. About one-third of second-level schools (vocational schools and community colleges) are indirectly financed through a block grant paid to their regional ETB, which then distributes funding onwards among schools under their remit within the region. National FET programmes are generally provided for free, the exception being the Post Leaving Certificate courses, which charge students an annual fee of EUR 200; waivers and other forms of financial support are available.

Public **higher education** institutions are mainly funded by the state, and receive compulsory student contributions (EUR 3 000), fees from those not eligible for free tuition (non-EU international students, EU students returning to higher education), research grants and other funding sources. Unlike most other OECD countries, around 10% of the funds are generated and distributed by local governments and the share of current expenditure is greater in tertiary education than non-tertiary. A performance-based approach to higher education funding is in place to help maximise the impact of funding, but the European Commission (EC) (2019) reported concerns that higher education funding will not keep up with growing enrolments in the short term. A student support fund, Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), provides non-repayable grants based on family income. These cover the student contribution and some living costs; approximately one-third of students qualify for a SUSI grant. In the FET sector, SOLAS operates a funding model based on the strategic performance agreements with the 16 ETBs.

Key strengths and challenges of funding education system (pre-crisis analysis)	
Key strengths	**Key challenges**
▪ Per student expenditure at primary and secondary levels was in line with OECD averages in 2016. ▪ Performance-focused funding measures in tertiary education can help drive system efficiency.	▪ Targeting more funding per student at ECEC level, where returns to education are highest. ▪ As the demographic bulge moves through the system, a more sustainable higher education funding model is required.

Recent policies and practices

The National Childcare Scheme (2019), provided financial supports for households to facilitate participation in ECEC. This single streamlined scheme integrates all existing targeted funding programmes, offering both universal and targeted subsidies. To support quality ECEC, the First 5 policy (see "Equity and Quality") committed to doubling public investment in ECEC by 2028 and to introducing a new funding model for ECEC.

According to national projections, primary school enrolments peaked in 2018 and post-primary will do so in 2025. Ireland has thus invested in school accommodation to cope with demographic change. Over 200 new schools or major extensions were built between 2012 and 2016. In addition, the School Building Programme 2016-2021 provides EUR 2.8 billion for 310 school building projects, catering for over 60 000 additional students. It follows on from the Capital Investment Programme 2012-2017, which provided 275 new major building projects.

As part of a comprehensive review of the funding allocation model for higher education, an evaluation (2017) of the use of performance-based funding found high buy-in among HEIs, but also that some overambitious goal-setting had led to funding being held back in some cases. In 2017, the Expert Panel for the wider review published their final report (2017). Recommendations included developing a more clear and transparent model, consistent across all tertiary institutions; doubling allocations to research, development and innovation (RDI); and increasing performance-based funding. The OECD and EU Country Review of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Higher Education (2017) fed into the development of a new System Performance Framework for higher education (2018-2020) with a stronger focus on research, development and innovation.

In 2016, an Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education (2014) published recommendations for stabilising the financial foundations of the tertiary system which set out three options: 1) abolish compulsory student contributions and extend free tuition; 2) increase fees and introduce an income-contingent loan scheme; 3) retain the student contribution. The DES has requested that the EC's Structural Support Service conduct an economic analysis of each option; this is intended to support the building consensus around a preferred way forward. In the meantime, the 2019 Budget included an increase in higher education spending by 25% since 2015. This increase provided around 3 500 additional student places and increased capital funding to complement a EUR 200 million investment in infrastructure via a public-private partnership announced in 2017.

Innovation 2020 (2015) aimed to strengthen research, development and innovation through prioritising public and private investment, enhancing the impact on enterprise, and addressing human capital challenges. An Innovation and Transformation Fund (2018) rewards institutions that collaborate and innovate on flexible approaches to learning and attracting new students. In 2019, 22 projects had received a total of EUR 23 million.

