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Case study - Ireland

Draft

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Contents

CONTENTS	3
ABSTRACT	5
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	6
1.1. The objective and the approach for country case studies on the response to the Council Recommendation on ILA	6
1.2. Ireland – an introduction to the case study	7
CHAPTER 2. IRELAND’S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR ADULT LEARNING	9
CHAPTER 3. ADULT LEARNING IN IRELAND – A SYSTEMATIC OVERVIEW	12
3.1. Participation patterns in adult learning.....	12
3.2. Governance of adult learning.....	16
3.3. Recent policy developments in adult learning	21
CHAPTER 4. ROLE OF PUBLIC FUNDING FOR ADULT LEARNING IN IRELAND	24
4.1. Role of public funding in adult learning.....	24
4.2. Role of provider-mediated (supply-side) funding for adult learning	25
4.3. Participant-mediated (demand-side) funding for adult learning	26
4.4. Conclusion – the space left for a novel type of ILA.....	28
CHAPTER 5. ENABLERS FOR TAKING UP ADULT LEARNING (‘ENABLING FRAMEWORK’)	29
5.1. Introduction	29
5.2. Digital portal for accessing support and accessible database/registry of learning, career guidance, validation and funding opportunities	29
5.3. Lifelong guidance/ career guidance.....	35
5.4. Validation of non-formal and informal learning	39
5.5. Training leave and contributions to subsistence costs/wage replacement	43
5.6. Outreach and awareness-raising activities	44
5.7. Quality assurance	45
CHAPTER 6. EXPLORATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PUBLIC FUNDING AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE GOALS SET BY THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION ON ILA	47
6.1. Introduction	47
6.2. Springboard+	47
6.3. Skillnet Ireland and its support for the hospitality/tourism sector	50
6.4. ETB support in County Offaly	54

CHAPTER 7. COUNTRY LEVEL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS – HOW TO RATE THE IRISH BASELINE AGAINST THE CONTEXT OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION ON ILA	57
CHAPTER 8. ‘POLICY SKETCHES’ FOR WORKING TOWARDS THE GOALS OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION ON ILA AND THEIR RECEPTION	61
8.1. Introduction	61
8.2. Policy Sketch 1: Creation of a single online portal to access training offers, career guidance services, and funding opportunities.....	62
8.3. Policy Sketch 2: Increasing the roll-out and take-up of micro-credentials	69
8.4. Policy Sketch 3: Establishing a paid training leave entitlement	80
8.5. Summary – Closing the gaps: What the implementation of the policy sketches has to offer in fulfilling the goals of the Council Recommendation on ILA	88
CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS FOR POLICY-MAKING	91
REFERENCES.....	95
ANNEX.....	97
Further figures on Ireland’s socio-economic context.....	97

Abstract

Ireland is generally viewed as having a strong education system, particularly at primary and secondary levels with the country regularly appearing amongst the top countries in the OECD's PISA ranking. The landscape of adult education and training in Ireland is complex, as it sees the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, from the public and private sector, at national, regional, sectoral and local level, which play an important role not only in terms of policy development, but also in relation to training provision, funding, and support services. Most adult learning provision is funded via the supply-side (i.e. provider-mediated), and in part financed by Ireland's National Training Fund. In terms of the Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts (ILA), there are a number of policies in place aiming to strengthen individuals' choice and using a more demand-focused approach, but current focus lies on strengthening the 'enabling environment' or smaller scale reforms (fulfilling only certain aspects of the council recommendation) rather than the creation of an ILA itself. Several digital portals and online databases provide career and labour market information to prospective adult learners, but few provide clear information on funding support by indicating whether learners can benefit from a specific funding scheme to participate in the course, and indicating how and where to apply grants. Potential ways forward constitute the creation of a single government-funded integrated platform to provide information about adult learning opportunities, career guidance and access to financial support in Ireland and to provide an overall enhanced user experience, incorporating other government-funded course finder websites and career guidance services. Vocational education and training (VET) has traditionally been viewed as the lesser sector in comparison to tertiary education, although efforts are being made to change this in an attempt to increase participation in adult learning and align with EU policy goals. Ireland could consider extending the use of micro-credentials even further beyond the existing provision in the HE and FET sectors to include a wider range of small scale, industry-recognised online and in-person courses from different training providers, which could strengthen existing instruments and improve the overall outreach of/participation in the FET sector. And finally, Ireland remains one of the few countries in the EU where the right to a training leave is not enshrined in legislation. A legal right to training leave, setting standards and eligibility criteria, and creating a training allowance for learners to cover living costs while attending training, is however unlikely to happen in the short and medium term due to concerns from all stakeholders about the cost implications and uncertainty regarding its potential impact on access to training and participation levels.

CHAPTER 1. Introduction

1.1. The objective and the approach for country case studies on the response to the Council Recommendation on ILA

This case study on Ireland is part of a broader Cedefop study on individual learning accounts (ILAs). The study aims to explore the potential for developing ILAs in selected EU Member States and provide support to policymakers, social partners and other stakeholders in designing and implementing ILAs. Based upon the Council Recommendation on ILAs and existing academic and applied research literature, the study proposes an analytical framework that identifies the key functions of an ILA and the elements of the 'enabling framework' (including career guidance, validation of non-formal and informal learning, paid training leave, etc.) needed for successful ILA implementation and use. Using the developed analytical framework as a reference, the in-depth case studies (Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Ireland, Estonia) examine in-depth the countries' current financing policies/instruments available to support individual learning as well as the components of the 'enabling framework'. The country analysis provides a better understanding of the strengths and challenges of the current arrangements relevant for ILAs in selected countries, and of the potential actions that would need to be taken for the development of ILAs (or ILA relevant arrangements).

The case studies draw on desk research as well as primary data collection and build on input from national stakeholders/experts collected via interviews, focus group discussions and validation workshops. Policy developments were followed until 31st of March 2023 (cut-off date for data collection). The case studies provide a description of the overall socio-economic context of the country and status quo regarding its adult learning system, including an overview of all main funding instruments and a shorter review of the existing sub-systems or arrangements of the enabling framework. Based on the analytical framework, one selected ILA-relevant national-level key instrument is reviewed in detail per country and studied to what extent it fulfills ILA functions, which is followed by a review of this instrument implementation in two skills ecosystems (e.g. sectors and/or regions) and/or a review of an additional sectoral/regional instrument(s). Based on the identified strengths and weaknesses of the system, three policy sketches (with SWOT analysis) considered as realistic (at least in the long-run) for implementing ILA (or ILA relevant arrangements) and the enabling framework are presented for each country. Building on these findings, country-specific policy reflections for implementing ILA (or ILA relevant arrangements) are formulated.

1.2. Ireland – an introduction to the case study

Ireland is generally viewed as having a strong education system, particularly at primary and secondary levels with the country regularly appearing amongst the top countries in the OECD's PISA ranking.¹ Indeed, education discourse in Ireland is dominated mainly by the role of the Leaving Certificate as a formal endpoint to education, as a stepping-stone to higher education, and as a gateway to vocational education and training. In addition to a strong compulsory education system, Ireland also has a high percentage of the population with tertiary level educational attainment and low levels of unemployment. In this context, vocational education and training (VET) has traditionally been viewed as the lesser sector in comparison to tertiary education, although efforts are being made to change this.

Ireland does not separate IVET from CVET and it incorporates VET along with adult education and training, up to EQF Level 5, as further education and training (FET). VET is not usually offered within the second level system (neither lower secondary NFQ 3, EQF 2, ISCED 244) nor upper secondary (NFQ 4/5, EQF3/4, ISCED 343/344)). Therefore, most learners are aged at least 16 or over. VET programmes within FET in Ireland include:

- apprenticeships: the range of apprenticeship opportunities has diversified in recent years and there is an increasing emphasis on offering apprenticeships to young school leavers. All apprentices are employed and each programme includes a minimum of 50% on the job training which spans both FET and Higher Education. They usually require a Junior Certificate (EQF level 2). Apprenticeships are included in the following sectors: engineering, construction, motor, electrical, finance, hospitality and food, biopharma, logistics, property services, recruitment, sales and ICT;
- traineeship is a programme of structured training which combines learning in an education and training setting and in the workplace, aiming to improve recruitment and employment outcomes for participants. Traineeships range from EQF levels 3-5 (NFQ levels 4-6) and are predominantly focused on employment, open to all potential participants of all ages and backgrounds)
- many learners enrol on a post-leaving certificate (PLC) programme (EQF levels 4/5). PLC provision has two overarching aims: to provide successful participants with specific vocational skills to enhance their employment opportunities or to facilitate their progression to additional education and training. They require a Leaving Certificate (EQF level 3-4).

There has traditionally been less of a focus on adult learning in Ireland, but this began to change around the turn of the millennium, in an attempt to increase participation in adult learning and work towards meeting the benchmarks set through consecutive EU policies adopted over previous decades and since the 2000 Memorandum on Lifelong Learning.² The initial momentum on lifelong learning in Ireland following the Memorandum came to a halt due to the 2008-2012 financial and economic crisis, which heavily impacted the Irish economy and

¹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/pisa-rankings-irish-teens-among-the-best-at-reading-in-developed-world-1.4102951>

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Ac11047>

public finances. However, as the Irish economy began to recover from the crisis, policies promoting adult learning received increased attention once more. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 and the impacts on business and workers has placed even more emphasis on the tools available to adults in Ireland who want to upskill or reskill.

The landscape of adult education and training in Ireland is rather complex, as it sees the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, from the public and private sector, at national, regional, sectoral and local level, which play an important role not only in terms of policy development, but also in relation to training provision, funding, and support services. Most adult learning provision is supply-side it is funded and provided by the state. There are several policies in place aiming to strengthen individuals' choice and using a more demand-focused approach, but there are currently no plans to introduce an individual learning accounts system, or similar proxies, such as training vouchers.

Irish policymakers made it clear during interviews that, in the country's discussions with other EU Member States about the implementation of the Council Recommendation on ILAs, Ireland said it would focus more on the 'enabling framework' rather than an ILA instrument itself. Policymakers said that more research and evidence of potential gain would be required in the Irish context before committing to the introduction of an ILA instrument. Ireland is therefore interesting as a case study for ILAs because it is a country that arguably has the financial means to implement such an instrument but plans not to do so and prefers to focus on the enabling framework for ILAs rather than ILAs themselves. The Irish adult education system is already in a relatively strong position concerning the range and depth of supply-side measures and training provisions for the employed and unemployed (see section 4.2), as well as mixed approaches combining supply and demand side funding to support adult education (see sections 6.2 and 6.3). As such, the priority at policy level is to strengthen the current system, rather than implementing new measures (e.g. an ILA-type instrument), for which stakeholders indicated that more research and evidence of potential impact would be required.

In this case study, we began with a brief overview of the Irish socio-economic context before further digging into Ireland's adult learning system and further education and training sector (FET), with a focus on funding structures, key policy instruments, and main actors involved. This overview is complemented by an analysis of the foundational elements of what the Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts defines as 'enabling framework'. Furthermore, we explore in detail three measures closely linked to the provision of adult learning in Ireland: the National Training Fund and its support for the Springboard+ scheme; the role of Skillnet Ireland and in particular its support to the hospitality/tourism sector, and the activities of the Laois & Offaly Education and Training Board in support of a just transition in County Offaly. Lastly, we conclude by analysing the feasibility in the Irish context of three potential policy sketches for the implementation of individual learning accounts and the elements of the enabling framework and outline conclusions and policy recommendations for the way forward.

CHAPTER 2. Ireland's socio-economic context and its relevance for adult learning

Ireland's real GDP per capita was EUR 43 310 in 2022, the second highest in the EU after Luxembourg,³ (European Commission, 2022). It represents a significant recovery from 2008-2012 when Ireland's then so-called 'Celtic Tiger' economy, alongside those of Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal, was severely impacted by the global financial crisis and the country had to receive significant 'bailout' payments from the EU and global financial institutions to help protect the economy from collapsing further. Ireland introduced severe austerity measures in response to the crisis which led to the cancellation and restriction of many public services. The return to economic growth in 2015-2016 and strong continued growth since then, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to Ireland's economy being dubbed the 'Celtic Phoenix'. The up and downs in the strength of the economy had effects on adult learning, with the recent economic recovery mirrored by a surge in participation rates (see chapter 3.1).

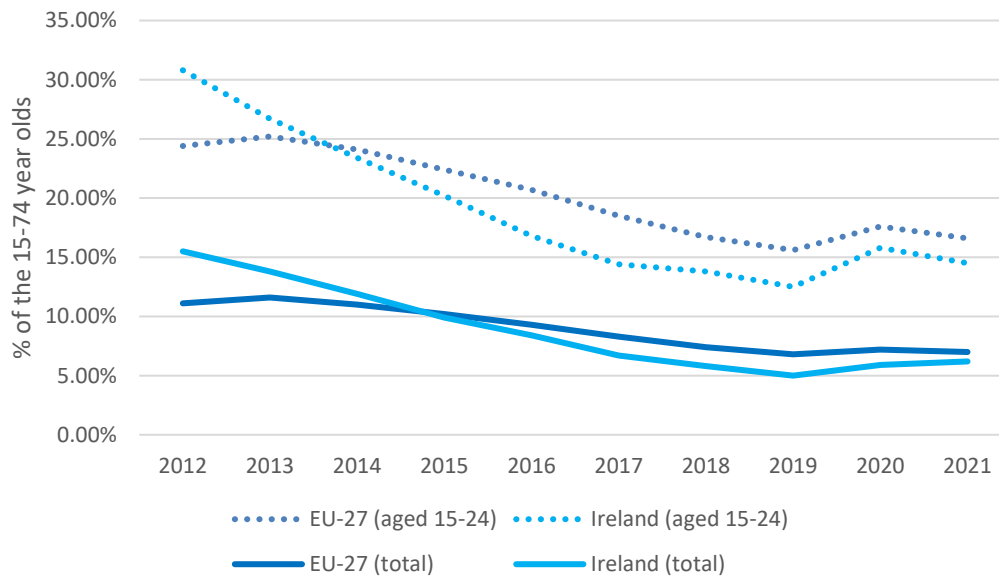
For the past decade, Ireland showed a very low inflation rate constantly below the EU average, and also the hike in 2022 is lower compared to the average across Member States (8.1%, EU average: 9.2) (Eurostat – TEC00118 [24.2.23]).

Ireland's overall population has grown over the past decade, accounting for about 5.2 million in 2022 (National census 2022), which is an increase of 8% since 2016. This growth is reflected in the highest natural rate of population change in the EU (2021: 5 per 1000, EU average: 2.8). The country's rate of net migration has been largely above EU-average in the past decade (2021: 5.6 per 1000, EU average: 2.4) and there has been a 63% increase since 2016 of people with dual citizenship. Supporting migrants is therefore an important component for adult learning in Ireland.

Ireland's unemployment rate was above the EU average in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (19% in 2011) but dropped below the EU-average in 2015 and since then has remained roughly below that level, with a renewed increase to 6.2% in 2021 (EU average: 7.0). A similar pattern is visible in the youth unemployment rate (2021: 11%, EU average: 16.6%).

³ The figures are impacted by statistical distortions due to the activities of multinational companies reporting in Ireland to cut corporate taxes.

Figure 1. Unemployment & youth unemployment rate – Ireland, 2012-2022



Source: Eurostat – UNE RT A [15.2.23]

The share of the population with educational attainment of upper secondary-level or above has increased in the past decade (2012: 71.8%; 2021: 82.3%), and has therefore grown faster than the average across the EU-27 (2012: 70.2; 2021: 74.1) (Eurostat – EDAT LFS [15.2.23]. The share of population with educational attainment at tertiary level has further increased from the extraordinary high level of 35.7% in 2012 to 45.2% in 2021, which is substantially above the EU-27 average of 29.5% (2021). The share of households' expenditure (mostly tuition fees) on total expenditures for primary to post-secondary non-tertiary educational institutions accounts for 6% in Ireland, which is above the average of the 22 EU states captured in the dataset (5%) (OECD, 2022). First-time HE students studying full-time in undergraduate programmes in Ireland are exempt from full tuition fees, but they still pay a considerably high student contribution of EUR 3 000 per academic year. Standard tuition fees for undergraduate programs account for up to EUR 45 000 per year. Those in graduate programmes pay fees of up to EUR 34 000 per year (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2021b). Part-time students have to pay half of either the student contributions or the full tuition fees. In short, for adult learners, the HE sector is associated with high costs. HE in Ireland plays an important role for adult learning, with the vast majority of adults having the credentials to enter, however, with substantial fees for higher level programmes, which works as restraining factor when compared to countries where HE is practically free for all cycles. Furthermore, expanding the option for participation in HE programmes for free or at low fees turned into an important aspect of adult learning policy (see 6.2).

Ireland's industrial relations system is often considered to be an example of 'Liberal Pluralism' (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1997; European Commission, 2008), with a low collective bargaining coverage of only 34% in 2017, which is however higher than in countries with similar industrial relations systems (e.g. the UK) system (OECD & AIAS, 2021). This also holds for trade union density (26.2% in 2020) as well as employer organisation density (71.2%). Bargaining takes place predominantly at the company level. With regard to skill

formation, over the past three decades, the limiting effects of comparative low level of employer coordination has been mitigated by institution building, including the employer-levy sourced National Training Fund (Vossiek, 2018).

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CHAPTER 3. Adult learning in Ireland – a systematic overview

3.1. Participation patterns in adult learning

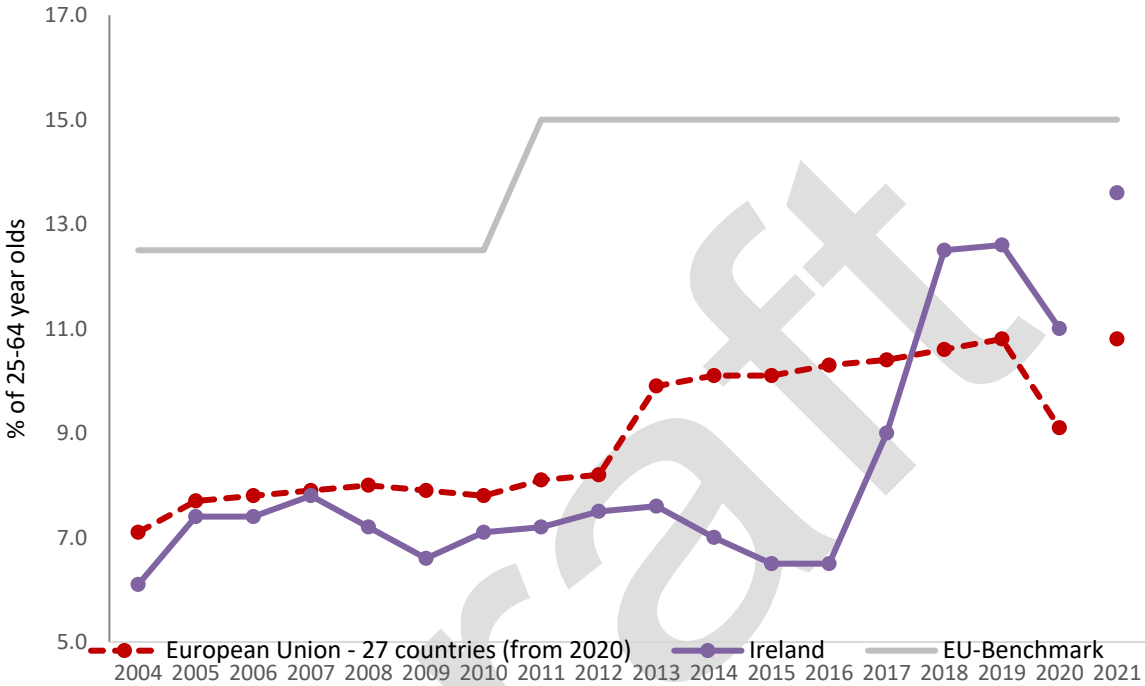
Participation in adult learning is measured by two main surveys, using considerably different approaches, which has consequences for the revealed level of inequality across socio-economic strata (Cedefop, 2015). The main measure for adult learning used to be the indicators for participation in any (organised) learning activity within in the past four weeks, based on the labour force survey (LFS). The LFS-based measure for participation excludes important forms of non-formal learning activity, in particular, guided on-the-job-learning, which in consequence reduces the major effects of the workplace on participation. Moreover, by the reference period of four weeks, longer educational spells have more impact on the figures (e.g. the participation in formal adult learning). The indicators based on the Adult Learning Survey are based on a much more detailed exploration of learning activities and a 12-month reference period and are particular strong with regard to job-related learning activities (workshop and seminars, guided-on-the-job training), which are not covered by LFS. In turn, the effects of the workplace play out stronger base on the AES data. For policy making, the regularly available indicators of the LFS are more often used, however, it is important to take into consideration both sources to have a more complete picture. In the final part of this section, based on statistical models, we present studies trying to disentangle whether or not an observed disadvantage – e.g. of women – in the participation in adult learning is linked immediately to the variable of observation or not. In the latter case, a group might be disadvantaged in accessing adult learning, however, this real disadvantage is the outcome of the effects of other factors (e.g. women might be disadvantaged due to the gendered distribution of men and women across workplaces offering more or less access to adult learning). In short, these statistical models do not deny the observed disadvantage but attribute the reasons for this disadvantage to various components, the latter lying often outside decision-making processes on adult learning as such. In the following section data from LFS and AES, but also results from statistical modelling are presented to achieve an overall more balanced picture.

According to the European AES, in 2016, about 4% of the Irish adult population participate only in job-related non-formal adult education with the costs borne by their households or third parties, but not by their employer, the latter working as a proxy for the adults participating in this type of education on their own initiative. Moreover, about 4% of adults (ELFS, 2019) participate in formal adult learning. Taken these vague proxies together, the current proportion – in absence of an ILA, however, based on the given approaches of support – of adults initiating their own job-related further education could be estimated as between 7 and 13% each year (for more details on this estimate see main report to this study).

In terms of take up of FET opportunities, until 2015, participation in adult learning in Ireland, as measured by the (former) Structural Indicator on Lifelong learning, was considerably low and far below the EU27 average. Since 2016, participation rates have significantly increased and in 2021 they were well above the EU average when Ireland had the

fourth highest rate amongst EU Member States. However, the high participation rate in 2021 may have been a result of employees being placed in furlough or made redundant during the Covid-19 pandemic. By 2022, the rate had once again fallen below the EU average (11.9%) to 11.8%, placing Ireland fifteenth out of 27 EU Member States.⁴

Figure 2. Participation rate of 25-64 year olds in education and training (last 4 weeks) (Labor Force Survey)



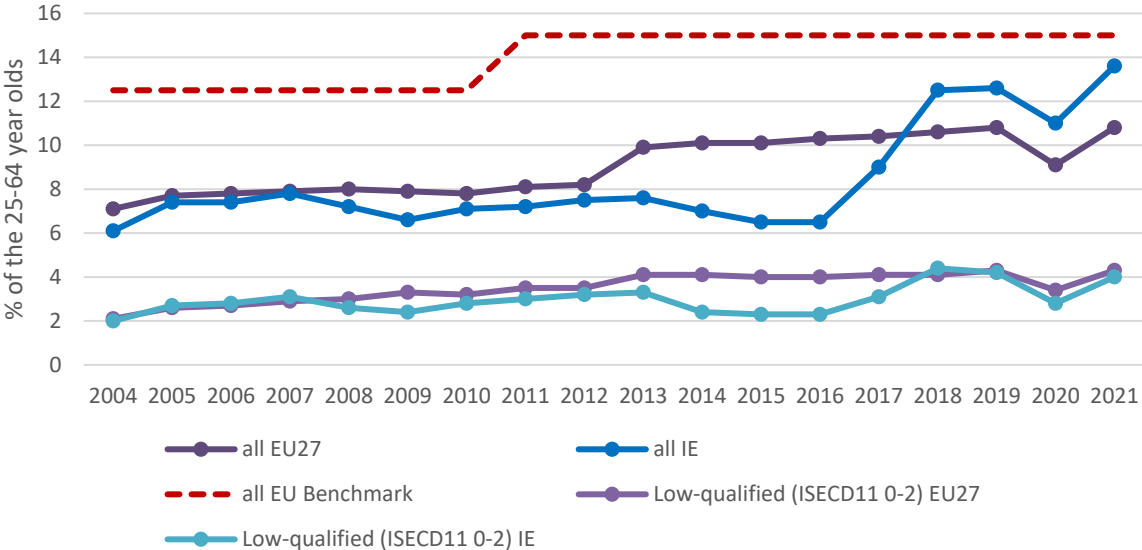
Source: Own development based on Eurostat trng_lfse_03 Version of: 28.04. 2022

While participation rates for low qualified adults (i.e. adults that have not completed upper secondary education) suffered from the impacts of austerity measures implemented to respond to the 2008-2012 crisis, the share of low qualified adults participating in learning activities has doubled between 2016 and 2021, albeit starting from a considerably low level. Despite these encouraging numbers, according to feedback gathered through the interview programme and research by SOLAS and AONTAS, adults with lower educational attainment, the unemployed, those working in occupations commonly referred to as 'low-skilled', and those of an older age are less likely to participate in lifelong learning. Similarly, vulnerable groups, including lone parents, people living in Direct Provision (accommodation provided by the State for asylum seekers) and minority groups such as Roma and travellers, who have historically

⁴ Lifelong learning in Ireland, June 2023
<https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/df6c2249bf/lifelonglearning-report.pdf>

very low participation rates and may be reluctant to engage with the education system, may experience greater challenges in accessing formal and nonformal education in Ireland.⁵

Figure 3. Participation in adult learning within the past 4 weeks prior to the Survey 2004-2021 for all adult and for low qualified adults - Ireland compared to the EU-27



Source: Eurostat trng_ifse_03 [Version: 28.04.2022]M EU27

Low participation rates of low qualified needs to be put in context. Over the past three decades, growth in educational participation at upper secondary and tertiary level set off Ireland’s historic high proportion of low qualified adults; only for the 55-64 year olds, with 31.9% the proportion of low qualified in Ireland had been higher than in the EU average in 2019 (Figures for other age cohorts: 25-34: 7.4% 35-44: 10.2% 45-54: 19%) (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2021a, p. 31).

In the following, differences across socio-economic groups in the uptake of adult learning are studied in more detail. Table 1 presents a selection of descriptive indicators on the inequality in participation, based on the LFS (measuring participation in formal or non-formal adult learning within the four weeks prior to the survey). Men (12%) participate less in adult learning than women (15.2%). The differences in participation according to educational attainment are very high by comparison (ISCED11 0-2 4.0; ISCED11 3-4 9.9; ISCED11 5-8: 18.6), providing the backdrop for the emphasis of policy making in Ireland to attract in particular more formally low qualified adults. Adults born in Ireland participate less than migrants (12.6% versus 16.1%). Furthermore, participation is declining with age (25-34: 19.95%; 35-54: 13.2% 55-64: 7.7%). Finally, levels of participation in adult learning are comparably equal across Ireland’s different regions, with the highest participation in the Eastern and Midland Region (15%) and the lowest in the Southern Region (12%).

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https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Lifelong%20Learning/AONTAS_LLL%20Research%20Report_Final%20Digital%20Launch.pdf [accessed on 07/08/2023]

Table 1. Indicators on inequality in participation in adult learning (formal/non-formal) – LFS, 4 weeks prior to the survey – 2021 - Ireland

			Percentage	Compared to
Sex	Men	12	-26,7%	women
	Women	15,2		
Educational attainment	ISECD 0-2	4	-365%	ISCED 5-8
	ISECD 3-4	9,9	-88%	ISCED 5-8
	ISECD 5-8	18,6		
Place of birth	in the country	12,6	21,7%	in the country
	outside the country	16,1		
Age	25-34	19,9	-51%	25-34
	35-54	13,2		
	55-64	7,7		
Employment	Employed	13,8	28,5%	employed
	unemployed	19,3		
	outside labour force	11,4		

Source: Eurostat – TRNG_LFS_01 ...

The table below presents a selection of abovementioned descriptive indicators on the inequality in participation based on the AES data (measuring participation in job-related non formal adult learning 12 months prior to the survey). In contrast to the LFS data, men (46.3%) participate more in adult learning than women (41.5%). The differences in participation according to educational attainment are, in contrast to the LFS data, comparatively less pronounced (ISCED11 0-2 21.3%; ISCED11 3-4 38.1%; ISCED11 5-8: 56.9%). Participation decreases with age (25-34: 53.1%; 35-54: 44.6%, 55-64: 30.6%). In contrast to the LFS data, participation of the employed (56.4%) is higher than for the unemployed (20.6%).

Table 2. Indicators on inequality in participation in job-related non formal adult learning– AES, 12 months prior to the survey – 2016 – Ireland

		Participation	%age	Compared to
Sex	Men	46,3	10,4%	women
	Women	41,5		
Educational attainment	ISCED11 0-2	21,3	-167%	ISCED 5-8
	ISCED11 3-4	38,1	-49%	ISCED 5-8
	ISCED11 5-8	56,9		
Place of birth	in the country			in the country
	outside the country			
Age	25-34	53,1	-19%	25-34
	35-54	44,6		

		Participation	%age	Compared to
Employment	55-64	30,6	-74%	25-34
	employed	56,4		
	unemployed	20,6	-173,8%	employed
	outside labour force	5,5	-925,5%	employed

Source: Eurostat – TRNG AES 121 [2.12.2020]

As levels of inequality according to single socio-economic variables do not capture the interaction of determinants of participation, we provide information on Odd Rates in participation from multivariate analysis. For Ireland, we draw on work based on the first round of PIAAC data (2011/2012) with the outcome variable restricted to job-related non-formal education (Lee & Desjardins, 2019). The model applied controls for gender, educational attainment, age, education of the parents, literacy levels, occupational status and full versus part-time employment. According to the controls applied within this model, women suffer from a small disadvantage in access to non-formal education compared to men⁶, the age group of the 35-44 year olds is at a moderate advantage (Odd Rate 1.6) compared to 25-34 year olds. By far the strongest predictors within the model are occupational group (skilled versus unskilled; Odd Rate 2.6) and the own educational attainment (low versus high; Odd Rate 2.9). This analysis shows – in line with comparable research - that educational attainment and the type of work done are the key sources of inequality in participation in job-related non-formal adult learning. Moreover, it also works as a reminder that descriptive statistics would be insufficient to trace the sources of inequality, as the levels of inequality might be determined by compositional effects (e.g. the distribution of men and women across occupations).

The existing patterns of participation in lifelong learning in Ireland and views of stakeholders interviewed suggest that the introduction of an ILA in Ireland would likely benefit most those with an existing high level of education and ILAs would be unlikely to increase the participation in lifelong learning of key target groups in Ireland, such as the low-skilled, individuals with care responsibilities, women, minority groups such as Roma and Travellers. This is due to the physical and psychological barriers they face in accessing and interacting with the education system, for example, not having access to broadband and not possessing digital skills or having had a negative experience of education in childhood which makes some adults reluctant to engage again in adulthood. However, the enabling framework as set out in the Council Recommendation aligns well with existing national policy and programmes and that is where Ireland's focus will continue to lie.

3.2. Governance of adult learning

The compulsory education system (primary and secondary education) typically covers the ages 4-18 with subsequent FET and HE courses typically serving 18-24 year olds. Beyond

⁶ Nonetheless, women might be disadvantaged due to the gendered distribution of men and women across workplaces offering more or less access to adult learning.

formal HE and FE courses, there is a wide range of adult learning available. A distinction could possibly be drawn between adult learning and adult education, with adult learning being understood as all learning continuing from the compulsory education system, and adult education being understood as primary and secondary education being provided to adults specifically.

The adult learning system in Ireland sees the involvement of several ministries, as well as a wide range of public and private stakeholders. At government level, the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)⁷, as its name suggests, is the main public authority responsible for policies on further and higher education, and a few state agencies and public institutions operating in this area sit under its aegis. Other governmental departments playing an important role in this policy area include the Department for Social Protection, which oversees the Irish Public Employment Service, INTREO⁸ - a single point of contact for all employment and income support services, including financial support for training and education. The Department of Education is responsible for primary and secondary school education (ISCED levels 1-3).

As mentioned above, a few state agencies sit under the aegis of DFHERIS. The Higher Education Authority (HEA)⁹ leads the strategic development of the Irish higher education and research system and ensures coordination with other public bodies working in related areas. It also manages several training programmes, such as the Springboard+ programme¹⁰ - a national initiative to provide free higher education courses across a range of skill shortage disciplines - and the Human Capital initiative¹¹ which invests in increasing capacity in higher education in skills-focused programmes.

SOLAS is the state agency responsible for planning, funding and coordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Its mandate is to ensure the provision of 21st century high-quality, learner focused, education programmes all adults across society, including school leavers, jobseekers, and those seeking upskilling in employment. SOLAS' core functions are to research, plan, fund, and co-ordinate the delivery of over 300 000 FET places annually.¹² SOLAS was a designated managing authority for the deployment of resources under the European Social Fund Programme for Employment, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020,¹³ and worked with the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), which comprises representatives of social partners, to support their research on future skills requirements.¹⁴

⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-higher-education-innovation-and-science/>

⁸ <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/3c095-intreo-the-public-employment-services/>

⁹ <https://hea.ie/about-us/overview/>

¹⁰ <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/springboard/>

¹¹ <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/human-capital-initiative-pillars-1-2-and-3/>

¹² www.solas.ie

¹³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/aefa6-european-social-fund/>

¹⁴ The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) is an independent, non-statutory body, which includes members from the business community, education and training providers, learner-support groups, trade unions, and a small number of Government Departments and agencies. www.skillsireland.ie

There are currently 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in Ireland which promote and provide education and training opportunities. They employ over 32 000 staff and manage more than 200 FE colleges and training centres, reaching over 200 000 learners.¹⁵ The ETBs are one of the main providers of education for those over 16 years of age and they provide re-skilling and up-skilling programmes for those who are unemployed or inactive and for employees. They also assist individuals to progress to higher education who otherwise could not directly do so. Another important role is to provide upskilling opportunities for the many individuals who have not completed second-level education. ETBs have a combined annual spend of approximately EUR 2.2 billion.¹⁶

Other agencies and bodies whose work contributes to the advancement and provision of further education and training in Ireland include Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)¹⁷, the state agency responsible for the external quality assurance of further and higher education and training. This includes quality assuring education and training providers, as well as validating programmes of education and training leading to qualifications,¹⁸ awarding qualifications and issuing certificates. Lastly, QQI manages the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)¹⁹ and the Irish Register of Qualifications,²⁰ a comprehensive database of all qualifications included in the NFQ.

Skillnet Ireland,²¹ a business support agency of the Irish government responsible for advancing the competitiveness, productivity and innovation of Irish businesses through enterprise-led workforce development, is another key stakeholder in the FET sector. Skillnet Ireland currently supports over 22 500 businesses across Ireland and provides training opportunities to over 86 500 learners.²² It is funded primarily through the National Training Fund, which more than doubled from EUR 319 million in 2011 to EUR 718 million in 2020. Skillnet Ireland is referenced in the National Skills Strategy 2025 as an important model that enables employers to come together to determine their common skills needs, as well as being a flexible and effective framework for supporting learning outside of traditional education structures: '[T]he Skillnets model enables networks of employers in regions or sectors to come together to determine their common skill needs and procure training for their employees. Skillnets is co-funded by the National Training Fund and by employers directly and has proved to be a flexible and effective model for companies of various sizes to meet their short and medium term skill needs.' (National Skills Strategy, page 58.)²³

¹⁵ <https://www.etbi.ie/etbs/>

¹⁶ <https://www.etbi.ie/etbs/>

¹⁷ <https://www.qqi.ie/>

¹⁸ <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/qqi-awards>

¹⁹ <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications>

²⁰ <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/irish-register-of-qualifications>

²¹ <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/about/about-skillnet/>

²² Ibid.

²³ <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Evaluation-of-Skillnet-Ireland-in-2019-20-Indecon-Report-March-2023.pdf>

Organisations such as AONTAS, Ireland’s National Adult Learning Organisation,²⁴ and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)²⁵, represent the voice of adult learners, including those most vulnerable, and provide important contributions to the FET sector and to the policy debate on the adult learning system in Ireland. Lastly, further public providers for vocational upskilling include universities, Institutes of Technology (now largely replaced by newly-established Technological Universities) and sector specific organisations, as well as private training providers (e.g. private colleges). Chambers of commerce, trade unions, and employer networks complete the landscape of education and training providers and FET stakeholders in Ireland.

Despite the variety of actors involved in adult education and lifelong learning in Ireland, a number of structures and fora exist to promote coordination. One such structure is the National Skills Council.²⁶ Acting as an advisory body to DFHERIS, the Council meets on average twice a year and brings together actors both from the private and public sector, including education and training providers and business representatives, to discuss how to best respond to skills needs, and advise DFHERIS on priority skills needs based on relevant developments and emerging global trends. Moreover, Regional Skills Fora have been established through the National Skills Strategy 2025²⁷ to bring together businesses and education and training providers at the regional level, responding to the specific skills need across different regions. Each Regional Skills Forum has a Regional Skills Manager responsible for leading the work of their respective Forum and ensuring cooperation between regional level stakeholders. Furthermore, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) represents another structure to promote cooperation at the national level. It brings together representatives from key governmental departments (e.g. DFHERIS; Department of Education; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment), as well as state authorities (e.g. SOLAS, HEA), trade unions (e.g. Irish Congress of Trade Unions) and business organisations (e.g. IBEC; Enterprise Ireland) to advise the government on future skills needs at national and sectoral levels, and provide recommendations on how to address these, and on how the current education and training offer can be adapted to match new needs.²⁸

Nonetheless, effective cooperation was identified by several interviewees as a challenge in Ireland due to the number of actors and public authorities involved in FET. According to one interviewee from a national agency, while cooperation exists between actors at the national, regional and local level and there is ‘an open and collaborative approach to the sharing of information and resources’, a ‘natural competition between different agencies and providers’ exists in relation to the training offer and the outreach to potential learners. Another interviewee from a national agency underlined that, despite adult learning stakeholders’ overall willingness to cooperate, external factors mean that state agencies do not necessarily have the freedom to identify their own priorities and collaborate with other actors to promote adult

²⁴ <https://www.aontas.com/>

²⁵ <https://www.nala.ie/>

²⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/7637e6-national-skills-council/>

²⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/>

²⁸ <http://www.skillsireland.ie/>

learning. According to this interviewee, for example, demographic changes in Ireland resulted in a larger cohort of younger learners which required increased attention from ETBs, potentially leaving adult learners behind. From the perspective of trade union representatives, the large number of governmental departments – and agencies managed by them – involved in adult learning often leads to gaps and duplication, which, in turn, can result in a lack of clarity from the learner’s perspective on training opportunities.

Trade union representatives highlighted that social dialogue in the area of adult education and lifelong learning remains a challenge, as existing bodies and structures bringing together social partners do not necessarily lead to concrete outcomes. Interviewed representatives from employer organisations, however, shared a more positive view as they stressed that business associations tend to work closely together, despite being competitors in the labour market. The Skills for Better Business Tool – an online self-assessment tool to support employers to identify their skills needs – was mentioned as an example of this cooperation.²⁹ The tool, launched in November 2022, was developed by a consortium of 14 partners from the public and private sector, with Skillnet Ireland leading the process.

Ireland’s National Skills Strategy stresses the importance of ensuring that the FET sector is responsible to the needs of employers, learners and the labour market. To this end, the teaching staff also plays a key role in ensuring that adult education and training courses are useful and meaningful for learners. Despite this, data on teaching staff in the sector remains limited. The Further Education and Training Professional Development Strategy³⁰ defines FET practitioners as “anyone working in the sector who is involved in working directly with learners or in supporting or influencing the learner experience in FET”. While this definition remains broad, the Strategy identifies three main categories of FET practitioners:

- Learning practitioners (72% of the overall workforce)³¹: these include post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) teachers, adult literacy tutors, community education tutors, VTOS tutors, Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) tutors, Youthreach resource persons, guidance counsellors and instructors in training services.
- Managers (14% of the overall workforce)³²: these include programme coordination roles, adult education officers, training services managers and assistant managers, and further education principals, directors and deputies.
- Support and administration staff (14% of the overall workforce)³³: administrators supporting ETB central functions, administrators and support staff associated with specific programme areas, development officers, guidance information officers, training standards officers.
- While all teachers in all fields of education need to regularly update their pedagogical competence via appropriate continuous professional development (CPD) programmes, FET tutors have an obligation to also ensure that their vocational

²⁹ <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/skills-for-better-business-sme-online-assessment-launched/>

³⁰ <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/4e966c3112/solasfetpds.pdf>

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

competence is regularly upgraded, to prepare learners for current and emerging skill needs.³⁴ Local ETBs are mainly responsible for supporting the professional development of practitioners, with SOLAS playing an important role too, by providing coordination and funding. For example, SOLAS funds a number of organisations to provide professional development services to the FET sector. These are the Further Education and Support Service (FESS) which provides national, regional and local professional development workshops for FET practitioners. Moreover, the Further Education and Training Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019³⁵ prepared by SOLAS and the ETBI provides a comprehensive overview of the current skill base of FET practitioners in Ireland and sets out a strategy to renew and further embed a strong professional development culture across the Education and Training Board (ETB) network.

In terms of working conditions, a survey carried out for the development of the Further Education and Training Professional Development Strategy revealed that 54% of surveyed further education and training practitioners worked full time, while more than a third (38%) had a part-time contract; and 8% of respondents are sessional or occasional workers.³⁶

Despite their small differences in policy priorities and target audiences, Irish policymakers and stakeholder organisations in adult learning were almost unanimous in their interviews that the introduction of an ILA-type instrument in Ireland was not a policy priority, and that much more research and evidence of potential gain would be required to make a convincing case for one. The focus in Ireland is much more on the 'enabling framework' rather than an ILA instrument itself.

3.3. Recent policy developments in adult learning

In terms of recent socio-economic developments and emerging trends that can have an impact on the FET sector, it should be noted that despite the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and the current energy crisis, the Irish economy continues to perform well. The unemployment rate for December 2022 stood at 4.4%, 0.4 percentage points lower than the pre-pandemic level of 4.8%.³⁷ Nonetheless, research from the EGFSN highlights the ongoing need to address skills shortages, and respond to new challenges, including those brought about by the digital transformation, the decarbonisation of the

³⁴ <https://assets.gov.ie/24397/2a68611321f845ce90d4ab6e599e7313.pdf>

³⁵ SOLAS 2017 Further Education and Training Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019 <http://solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SolasFETPDS.pdf>

³⁷ CSO 2022 Monthly Unemployment 2022 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-mue/monthlyunemploymentdecember2022/#:~:text=The%20Monthly%20Unemployment%20rate%20for%20December%202022%20was%204.3%25&text=Down%20to%2011.5%25%20for%20pers ons,74%20years%20from%20November%202022> [accessed on 25/07/2023].

economy; the impact of Brexit on the Irish economy, and the need to address Ireland's housing and infrastructural requirements.³⁸

In relation to adult education and lifelong learning more specifically, the overarching strategy since its publication in 2016 has been 'Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025'. The ten-year strategy seeks to encourage employers to participate in skills development through active collaboration with education and training providers, to enhance the capability of SMEs through skills development, to promote and communicate the benefits of lifelong learning and the support disadvantaged and under-represented groups to participate in education, amongst other goals.³⁹

More recently and more specifically in the FET sector, SOLAS published its new four-year Strategy for the Further Education and Training Sector in 2020. The Strategy recognises the need to invest in anticipating and responding to rapidly evolving regional and national needs, promoting inclusion by tackling the specific and diverse issues faced by the most marginalised groups in society through more targeted approaches, and addressing the current complex structure and lack of clarity on learning offers by implementing simplified pathways into education and training.⁴⁰ Moreover, in 2021, the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) was launched as a new 10-year strategy to address literacy, numeracy and digital inclusion needs via a cross government and cross-society approach.⁴¹

In May 2022, DFHERIS published a policy platform document - Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge⁴² to work towards a more unified tertiary education and research system, to be able to implement more diverse and aligned learning and development opportunities for learners and researchers; ensuring a higher degree of responsiveness the further education and training, higher education, research and innovation sectors to new challenges; and foster more flexible approaches to skills development. Moreover, in October 2022, the Higher Education Authority Act⁴³ was adopted, setting out the functions and governance structure of the HEA. Part 5 of the Act focuses on lifelong learning, requiring the HEA to promote and support HEIs in the development and provision of lifelong and flexible learning for learners.