Figure 8. Annual expenditure per student (2016) and recent trends, by level of education
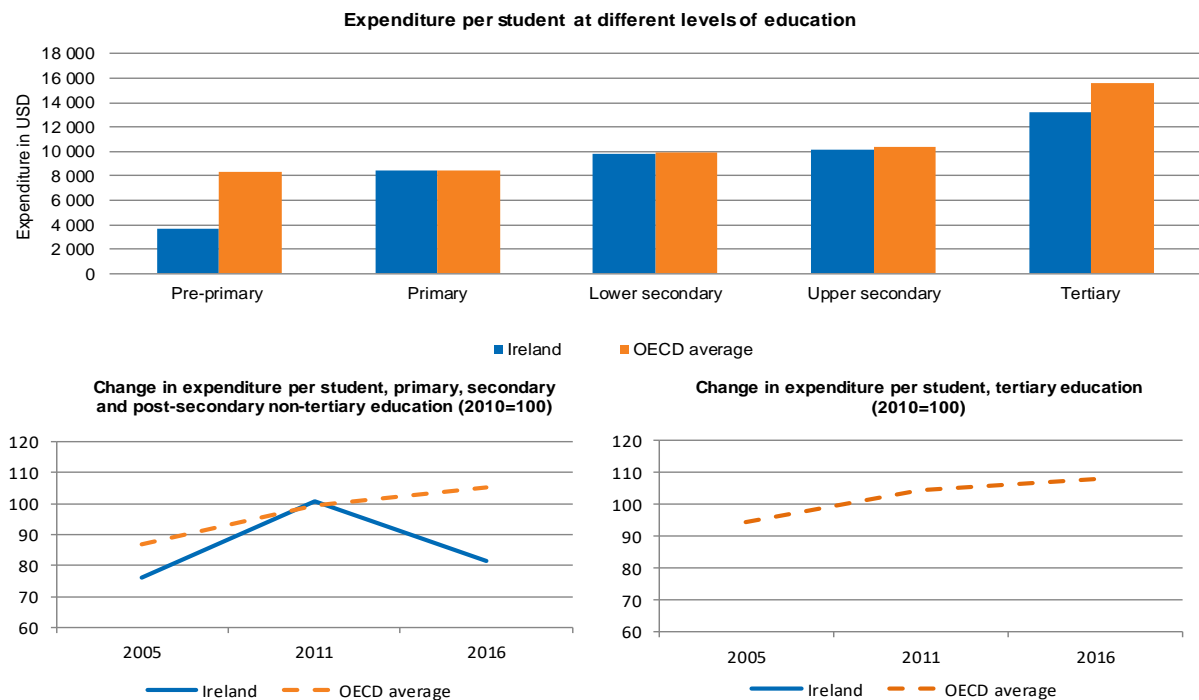
Note: Data for the change in expenditure per student in tertiary education are not available for Ireland.
Source: OECD (2019), *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en.

EDUCATION POLICY OUTLOOK

ANNEX A: STRUCTURE OF IRELAND'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

Ireland (Éire)   2018

Theoretical starting age*

ISCED level	Age
ISCED 8	26+
	22-26
ISCED 7	21-23
ISCED 6	21-23
ISCED 5	17-19
ISCED 4	17+
ISCED 3	15 / 16
ISCED 2	12/13
ISCED 1	4/5
ISCED 020	3/4

Higher doctoral degree
Variable years
Work experience

Doctoral degree (PhD) — Year 4, Year 3, Year 2, Year 1

Direct entry

Master's — Year 2, Year 1
Postgraduate Diploma — Year 1

Higher Diploma — Year 1

Honours Bachelor's — Year 4, Year 3, Year 2, Year 1
University Certificate — Year 1
University Diploma — Year 3, Year 2, Year 1

Higher certificate — Year 2, Year 1
Ordinary Bachelor's — Year 3, Year 2, Year 1
Honours Bachelor's — Year 4, Year 3, Year 2, Year 1