These new policies and strategies further exemplify the central role that adult education and lifelong learning plays within policymaking in Ireland. While not establishing an ILA-type

³⁸ EGFSN 2022 The Expert Group on future Skills Needs Statement of Activity 2021.

https://www.egfsn.ie/all-publications/2022/egfsn-annual-activity-statement-2021_.pdf [accessed on 20/06/2023]

³⁹ Department of Education and Skills (2016) Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025. Available at

<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/137349/3b66360a-64f4-45db-881f-eb326950051e.pdf#page=null>

⁴⁰ SOLAS 2020 Future FET: Transforming Learning The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024 available at:

https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

⁴¹ <https://www.adultliteracyforlife.ie/>

⁴² DFHERIS 2022 Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge

<https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/982e2-unified-tertiary-education-sector/>

⁴³ Higher Education Authority Act 2022

<https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/act/2022/31/eng/enacted/a3122.pdf>

instrument, these policy documents support several of the key objectives of the ILA Recommendation, particularly the need to support more disadvantaged groups of learners to participate in lifelong learning opportunities that are able to respond to their needs as well as those of the market.

In July 2022, the Irish government announced a reform of the funding model for the FET sector.⁴⁴ The reform aims to establish a new funding model based on a 5-pot system, to allow each ETB effectively and strategically deliver FET that meets the needs of their regions. One pot will focus on quality assurance, enterprise engagement, learner support, programme development and data analysis, while the remaining four pots be mostly dedicated to training provision. The overall aim is to establish a more outcome-oriented system, where investment in FET is driven by the previous years' activity, rather than on demand predictions. This means the funding 'pot' may vary from year-to-year, depending on the overall SOLAS budget granted by the exchequer, with the ETBs' shares of that pot based in part on FET learner demand; and on other regional costs and needs. While this reform will not lead to the establishment of an ILA-type of instrument, it represents an important step forward in terms of providing a more central role to learners, whose demand for FET will have a direct impact on investment levels.

Lastly, In November 2021, the Irish government launched a review process of Ireland's National Skills Strategy, 2016 to 2025,⁴⁵ to be led by the OECD. The review, which started in early 2022, was completed in May 2023 with the publication of 'OECD Skills Strategy Ireland – Assessment and Recommendations'. The report presents 24 tailored recommendations for Ireland on building a further strengthened skills system and ensuring the ongoing relevance of the country's national skills strategy.⁴⁶ While not explicitly recommending the implementation of individual learning accounts, the OECD report covers many of the key elements of the enabling framework promoted by the ILA Recommendation.⁴⁷ These include enhancing cooperation across stakeholder groups to improve the overall governance of the FET system; further consolidating the provision of online information on learning opportunities; strengthening career guidance services; incentivising participation, including from more disadvantaged groups; reforming funding for lifelong learning.

⁴⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/8510f-significant-shift-in-how-further-education-and-training-sector-is-funded-announced-by-minister-harris/>

⁴⁵ <https://assets.gov.ie/24412/0f5f058feec641bbb92d34a0a8e3daff.pdf>

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/256184/c6e02dad-0790-4a53-8fda-cfe74cd0a7f4.pdf#page=null>

⁴⁷ OECD (2023), OECD Skills Strategy Ireland. <https://www.oecd.org/publications/oecd-skills-strategy-ireland-d7b8b40b-en.htm> [accessed on 10/11/2023]

CHAPTER 4. Role of public funding for adult learning in Ireland

4.1. Role of public funding in adult learning

Due to the numerous actors involved in providing adult learning services, it is difficult to provide an estimate for the total spending on adult learning in Ireland. However, there is detailed information available on principal funding mechanism, the National Training Fund (NTF).⁴⁸ It is funded by a levy on employers, which is collected through the Pay As You Earn (PAYE)/Pay-Related Social Insurance (PRSI) system and transferred monthly to DFHERIS by the Department of Social Protection. Following a consultation process in 2017, the Government decided to increase the NTF levy by 0.1% annually for 2018, 2019 and 2020 as part of the budget process. Following the implementation of the reforms, the current levy is one% for 2023. The NTF was originally ring-fenced and heavily concentrated on funding of SOLAS training programmes. Over time there has been a move away from ring-fenced arrangements and the NTF is now a broad-based fund supporting higher education, FET and some programmes providing enterprise and employment supports.⁴⁹

In 2022, the NTF had a surplus of over EUR 850 million, while in 2023, the NTF's income is projected to be EUR 1.02 billion, with spending of ERU 0.9 billion, resulting in an expected surplus of around EUR 0.12 billion. The total accumulated surplus in the NTF is projected to reach between EUR 1.4 to EUR 1.5 billion by end 2023, following successive years of surpluses being generated by the fund. As the Irish economy was operating at record levels of employment in mid-2023, a challenge facing the NTF is shifting priorities of how to balance the allocation of funding between training for employment and training for those seeking to upskill.⁵⁰ Employer organisations have been calling for these resources to be used to address skills shortages experienced by businesses and support companies facing higher expenditures due to higher minimum wages, and other labour market reforms that they see as posing additional costs to employers.⁵¹

In 2021, the NTF spent EUR 741 million on a range of programmes supporting adult learning. EUR 300 million of NTF funding was reserved for adults (already) in employment and EUR 438 million for preparing young people and adults for employment. The NTF supports frameworks supporting enterprises and their respective employees, working at a sectoral, respectively sectoral and regional level, with Skillnet Ireland and its about 70 business networks as the key example. Moreover, it provides funds for specific frameworks supporting

⁴⁸ <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/58402/65518/F-1684392121/IRL58402%202014.pdf>

⁴⁹ https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2023/2023-06-20_an-overview-of-the-national-training-fund-ntf_en.pdf [accessed on 10/08/2023]

⁵⁰ https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2023/2023-06-20_an-overview-of-the-national-training-fund-ntf_en.pdf [accessed on 10/08/2023]

⁵¹ <https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/media/2022/09/05/government-must-utilise-the-855-million-surplus-in-the-ntf> [accessed on 05/06/2023]

particular types of educational opportunities, with the Springboard+ scheme as the key example. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the breakdown in spending between programmes. Section 6.2 of this report provides more information on Springboard+; section 6.3 provides more information on Skillnet Ireland and its support in particular for the hospitality/tourism sector; and section 6.4 provides an example of regional support provided by an ETB.

Figure 4 Overview on National Training Fund (NTF) Allocation in 2021



Source: <https://assets.gov.ie/242525/fdd1bda5-a52b-4af4-9bb4-ba3e3b03b79b.pdf>

4.2. Role of provider-mediated (supply-side) funding for adult learning

Overall, in Ireland, supply-side funding strategies for adult learning are more pronounced than demand-side strategies, with educational providers receiving public funding for places in their courses or programmes, covering all or a part of the costs. Individuals may need to contribute a particular share of the costs (these costs are set out clearly for higher education programmes) or can participate for free, depending on the arrangements and their eligibility for specific forms of financial support. Moreover, specific forms of demand-side funding instruments or instruments using a mixture out of supply-side and demand-side funding approach exist (See section 4.3 below).

Supply-side funding for adult learning in Ireland is geared towards social inclusion and the FET sector. It is made available by DFHERIS in cooperation with the Department of Public

Expenditure and Reform (DPER)⁵² and comes through the NTF and SOLAS costs. EU funding programmes, such as the European Social Fund, are also used to partly fund FET provision and adult learning courses for those furthest from the labour market. By way of example, the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Funds (now called the Reach Fund) were put in place to address educational disadvantage among adults.⁵³ The EUR 5.5 million Reach Fund delivers funding to improve access and supports for educationally disadvantaged learners. There is a strong focus on community education as a mechanism to support disadvantaged learners, and increasing the availability of devices and technology.

Interviewees highlighted the crucial role played by community-based education initiatives (e.g., women's groups, local unemployed groups), usually supported by community development funding rather than education funding. These initiatives are highly localised or and respond to sector specific needs at the local level. According to interviewees, while organisations carrying out such initiatives have been increasingly coordinating with the ETBs as they do not have the necessary research capacity to carry out quality assurance, some have a 'conflicted relationship' with public funding and maintain a 'critical distance' from statutory bodies.

The NTF also supports a supply-side funding strategy via the FET offer implemented through ETBs. The ETBs provide a large variety of adult education programmes, including initial vocational education and training, re-entry routes for individuals including literacy and basic education and professional or vocational development of individuals. Overall, Ireland is in a strong position in terms of the range and depth of the supply-side offering available to employed and unemployed people in Ireland.

4.3. Participant-mediated (demand-side) funding for adult learning

Figure 5 provides an overview on policies using mainly demand-side measures, which, however, do not include Individual Learning Accounts or related instruments. Nevertheless, they are partly fulfilling – in isolation or in combination - the objectives set out by the ILA Recommendation.

As indicated earlier, the NTF has evolved from primarily funding supply-side measures in FET to also funding demand-side measures that aim to meet the skills needs of the economy. On the demand side, NTF-funded measures include the Skills to Advance programme operated through ETBs works with companies with employees aged over 50 who work in lower-skilled jobs or roles which are experiencing significant change, to offer subsidised upskilling and reskilling options for staff. The Skills for Work programme (see #113 in Figure 5) provides free of charge, 35-hour long programmes for employees to deal with skills demands in the workplace. It is also delivered by the ETB network. These two similar programmes are provided by the same organisation, yet there is little apparent difference between them and

⁵² <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/99ca806e56/fet-funding-model-review-june-2022.pdf>

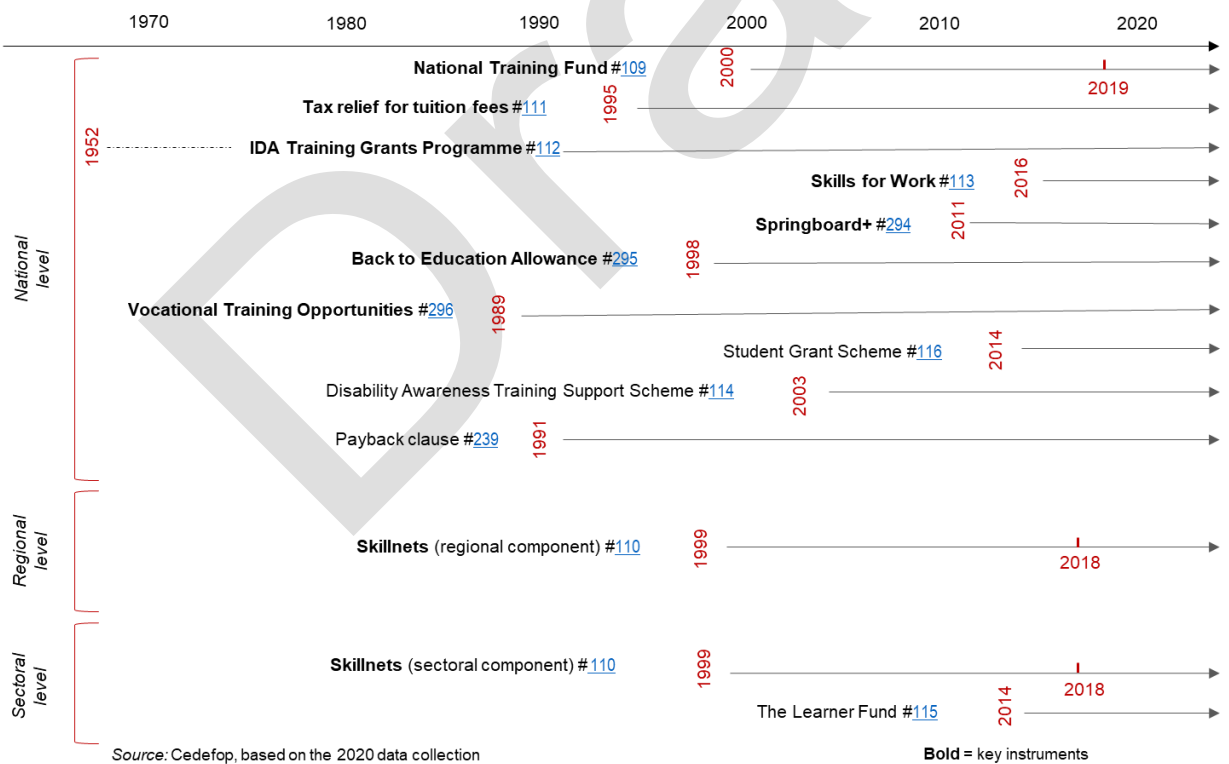
⁵³ <https://www.solas.ie/reach-fund/>

information is spread across the SOLAS, FETCH and ETB websites. This exemplifies some of the barriers referred to in accessing adult learning in Ireland.

Still financed through the NTF, the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS – see #296) is targeted at unemployed persons over 21 years of age (mainly longer-term unemployed), granting a training allowance in place of welfare payment and compensation for travel and food. Participants can also access childcare supports. In the higher education sector, specific financial support is provided to students (grants – see #116, tax incentive – see #111). In 2019-20, the total cost of the Student Grant scheme to the Exchequer was EUR 334 million.⁵⁴

Employers receive state-funded contributions to their training costs for particular types of training activities and groups of employees through a number of different schemes (#112). Foreign-owned companies can apply for the grant in the context of improving the company’s long-term competitiveness and transformation. The eligible education and training activities include specific work-related training and general skills training. The co-funding share is variable: 25% is funded in the case of specific training and 60% is funded in the case of general training. There is a specific grant providing support to the promotion of disability awareness to their staff (#114).

Figure 5. Development of demand-side instruments over time – Ireland



⁵⁴ https://www.indecon.ie/assets/files/pdf/report_on_indecon_review_of_the_student_grant_scheme.pdf [accessed on 07/08/2023]

The NTF also funds the work of Skillnet Ireland (see #110 in Figure 5), which provides training for companies and employees at the regional and sectoral levels. The work of Skillnet Ireland is explored in more detail in Section 6.3. The picture in Ireland is mixed when it comes to co-funding instruments for direct costs of learning or supply-side funded provision. Ireland has no training leave scheme, however, employers voluntarily sending employees to Springboard+ , a mixed supply- and demand-side funding instrument, can use the JobsPlus Incentive to offset wage costs. The Back to Education Allowance (#295) offers additional support for subsistence costs for disadvantaged candidates.

4.4. Conclusion – the space left for a novel type of ILA

While the adoption of the Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts⁵⁵ was welcomed by the Irish government, the implementation of the Recommendation, or the establishment of an ILA-type instrument is not currently being discussed at national level. This is because the Ireland's FET system is considered to be in a strong position in terms of both the range and depth of the supply-side (provider-mediated) funded education and training provision. Overall, however, all interviewed stakeholders recognised the relevance of the main objectives and goals of the Recommendation, and generally agreed on the need to focus on strengthening the current system to establish a strong enabling environment, particularly with regards to the provision of career guidance and outreach efforts towards learners.

It is worth noting that most interviewees across stakeholder groups shared positive views on the potential of micro-credentials to increase take-up of and participation in adult education and lifelong learning.

Lastly, the recommendations of the OECD Ireland Skills Strategy Project report published in May 2023, while not directly linked to the implementation of the Council Recommendation, might further influence future policy developments in adult education and training in Ireland.

⁵⁵ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8944-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

CHAPTER 5. Enablers for taking up adult learning (‘*Enabling framework*’)

5.1. Introduction

The Council Recommendation on ILAs highlights that adult learning participation can be only partially increased by introducing new funding instruments in isolation, as there are many more reasons for non-participation beyond ‘financial barriers’. This means that public supply-side funding or demand-side funding instruments alone might not be sufficient to reach the goal of increasing adult learning participation. Consequently, the embeddedness of these funding instruments in the wider adult learning system is of central importance. The existence of services complementary to demand-side and supply-side funding, including guidance, validation of non-formal and informal learning, training leave, outreach and awareness raising activities as well as a quality assurance framework are often a necessary condition for raising adult learning participation.

This report will describe these complementary arrangements/institutions of the enabling framework that act as favourable conditions for the operation of the countries’ main funding instruments. In this chapter, they will be studied addressed as a feature of the current adult learning system in Ireland.

5.2. Digital portal for accessing support and accessible database/registry of learning, career guidance, validation and funding opportunities

The Irish FET sector is characterised by the presence of several digital portals and online databases, which tend to mirror the variety of actors involved in education and training. While each portal has its own scope and audience (see Table 3), the large number of existing databases (mostly freely accessible) makes for a complex ecosystem, where information and target groups are often overlapping. For instance, lists of available training opportunities can be found on several portals, including Qualifax, FETCH, CareersPortal⁵⁶, the Right Course. Information usually includes technical details about the opportunity (e.g. duration, location, timing, provider); a general description of the course as well as the eligibility criteria to participate in the training and the learning objectives to be achieved. While there are some links between these platforms (e.g. the Qualifax portal includes direct links to the CAO website), coordination is not systematic, and may lead to increased confusion among learners due to duplication of information.

⁵⁶ See Cedefop. Resources for guidance. CareersPortal.ie.

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/resources-guidance/handbook-transferability/case-studies/careersportalie> [accessed 25.1.2024]

Qualifax stands out as the online platform that includes the most accurate and user-friendly information on validation and certification, most likely due to Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI)'s leading role in the development and management of the portal. On this platform, under each training opportunity, learners can access information on whether the course will lead to a qualification, to what level of the NQF this corresponds to, and opportunities for future career progression linked to the training and/or qualification obtained. The myExperience portal provides a specific entry point for validation and certification of knowledge and skills of learners having completed or interested in undertaking training. Applications are assessed against several relevant criteria (e.g. module learning outcomes or programme entry requirements), based on the evidence provided by applicants themselves⁵⁷.

Table 3. examples of portals operating in Ireland

PORTAL	DESCRIPTION	RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY	TYPE OF INFORMATION PROVIDED				
			TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES	CAREER GUIDANCE	FINANCIAL SUPPORT	VALIDATION	LABOUR MARKET INFORMATION
Qualifax	Ireland's National Learners' Database and provides comprehensive and up-to-date information on further and higher education and training options in Ireland and beyond. Specific sections target students, adult learners, practitioners, parents/families, and apprentices.	QQI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Further Education and Training Course Hub (FETCH)	The FETCH portal provides learners with a search tool to find training opportunities, as well as information on grants and allowances to obtain financial support.	SOLAS and ETBI	✓		✓		
eCollege	eCollege is the national online learning service for further education and training. The portal provides a range of free online learning courses, that allow learners to attend training their own pace	SOLAS	✓				

⁵⁷ Atlantic Technological University. *MyEperience.ie*. <https://www.myexperience.ie/how-to-apply/> [accessed on 10.07.2023]

information on funding support is outlined under each training opportunity, allowing potential learners to have a complete overview not only of the costs associated with training that is relevant to them, but also of grants and allowances they can take advantage of. More commonly, information on grants and funding remains rather general, with platforms just listing existing schemes, without linking them to any specific training opportunity. This is for example the case for the FETCH portal, which gathers general information on grants and allowance on a specific webpage⁵⁸, but does not include any indication of available financial support within its course finder tool. While not specifically focused on the FET sector, moreover, the Citizen Information website, managed by the Citizen Information Board on behalf of the Department of Social Protection, provides information on a wide range of financial schemes available to adult learners and job seekers⁵⁹. These, however, are not directly linked to any specific training opportunity.

On career guidance, while general career information can be accessed through several portals (e.g. Qualifax; The Right Course; Generation Apprenticeships), MyCareerPath stands out as the online portal providing the most personalised and targeted guidance provisions to learners.⁶⁰ Consulting career advisors to discuss learning pathways is a pre-requisite to be able to access the platform and allows for more tailored support to be provided to adult learners, entrepreneurs seeking to upskill, and employees looking to accelerate their career and progress within their organisation.

Box 1 Example of portal: MyCareerPath

The Atlantic Technological University (ATU) has developed a new website/portal, mycareerpath.ie, as one of the projects funded under the Human Capital Initiative. This new portal will be targeted both at people who are looking to reskill and newcomers to the labour market, with the aim to provide users with individualised and targeted financial and non-financial support. To this end, in order to access the portal, each user will be asked to meet with an adviser to assess needs, strengths, interests, in order to ensure that users are matched with relevant industry sectors and courses. Afterwards, the portal can be accessed online by the user.

Source: stakeholder interview, 2022

Lastly, on careers and labour market information, CareersPortal.ie and SmartChoices are examples of online platforms available to adult learners in Ireland. These platforms target a wide range of stakeholder groups (e.g. students; job seekers; employers; employees) and include interactive dashboards where users can access information and resources on specific sectors and job profiles within these, providing both qualitative (i.e. career pathways, vacancy

⁵⁸ Government of Ireland. *Further Education Training Course Hub (FETC)*. <https://www.fetchcourses.ie/courses/grants> [accessed on 10.07.2023]

⁵⁹ For example, see Citizens Information Board. *Citizens Information*. <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social-welfare/social-welfare-payments/back-to-education/> [accessed on 09.07.2023]

⁶⁰ Atlantic Technological University. *MyCareerPath*. <https://mycareerpath.ie/learners/book-an-appointment/> [accessed on 10.07.2023]

information, job descriptions, etc.) or quantitative (i.e. employment statistics, occupational forecasts) information. For example, CareersPortal.ie, a privately operated freely available website, provides detailed information for a broad range of occupational profiles, including skills needed to access each of these, relevant labour market updates, information on career progression as well as on salary and pay.⁶¹ The SmartChoices portal is operated by SOLAS and it includes a specific section dedicated to labour market information, where users can find out about employment prospects for a large number of occupations, including employment and growth statistics, alongside a search tool to look up relevant training courses. Despite the useful information that can be accessed through these portals, several shortcomings can be identified, including: lack of information on skills gaps and mismatches within sectors and professions; lack of disaggregated statistics and information to allow for a more thorough overview of labour market needs by region; as well as considerable overlap in between the two websites as the information is often based on the same sources.⁶² In addition, for example the CareersPortal.ie suffers from high resources needed to update on a daily basis and maintenance of the portal, as well as the amount of information which could be intimidating for people with low digital literacy skills⁶³. Furthermore, as with other portals, links are made to other online platforms where users can access information on training opportunities. However, guidance on what type of information can be found on each of these websites remains rather general.

Most of this information is provided at a centralised level. As shown above, the main digital portals and online databases are managed by public institutions and organisations at the national level and target the Irish FET sector as a whole. However, this does not mean that sectoral and/or regional portals do not exist. ETBs as well as sectoral and/or regional Skillnets have individual websites covering specific regions or industrial ecosystems. However, information provided on these websites is often limited to opportunities for training and/or career/education guidance, with less focus on labour market needs. These regional and sectoral portals are often linked to national platforms (e.g. FETCH), re-routing users to other websites where information is stored.⁶⁴

Interviewees across stakeholder groups highlighted the existence of several portals providing information on lifelong learning opportunities and stressed that these can result in duplication, and overlaps, and can lead to learners feeling overwhelmed by the large number of information sources available to them. Interpreting this information for clients, and enabling

⁶¹ <https://careersportal.ie/about.php> [accessed on 10.07.2023]

See also Cedefop. Resources for guidance. CareersPortal.ie. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/resources-guidance/handbook-transferability/case-studies/careersportalie> [accessed 25.1.2024]

⁶² OECD (2023), *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en>

⁶³ See also Cedefop. Resources for guidance. CareersPortal.ie. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/resources-guidance/handbook-transferability/case-studies/careersportalie> [accessed 25.1.2024]

⁶⁴ For example, see Cork College of FET. *Cork Further Education and Training Service*. <https://fet.corketb.ie/our-courses/full-time-courses/level-5-6-courses/?sfcw-courseid=371711> [accessed on 10.07.2023]

their career development skills in using these portals, is a competence area expected of career practitioners. To this end, feedback from the interviewees pointed towards the need for a more centralised approach to information, through the development of a single portal to act as the main point of access for learners and practitioners. It was mentioned that this could be implemented either by developing a new portal, gathering the information currently available on existing platforms, to serve all needs, or by selecting one of the current portals as the main webpage for adult education, with a link to other websites and a clear explanation of how different portals complement each other. Moreover, for online portals to be as effective and useful as possible, several interviewees mentioned the need to improve accessibility and user-friendliness, to ensure that the information provided is clear and understandable for all. This aligns with policy recommendations on ICT based practices in career guidance made by Cedefop (2018). Furthermore, interviewees highlighted the importance of ensuring that the opportunities included on these portals are up-to-date, and that they are paired with more information on current labour market needs. This, for example, could be achieved by ensuring better links with the work carried out by Regional Skills Fora, the EGFSN and other organisations monitoring developments and labour market intelligence so that users are better informed in their choices and career guidance professionals can better use the information to support decision-making of clients.

Ensuring learners have access to an up-to-date public registry of training, career guidance and validation opportunities is a key component of the enabling framework outlined in the ILA Council Recommendation. In this sense, the Irish FET system is compliant with the Recommendation, given the number of existing digital platforms offering a wide range of services. Despite this, gaps remain. First, as outlined above, the information ecosystem remains rather complex, duplication across platforms, and lack of systematic coordination, could potentially lead to unwanted results, by increasing the confusion among potential learners and discouraging them from taking up learning opportunities, calling for a better rationalisation of the offer. Some platforms do not provide information on accessibility features according to the governing standards, as well as access for those with low digital skills or other barriers. Furthermore, the Council Recommendation also calls for clear rules to be published to regulate the inclusion of learning opportunities onto public platforms, based on a set of quality criteria and in cooperation with social partners and relevant stakeholders). Currently, there is insufficient transparency on the approach to the selection and appraisal of the opportunities that ultimately are included onto these platforms. Anecdotal evidence from the consultations suggests that, at least for certain privately-run websites (e.g. Courses.ie), editorial and fact checking teams are responsible for selecting and appraising training offers that are advertised online, to ensure that only reliable opportunities are promoted to learners. However, information on the selection procedures and/or quality criteria and standards applied to support these processes is not available on any of the publicly-run platforms, indicating that additional steps are needed to ensure full compliance with the provision of the ILA Recommendation.

5.3. Lifelong guidance/ career guidance

Ireland, like other EU Member States, has seen significant transformations due to megatrends such as globalisation and digitalisation, affecting jobs and careers, as well as the world of education. Similarly, with Ireland's population getting steadily older since the 1980s⁶⁵, demographic changes and longer lifespans result in labour market changes, with more people staying in employment for longer. These trends are rapidly impacting the worlds of education and work, making effective career guidance even more crucial to ensure sustainable, inclusive and adaptable labour markets, where individuals are supported, enabled and empowered to navigate through changes and transitions and develop their careers. However, according to research participants of this projects, this as an area where Ireland's performance could be enhanced.

As shown in the previous section, several existing online self-help platforms already provide career information and offer staff supported guidance to potential learners seeking for opportunities to upskill and reskill, or looking for information on labour market needs to better identify the learning pathway that best responds to their needs. These resources can be used by those with adequate career readiness and career management skills, and who are in a position to utilise self-help tools or to reach out and find them.

However, as highlighted by interviewees and mentioned elsewhere in this report, the full potential of existing online platforms and online guidance services is yet to be realised. This is due, on one hand, to the plethora of online platforms available leading to duplication; and, on the other hand, to the lack of tools and services taking advantage of new technologies (e.g. AI and chatbots), including staff assisted services, that could provide real-time support to users and respond to simple queries.

While online guidance remains crucial as it can allow for facilitated contact with career practitioners, interviewees stressed the need to avoid over-reliance on mobile apps and digital portals. Data shows that 30% of adults in Ireland have less than basic digital skills,⁶⁶ highlighting the need to ensure that online portals do not replace face-to-face, in addition to the principle that the preference of service users, who also face different accessibility issues, is also important in career guidance policy.

As with online portals, the system of provision of guidance in Irelands stands out for its complexity as it involves coordination across levels and stakeholders, with different structures and institutions being involved depending on the specific target audience. Furthermore, the guidance services provided are also of a mixed nature, as these entail both one-to-one and group sessions, online and in-person provision, centralised and decentralised approaches, which is an advantage in respect to mature lifelong guidance systems that offer different channels and modes of service to suit all clients. The National Centre for Guidance in

⁶⁵ Central Statistics Office (2017). Press statement – An age profile of Ireland. <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2017pressreleases/pressstatementcensus2016resultspofireland/#:~:text=Ireland's%20population%20has%20been%20getting,the%2025%2D44%20age%20group>. [accessed on 12.07.2023]

⁶⁶ European Commission. Digital Skills & Jobs Portal - Ireland: a snapshot of digital skills. <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/latest/briefs/ireland-snapshot-digital-skills>

Education (NCGE)⁶⁷ was an agency of the Department of Education and oversaw the provision of quality guidance both within the education and FET sectors. The NCGE cooperated with relevant stakeholders at national, regional, and international level through the National Forum on Guidance (NFG), which met twice per year to provide stakeholders the opportunity to discuss issues of interest and development in guidance across all sectors. However, in mid-2022, the Department of Education decided to close the NCGE and in January 2023 it launched a public consultation on a 'National Framework for Guidance',⁶⁸ aiming to address shortcomings in the provision of career guidance in Ireland as identified in a report produced by Indecon in 2019.⁶⁹ The background paper accompanying the launch of the consultation sets out some principles guiding the vision for a high functioning guidance system. Under the principle of 'Equal, inclusive and sustainable provision', it is envisioned that any new career guidance system in Ireland should have: *'Well-functioning and accessible hybrid/digital services in which guidance and career development are at the centre, serving lifelong learners smoothly, including provision of digital services (with the use of artificial intelligence) and in person support.'*⁷⁰ Furthermore, the background paper also includes a range of potential policy directions for Ireland, which include exploring the possibility of a centralised multi-channel, blended career guidance support and making guidance support inclusive and career information accessible and available to all.⁷¹ The main priorities mentioned also align with the 2015 European lifelong guidance policy network guidelines for lifelong guidance, where Ireland was a country delegation during their development.

Guidance in Ireland is currently provided through multiple channels. These include:

- Career advice services offices in higher education institutions. These services are available free of charge to students in most higher education institutions and focus on the provision of information, advice, and guidance through helpdesks, as well as one-to-one consultations⁷². According to research, careers advisory and placement professionals provide careers advisory support to 180,000 students across 26 universities, institutes of technology and higher education institutions.⁷³ The Association of Higher Education Career Services (AHECS)⁷⁴ provides support to career advisers based within the HE sector, including by setting standards to ensure quality guidance.

⁶⁷ See <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/17161907-national-centre-for-guidance-in-education/>

⁶⁸ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/ae51d-public-consultation-on-a-strategic-framework-for-lifelong-guidance/>

⁶⁹ <https://assets.gov.ie/24951/dffde726604b451aa6cc50239a375299.pdf>

⁷⁰ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/ae51d-public-consultation-on-a-strategic-framework-for-lifelong-guidance/>

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Cedefop (2023). Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices – Ireland.

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/inventory-lifelong-guidance-systems-and-practices-ireland#guidance-for-higher-education-students> [accessed on 11.07.2023]

⁷³ IBEC (2018), Informed choices: career guidance in an uncertain world. <https://www.smartfutures.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Informed-Choices-Career-Guidance.pdf> [accessed on 11.07.2023]

⁷⁴ <https://ahecs.ie/>

- Adult Education Guidance Service (AEGS): established in 2000 by the Department of Education and Skills, this is now managed within regional ETBs. The AEGS works with both adult learners and early school leavers, and deliver a wide range of services, including one-to-one guidance, group sessions, 'outreach' services, as well as seminars targeting community education learners.⁷⁵ Services provided by AEGS are free of charge.⁷⁶
- ETBs: The 16 ETBs⁷⁷ provide a wide range of information and guidance services in the FET sector to adults aged 18 years and over, including one-to-one free of charge guidance and group guidance, which help people to make informed educational, career and life choices.⁷⁸
- The Springboard+ programme funded by the Higher Education Authority⁷⁹ (see next section) provides a free telephone-based guidance service for the unemployed to receive information and guidance on the programme.
- Public Employment Services (INTREO)⁸⁰: INTREO centres act under the remit of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, and provide free guidance services for job seekers, including through advice and support on developing a curriculum vitae, gaining relevant work experience, finding suitable training,⁸¹ and accessing financial/income support while on an education or training course, depending on the type and length of the course, as well as existing provision of social welfare payments.⁸² Furthermore, INTREO manages the Jobseekers.ie platform, where users can access to career advice and tips on CV and interview preparation, including through a telephone helpline, and to create their own profile, outlining their skills to identify employers whose needs match their experience.⁸³ However, some interviewees said that the focus of INTREO is to move people off the live register and into employment, and that the career guidance they provide tends to have a short-term perspective as a result.

⁷⁵ AONTAS (2020). The Adult Education Guidance Services - Free, Local, Impartial and Confidential <https://www.aontas.com/knowledge/blog/the-adult-education-guidance-services-free,-local,-impartial-and-confidential> [accessed on 05.04.2023]

⁷⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/0da49-career-guidance-and-information/>

⁷⁷ Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). <https://www.etbi.ie/etbs/directory-of-etbs/> [accessed on 05.04.2023]

⁷⁸ Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). <https://www.etbi.ie/fet-guidance/> [accessed on 05.04.2023]

⁷⁹ Higher Education Authority (HEA). <https://hea.ie/> [accessed on 05.04.2023]

⁸⁰ Intreo - the public employment service <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/fb84c0-intreo/> [accessed on 05.04.2023]

⁸¹ Department of Social Protection (26 May 2021). *Get support to find a job.* <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fd0df-get-support-to-find-a-job/> [accessed on 05.04.2023]

⁸² Department of Social Protection (20 May 2021). *Get financial support for training or education.* <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/58c68-get-financial-support-for-training-or-education/> [accessed on 05.04.2023]

⁸³ JobsIreland.ie <https://jobsireland.ie/en-us/about-us> [accessed on 11.07.2023]

As the emphasis in INTREO or ETB career guidance is geared towards getting the service user into employment quickly, there is no clear limit on the amount of time an individual can benefit from the service since the guidance needs to be based on the needs and progress of the client. The career guidance support provided to hard-to-reach groups will invariably be designed to last for a longer period of time as clients move closer to a position of employment and/or education and training.

From a policy perspective, the National Skills Strategy 2025⁸⁴ represents the main roadmap for the provision of guidance. It identifies the development of career guidance services, as well as carrying out a review of existing arrangements as key tools to ensuring that more people across Ireland engage in lifelong learning. Furthermore, the Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025 re-emphasises Ireland's ambition to better support under-represented groups that are further away from the labour market, including through the provision of more tailored and individualised guidance.⁸⁵

Despite the existing provision of career guidance services and commitments across policies and strategies, most interviewed stakeholders highlighted several issues to be addressed to ensure learners are adequately supported. First, as career guidance is split across different authorities and bodies, service provision remains fragmented and insufficiently streamlined. Furthermore, interviewees mentioned that learners are not always aware of the support available to them: a 2022 report by AONTAS revealed that, while those that did engage in career guidance found it very useful, the majority of those who did not take advantage of these services did not know that guidance was available to them or how to access it.⁸⁶ Interviewees stressed that guidance should be adequately tailored to ensure that learners received support that responds to their specific needs and circumstances.

According to some interviewees, conflicting interests (i.e. different agencies providing training opportunities and competing for the same target user audience) often have an impact on the extent to which adequate, transparent guidance can be provided. One interviewee mentioned that some ETBs were becoming like 'recruitment centres' in their career guidance because they were focused on solving the staff shortages in certain companies rather than providing impartial career guidance. Overall, a lack of resources and a lack of adequate training for career practitioners were seen as negatively affecting the provision of quality guidance to learners throughout the course of their lives. Elftorp and Stokes (2022) also reviewed some issues affecting AEGS, and the insufficient number of career professionals in adult career guidance.

These shortcomings were also reflected in the outcomes of the recent OECD Skills Strategy Assessment and Recommendations project, which stressed the need to improve the quality of guidance counselling services by providing high-quality and up-to-date information,

⁸⁴ Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2021). *National Skills Strategy 2025* <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/>

⁸⁵ Department of Social Protection (2021). *Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1feaf-pathways-to-work-2021/>

⁸⁶ AONTAS (2022). *National FET Learner Forum – Annual Synthesis Report 2021-2022* https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Annual-Reports/AONTAS_NFLF_AnnualSynthesisReport%20FINAL.pdf

including on labour market needs and skills requirements, and tools to support guidance counsellors in providing effective guidance to learners.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the OECD review also highlighted the current extensive but segregated provision in the FET sector, which is not conducive to ensuring outreach and accessibility, or avoiding biases towards guidance services' own education and training offers.⁸⁸

In terms of compliance with the provisions of the ILA Recommendation, the Irish lifelong guidance system is in line with the provision calling for guidance services, either in person or on-line, to be available to learners free-of-charge. However, considering the many shortcomings outlined above and highlighted by the interviewees, the Recommendation's call for strong links with other key elements of the enabling framework (e.g. online portals) to ensure learners have access to holistic support through a variety of avenues and resources, still represent gaps to be filled. To this end, the consultation in early 2023 by the Department of Education on a 'National Framework for Guidance' is particularly relevant.⁸⁹ Through this process, Ireland aims to achieve a well-functioning and accessible guidance system that brings together in-person, online and hybrid support to address current shortcomings, with policy options ranging from taking more advantage of digital technologies to provide more effective support (including by exploring options for a centralised multi-channel, blended career guidance support); to improving the use of labour market intelligence and building the competencies of guidance professionals.⁹⁰

5.4. Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is referred to as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Ireland.⁹¹ Data available from QQI shows that, over the past few years, there has been a general downward trend in the number of FET and HE learners receiving awards, potentially accelerated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent data from 2022 seems more positive, as the downward trend has started to revert, with numbers of learners gaining an award increasing by 4% from 2021 – the largest increase since 2015⁹². It should be noted, however, that increases are mostly due to a boost in popularity of bite-sized qualifications (e.g. micro-credentials) which have gained more popularity among learners,

⁸⁷ OECD (2023), *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Department of Education (4 January 2023), Public Consultation on a Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance. <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/ae51d-public-consultation-on-a-strategic-framework-for-lifelong-guidance/>

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Cedefop (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Ireland*. http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Ireland.pdf

⁹² Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). *Annual analysis of awards made by QQI in 2022*. https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2023-02/QQI%20Certification%20Data%20and%20Analysis%202022_0.pdf

while FET major awards continued the downward trend observed in the sector since 2014⁹³. This overall downward trend is further evidenced by data on certifications obtained by learners taking part in SOLAS-funded programmes, showing how in 2022, 186 740 learners were enrolled in FET courses, with 136 807 partially or fully completing their course(s), and 71.3% of these completions being fully or partially certified⁹⁴ - 1% less compared to 2021.⁹⁵

Downward trends, albeit slow, may reflect existing shortcomings within approaches to validation and RPL in Ireland. Indeed, while significant progress has been made in terms of the implementation of RPL in Ireland since the 2012 Council Recommendation of validation of non-formal and informal learning, in practice, QQI notes on its website that 'practice in this field is at an early stage nationally and is unevenly available, and can be time-consuming and challenging for applicants', a point echoed by AONTAS, the representative body for community education.⁹⁶

From a regulatory standpoint, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 represent the main frameworks for RPL in Ireland. Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)⁹⁷ was established in 2003 and represents a 10-level system, covering general education, higher education, and further education and training. For each level, the NFQ outlines the needed competencies and skills to achieve a qualification and it lists the pathways to move from one level to the next. Moreover, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012⁹⁸ sets out the statutory basis for QQI's engagement with RPL. QQI represents the main organisation leading on RPL, as it facilitates providers of education and training programmes in issuing certificates to learners who have reached the standard for a QQI award at levels 1-6 of the NFQ. Despite the above-mentioned legal provisions and frameworks, no single national quality assurance system is in place for RPL. QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines require that provider policies and procedures for learner admission, progression and recognition include 'fair recognition of education and training qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning' and that the provider ethos enables flexible learning pathways.⁹⁹ Moreover, the ETBI National Assessment Working Group drafted an Assessment Reference Framework Materials

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ SOLAS (2023). *This is FET Facts and Figures 2022*.

https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/bf2a524405/solas_facts_report_2022.pdf

⁹⁵ SOLAS (2023). *This is FET Facts and Figures 2021*.

https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/6783e52812/solas_facts_report_2021.pdf

⁹⁶ AONTAS (2021). *The Recognition of Prior Learning in the Community Education Sector*.

<https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/European/Recognition%20of%20Prior%20Learning%20Report-FINAL.pdf>

⁹⁷ Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications> [accessed on 04.04.2023]

⁹⁸ Government of Ireland (2012). *Qualifications and quality assurance (education and training) act 2012*

<https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2012/act/28/enacted/en/html>

⁹⁹ Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2016). *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines*.

<https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Core%20Statutory%20Quality%20Assurance%20Guidelines.pdf>

on the Recognition of Prior Learning¹⁰⁰. However, no overarching framework exists, resulting in several unintended effects, including:

- Variety of approaches to RPL: While the process to obtain RPL generally involves completing an application with the support of an RPL mentor, presenting a portfolio of evidence to be assessed, individual institutions providing RPL are fairly autonomous and follow their own specific procedures, including different approaches to skills audits and assessments.¹⁰¹¹⁰²).
- Low awareness levels among learners and employers:¹⁰³ with no national strategy on RPL, nor specific coordination structures to ensure coherence of approaches, the provision of information on RPL is left to individual organisations and agencies (e.g. AEGS; INTREO). However, efforts are being made to address this gap, particularly within the FET sector:¹⁰⁴ ETBs have been developing their own RPL policies and procedures since 2017, and RPL is increasingly and more systematically featured in key policy documents. For example, the National Skills Strategy 2025 mentions the need to provide for the recognition of awards that are consistent with Ireland's NFQ system and ensure quality assurance of courses that result in recognised awards; and develop a common understanding of RPL and share good practices.¹⁰⁵

Moreover, while, as stated above, QQI represent the main public authority responsible for RPL, several other institutional actors and agencies are responsible for validating the learning outcomes of their training offers, mirroring the variety of actors involved in the Irish FET sector. In general, the overarching responsibility for RPL lies with DFHERIS which then coordinates with other relevant government departments (e.g. Department of Social Protection), and agencies under the remit of these. Other agencies involved in RPL in Ireland include ETBs and SOLAS which support the implementation of RPL both strategically and at regional level, through the work of the National Skills Council and the Regional Skills Fora, who play a key role in fostering greater engagement between the education and training sectors, with employers and in matching skills provision with economic and development.¹⁰⁶ The involvement of different organisations, and the level of autonomy granted to these, further contributes to the variety of approaches to RPL, as outlined above.

¹⁰⁰ ETBI National Assessment Working Group (2018). *Assessment Reference Framework – Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*. <https://www.cmetb.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Recognition-of-Prior-Learning.pdf>

¹⁰¹ OECD (2021). *The recognition of prior learning in adult basic education*, https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/skills-and-work/adult-learning/Prior_learning.pdf

¹⁰² ETBI (2019). *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*. and ETBI National Assessment Working Group (2018). *Assessment Reference Framework – Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*. <https://www.cmetb.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Recognition-of-Prior-Learning.pdf>

¹⁰³ Cedefop (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Ireland*. http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Ireland.pdf

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2021). *National Skills Strategy 2025* <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/>

¹⁰⁶ Cedefop (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Ireland*. http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Ireland.pdf

Validation for initial levels of the NFQ are free of charge, however, fees associated with assessment method and/or portfolio building are quite common, and can be applied depending on the institution, sector and level. Reports, however, highlight that fees do not necessarily match the costs of RPL, both in terms of time invested (e.g. to monitor and assess candidates) and financial resources spent,¹⁰⁷ potentially limiting the scope of its implementation as costs may prevent organisations from promoting the use and value of RPL.¹⁰⁸ This risk is further heightened by the fact that funding for RPL is currently only foreseen within allocations to SOLAS and other organisations operating within the FET sector. As such, no national funding framework ringfencing resources for validation is in place either for applicants for RPL or to incentivise providers to implement policies and build capacity¹⁰⁹.