University / College of Education

Institute of Technology

Vocational or General Certificates

Further Education College — Year 4, Year 3, Year 2, Year 1

Leaving certificate — 11th, 10th — Leaving Certificate
Leaving certificate — 11th, 10th — Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)
Leaving Certificate Applied — 11th, 10th — Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

Optional transition year

Senior cycle

Junior cycle — 9th, 8th, 7th

Primary school — 6th, 5th, 4th, 3rd, 2nd, 1st, Senior infants, Junior infants

Pre-primary school

Special needs education

Adult education and training

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Note: The key for the interpretation of this table is available at the source link below.
Source: OECD (2018), "Ireland: Overview of the Education System", *OECD Education GPS*,
http://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/MapOfEducationSystem/IRL/IRL_2011_EN.pdf.

ANNEX B: STATISTICS

#	List of key indicators[1,2,3]	Ireland	Average or total	Min OECD	Max OECD
	Background information				
	Economy				
1	GDP per capita, 2016, in equivalent USD converted using PPPs (OECD Statistics)	70 616	42 441	14 276	107 775
2	GDP growth, 2016 (OECD Statistics)	3.7%	1.8%	0.6%	6.6%
	Society				
3	Population density, inhab/km^2, 2017 (OECD Statistics)	70	37	3	517
4	Population aged less than 15 as a percentage of total population, 2018 (OECD Data)	20.8%	17.0%	12.2%	28.4%
5	Foreign-born population as a percentage of total population, 2018 or the most recent available year (OECD Data)	17.1%	14.4%	0.8%	47.6%
	Education outcomes				
6	Mean performance in reading (PISA 2018)	518	487	412	523
7	***Average three-year trend in performance across PISA assessments, by domain (PISA 2018)[4,5]***				
	Reading performance	-0.3	0.4	**-4.9**	**7.1**
	Mathematics performance	0.1	-0.6	**-9.1**	**6.4**
	Science performance	**-3.0**	-1.9	**-10.7**	**6.4**
8	Enrolment rates of 3-year-olds in early childhood education and care, 2017 (EAG 2019)	92.1%	79.3%	2.4%	100%
9	Percentage of 25-64 year-olds whose highest level of attainment is lower secondary education, 2018 (EAG 2019)	11.7%	14.4%	0.8%	39.9%
10	***Educational attainment of the population aged 25-34 by type of attainment, 2018 or latest available***				
	At least upper secondary education, 2018 (EAG 2019)	92.4%	85.4%	50.1%	97.8%
	Tertiary education, 2018 (EAG 2019)	56.2%	44.3%	23.4%	69.6%
	Vocational upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education, 2018 (EAG database 2020)	m	24.5%	1.8%	50.1%
11	***Unemployment rates of 25-34 year-olds by educational attainment, 2018 (EAG 2019)***				
	Below upper secondary	14.5%	13.7%	3.0%	37.3%
	Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary	7.0%	7.3%	2.5%	25.1%
	Tertiary education	4.4%	5.5%	1.7%	23.2%
	Students: Raising outcomes				
	Policy lever 1: Equity and quality				
12	First age of selection in the education system (PISA 2018)	15	14	10	16
13	***Students performing at the highest or lowest levels in reading (%) (PISA 2018)***				
	Students performing below Level 2	11.8%	22.6%	11.1%	49.9%
	Students performing at Level 5 or above	12.1%	8.7%	0.8%	15.0%
14	Percentage of students in schools where students are grouped by ability into different classes for all subjects, PISA 2015	2.0%	7.8%	0.0%	56.1%
15	Percentage of students whose parents reported that the schooling available in their area includes two or more other schools, PISA 2015	56.9%	36.8%	20.4%	56.9%