Aside from shortcomings related to funding and awareness raising, a study carried out by QQI in 2021 highlighted lack of sufficient staff training and development and lack of sufficient investment in capacity building as key barriers to RPL.¹¹⁰ Despite these gaps, some positive developments can be identified. In 2017, QQI funded a research report on RPL approaches and practices in publicly funded FET, to support the dissemination of knowledge in this area.¹¹¹ In 2021, AONTAS and the Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at University College Cork developed and delivered a continuing professional development (CPD) programme for community adult education tutors and staff to build their capacity in the area of RPL. The Certificate in Continuing Professional Development in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a special purpose award worth 10 ECT credits and has been designed specifically for adult and community educators to support their work in the use of RPL when dealing with marginalised and vulnerable groups, and employees with low educational qualifications.¹¹² Moreover, another concrete initiative that has taken place has been the creation in 2015 of an RPL Practitioner Network. The network aims to:

- Provide a coherent practitioner voice to shape and inform policy development;
- Support the development of a community of practice, providing opportunities to share learning, face to face, online and through practical sharing of toolkits and resources;

¹⁰⁷ For example, a 2011 report by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs estimates that the average cost of an RPL procedure in Ireland is approximately EUR 1 000 to EUR 1 500 per participant. See Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2011). *Developing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – The Role of RPL In the Context of the National Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives*. https://www.skillsireland.ie/media/egfsn110411-developing_recognition_of_prior_learning.pdf

¹⁰⁸ Cedefop (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Ireland*. http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Ireland.pdf

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2021). *Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Further Education and Training (FET)*. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-10/recognition-of-prior-learning-in-fet.pdf>

¹¹¹ Goggin, D *et al* (2017). *Recognition of Prior Learning in Further Education and Training (FET)*. <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Prior%20Learning%20Report.pdf>

¹¹² University College Cork. *Continuing Professional Development in Recognition of Prior Learning - Cert*. <https://www.ucc.ie/en/ace-ccpdpl/>

- Promote good practice, informed by national and international practitioner and policy perspectives.¹¹³

Feedback gathered through stakeholder interviews confirms that there has been progress with regards to RPL in Ireland, as evidenced by ETBI's efforts to provide certifications to learners who have engaged in learning pathways but do not have certification to show for it at present, and by QQI's work on providing guidance. Despite this encouraging progress, interviewed stakeholders agreed that challenges and/or areas for further development remain. For example, some stakeholders stressed that quality assurance remains crucial, particularly in relation to training programs delivered by private sector providers, which do not always abide by the same quality standards as public providers. Furthermore, while recognising ongoing efforts to standardise approaches to RPL, some stakeholders noted that systematic implementation is still lacking. Lastly, other interviewees mentioned the need for better and increased recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which would benefit from further strengthening in Ireland.

Despite Ireland's ambition in setting up validation opportunities that aligns with the ILA Recommendation, in practice, the great variety of approaches by individual providers, as well as differing costs depending on assessment methods and portfolio building partially hinder the provision of RPL, as they add to the existing complexity of the Irish FET system. This is further reinforced by the lack of coherent approaches to the integration of validation within guidance services and online portals. While all three elements of the ILA Recommendation's enabling framework (validation; information through digital portals; and career guidance) are under the responsibility of the same public organisations and agencies, consultations and research point towards gaps in ensuring a coherent approach to implementation.

5.5. Training leave and contributions to subsistence costs/wage replacement

Irish legislation does not foresee any entitlement to training leave, de facto leaving it to individual employers to allow employees to undertake training. To encourage employers to promote and individuals to participate in lifelong learning and training opportunities, forms of financial support are foreseen in the Irish system. For example, employers voluntarily sending employees to Springboard+ courses can use JobsPlus Incentive offsetting wage costs. Moreover, the Back to Education Allowance offers additional support for subsistence costs for disadvantaged candidates. Lastly, the Part-Time Education Option (PTEO) allows individuals to keep their Jobseeker's Allowance (JA)¹¹⁴ or Jobseeker's Benefit (JB)¹¹⁵ or Jobseeker's

¹¹³ RPL Practitioner Network Ireland. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/2016/04/18/rpl-practitioner-network-ireland/>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social-welfare/social-welfare-payments/unemployed-people/jobseekers-allowance/>

¹¹⁵ <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social-welfare/social-welfare-payments/unemployed-people/jobseekers-allowance/>

Benefit (Self-Employed) (JBSE)¹¹⁶ while attending a part-time day or evening course of education or training (see section 6.2). Income support paid from the National Training Fund for 2018 was EUR 99.1 million which is 23.9% of the overall EUR 415.4 million expenditure from the fund.¹¹⁷

Interviewees across stakeholder groups agree that ensuring employees are allowed to take time off work for training is crucial not only to promote a culture of lifelong learning but also for business growth, as a skilled workforce can lead to increased productivity and competitiveness. However, several concerns remain. For instance, some interviewees highlighted that allowing employees to participate in training during working hours can pose additional obstacles for SMEs, which may rely on small teams to carry out their day-to-day operations. Awareness-raising on the importance and benefits of lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling among employers is also needed to overcome concerns that skilled workers might move on to other, more qualified jobs. Linked to this, one interviewee highlighted that “the fact that the employment market is full means employers are reluctant to release their staff because they worry they might not be able to find a replacement”. Equally however, several interviewees pointed to a collective understanding amongst employers that a circulating workforce becoming increasingly skilled over time is an overall benefit to all employers.

From the perspective of interviewed trade union representatives, the lack of a training leave entitlement was said to lead to inequality of access between workers and ecosystems, with employees in the hospitality and tourism sector, for example, being less likely to have the resources and time to invest in their up-/reskilling compared to workers in the ICT sector; or with personal circumstances and characteristics (e.g. care duties, gender, etc.) resulting in additional barriers to access training opportunities. In this sense, these interviewees stressed that the lack of access to training leave and lack of income replacement when in training are the main barriers to participation in adult learning. It is relevant to note, however, that interviewees representing employers insisted that “the Irish system is not mature enough to facilitate a move towards a training leave entitlement established in legislation as this would put an unnecessary administrative burden and cost on SMEs which are the backbone of the Irish economy”.

5.6. Outreach and awareness-raising activities

As outlined in section 5.3 on lifelong guidance / career guidance and section 5.2 on digital portals, a lack of awareness of training opportunities and/or available support and a lack of clear information (despite the large number of online portals and providers) were mentioned by the vast majority of stakeholders as key barriers to participation in adult education. Indeed, according to interviewees, when it comes to education in Ireland, efforts are focused on front-loading the offer at the start of the educational path, while adult learning opportunities are not

¹¹⁶ <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social-welfare/social-welfare-payments/unemployed-people/jobseekers-benefit-self-employed/>

¹¹⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/24754/c42908b6a02a4d9298418f9cdf129d4.pdf>

as streamlined as needed. There is a wealth of offers available, but potential adult learners may not be aware, and the system is generally difficult to navigate so that actually accessing and knowing what the best fit is remains a challenge due to the multiplicity of offers at regional and national level. According to interviewees, this is an issue also at company level: while multinationals have the necessary resources to invest in identifying the right information to provide to their employees and ensure their engagement in lifelong learning, SMEs struggle to navigate the system. Consequently ‘there are 260 000 SMEs in Ireland, and less than 30 000 people are engaged in training’.

Beyond a lack of awareness and fragmentation in the offer and across information sources, interviewed stakeholders pointed to the need of a more targeted approach to lifelong learning as an important objective to work towards. In particular, consulted stakeholders identified the following groups as in need of extra support structures: the long term unemployed; the low skilled; people with disabilities; parents; carers; people belonging to ethnic minorities. Lack of motivation, time- and childcare-related obstacles represent the biggest barriers to participation in adult learning in Ireland: this is particularly true for parents and carers who may be too busy with family/care responsibilities to engage in learning and training opportunities.¹¹⁸

In the context of the Council Recommendation on ILAs and its provisions on outreach and awareness-raising activities, it is difficult to criticise Ireland given the breadth of the adult learning offer and the fact that most stakeholders appear catered for. Organisations such as AONTAS and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) do their best to reach out to marginalised learners, HEIs aim to serve their student populations, Skillnet Ireland provides information to its member and non-member companies, and SOLAS and the ETBs provide information at the national and county levels about FET opportunities. What does appear to be needed however is greater coordination and streamlining of the offer, either through a new online gateway portal or enhanced cooperation and coordination between providers.

5.7. Quality assurance

As outlined in section 5.4, QQI is the principal stakeholder in Ireland when it comes to quality assuring education and training providers. Among its many functions are:

- maintaining a set of statutory QA guidelines (QAG), policies and criteria;
- approving and periodically reviewing the effectiveness of providers’ QA procedures;
- validating providers’ programmes of education and training leading to QQI awards;
- delegating awarding powers to certain institutions;
- monitoring quality and conducting focussed and thematic reviews.

QQI manages the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)¹¹⁹ and the Irish Register of Qualifications,¹²⁰ a comprehensive database of all qualifications included in the NFQ.

¹¹⁸

https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Lifelong%20Learning/AONTAS_LLL%20Research%20Report_Final%20Digital%20Launch.pdf [accessed on 07/08/2023]

¹¹⁹ <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications>

Public providers of adult learning, such as the ETBs, must have their quality assurance approved by QQI and are subject to external monitoring and review by QQI. Some community education providers also have their own quality assurance procedures approved by QQI, but as stated in section 4.3, some interviewees stated that some community education providers have a 'conflicted relationship' with public funding and maintain a 'critical distance' from statutory bodies such as QQI.

There is no apparent gap in Ireland's quality assurance of adult learning and the provisions of the Council Recommendation. The primary role of QQI is recognised by all the main providers of adult learning and interviewees did not express concerns about quality assurance in general.

Draft

¹²⁰ <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/irish-register-of-qualifications>

CHAPTER 6. Exploration of the implementation of public funding against the backdrop of the goals set by the Council Recommendation on ILA

6.1. Introduction

The EU Council Recommendation on ILAs understands individual learning accounts as a specific form of an individual training entitlement which should contribute to making the individual right for deliberately choosing and accessing adult learning during their working life a reality, irrespective to an adults' socio-economic background. The Council Recommendation acknowledges that any new instrument should 'complement other measures already in place' and should be implemented by Member States 'in accordance with their national needs and circumstances'. This implies that functions of an ILA as defined in the Council Recommendation can also be fulfilled by pre-existing instruments alternative to the specific set-up proposed in the Council Recommendation.¹²¹ Consequently, in this chapter, we ask to what extent existing financial instruments in Ireland cover ILA functions (as defined in the analytical framework) and how they aim to ensure that every adult can access quality learning opportunities of their choice and in line with their needs. Furthermore, we look at which key services of the 'enabling framework' (see previous chapter) are integrated into the respective funding instruments so that they can effectively empower adults to participate in adult learning. This section presents a selection of instruments funded from the National Training Fund (NTF) and the Exchequer that provide a range of supply-side and mixed supply- and demand-side options for people in Ireland looking to upskill and/or (re)train.

6.2. Springboard+

Within the higher education sector, Springboard+ is the most important programme funded by the NTF. It was launched as part of the government's Jobs Initiative in 2011 to provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities to those who were unemployed because of the economic recession that followed the 2008 financial crisis. In recent years, as unemployment has declined, the focus has changed to include more people in employment and those returning to the workforce. We have chosen to examine the programme given that it is an initiative that specifically targets individual adult learners to re-skill/upskill with the aim of finding new employment or to progress in their existing employment. In that way, Springboard+ resembles the type of initiative foreseen in the ILA Recommendation, but although the eligibility criteria have been relaxed in recent years to include people already in employment, it does not provide an entitlement directly to individuals that is theirs to use as they please.

¹²¹ An 'individual learning account is a delivery mode of individual training entitlements. It is a personal account that allows individuals to accumulate and preserve their entitlements over time' (European Commission, 2021).

Specific information on Springboard+ is provided through a dedicated online portal,¹²² which includes further details on available courses, entry and eligibility requirements. Through the Springboard+ website, moreover, users can submit their own application form to take part in funded courses. Springboard+ courses are provided free of charge to those who are unemployed. Social welfare recipients attending Springboard+ courses can keep their payments if they continue to meet the requirements for receipt of those payments. If they start a Springboard+ course but then lose their entitlement to social welfare payments, they can continue to attend the course. Those in receipt of a jobseeker's payment can study part-time on a Springboard+ course under the Part-Time Education Option (PTEO)¹²³ while those attending a full-time course may have the option to receive a Back to Education Allowance (BTEA).

In 2018, access to new Springboard courses was granted to people irrespective of their employment status. Employed participants on courses from a level 7 to 9 qualification were eligible to have 90% of their course fees paid by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), contributing the remaining 10% themselves. Level 6 courses continued to be free for all eligible participants.¹²⁴ Any recent graduates attending skills conversion courses are required to pay 10% of the tuition fee. In this sense, Springboard+ does not represent paid training leave as envisaged in the Council Recommendation. It does not provide workers with funds to replace any salary they might lose during periods of training. Instead, it is designed to be flexible to allow people to study alongside their work.

Furthermore, the recognition of prior learning (RPL) applies to Springboard+, allowing learners who do not meet formal academic entry requirements to apply to courses. Learners with previous qualifications can request the recognition of formal learning, based on the National Framework of Qualifications and for which a formal certification has already been awarded. Furthermore, RPL for Springboard+ learners also includes experiential learning – i.e. the recognition of skills and knowledge acquired through work or life experiences, as well as workplace training courses. Usually, learners are required to fill out a specific form provided by the training institutions delivering the course, setting out any previous certified or experiential learning.¹²⁵

In 2021, more than 10 000 places across 300 courses were available at 36 different institutions, including institutes of technology, universities and private colleges. In terms of validation, all Springboard+ courses are included on the NFQ and lead to a higher education award at either Level 6, Level 7, Level 8 or Level 9 on the Framework. On average, each year between 2012-2021, one in ten of all Springboard+ award achievers attended a QQI-listed HE

¹²² www.springboardcourses.ie

¹²³

https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/back_to_education/part_time_education_option.html

¹²⁴ https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/third_level_education/applying_to_college/third_level_places_for_unemployed_people.html

¹²⁵ For example, see https://www.wit.ie/schools/education/springboard_ictskills#third [accessed on 10/11/2023]

private provider.¹²⁶ Participants in Springboard+ courses provided by publicly-funded HEIs are generally entitled to benefit from the careers advice services provided by HEIs. The latter generally entail careers coaching, providing advice on placement opportunities (e.g. preparing application forms; developing interview skills; effective job search). In some instances, HEIs recruit positions (e.g. Springboard+ advisers or coordinators) to provide support to learners.

The types of courses offered through the Springboard+ initiative are, by design, aligned with the sectors with high-demand, high-growth and/or an identified skills gap. These include data analytics, data science, automation, cloud computing, software development, DevOps, UX design, fintech, innovation and environmental sustainability. With flexibility being a key component of the Springboard+ initiative, most courses are one-year, part-time and many are offered either in a blended format or delivered entirely online, leading to awards from level 6 (Certificate) to level 9 (Master's) on the National Qualifications Framework.

Table 4. Springboard+ Courses and Places by Academic Category Approved in 2021

Skills Category	Total Places	% of Total Places
ICT Skills Conversion (Level 8)	304	3%
1-year Full-time	140	1%
2-year Part-time	164	2%
Springboard Part-time	10,393	97%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary	91	1%
Arts and Humanities	230	2%
Business, Administration, and Law	3,598	34%
Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction	2,940	27%
Health and Welfare	438	4%
Information and Communication Technologies	2,007	19%
Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics	628	6%
Services	421	4%

¹²⁶ https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2022-09/10yearsQQIAwardsRelatedProvisionReport2022_0.pdf [accessed on 09/08/2023]

Social Sciences, Journalism, and Information	40	0.4%
Total	10,697	100%

An evaluation of Springboard+ published in 2016 reported that, between 2011 and 2016, an average of 6 129 participants per year participated in Springboard+ courses, with an average participation rate of 88%. The evaluation, moreover, noted that course participants expressed very positive sentiments about the impact that Springboard+ had had on their lives. Progression rates to employment for those who entered Springboard in 2015 were 57% up from 34% for those who entered in 2011. It also noted that **the proportion of** females participating on Springboard+ ICT courses was 27% which was almost double that entering through the CAO system to mainstream ICT courses at 15%.¹²⁷ However, the nature of Springboard+ as a programme focusing on the higher levels of the NQF means that **it** is not generally accessible to key target audiences in terms of broadening participation in adult learning, for example, the long term **unemployed**, older learners or those with an existing low level of education. **For example, in the 2011-2014 period, 81% of Springboard+ participations had a prior qualification at level 6-10 in the NQF but only 16% of participants had no previous higher education qualification.** Most participants were from the Dublin region at 44%, but this is consistent with the level of provision in Dublin, the size of the population in the city and the concentration of higher education institutions in and around the capital.¹²⁸

6.3. Skillnet Ireland and its support for the hospitality/tourism sector

The adult learning services provided by Skillnet Ireland focus on training, upskilling and reskilling workers to meet the demands of employers. In doing so, Skillnet Ireland in its 2021-2025 strategy says it is well placed to contribute to the EU's Skills Agenda and it can serve as a good practice model for other Member States.¹²⁹ This report therefore considers Skillnet Ireland's activities to be aligned to the goals of the ILA Recommendation in meeting the European Skills Agenda, the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027, the New Industrial Strategy for Europe and other high level EU policies, but it notes that Skillnet Ireland's services do not themselves provide an entitlement directly to individuals that is theirs to use as they please.

Skillnet Ireland operates 70 single sector and mixed sector networks that work with businesses in specific sectors, developing bespoke solutions to meet existing and emerging

¹²⁷ <https://assets.gov.ie/24776/47ecdda9ba5741af976b92c110d10953.pdf>

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ Skillnet Ireland Statement of Strategy 2021-2025 <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Skillnet-Ireland-Strategy-2021-2025.pdf> [accessed on 09/08/2023]

skills needs within those sectors and regions.¹³⁰ In 2022, Skillnet Ireland funding (EUR 43.7 Mio) and enterprise contributions EUR 26.5 million) amounted to EUR 67.2 million of investment which was used to train approximately 92 000 people in 24 000 companies. Skillnet Ireland also operates Regional Skillnets that work with businesses in specific regions, developing bespoke solutions to meet existing and emerging skills needs within specific regions. A company can be part of multiple sectoral and Regional Skillnets depending on their business and geographical location – they are not mutually exclusive. While there are differences in the scope of responsibilities between ETBs and Skillnet Networks, interviewees agreed that in many cases there is overlap in terms of the target audience and regional focus.

Each Skillnet network has its own online portal,¹³¹ where users can find detailed information on how businesses can join the network, available courses (e.g. description, entry fees), as well as resources providing insights into the talent and skills needs in the sector in which the network operates. Furthermore, Skillnet networks provide guidance to their members on how to achieve value for money when investing in learning and development for their employees, contributing to promoting adult education and lifelong learning. Skillnet courses offer academic accreditation and industry recognition, ranging from micro-credentials to continuous professional development programmes. Learners who wish to participate in training courses offered by the relevant Skillnet network can benefit from RPL mechanisms, as they can seek entry based on their prior experiential learning, by presenting evidence and/or undergoing RPL interviews with Skillnet.¹³² According to a report,¹³³ in 2020, Skillnet Ireland supported a total of 24 370 companies, the vast majority of which (94%) were SMEs, representing 8.3% of the overall population of SMEs in the country. In the same year, Skillnet Ireland delivered a total of 614 000 training days to persons in employment and to jobseekers, representing an increase of 163% since 2012.¹³⁴ However, data on the impact of FET courses on specific groups of learners is not available.

Tourism is a significant employer in Ireland, supporting 260 000 jobs prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, generating approximately EUR 9 billion for the Irish economy in 2019. Furthermore, in many rural areas, tourism is the only employer of note outside of agriculture. It is also the sector employs a higher proportion of young people, including a high proportion of young people on a part-time and seasonal basis providing them with their first experience of employment and valuable income to support further education.¹³⁵ The Covid-19 pandemic, however, had a devastating impact on the sector: virtually all tourism businesses had to close due to public health measures; up to 180 000 were jobs lost in 2020

¹³⁰ <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/our-networks/>

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² For example, see <https://retailirelandskillnet.com/apprenticeship-in-retail-supervision-employers/entry-requirements> [accessed on 10/11/2023]

¹³³ Evaluation of Skillnet Ireland in 2019-20 <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Evaluation-of-Skillnet-Ireland-in-2019-20-Indecon-Report-March-2023.pdf> [accessed on 09/08/2023]

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Tourism Recovery Taskforce (2020) *Tourism Recovery Plan 2020-2023*, [link](#)

alone;¹³⁶ and many tourism and hospitality employees moved to other sectors, causing a skills-shortage. Even before full reopening, 88% of businesses reported difficulty in recruiting new personnel, with just over two thirds having trouble in rehiring staff. (Source: Failte Ireland survey July 2021).

Despite businesses investing in recruitment and training, realignment of working hours, and increasing rates of pay, many operations were forced to reduce trading – a cut in opening hours or a reduction in capacity on offer. From a customer perspective the result has been a reduction in choice and/or the quality of the experience. This coupled with higher prices runs the risk of serious longer term reputational damage. Post-secondary level education institutions focusing on hospitality have much lower numbers of students than in previous years, but this may be a cyclical phenomenon as numbers increased after the 2008 financial crisis. The industry is now facing an enormous challenge, with upward pressure on wages inevitable and the risk of a further deterioration in the already critical skills levels.¹³⁷

In this context, the Tourism and Hospitality Careers Oversight Group (COG), a separate body to Skillnet Ireland, plays an important role. Established in March 2016 following a recommendation from the EGFSN, it is made up of sector stakeholders, such as the Irish Hotels Federation, Restaurants Association of Ireland, Irish Hospitality Institute, Failte Ireland, Vintners Federation of Ireland (current chairs), etc. It also includes state bodies such as SOLAS, Skillnet Ireland, ETBI, the Department of Tourism and Transport, the Department of Department of Trade, Enterprise and Employment, and Department for Social Protection. It allows state bodies to hear directly from the sector and to understand their specific needs.¹³⁸

Specifically, within the hospitality and tourism sector, Skillnet Ireland supports several specialised networks including Irish Hotels Federation (IHF) Skillnet, Restaurant & Hospitality Skillnet, Leisure Health & Fitness Skillnet and Rural Food Skillnet. However, in total, 42 Skillnet Business Networks provided upskilling and training programmes to tourism companies in 2022. The IHF Skillnet provides subsidised training to IHF members and other interested hotels. Initially set up as a pilot programme for seven months, it has now secured funding from Skillnet Ireland for a further three years. IHF Skillnet training is part-funded by recipient company contributions – this is seen as important in getting buy-in and a sense of ownership of the benefits. In 2022, Skillnet Ireland trained 1,530 people across 505 companies within the tourism sector. In total, over 400 training courses, masterclasses or CPD briefings were delivered and whilst most companies support were hotels, other businesses included tourist agencies, tour operators and tourist destinations/activities.

While SOLAS and ETBs have their own in-house trainers, Skillnet Business Networks source a mix of providers including specialist private training providers, further education providers and universities. For example, the IHF Skillnet Human Resources Management programme is provided by Griffith College, a privately-run third level college accredited by

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ <https://www.itic.ie/RECOVERY/competitiveness-2022/> and stakeholder interviews

¹³⁸ <https://nexttourismgeneration.eu/addressing-current-and-future-skill-requirements-in-the-irish-tourism-and-hospitality-sector-a-collaborative-approach/> [accessed on 09/05/2023]

QQI. However, not all IHF Skillnet courses are accredited by QQI because the subject content is very specific to the hotel sector.

Some of the larger hotel groups in Ireland are providing their own training and upskilling internally. By way of example, the Dalata Hotel Group has its own training academy and career progression pathways for staff.¹³⁹ However, this hotel group is looking to have its training certified by QQI (or a certified HE provider) as there is growing recognition of the need for certified qualifications that can be recognised across other sectors. Equally, the Cork College of Further Education Westside Hospitality Centre has chosen to have some of its qualifications certified by City and Guilds.¹⁴⁰

Interviewees were clear that they saw the future of training in this sector as being short, online, modular provision based on the principles of micro-credentials.

'You're never going to get anyone attend a 10-day program in person. In my opinion, the hybrid model is where it is and that's where you get the buy-in.'

This bite-size provision would also enable smaller, family-owned enterprises to train their staff while not having to release them for long periods. Last year, the Shannon College of Hotel Management, which is now part of the University of Galway, re-structured some of its Masters programme content so it could be delivered as micro-credentials.¹⁴¹ Interviewees also pointed out that micro-credentials are not only beneficial at the higher levels of the national qualifications framework (levels 6-9). The hospitality/tourism sector has always been a sector where people with a lower level of education, or perhaps early school leavers, have commenced employment. Completing a short micro-credential course is a far less intimidating prospect for these people to progress professionally as opposed to a more formal, long-term programme of education and training.

The national tourism authority, Fáilte Ireland, developed a lot of online learning provision during the Covid-19 pandemic and this was formalised in March 2023 with the launch of learniFI – an online portal containing over 150 training and development courses related to the tourism sector.¹⁴² It also developed a number of career progression pathways for professions in the sector, such as Green Tourism Manager, Chef, and Sales and Marketing. Each pathway sets out the skills and competences associated with different levels of seniority in the profession and links to suggested academic courses for progression.¹⁴³

The work of Skillnet Ireland aligns very closely with the EU-level overarching goals of the ILA Recommendation, for example, implementation of the EU Skills Agenda, and how they can be achieved in Ireland. The training provided is designed to address the skills needs of existing and emerging industries but flexible modes of delivery are being used to facilitate learners as much as possible. External evaluations of Skillnet Ireland in 2019-2020, 2018, 2017 and 2016 concluded that the training provided was relevant to the workforce

¹³⁹ <https://dalatahotelgroup.com/careers/develop-dalata>

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.echolive.ie/corklives/arid-41102725.html>

¹⁴¹ <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/shannoncollege/microcreds/>

¹⁴² <https://supports.failteireland.ie/welcome-to-learnifi/>

¹⁴³ <https://www.failteireland.ie/Development-menu-item/tourism-careers/progression-pathways.aspx>

development needs of business managers.¹⁴⁴ However, the work of Skillnet Ireland does not provide individuals with a universally available, direct learning entitlement that is theirs to use as they please. In that sense, it cannot be considered as an alternative to an ILA as envisaged in the Council Recommendation.

6.4. ETB support in County Offaly

ETBs are a main provider of adult learning in Ireland and worth examining in the context of the ILA Recommendation in Ireland. The 16 ETBs in Ireland (see Figure 6) are statutory education authorities with responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate over 200 Community National Schools, Post-Primary Schools, Further Education colleges, and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes, reaching more than 200 000 learners across Ireland.¹⁴⁵ RPL is used to facilitate access to courses, to ensure that skills and knowledge developed outside of formal education is evaluated and validated, and can support learners to access further training. To further facilitate the implementation of RPL across ETBs, the Donegal and Clare and Limerick ETBs recently developed a toolkit, to be used across the ETB network, which provides tools for ETB staff to support RPL applicants navigate the different stages of the process.¹⁴⁶ As mentioned in section 5.7, moreover, ETBs must have their quality assurance approved by QQI and are subject to external monitoring and review by QQI.

Beyond training courses, ETBs provide information and guidance services in the FET, including one-to-one and group guidance, to support learners in making informed decisions about their education and career. Each of the 16 ETBs has its own online portal,¹⁴⁷ where they provide users with course finder tools with information on activities, qualifications to be achieved and entry requirements. Furthermore, individual ETB websites provide information on how to access (online and in-person) career guidance, as well as other support services for learners (e.g. curriculum development services; psychological support) and employers (e.g. guidance on promoting upskilling and reskilling within their workforce).¹⁴⁸

This report focuses on activities of the Laois & Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB) in the context of a region that is transitioning away from dependency on a carbon-based industry. LOETB covers two counties, Laois and Offaly, in the Midlands region of Ireland. As part of its core responsibilities, it oversees nine post-primary schools, 13 FET

¹⁴⁴ Evaluation of Skillnet Ireland in 2019-20 <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Evaluation-of-Skillnet-Ireland-in-2019-20-Indecon-Report-March-2023.pdf> [accessed on 09/08/2023]

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.etbi.ie/etbs/> [accessed on 10/11/2023]

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.donegaletb.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/RPL-Toolkit-for-Education-and-Training-Providers-Web-Accessible-Version-@-23-March-23.pdf> [accessed on 10/11/2023]

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ For example, see <https://www.cityofdublINETB.ie/further-education-and-training-fet/> [accessed on 10/11/2023].

centres (including the National Construction Training Campus in Mount Lucas¹⁴⁹) and provides FET training in a range of sectors. In 2021, it had 12 075 beneficiaries, and this increased to 17 200 in 2022.

Figure 6. Distribution of ETBs in Ireland



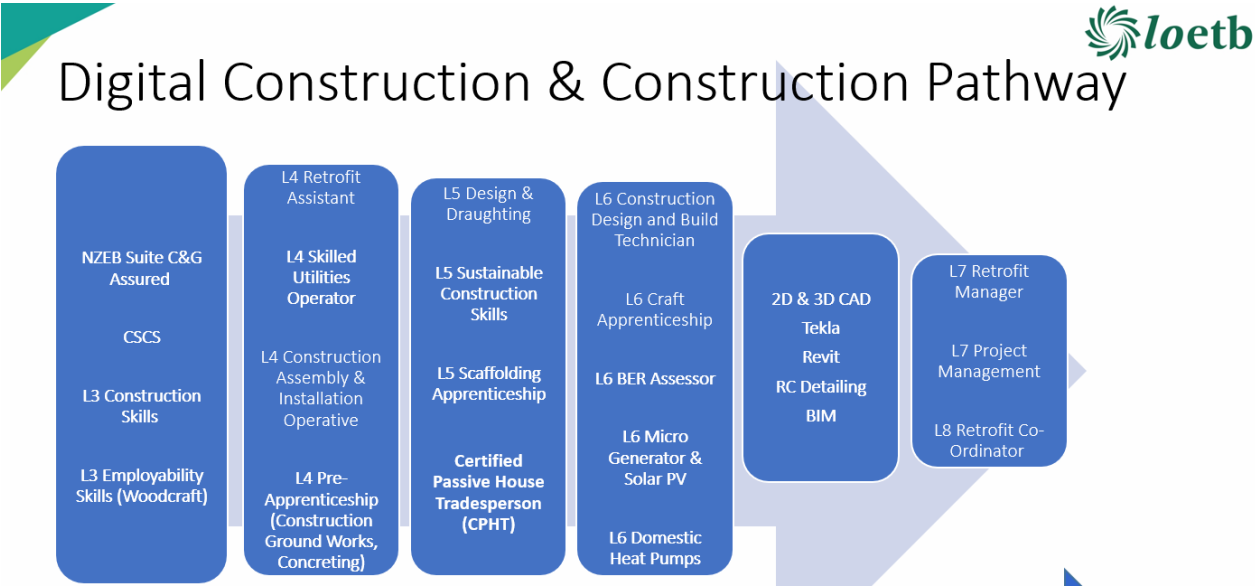
County Offaly has been badly affected in recent years by the closure of the peat harvesting industry which was led by the semi-state company, Bord na Móna, and the related electricity generating power plants run by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) which depended on peat to fire them. County Offaly has no higher education institution within its borders and its HE attainment levels are amongst the lowest in the country. The lack of a HE provider hasn't been an issue for many decades due to the stable employment opportunities provided by Bord na Móna and ESB, but with the decline of these industries, the educational disadvantage becomes more pronounced.

The LOETB has responded to continuing layoffs at Bord na Móna and ESB, both semi-state companies operating in peat harvesting and electricity generation respectively, by working with the companies to provide customised training opportunities for their workers in economic sectors where there are likely to be growth opportunities and where workers are likely to be able to transfer their skills. Working with the Labour Market Unit in SOLAS and the EGFSN, the LOETB identified growth sector opportunities such as the transition to a low carbon economy; advanced manufacturing; the digital economy; sustainable agriculture and biodiversity; and tourism and place-making. The LOETB modularised most of its provision and made it exit-entry, meaning that a learner could join, leave and re-join programme of learning

¹⁴⁹ <https://mountlucas.ie/>

without having to repeat work already done. While this is more challenging and costly for the ETB to deliver, it is a more learner-centred approach which allows them to develop more flexible progression pathways, for example, the Digital Construction and Construction Pathway (see figure 7).

Figure 7. Example of a course provided by LOETB



In terms of career guidance, LOETB’s in-house Adult Educational Guidance and Information Service (AEGIS) works to encourage adult learners to think about their lives in a way they might not have done before, to re-evaluate their existing strengths, abilities and skills, as well as looking at ways to develop new ones. It has worked in particular with Bord na Móna workers to develop their own ideas for start-up businesses or to upscale their existing smallholdings, in particular by providing training through Gurteen College, an agricultural college in County Tipperary.

Offaly and the Midlands are rural regions and can be classified as ‘low density economies’ in contrast with the higher density urban areas of advanced economies. This highlights the importance of an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to rural development and differs from more traditional, centralised rural policies. The LOETB is now working with the newly established Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) to investigate possibilities for greater collaboration in delivering progression pathways for learners from FET to HE and from levels 1-4 of the NQF to Levels 5-9.

LOETB support for adult learners in Laois and Offaly represents a significant supply-side learning offer that covers most elements of the enabling framework as outlined in the Council Recommendation. As with the Skillnet Ireland offer, however, it does not provide individuals with a universally available, direct learning entitlement that is theirs to use as they please. In that sense, while it is perhaps more inclusive than the Skillnet Ireland offer, it cannot be considered as an alternative to an ILA as envisaged in the Council Recommendation.

CHAPTER 7. Country level summary and conclusions – How to rate the Irish baseline against the context of the Council Recommendation on ILA

Summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of the Irish adult learning system against the backdrop of the ILA Recommendation shows that a variety of support instruments are already in place that contribute substantially to the goals of the Council Recommendation. The previous chapters show that Ireland is already in a strong position in terms of the range and depth of the supply-side offering and mixed supply- and demand-side instruments available to employed and unemployed people in Ireland. There is good strategic coordination between the principal stakeholders and providers of training and learning opportunities, and there is strong involvement of employers and social partners, as evidenced by the national level, multi-stakeholder initiatives such as EGFSN and sectoral initiatives such as the Tourism and Hospitality Careers Oversight Group (COG). Given the comparatively small geography and population of the country and the breakdown of national and regional (country-level) competence, strategic coordination and the organisation of delivery is done mainly at a national level, although providers may coordinate at regional level if appropriate, as seen in the example of LOETB.

As outlined in earlier chapters, Ireland is in a comparatively envious position by having a funding surplus available in the NTF to support adult learning. However, there are some challenges and tensions that remain in how this funding should be used and this affects the response to the Council Recommendation on ILA. For instance, differences in participation in lifelong learning according to educational attainment and gender persist. While there is a strong emphasis on social inclusion and key target groups such as members of the Traveller community, people with disabilities, long term unemployed, etc, there is also pressure to respond to the needs of employers for high level skills in sectors such as IT, green technology, finance and to address skills mismatches in Ireland's comparatively well-educated working population.

Another challenge is the complexity of adult learning provision in the Irish system, where multiple several public and private actors are involved in the provision of further education and training opportunities at national, regional and sectoral level, represents a 'turn-off' to people looking to engage. It also means that adult learning providers are often competing for the same learners, particularly at the higher levels of the NQF, representing a potential waste of staff time and resources.

In terms of the overarching enabling framework as envisaged in the Council Recommendation, there is widespread acceptance and understanding of the roles and importance of actors such as QQI and HEA and the overarching NQF in providing quality assurance and validation of adult learning. There is a room for improvement concerning career guidance, although the recent government consultation on this issue suggests there will be developments soon.

Ireland is one of the few EU Member States that does not have a statutory entitlement to training leave for employees. Feedback from interviews highlighted the difficulties foreseen with the implementation of such a scheme, particularly in the context of staff shortages in

many sectors. Stakeholders also highlighted the greater flexibility of provision in Ireland, particularly with a move towards online delivery and modular provision, and the growing number of micro-credentials available. Nevertheless, the absence of a statutory entitlement to training leave represents a key gap in relation to the Council Recommendation. Table 5 provides an at-a-glance view of the Irish adult learning system and its relationship to the Council Recommendation.

Chapter 8 puts forward several policy sketches which seek to address the potential gaps between Ireland's current systems for adult learning, as well as its sub-systems and related services that could be better exploited, and the provisions of the Recommendation. In particular, the sketches seek to address the issues over the supply of career information via online portals, the clear interest in micro-credentials and the absence of a statutory entitlement to training leave.

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Table 5. Summary table following the analytical framework

	Instrument/Skill ecosystem level			Country level summary
Short description	Springboard+ Supply- and demand-side provision of HE programmes	Skillnet Ireland Supply- and demand-side provision of tailored training for employees	Laois and Offaly ETB Supply-side provision of formal FET training	
Core features				
Interplay of demand and supply side funding	Supply-side funding for eligible participants, with other participants required to pay a contribution	Supply-side funding from the NTF, but heavily targeted at the skills needs of employers.	Primarily state-funded provision which aims to respond to needs articulated by local employers	Predominantly state-funded supply-side provision but this is developed in consultation with employers and industry and seeks to address anticipated skills needs in the future.
Unconditional individual entitlement/individual right	No unconditional individual entitlement. Restrictions apply on the eligibility of participants, but have been eased in recent years	No unconditional individual entitlement. Companies and individuals must apply for assistance.	No unconditional individual entitlement (based on application only)	Beyond formal education, there is no unconditional individual entitlement, although there is easy access to most state-funded adult education programmes.
Stable funding source and cost-sharing	Funded by the National Training Fund, the Exchequer and contributions from individual beneficiaries	Funded by the National Training Fund and contributions from companies benefiting from training	Funded by the National Training Fund and the Exchequer	Stable funding at national-level, with the employer-funded National Training Fund representing a key pillar.
Eligibility and inbuilt targeted support	Restrictions apply on the eligibility of participants, but have been eased in recent years	All companies and their employees are entitled to benefit from Skillnet support, with support targeted along thematic and regional lines	Focus is on unemployed and low qualified people	Main state-funded programmes aim to be inclusive by default, with a focus on those furthest from the labour market and from education
Short/long training spells	Short & long spells – it depends on the course being attended. Most are between 6-12 months	Short & long spells – it depends on the support provided	Short & long spells – it depends on the support provided	Little support available for longer training offers initiated by employees beyond formal CVET
Support for direct costs	Depends on eligibility, but support for 90-100% of costs is typical	Employer contribution expected – amount depends on training provided	Support provided free of charge and support for indirect costs available to eligible participants	Where support is available, the level is usually generous
Accumulation	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Main instruments do not offer accumulation of benefits

Independent from employer and portable entitlement	Independent of current employer/employment status	Skillnet support is primarily based on employers. Individual entitlement exists but is less common	Independent of current employer/employment, portability depends on the ETB and QQI	Little support available for longer training offers initiated by employees beyond formal CVET
Collective governance/ social partners	Not applicable.	Provision is closely aligned to needs of employers	Not directly	Social partners are involved in the policy-making and course-design processes at a national level

Features of adult learning system – Enabling framework

Portal/ information	HEA website	Skillnet Ireland website and Skillnet Network websites	Local portal and information	There is a variety of portals available, including national-level meta-portals
Guidance	HEA website and HEIs themselves	Depends on the course	Integrated into all provision	Career guidance is seen as a weakness in the Irish system overall.
Training leave/ subsistence costs	Depends on the individual (employed and unemployed) and the employer	Depends on the employer, but granting the worker time to train is expected. Employer may be required to contribute to course costs.	Depends on the employer.	There is no national training leave system in place.
Validation	HEA	Not all provision is validated by QQI as some is employer-specific.	Link to SOLAS and growing links to accredited HE providers	QQI is seeking to improve validation of prior learning as that is a current gap.
Outreach	HEA website and government promotion	Promotion through nation-wide Skillnet Ireland activities	Promotion through LOETB outreach staff, employers networks, and educational institutions	Government departments and state agencies promote publicly-funded courses through a range of media and office locations.
Quality assurance	HEIs are quality assured and accredited by QQI	Not all provision is quality assured by QQI as some is employer-specific.		QQI is recognised as a clear lead in this area.

CHAPTER 8. 'Policy Sketches' for working towards the goals of the Council Recommendation on ILA and their reception

8.1. Introduction

The project's methodology has foreseen the research-based proposal of three 'Policy Sketches' for relevant policies reforming one or several parts of the adult Learning System, which would facilitate substantial progress towards the goals outlined by the ILA Recommendation. 'Policy Sketches' were drafted by members of the research team and used as common points of references within the expert interviews and the focus group discussions, so that research participants can share their assessment for the sketches under scrutiny. As a common starting point, 'Policy Sketches' were formulated with the goal to represent a range of policies, starting with less demanding ones and including large-scale reforms, with the introduction of an ILA as a potential example. Policy Sketches were developed with the goal of being fairly realistic, meaning that they should share considerable similarities with real world policy proposals expected for the near future. The introduction of an ILA mirroring the framework of the ILA Recommendation was included as one of the Policy Sketches, in case desk research and early expert interviews suggested that such a policy development can be regarded as among the fairly probable developments for the foreseeable future. By this approach, more insights in the likely levels of support as well as the involved challenges for any future policy making were sought to be established. Wherever possible, existing policy proposals (e.g. as included in work programs) were taken into consideration when formulating the sketches, with the sketches considered as a tool for gaining insight into how any similar policy would fare in the current policy-making environment. In most cases, the research team suggested detailed sketches, so that research participants interviewed can relate to a well-rounded suggestion (for more details on the approach, see main report).

While stakeholder consultations in Ireland highlighted that the introduction of ILAs as foreseen in the Council Recommendation is unlikely in the Irish context, at least in the short to medium term, the three policy sketches included in this section aim and have the potential to fulfil at least some of the goals put forward in the ILA Recommendation, and provide a way forward for the potential introduction of ILAs in the long run. The three policy sketches are as follows:

- Creating a single online portal to access training offers, career guidance services and financial support (policy sketch 1), representing an example for a reform by building on an existing framework;
- Increasing the roll-out and take-up of micro-credentials; (policy sketch 2), representing the scaling up of an existing instrument through the reform of the National Training Fund;
- Establishing a paid training leave entitlement (policy sketch 3), representing the introduction of a new measure that would lead to a larger scale reform of the FET system.

For each policy sketch, we provide a short summary outlining the rationale, as well as the steps that would be needed to work towards its implementation. Furthermore, we include an analysis of the potential strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities (SWOT) associated with each of the three Policy Sketches, as well as an overview of the main arguments in favour/against for each main stakeholder group consulted for this case study.

8.2. Policy Sketch 1: Creation of a single online portal to access training offers, career guidance services, and funding opportunities

As outlined in section 5.2, several online portals exist in the Irish context, mirroring the wide range of stakeholders involved in the FET sector. As all the main FET stakeholders (e.g. SOLAS, ETBI, QQI) have their own online portals where they provide guidance and include learning offers available to learners, they often compete for the attention of prospective learners, rather than providing mutually reinforcing support. In turn, this often leads to confusion on the side of the learners, who are faced with different information sources and little guidance on how to navigate this landscape. Because of the lack of a streamlined approach to information and guidance through these online portals, most stakeholders consulted for this case study say the portals are not as effective as they should be in increasing participation in adult learning in Ireland, nor do they provide learners with adequate support to navigate the extensive learning offer available.

Policy sketch 1 takes into account current policy developments in Ireland. The Department of Education (DoE) launched a public consultation in January

2023 on a 'National Framework for Guidance',¹⁵⁰ aiming to address shortcomings in the provision of career guidance in Ireland as identified in a report produced by Indecon in 2019.¹⁵¹ The background paper accompanying the launch of the consultation sets out some principles guiding the vision for a high functioning guidance system. Under the principle of 'Equal, inclusive and sustainable provision', it is envisioned that any new career guidance system in Ireland should have: *'Well-functioning and accessible hybrid/digital services in which guidance and career development are at the centre, serving lifelong learners smoothly, including provision of digital services (with the use of artificial intelligence) and in person support.'*¹⁵² Furthermore, the background paper also includes a range of potential policy directions for Ireland, which include exploring the possibility of a centralised multi-channel, blended career guidance support and making guidance support inclusive and career information accessible and available to all.¹⁵³

The French experience with the Compte Personnel de Formation (CPF) stands out as a particularly successful practice and has been taken as a basis for the development of policy sketch 1. The CPF is a multifunctional online portal providing information about courses, the opportunity to enrol in them and allowing users to redeem publicly available financial and counselling support. Created in 2015 and reformed in 2018, CPF represent the most comprehensive example of an individual learning account in which every worker gains entitlements each year (EUR 500) and can accumulate training rights over time.