#	List of key indicators[1,2,3]	Ireland	Average or total	Min OECD	Max OECD
16	Percentage of students reporting that they have repeated at least a grade in primary, lower secondary or upper secondary schools (PISA 2015)	7.2%	11.3%	0.0%	42.6%
17	Percentage of variance in reading performance in PISA test explained by ESCS (PISA 2018)[4]	10.7%	12.0%	6.2%	19.1%
18	Score difference in reading performance in PISA between non-immigrant and immigrant students AFTER adjusting for socio-economic status (PISA 2018)[4]	**-9**	**-24**	**-80**	**16**
19	Score difference between girls and boys in reading (PISA 2018)[4]	**23**	**30**	**10**	**52**
Policy lever 2: Preparing students for the future					
20	Mean proficiency in literacy among adults aged 16-64 on a scale of 500 (Survey of Adult Skills, PIAAC, 2012)	266.5	267.7	220.1	296.2
21	Difference in literacy scores between younger (25-34) and older (55-65) adults AFTER accounting for age, gender, education, immigrant and language background and parents' educational attainment (Survey of Adult Skills, PIAAC, 2012).	6.7	15.6	-8.3	37.6
22	***Share of students in upper secondary education in 2017 following:***				
	General programmes (OECD Stat - INES 2020)	89.7%	58.1%	27.6%	100.0%
	Vocational programmes (OECD Stat - INES 2020)	10.3%	43.1%	9.0%	72.4%
	Combined school and work-based programmes (OECD Stat - INES 2020)	10.3%	18.3%	1.0%	58.0%
23	First-time graduation rates from tertiary education, 2017 (Below the age of 30, excluding mobile students / OECD Stat - INES 2020)	m	36.6%	10.1%	49.9%
24	Percentage of 18-24 year-olds not in education, employment or training, 2018 (EAG 2019)	12.5%	14.3%	5.9%	29.8%
Institutions: Improving schools					
Policy lever 3: School improvement					
25	***The Learning Environment - PISA 2018***				
	Mean index of teacher support in language-of-instruction lessons	0.16	0.01	-0.61	0.47
	Mean index of disciplinary climate	0.04	0.04	-0.34	1.07
	Mean index of students' sense of belonging	-0.15	0.00	-0.28	0.46
26	Percentage of teachers in lower secondary education aged 50 years old or more, 2017 (EAG 2019)[7]	26.8%	37.0%	6.3%	54.2%
27	***Number of teaching hours per year in public institutions by education level, 2018 (EAG 2019)[8]***				
	Primary education	905	783	561	1063
	Lower secondary education, general programmes	726	709	481	1063
28	Ratio of actual teachers' salaries to earnings for full-time, full-year adult workers with tertiary education, lower secondary education, general programmes, 2016 (EAG 2019)	m	0.88	0.64	1.40
29	Proportion of teachers who believe the teaching profession is valued in society (TALIS 2018)	NP	25.8%	4.5%	67.0%
30	Proportion of teachers who would become a teacher again if they could choose (TALIS 2018)	NP	75.6%	54.9%	92.2%