Policy sketch 1 foresees that the success of the 'Mon CPF' digital portal could be an important inspiration for Ireland, and therefore proposes the setting up a single government-funded integrated platform to provide information about adult learning opportunities, career guidance and access to financial support in Ireland and to provide an overall enhanced user experience. To this end, policy sketch 1 proposes that the *MyCareerPath.ie* website and related career guidance services is upscaled to provide national coverage, by incorporating and replacing other government-funded course finder websites and career guidance services. MyCareerPath has been recently developed by the Atlantic Technological University and is funded by the Human Capital Initiative - a five-year project, investing EUR 300 million from the NTF to support skills-focused programmes in

¹⁵⁰ <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/ae51d-public-consultation-on-a-strategic-framework-for-lifelong-guidance/>

¹⁵¹ <https://assets.gov.ie/24951/dffde726604b451aa6cc50239a375299.pdf>

¹⁵² <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/ae51d-public-consultation-on-a-strategic-framework-for-lifelong-guidance/>

¹⁵³ Ibid.

higher education.¹⁵⁴ *MyCareerPath.ie* targets both people who are looking to reskill and newcomers to the labour market, with the aim of providing users with individualised and targeted support. To this end, to access the portal, each user is required to meet with an adviser to assess needs, strengths, interests, to ensure that prospective learners are matched with relevant industry sectors and courses. These features could be further integrated based on the experience of the CPF portal, and include, for example, information on relevant occupational profiles (e.g. educational level and skills required; average remuneration levels; testimonials); as well as interactive tools such as e-chats that could provide additional guidance to navigate the portal; and self-assessment tools to identify specific skills needs; a direct line to engage with career advisors; and insights from on jobs and skills in Ireland based on labour market developments at national, regional and sectoral level.

To summarise, policy sketch 1 refers to a reform of the current *MyCareerPath.ie* portal to:

- Either merge other existing online portals as established by other FET bodies, structures and agencies (ETBI, SOLAS, INTREO etc.) into *MyCareerPath*; or at the very least ensure that *MyCareerPath* is publicised as the main FET portal, and an explicit and clear link is made, and user-friendly information is provided on the type of information available in/how to use other existing portal to complement the support available on *MyCareerPath*.
- Ensure that *MyCareerPath* incorporates all services currently provided by other online portals and acts as the single/main point of entrance to access information;
- Integrate new services and tools in the *MyCareerPath* portal to include information on occupational profiles; interactive tools (e.g. self-assessment tools; chats); latest labour market updates;
- Ensure that *MyCareerPath* is updated to target all relevant key stakeholder groups that will need support and guidance, with a specific focus on all types of learners and vulnerable groups within these; as well as employers.

In terms of the key **strengths** of policy sketch 1, the establishment of a single online portal for the FET sector in Ireland would ensure a more streamlined and centralised approach to information and career guidance,

¹⁵⁴ <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/human-capital-initiative-pillars-1-2-and-3/>

addressing existing duplication, and overlaps. This would then have the potential to increase participation levels in adult education in Ireland as learners would not only have access to better information but would also be able to receive tailored guidance according to their specific background and needs. Interviewees noted that information about adult learning opportunities, while available, is currently dispersed across multiple channels, and by further streamlining it would ‘almost automatically increase participation in lifelong learning’. Experts also highlighted the importance of ensuring navigability and up to date information, also in line with a National Career Guidance Framework being developed by the Irish government.

Interviewees provided additional examples of successful portals, including the Danish Uddannelses Guiden, which acts as an online ‘job compass tool’ providing detailed information about the daily activities, incomes, education requirements and testimonials for different occupations.¹⁵⁵¹⁵⁶ The Labour Market Insights portal in Australia ‘gave people an opportunity to do online skills audits’ and advised them on their skills development needs.¹⁵⁷ The stakeholder reflected on the role that features like e-chats and emails could play in online career guidance provisions. They described an ILA-like setup as an ‘e-passport’ that would allow for the individual tracking of credentials, skills and of both formal and informal learning. They argued: *‘If we’re going to talk about a centralised system, it needs to cover as many bases as possible and bring all those pieces together. Otherwise, you’re just added another portal to a system that already has 10 different centralised portals. So, it’s really got to be the final evolution of this’.*

However, Policy Sketch 1 also presents some potential **weaknesses**. For instance, considering the large amount of information, the extensive FET offer and the variety of actors involved in the provision of adult learning and guidance, a single online portal may lead to opposite outcomes, resulting in greater confusion on the side of learners, particularly if not paired with conscious efforts to improve in-person services which will continue to be needed to tackle local and individual needs and preferences. Interviewees stressed the need to reconcile the idea of a single public online portal for FET with the existence of already established and well-functioning privately-run websites (e.g. ‘MyFuture+’¹⁵⁸),

¹⁵⁵ <https://www.ug.dk/evejledning>

¹⁵⁶ This platform from Denmark was reviewed by Cedefop for its 2018 publication on career guidance platforms, as an interesting and innovative case in a rapidly growing field (Cedefop, 2018)

¹⁵⁷ <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/topics/lmi-content-transition/>

¹⁵⁸ <https://careersportal.ie/myfuture>

and/or portals that are dedicated to specific types of opportunities, such as apprenticeships. Interviewees suggested that these specialised portals should not be replaced with a potentially new centralised platform. Rather, they underlined the possibility of developing an integrated website whereby users can be re-directed towards other specialised portals, according to needs. Moreover, interviewees raised concerns with regards to financial resources to be invested in the development of a single gateway portal. It was mentioned that, in the absence of new funding streams, resources currently invested elsewhere would need to be repurposed. As such, the creation of a new portal would require a cost efficiency analysis to provide sound evidence on the benefits outweighing drawbacks/costs. Furthermore, relying on MyCareerPath.ie to become the main FET online platform presents additional risks linked to the fact that it is a relatively new portal, whose impact is yet to be assessed. Lastly, merging all main public platforms into a single online portal would not address the existence of multiple privately run websites, of varying quality, which would continue to operate in parallel.

With regards to **opportunities**, policy sketch 1 would provide a platform to strengthen the integration of career information provision with an overarching concept of career guidance (since information provision is always needed for career guidance interventions and activities, but adequate guidance goes beyond this) so that they can mutually reinforce each other and lead to better outcomes for learners and employers alike. Moreover, it offers the opportunity to increase cooperation across FET actors. Experts stressed that, while the Irish FET sector is already characterised by a good level of collaboration between key actors, any new initiative would have to further leverage the expertise of adult education guidance practitioners and operationalise existing cooperation. Ensuring that the online services currently provided by ETBs, SOLAS, INTREO, QQI, Regional Skills Fora, etc, are consolidated into one platform would address key. Furthermore, improving the current landscape of online portals and services could be an opportunity to explore how new technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence (AI) could be used to provide more tailored support and guidance (e.g. via chat bots responding to users' queries).

However, potential **threats** associated with policy sketch 1 should also be considered. In particular, an over-reliance on online guidance and information provision risks leaving out key segments of the adult learner population (i.e. marginalised and vulnerable groups facing barriers to access the internet, or otherwise clients who prefer not to use online services and who have complex situations), which may be in greater need of support or where their preferences should be taken into account. Linked to this, a single main point of entry at the

national level may not be sufficient to consider the variety of support available at the national and regional level, potentially failing to address specific needs at lower governance levels.

Table 6 summarises the strength and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats of Policy Sketch 1 against the backdrop of the analytical framework developed for displaying the content of the ILA Recommendation.

Table 6. SWOT analysis of Policy Sketch 1

Point of reference		Analysis
Alignment of Policy Sketch with analytical framework	Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addresses one of the main barriers to participation in adult and lifelong learning in Ireland Potentially leads to greater take up of further education and training opportunities among adults
	Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May lead to opposite, undesired results (i.e. greater confusion as information is condensed) MyCareerPath is a new tool and its impact and effectiveness is yet to be evaluated Remains insufficient if not paired with adequate in-person career guidance services Would need additional/repurposed funding and a cost-efficiency analysis No apparent mechanism for coordination between public and private sector initiatives
Desirable/undesirable effects if implemented; compementarity with other instruments	Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pairs provision of information with tailored career guidance Potential to make use of new technologies (e.g. AI) Provides opportunity for more tailored information and guidance, taking into account specific needs Fosters more coordination and collaboration across existing bodies and structures in FET sector

	Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potentially leaves out adult learners that are less familiar with/do not have access to internet and ICT equipment or lack digital skills • A national level, one-stop-shop for FET opportunities and guidance risks leaving out specific needs at regional and local level and for individuals
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While interviewees agreed that the diversity of course providers and information sources is compounded by weaknesses concerning career guidance services, differences and commonalities in the statements across dividing lines – Employment versus Education and Business versus Labour – can be summarised as follows.

Employment versus Education: Further streamlining career guidance through a centralised portal acting as a single point of entry for perspective learners seeking support and information to navigate Ireland’s vast education and training offer is seen favourably by both representatives working on employment and education. Lack of awareness of existing opportunities and adequate guidance hinders the impact of FET policies. Representatives of organisations working in education, however, stress the importance of a blended approach whereby online guidance is further complemented by other types of support that consider the needs of groups of learners that may not be comfortable with digital tools or who lack digital skills (e.g. marginalised communities; older adults).

Business versus Labour: Both experts working for interest organisations representing employers and employees agreed that the provision of career guidance in Ireland presents several structural and cross-cutting challenges that needs addressing. They highlighted the fragmentation of career guidance services across stakeholders, as well as its segmentation across sectors and levels. Employee representatives stressed that career guidance is very limited once learners leave secondary school according to different life stages. Employer representatives also perceive gaps in available guidance information as it pertains to career information across sectors as well as pathways through education, beyond the traditional higher education routes. Furthermore, they stress that existing portals for career guidance target different users or provide information on specific pathways, which can imply they are not always impartial: if used individually these websites provide valuable information on quality programmes, but do not offer the full picture on all the options available to learners at different stages of their education and careers. Both employer and

employee organisations agree that the information provided to perspective learners needs to be more intuitive and user-friendly, and that a ‘one-stop-shop’ portal may be a more effective option. However, organisations representing the interests of workers caution against the over-reliance on online tools, as the digital environment may leave out disadvantage learners who need upskilling and reskilling the most.

There is no clear **regional dimension** to this policy sketch. Online portals are generally accessible to a global audience unless they are restricted using passwords or other tools. The online public consultation run by the Department of Education on a ‘National Framework for Guidance’ in early 2023 did not refer to any regional prioritisation or considerations.¹⁵⁹

Concluding assessment: The current Irish career guidance and information services is fragmented across providers and platforms. These shortcomings risk hindering progress with regards to participation levels and the effectiveness of the FET sector, as prospective learners struggle to navigate information and take up opportunities. The establishment of a single online portal for career guidance, providing up-to-date information, a link to career counselling and advice and career management skills building activities, and including interactive, user-friendly features for learners to better understand their skills needs and how the current FET offer can match these, is considered a potential way forward across stakeholder groups representing different policy areas (education and employment) and interests (business and labour). This policy sketch would support the strengthening of the enabling framework set out in the ILA Recommendation.

8.3. Policy Sketch 2: Increasing the roll-out and take-up of micro-credentials

As mentioned in previous sections, micro-credentials are becoming more and more central in the CVET political agenda in Ireland. Not only is Ireland one of the very few EU Member State to have included micro-credentials (i.e. short courses and certificates) in its National Qualification Framework (NQF) since its establishment in 2003 (NQF levels 6-9),¹⁶⁰ but the National Further Education

¹⁵⁹ Department of Education (4 January 2023), Public Consultation on a Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance. <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/ae51d-public-consultation-on-a-strategic-framework-for-lifelong-guidance/>

¹⁶⁰ Cedefop (2022). *Are micro-credentials becoming a big deal?* Briefing Note https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/9171_en.pdf [accessed on 30.03.2023]

and Training Strategy¹⁶¹ explicitly recognises the role that micro-credentials can play in ensuring that FET courses are delivered in flexible formats that can respond to the needs and demands the labour market, while also allowing for formally recognised learning outcomes.¹⁶² Moreover, as showed by the positive trends on the increasingly high number of learners achieving qualifications through micro-credentials, as opposed to longer training opportunities,¹⁶³ the Covid-19 pandemic, has resulted both in a more pressing demand for more focused and specific up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities, but also in a growing interest in flexible learning, highlighting the importance of further reflecting on micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials are particularly attractive as they are short-term courses that can act as ‘quick wins’ and benefit from their own ‘stackability’, resulting in higher motivation and encouraging future learning. Moreover, micro-credentials are perceived as effective as they allow training to be more responsive to rapidly changing demands in the labour market. Interviewed governmental stakeholders, furthermore, highlighted that the Irish national qualifications framework has been able to adapt to allow for micro-credentials, and that higher education institutions have started to cooperate with qualification organisations to ensure that micro credentials can be awarded. In 2021, QQI published a report¹⁶⁴ investigating the feasibility of micro-credentials in higher education. The report supports the feedback gathered through the interviews carried out to date, as it underlines that, while micro-credentials are not a new phenomenon in Ireland, their number is increasing. According to QQI, the increase in take up of micro-credentials is encouraging the provision of a more diverse offer, and the targeting of a wider group of learners.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play an important role in promoting and providing access to micro-credentials. Several universities across the country

¹⁶¹ SOLAS (2020). *Future FET: Transforming Learning – The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy*.
https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). *Annual analysis of awards made by QQI in 2022*.
https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2023-02/QQI%20Certification%20Data%20and%20Analysis%202022_0.pdf [accessed on 10.07.2023]

¹⁶⁴ QQI 2021 QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014–2020 <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-10/early-exploration-into-micro-credentials-in-higher-education-2014-20.pdf>

offer micro-credential opportunities to learners (for example, Trinity College Dublin¹⁶⁵; University of Galway¹⁶⁶; University of Limerick¹⁶⁷; Maynooth University¹⁶⁸; National College of Ireland¹⁶⁹). These are provided either free of charge or for a fee, usually covered by learners themselves. However, programmes are in place for employers to cover part of the costs for their employees¹⁷⁰, and vouchers/grants can be made available to learners/specific groups of learners or employers to either partially or fully fund participation in this type of learning opportunities.¹⁷¹ The increased investment in micro-credentials, particularly in the higher education sector, has partly come through the Human Capital Initiative (HCI).¹⁷² Launched in 2019, the HCI aims to invest around EUR 300 million to increase the capacity of HE institutions to match current and future skills needs in the Irish labour market.¹⁷³ Under 'Pillar 3 - Innovation and Agility', the HCI so far has supported 24 projects, 18 of which include micro-credentials among their deliverables.¹⁷⁴

In parallel in the HE sector, a new FET micro-qualification model, delivers bite-sized, specific modules of training in skills areas identified with industry as relevant to their business needs. It also supports sharing and streamlining of resources across Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to minimise duplication and complexity in programme development. Micro-qualifications in critical skills areas such as green, digital, robotics, aquafarming, business innovation and market development has been developed and validated through QQI and is now being rolled out across the FET sector.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁵ See <https://www.tcd.ie/courses/microcredentials/> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁶⁶ See <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/courses/cpd/microcreds/> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁶⁷ See <https://www.ul.ie/gps/microcredentials> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁶⁸ See <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/student-fees-grants/micro-credentials> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁶⁹ See <https://www.ncirl.ie/Study/Microcredentials> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁷⁰ For example, see <https://www.tcd.ie/courses/microcredentials/how-to-apply/> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁷¹ For example, [Next Level Skillnet](#) offers its members financial support to cover training costs for their employees (up to 40% of the course fees). [Skills Connect](#), moreover, is a series of free training and upskilling courses available to the unemployed.

¹⁷² See <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/human-capital-initiative-pillars-1-2-and-3/> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with national stakeholder.

¹⁷⁵ An agile programme design model was developed in conjunction with the ETBs, key stakeholders including companies, enterprise agencies and bodies and the Regional Skills Fora. Applying the model, each micro-qualification has a 5 FET credit value (50 hours of tutor

Box 2. Example of an HCI-funded project focusing on micro-credentials

The MicroCreds Project

MicroCreds¹⁷⁶, a five-year, EUR 12.3 million project, funded through the Human Capital Initiative¹⁷⁷, is led by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) in partnership with seven IUA universities. The project aims to promote a new approach to lifelong learning that has learners at the centre, by re-imagining their relationship with education through agile, accessible and bite-sized qualifications: micro-credentials.¹⁷⁸ To this end, one of the project deliverables is developing a national framework on micro-credentials, also through engaging with employers, including to estimate costs. Some of the challenges encountered by the project are related to identifying the types of costs that SMEs would face when providing upskilling and reskilling opportunities (i.e. recognising the need for reskilling and upskilling but also the costs that these opportunities present to employers), and finding solutions to ensure employers can bear these costs to free up staff to undertake training.

While specific data on the impact of micro-credentials on adult education and lifelong learning is currently lacking, feedback gathered through interviews seems to indicate that this type of bite-sized learning opportunity could help to address existing barriers to participation in lifelong learning, for example, lack of time. A 2021 research study carried out by QQI on the evolution of micro-credentials between 2014 and 2020¹⁷⁹ suggests that learners who completed micro-credentials were seeking to upskill or reskill in a particular narrow knowledge area. Learners were seeking to authenticate an existing skill or knowledge area with a certification and that validated programmes at level 6 for minor awards and levels 7 and 8 for special purpose awards were more numerous than at other level.¹⁸⁰ The 2020 National Micro-Credential Survey

supported and self-directed learning) and may be both accredited in its own right and also stackable to lead to a Special Purpose award. A key feature of the FET micro-qualifications model is that the resulting programmes and awards are shared by all ETBs and therefore accessible across the country to FET learners.

¹⁷⁶ Irish Universities Association. MicroCreds Project. <https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/learning-teaching/microcreds/microcreds-project-overview/> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁷⁷ See <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/human-capital-initiative/> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁷⁸ Irish Universities Association. *MicroCreds Project Flyer*. <https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/MicroCreds-A4-Flyer-UPDATE.pdf> [accessed on 30.03.2023]

¹⁷⁹ Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2021). *QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014–2020*. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-10/early-exploration-into-micro-credentials-in-higher-education-2014-20.pdf> [accessed on 10.07.2023]

¹⁸⁰ Ibid

conducted by Skillnet Ireland, furthermore, highlights that the attractiveness of micro-credentials is closely linked to cost constraints for both employees and employers.¹⁸¹ Surveyed employees emphasised that the cost of earning the credential were a key obstacle, while employers stressed the need for micro-credentials to be flexible, customisable and offered without significant new costs.¹⁸²

In this context, policy sketch 2 foresees extending the use of micro-credentials even further beyond the existing provision in the HE and FET sectors to include a wider range of small scale, industry-recognised online and in-person courses from different training providers. This would entail extending micro-credentials to lower education levels to increase take up from more vulnerable groups that are further away from the labour market/at a greater risk of being left behind by the green and digital transformation.

To achieve this goal, policy sketch 2 requires rethinking investment in micro-credentials, beyond what is currently foreseen under the HCI. This could happen within the framework of current discussions around the National Training Fund (NTF) surplus, and/or in the context of the recently announced reform of the funding model for the FET sector.¹⁸³ For the NTF, a revision could entail, for example, investing the current surplus in establishing a voucher system for employers to use to encourage their employees to undertake short, industry relevant courses leading to a certification. Alternatively, as discussions around public expenditure for the FET sector have already shifted towards a greater focus on yearly outcomes, linking public funding to learners' demands, the next step could be looking at the type of education and training opportunities being taken up by learners, and allocating resources according to participation levels in each of these. If paired with efforts to raise awareness around micro-credentials, this new funding model could contribute to further supporting their roll out and take up in the future.

To summarise, policy sketch 2 refers to an upscaling of the current provision of micro-credentials through a revision of the NTF to:

¹⁸¹ Skillnet Ireland (2021). *A Micro-Credential Roadmap: Currency, Cohesion and Consistency*. <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/A-Micro-Credential-Roadmap-Currency-Cohesion-and-Consistency.pdf> [accessed on 10.07.2023]

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. *Significant shift in how further education and training sector is funded announced by Minister Harris* (Press release, 20 July 2022). <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/8510f-significant-shift-in-how-further-education-and-training-sector-is-funded-announced-by-minister-harris/> [accessed on 23.03.2023]

- Extending the use of micro-credential beyond the existing provision in the HE and FET sectors to include a wider range of small scale, industry-recognised online and in-person courses from different training providers;
- Potentially extending micro-credentials to lower education levels to increase take up from more vulnerable groups;
- A new investment strategy for micro-credentials beyond the HCI, for example through:
 - Investing current National Training Fund (NTF) surplus to establish a voucher system for employers to use to support their employees to take up short courses leading to micro-credentials; or
 - Increasing funding for micro-credentials as part of current discussions on budgeting for FET.
- Investing in awareness raising measures focused on micro-credentials, both for learners and employers.

Policy Sketch 2 would not lead to the direct implementation of the ILA Recommendation as micro-credentials are not universal financial entitlements as such. However, under policy sketch 2, micro-credentials would form the basis for a new funding strategy for adult learning, thereby fulfilling a part of the objectives of the ILA Recommendation. Furthermore, the European Commission encourages Member States to link their responses to the two Recommendations and make specific funding instruments (such as ILAs) available to cover the costs of increased micro-credentials. Lastly, micro-credentials would contribute to promoting several other key elements of the ILA Recommendation, by promoting an increased focus on learners' individual choice, by supporting them to have greater ownership over their own skills development; providing adequate support and information to potential learners, both through online portals promoting micro-credential, and through better and more efficient career guidance; as well as supporting greater outreach efforts to ensure that more vulnerable learners have the opportunity to benefit from this type of bite-sized learning and micro-credentials do not remain predominantly available to learners with higher levels of educational attainment.

In terms of the **strengths** of policy sketch 2, increasing the investment in micro-credentials to improve the offer across sectors and educational level would lead to more offers of short-term, less costly/free learning opportunities, which might increase participation in adult learners, tackling existing obstacles (e.g. time commitment, high costs). Furthermore, policy sketch 2 would build on existing pilot projects, allowing for their further scalability beyond the higher

education sector. Experts recognise the potential of micro-credentials as a flexible pathway for lifelong learning that can support upskilling and reskilling in skills areas critical for the Irish economy and wider society. In particular, they highlight that micro-credentials will be particularly important for preparing individuals and companies for the twin digital and green transitions. However, the need for a common framework for micro-credentials was mentioned as a needed next step to ensure the stackability and portability of micro credentials, as well as minimum standards with regards to their quality.