#	List of key indicators[1,2,3]	Ireland	Average or total	Min OECD	Max OECD
	Policy lever 4: Evaluation and assessment to improve student outcomes				
31	**Percentage of students in schools where the following arrangements aimed at quality assurance and improvement at school are used (PISA 2015):**				
	Internal/Self-evaluation	100.0%	93.2%	74.8%	100.0%
	External evaluation	95.3%	74.6%	20.8%	97.4%
32	**Percentage of students whose school principals reported that standardised tests are used for the following purposes (PISA 2015):**				
	To make decisions about students' retention or promotion	53.7%	31.3%	3.4%	60.6%
	To monitor the school's progress from year to year	83.0%	69.4%	26.2%	97.7%
	To make judgements about teachers' effectiveness	47.7%	37.0%	4.4%	87.5%
	To identify aspects of instruction or the curriculum that could be improved	62.5%	58.9%	14.1%	92.4%
33	Percentage of lower secondary teachers whose principals report conducting formal appraisal of their teachers at least once per year (TALIS 2018)	NP	63.5%	16.2%	98.1%
	Systems: Organising the system				
	Policy lever 5: Governance				
34	**Percentage of decisions taken at each level of government in public lower secondary education, 2017 (EAG 2018)**				
	Central	41.7%	23.8%	0.0%	83.3%
	State	a	10.3%	0.0%	62.5%
	Regional/Sub-regional	a	4.9%	0.0%	33.3%
	Local	0.0%	13.3%	0.0%	71.9%
	School	45.8%	34.0%	0.0%	91.7%
	Multiple levels	12.5%	13.8%	0.0%	100.0%
	Policy lever 6: Funding				
35	Expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP (from primary to tertiary), 2016 (EAG 2019)	3.5%	5.0%	0.0%	6.5%
36	**Annual expenditure per student by educational institutions, for all services, in equivalent USD converted using PPPs for GDP, 2016 (EAG 2019)**				
	Pre-primary education	3 705	8 349	1 579	17 533
	Primary education	8 468	8 470	2 961	17 913
	Lower secondary education	9 814	9 884	2 561	21 739
	Upper secondary education	10 094	10 368	3 001	21 231
	Tertiary education	13 237	15 556	5 787	48 407
37	**Relative proportions of public and private expenditure on educational institutions, 2016 (EAG 2019)**				
	Public sources	91.1%	82.7%	62.7%	97.6%
	All private sources (includes international sources)	8.9%	17.4%	2.4%	37.3%
38	**Change in the share of expenditure on educational institutions, EAG 2019 (Percentage-point difference between 2010 and 2016, primary to tertiary education)**				
	Public sources	-0.7	-2.7	-9.8	6.3
	All private sources	1.3	2.5	-6.3	7.0

Notes
1. The average, total, minimums and maximums refer to OECD countries except in the Survey of Adult Skills, where they refer to participating countries. For indicators 6, 13 and 17-19 the average value refers to the arithmetic mean across all OECD member countries (and Colombia), excluding Spain. For indicator 5, the average value refers to the arithmetic mean across all OECD member countries (except Japan, Korea and Poland) as calculated by the Education Policy Outlook.
2. "m": included when data is not available.
3. "NP": included if the country is not participating in the study.
4. Statistically significant values of the indicator are shown in bold (PISA only).
5. The average three year trend is the average change in PISA score points from a country's/economy's earliest participation in PISA to PISA 2018.
6. "a": included when the category is not applicable.
7. For Ireland, this refers to teachers in public institutions only.
8. For Ireland, this refers to typical teaching time (time required from most teachers when no specific circumstances apply to teachers).

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NOTES

[1] On 25 May 2018, the OECD Council invited Colombia to become a Member. While Colombia is included in the OECD averages reported in this publication for data from Education at a Glance, the Programme for International Student Assessment and the Teaching and Learning International Survey, at the time of preparation of these OECD datasets, Colombia was in the process of completing its domestic procedures for ratification and the deposit of Colombia's instrument of accession to the OECD Convention was pending.

[2] In Ireland, post-primary education consists of a three-year Junior Cycle (lower secondary), followed by a two- or three-year Senior Cycle (upper secondary), depending on whether the optional Transition Year (TY) is taken. The term "secondary school" is usually employed in Ireland only for privately owned schools (e.g. schools run by religious orders or trusts). To avoid confusion, OECD terminology ("lower secondary" for ISCED 2 and "upper secondary" for ISCED 3) is retained only when referring to international indicators, or to differentiate between ISCED levels.

[3] Ireland's further education and training (FET) sector encompasses adult education and vocational education and training. Where this profile refers specifically to vocational education at upper secondary level, the term Vocational Education and Training (VET) is used.

[4] This refers to registered ECEC services classified as providing educational programmes aligned with ISCED 0, only. Other registered ECEC services that are considered an integral part of countries' ECEC provision but do not comply with all the ISCED 0 criteria, as well as informal childminding, are not captured in this indicator. For further details regarding the criteria for ISCED 0 see OECD (2019).

[5] For Ireland, this refers to typical teaching time (teaching time required from most teachers when no specific circumstances apply to teachers).

[6] The ratio of student to teaching staff only considers public and government-dependent private schools in Ireland.

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