Policy sketch 2, however, also presents a number of **weaknesses**. For instance, while micro-credentials have a somewhat well-established position in the Irish FET offer, they only represent one type of learning opportunity, the impact of which is still under-researched. While recognising the importance of micro-credentials and the specific benefits associated with short term and targeted courses, interviewees stressed that focusing on this specific type of offer may not be sufficient to further stimulate the uptake of adult education on its own. Interviewees recall the importance of stimulating the demand for adult learning through better career guidance and awareness raising as a pre-condition to any further policy and funding investment in micro-credentials. Lastly, another weakness identified through the interviews is that no additional investment is foreseen for the promotion of micro-credentials, aside from the funding currently available through the Human Capital Initiative.

In terms of **opportunities**, an increased roll out of micro-credentials offers could represent the first step for a gradual reform of the FET system with a focus on the demand side and individual choice. For instance, this could have an impact in terms of funding. In line with current debates about the budgetary approach to FET, micro-credentials present an opportunity to invest in a form of learning that focuses on ensuring the specific needs of the learners (in terms of training, time commitment, costs) are prioritised. Furthermore, policy sketch 2 is seen by experts as an opportunity to repurpose the current NTF surplus, and provide support to businesses (particularly micro, small and medium companies) to cover the costs incurred by providing training to their employees.

With regards to **threats** posed by policy sketch 2, increasing investment (through an overall budgetary reform or through repurposing the NTF surplus) in a specific type of learning offer presents a number of risks, associated with the fact that little evidence exists to date on the impact of micro-credentials on adult education and lifelong learning. Therefore, investment in increasing the roll out of micro-credentials across education levels and sectors would need to be supported by further research to gather evidence on benefits, and be accompanied by complementary measures (e.g. awareness raising).

	Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financing through a revised NTF is a contested topic among stakeholders and additional funding might be dependent on awareness raising efforts and further evidence on the impact. • Given the existing prevalence in the higher education sector, an increased roll out of micro-credentials might disproportionately benefit highly-qualified learners and not reach those most in need of training (e.g. low skilled; long-term unemployed; older workers) etc. and/or specific sectors (e.g. ICT/digital).
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To conclude, differences and commonalities in the statements across dividing lines – Employment versus Education and Business versus Labour – can be summarised as follows.

Employment versus Education: Both representatives working on employment and education policy recognise that micro-credentials have the potential to increase learners’ agency and provide potential for further scalability. Experts working on education policy highlighted that current pilot projects in the HE sector could spearhead the take-up of micro-credentials at lower education levels. Micro-credentials could also lead to faster validation processes for learners. However, some also caution against immediate investment as the employer-associated costs of micro-credentials would need to be considered and recall that any financial decision to this end would need to be based on strong agreement across relevant stakeholder groups, both on the education and employment side of the fence. Representatives working on employment, moreover, highlighted that, if investments were to be made to increase the offer of micro-credentials, then specific attention would need to be made to ensure that courses match labour market needs.

Business versus Labour¹⁸⁴: Representatives from employer organisations recognise the key role that micro-credentials can play in upskilling and reskilling existing and potential workers, particularly with regards to skills for the digital and green transition. However, they stressed the importance of ensuring that greater focus on micro-credentials does not result in additional and/or disproportionate

¹⁸⁴ Please note that, to date, no specific feedback on this scenario has been received from organisations representing employees.

costs for employers. These stakeholders support the implementation of training voucher to cover costs for employers, based on previous successful examples (e.g. Innovation Voucher Programme¹⁸⁵). In addition, employer representatives generally support the use of the NFT surplus to finance such voucher system as this would provide a rebate, particularly for smaller business. This rebate would allow businesses that faced the most difficulties during COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis to draw down what they have contributed to the NFT for the specific purpose of investing and training.

There is no clear **regional dimension** to this policy sketch. The policy sketch envisages creating more quality-assured and validated micro-credentials which assumes the involvement of national-level institutions such as QQI and the Higher Education Authority. They would also be funded through the NTF which is a national level funding instrument. Higher education institutions with more of a regional focus, such as some of the newly created Technological Universities, may develop micro-credentials that meet local needs for specific skills and knowledge.

Concluding assessment: Research points towards a growing interest in an increased roll out of micro-credentials in Ireland, to bridge both the needs of the learners and those of employers. Increased policy and financial support for micro-credentials has the potential to increase participation in adult learning, support learners' individual agency, and ensure training opportunities better match labour market needs. Furthermore, an increased offer of micro-credentials would likely have a positive impact on the initiatives and instruments presented in Chapter 6.

As shown in section 6.3, Skillnet Ireland is heavily dependent on employers' buy-in, as the training offer is funded through the fees paid by them. This means that return on investment is crucial, as is ensuring a strong focus on addressing challenges faced by employers, and how to ensure that upskilling and reskilling opportunities offered by Skillnet Ireland can address these. Micro-credentials can help tackling several of these needs, by providing more tailored, and short-term learning opportunities that can better respond to employers' needs, and ensure employees can invest a reasonable amount of time training without putting an excessive strain on their employers, and potentially leading to greater buy-in. Furthermore, the experience of the tourism sector (see section 6.3) highlights how micro-credentials can be beneficial for learners at lower education levels,

¹⁸⁵ See <https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/research-innovation/companies/collaborate-with-companies-research-institutes/innovation-voucher.shortcut.html> [accessed on 05.04.2023]

with bite-size training opportunities representing an ideal compromise between the needs of the sector, and those of its employers.

Furthermore, as shown by the experience of the Laois & Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB) in modularising its training provision to allow for greater flexibility and for learners to leave and re-join programmes depending on their availability and commitments, shorter and more flexible opportunities can be driver of change at the local level. To this end, an increased roll-out of micro-credentials can help ETBs increase their outreach to learners and employers in their respective community, by catering to their respective needs. Through micro-credentials, ETBs can respond faster to the needs of local employers, and allow jobseekers as well as employees to upskill faster, with greater opportunities for job retention.

Box 3 Skills to Advance programme

Skills to Advance – Introduction to Pastry and Baking

The Skills to Advance programme¹⁸⁶, implemented by SOLAS in cooperation with the network of 16 ETBs, is a national initiative that provides upskilling and reskilling opportunities to employees in jobs undergoing change and to those currently employed in vulnerable sectors. Bite-size learning represent a key component of the programme, as learners are required to attend 50 hours of training, provided in different modes and leading to mini-qualifications. An example of this is the Introduction to Pastry and Baking – a training programme under Skills to Advance to “equip learners with the knowledge, skills and competence to produce a range of baked goods, including breads, pastries and hot and cold desserts”. The short 8-week course allows learners to gain a minor award, including a component certificate or a certificate of unit credit, which can be stacked to lead a major award.

As the scope of the Springboard+ programme evolved from complementing the core state-funded education and training system to supporting employability after the 2008 financial and economic crisis, and evolved further to promoting innovative training models to better respond to ever evolving labour market needs due to the digital transformation,¹⁸⁷ it seems clear that an increased provision of non-major qualifications in the form of shorter, targeted training

¹⁸⁶ SOLAS. Skills to Advance. <https://www.solas.ie/programmes/skills-to-advance/employers/> [accessed on 10.07.2023]

¹⁸⁷ European Commission (2018). Annex 2 – *A European approach to micro-credentials*. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/european-approach-micro-credentials-higher-education-consultation-group-output-annex-2.pdf> [accessed on 11.07.2023]

opportunities (i.e. micro-credentials) can enable the higher education system to respond rapidly to changes in both skills requirements and technology¹⁸⁸.

Despite the positive impact that an increased roll-out of micro-credentials could have in strengthening existing instruments and improving the overall outreach of/participation in the FET sector, the feasibility of Policy Sketch 2 is hampered by the specificity of micro-credentials within a much more varied FET offer, and a general lack of evidence on their long term impact and cost (for learners and employers), which represent an obstacle to further investment.

8.4. Policy Sketch 3: Establishing a paid training leave entitlement

Frameworks allowing adults to take leave from work and to focus on full-time education while receiving contributions to their living costs have been identified as crucial for increasing the number of adults who acquire a (higher/different) level of formal education or who acquire a vocational qualification in adulthood. This is often desirable both from the standpoint of individual welfare and for achieving a better match of supply and demand in the labour market/closing gaps in the available qualifications and/or skills.

Currently, Ireland remains one of the few countries in the EU where the right to a training leave is not enshrined in legislation.¹⁸⁹ However, provisions on career breaks or study leave can be included in work contracts or negotiated between employers and their employees.¹⁹⁰ Aside from the existing gaps with regards to the provision of information and career guidance as outlined in Policy Sketch 1, our research indicates that the lack of access to training leave, paired with lack of income replacement when in training, remains one of the key barriers to participation in lifelong learning. As the possibility to take time off work to participate in education and training opportunities might change depending on the sector, the size of the employer, the provisions of individual work contracts and people's personal circumstances, this results in increased inequalities across sectors, for example, people working in hospitality are less likely to have the

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db/instrument-types/training-leave#end-of-desc>

¹⁹⁰

https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/employment_rights_and_conditions/leave_and_holidays/types_of_leave_from_work.html

resources and time to invest in their up-/reskilling compared to IT workers. There are critical issues to be considered when considering the introduction of a paid training leave entitlement in Ireland:

- Impact on employers: According to the Irish Central Statistics Office,¹⁹¹ SMEs account for 99.7% of active enterprises (with micro-enterprises constituting 90.7% of all businesses in Ireland) and employ almost seven in every ten persons in the business economy.¹⁹² Should a training leave entitlement be introduced, it may have a disproportionate impact on employers, particularly SMEs. SMEs often rely on a very limited staff and it may be difficult for them to free up their employees' time for training as this could possibly result in additional costs and/or loss of revenue.
- Accessibility of training: there is a need to encourage greater participation in education and training of more vulnerable groups who are further away from the labour market or who face greater barriers to access to education, training and employment, such as for persons with disabilities. However, there is a risk that the introduction of a training leave would benefit those groups who are already comparatively highly skilled or with higher level qualifications and enjoy more access to upskilling and reskilling, as opposed to those in lower skilled occupations (e.g. less than ISCED 3) and/or the unemployed and those outside the labour market (e.g. older workers) who would actually need the most support.
- Financial implications: The introduction of a training leave entitlement, especially if paid, would have budgetary consequences as it would require a revision of the allocation of existing resources, or additional investments.

¹⁹¹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-bii/businessinirelandabridged2012/smallandmediumenterprises/>

¹⁹² <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-bii/businessinirelandabridged2012/smallandmediumenterprises/>

Box 41. Example of where a training leave entitlement might be used

Skills to Advance¹⁹³ - Developing Leaders for Hospitality & Tourism

SOLAS worked with the Irish Hotels Federation to develop the ‘Skills to Advance – Developing Leaders for Hospitality & Tourism programme’ targeting team leaders and supervisory staff. The programme was developed to increase participation in upskilling in the sector. However, shift work made it difficult for employers to allow their staff to take time off to train.

Policy sketch 3 seeks to address these challenges by creating a paid training leave sufficiently flexible for employees and individuals, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, to benefit from it and adequately funded to avoid overburdening employers. The training leave would support both frequent (e.g. yearly) short training spells (e.g. 5 days a year) and long training spells for completing extended educational programmes once in a multi-year time frame, with different arrangements for either compensating the employer for days off for training (short leave) or contributing to the subsistence cost of individual learners during longer spells in education while on unpaid leave.

To achieve this, policy sketch 3 requires legal changes to recognise employees’ legal right to training leave. Standards would need to be established with regards to the specific conditions to access this right, whether there would be specific eligibility criteria based on the type of contractual relationship, time spent with the employer; eligibility criteria related to the type of training to be undertaken; length of the training leave; use of the training leave (e.g. to be used in one instalment; to be take up within a fixed timeframe).

To ensure greater accessibility, the establishment of a training leave entitlement would need to be accompanied by the introduction of an allowance to be paid to learners to cover their living costs while attending training. This allowance would need to comply with adequacy criteria to ensure that the foreseen income support is sufficient to ensure take-up and participation and that its provision does not result in a disproportionate financial burden on employers. To this end, resources for a new training allowance could be pooled from:

- The National Training Fund: this could entail a revision/reform of the NTF to establish either a credit-based type of learning system, where employers would be given access to vouchers to be used to support their own employees or potential employees to access training (allowing employers to take the lead and ensure that courses are job-relevant); or

¹⁹³ <https://www.ihf.ie/content/skills-advance-developing-leaders-hospitality-tourism>

an ILA type of entitlement where individual employees would be able to apply for financial support directly.

- Employees' social contributions: as proposed by Irish trade unions, a percentage of employees' social contributions could be earmarked towards training.¹⁹⁴

Furthermore, awareness raising efforts and better outreach and guidance services would be needed to ensure the roll out and take up of a newly established training leave. Policy Sketch 3 would require a thorough consultation process with the involvement of relevant social partners and governmental stakeholders and would benefit from the experience of other EU Member States where paid training leave entitlements already exist. To this end, Finland's recently reformed Adult Education Allowance¹⁹⁵ could represent an example of an approach to the establishment of a paid training leave scheme that could be adapted to the Irish context and piloted (see Box 5).

Draft

¹⁹⁴ <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/staff-taking-up-training-should-get-paid-leave-25977192.html>

¹⁹⁵ <https://www.aikuiskoulutustuki.fi/en/adult-education-allowance/>

Box 5 Example of a State-supported training leave scheme

Adult Education Allowance - Finland¹⁹⁶

The Adult Education Allowance supports employees and self-employed persons to cover their living costs during their studies. To qualify for the allowance, applicants must live permanently in Finland, and have been employed full-time with the same employer or pension-insured entrepreneurship must have lasted for at least one year. In addition, applicants must have been employed by a Finnish employer or have worked as a self-employed person in Finland for at least eight years. Furthermore, applicants must be on unpaid study leave of at least two months due to their studies. Allowance can also be paid to an applicant whose periods of study leave last less than two months or who studies part-time based on a study leave agreement made with the employer. Lastly, applicants must participate in studies leading to a degree, or be in vocational, further or continuation training organised by a Finnish educational institution under public supervision, and complete 2 or 4 study credits each month to be eligible for the allowance.

The allowance consists of a base amount (EUR 705.20 per month) and a wage-based amount (45% of the difference between the monthly wage and the base contribution), and it is funded by the Education Fund, which is financed by the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the State.

In 2020, the allowance was reformed to encourage greater take up from people working in low-paid sectors and / or the low-skilled, with a view to improve the level of income support provided, and the training offer for which the allowance is eligible.

To summarise, policy sketch 3 refers to the introduction of a paid training leave entitlement Ireland, which entails:

- Introducing a legal reform to establishing a legal right to paid training leave and setting out criteria in relation to eligibility, levels of financial support, rights and obligations of all relevant parties (learners, employers, training institutions etc);
- Ensuring the paid training leave provision allows for short training leave to be taken up on a yearly basis, and long-training leave to complete extended educational programmes within a multi-year time frame;
- Including arrangements to either compensate employer for short training leave and/or providing financial contributions to learners during longer training leave;
- Implementing a funding reform to pool resources to fund a paid training leave, for example through the NTF, or by repurposing employees' social contributions;

¹⁹⁶ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db/search/adult-education-allowance>

- Implementing supporting measures (e.g. awareness raising and tailored career guidance services) to increase take up and impact.

In terms of **strengths** of policy sketch 3, the introduction of a paid training leave entitlement would remove some of the key barriers faced by learners in accessing/taking up adult education and training opportunities, namely lack of time. In turn, this ensure that Ireland's FET offer to employees is better aligned and more comparable with that of other EU Member States where training leave entitlements are currently foreseen.¹⁹⁷ Experts note that there is a need to '*make the journey for lifelong learners as easy, accessible and supported as possible*' and that ensuring workers can access paid training leave is worth considering if it contributed to this goal. However, experts underlined that employers already offer support for training regardless of statutory leave entitlements, and that a right to a training leave alone would not necessarily drastically impact participation in FET.

With regards to **weaknesses**, the potential costs of implementing policy sketch 3, and uncertainties with regards to where financial resources would come from, stand out. If provided by the State, a paid training leave would require discussions on re-purposing financial resources. If provided by employers, it might provide an additional burden, particularly for smaller companies, who already struggle to support their employees' participation in training (e.g. costs incurred when releasing staff for training). Furthermore, policy sketch 3 would not necessarily lead to increased take-up of learning opportunities from employees as experts note that that free or subsidised courses already exist in Ireland, and that the biggest challenge remains stimulating the demand. As such, an entitlement to training leave alone would not be sufficient if not accompanied by a supporting framework focused on improving guidance and information, as outlined in policy sketch 1.

In terms of **opportunities**, policy sketch 3, by providing financial support to learners, could potentially increase participation in adult education and training of those groups that are further away from the labour market and would benefit from upskilling and reskilling the most. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to re-think the use of existing resources (i.e. NFT surplus). Lastly, policy sketch 3 would ensure the implementation of one of the enabling conditions to ILAs as enshrined in the Recommendation: the recognition of workers' right to take up learning opportunities with no negative impact on their employment. Furthermore,

¹⁹⁷ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db/instrument-types/training-leave#end-of-desc>

the establishment of a training leave, paired with the provision of an allowance, would promote the idea of individual entitlements to be used over time, where the individual has increased ownership over their learning path.

Lastly, in relation to **threats**, the introduction of a paid training leave, which would require substantial reforms, might stifle policy developments and hamper existing cooperation in the FET sector.

Table 8 summarises the strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats of Policy Sketch 3 against the backdrop of the analytical framework developed for displaying the content of the ILA Recommendation.

Table 8. SWOT analysis of Policy Sketch 3

Alignment of Policy Sketch with analytical framework	Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removes a principal barrier to adult learning, namely lack of time. • Makes Ireland's offer to employees more comparable with that of other EU Member States
	Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not necessarily take into account barriers faced by employers in releasing staff, or indirect costs of doing so • Does not address long-standing issues within FET sector (e.g. career guidance)
Desirable/undesirable effects if implemented; complementarity with other instruments	Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potentially leads to greater engagement in education and training by more vulnerable and marginalised groups • Provides opportunity to repurpose NFT surplus to respond to both learners and employers needs • Increase learners' ownership over their learning path
	Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires lengthy structural reforms which may polarise the discourse across stakeholder groups and hamper existing cooperation • Requires investment that may not lead to actual impact

To conclude, differences and communalities in the statements across dividing lines – Employment versus Education and Business versus Labour – can be summarised as follows.

Business versus Labour: Views across representatives of employer and employees' organisations are rather polarised. Employer organisations stressed that not all companies can afford time off or financial support for employee training, particularly SMEs. Moreover, these stakeholders highlighted that the labour market remains very competitive, with employers struggling to fill vacancies and retain talent. In this context, it would be challenging for some employers for staff to take extended periods of leave. Furthermore, employer organisations noted that, if employers were expected to finance a statutory entitlement to training leave, this would result in a disproportionate burden on businesses, at a time when employers are facing increasing labour and business costs, due to the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crisis. Instead, these organisations insist on the need for more incentives for employers, for example through vouchers, they can direct the demand towards areas where jobs are available. At the opposite end of the spectrum, organisations representing the interests of employees, stressed that the lack of access to training leave and lack of income replacement when in training are the main barriers to access to adult learning. This results in greater inequalities between sectors and groups of learners depending on working conditions and income levels (e.g. workers in hospitality may be less likely to have the financial and time resources to invest in their up-/reskilling compared to workers in the ICT sector).

Employment versus Education: Representatives across both policy areas recognised the importance of ensuring that employees have right to take time off for training, and of further raising awareness among employers of the benefits of training for business growth and development. However, they also highlighted the need to strike a balance between employees and employers' needs. While concerns remain with regards to the feasibility of the establishment of a right to paid training leave (e.g. in relation to costs), the introduction of such a measure could be taken into consideration provided more evidence existed on a direct correlation between paid training leave entitlements and increased participation in adult learning. However, these stakeholders stressed that priority should be given to strengthening existing gaps in relation to information and career guidance, which are perceived as having a bigger impact on participation levels.

The research suggests that, while there is a growing interest in the introduction of a paid training leave specifically on the side of organisations representing employees, who perceive this as a crucial support measure to foster

an equitable access to training, other stakeholder groups (employer representatives, public authorities; FET sector) raise concerns with regards to the impact of such an instrument. Particular concerns relate to the proportionality of costs vis a vis benefits.

There is no clear **regional dimension** to this policy sketch. Creating a new statutory training leave entitlement would require national level legislation. Local administrations, i.e. county councils and city councils, do not have the legal competence to create regional training leave schemes.

Concluding assessment: The research suggests that, while there is a growing interest in the introduction of a paid training leave specifically on the side of organisations representing employees, who perceive this as a crucial support measure to foster an equitable access to training, other stakeholder groups (employer representatives, public authorities; FET sector) raise concerns with regards to the impact of such an instrument. Particular concerns relate to the proportionality of costs vis a vis benefits.

8.5. Summary – Closing the gaps: What the implementation of the policy sketches has to offer in fulfilling the goals of the Council Recommendation on ILA

The three Policy Sketches outlined in the previous sections represent potential avenues to address several shortcomings identified in the Irish FET sector, while fulfilling some of the key goals of the ILA Recommendation.

The implementation of Policy Sketch 1 would address the ILA Recommendation's objective of supporting all working-age adults to accessing training¹⁹⁸ and, drawing on the findings of previous studies (e.g., Cedefop, 2018) and existing platforms developed in and outside of Ireland, provide an opportunity to tackle current challenges in the provision of information and guidance services, through an easily accessible and user-friendly portal acting as the main entry point for current and future learners, as well as employers to find out about training opportunities and financial support available to them. Moreover, Policy Sketch 1 would be conducive to promoting stronger cooperation between stakeholders (e.g. social partners, organisations involved in the provision of

¹⁹⁸ Council of the European Union (2022). Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts 2022/C 243/03, para 1 (a). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2022.243.01.0026.01.ENG

learning and career opportunities) for the identification and promotion of further education and learning, the definition of eligibility criteria for education and training opportunities, and ensure their relevance to labour market needs, as outlined in the ILA Recommendation¹⁹⁹.

Policy Sketches 2 and 3 would facilitate the achievement of the ILA Recommendation's goal of increasing individuals' incentives and motivation to seek training,²⁰⁰ either by providing more flexible formal and non-formal learning opportunities (e.g. providing micro-credentials through Policy Sketch 2), or by tackling existing barriers to participation (e.g. lack of time, by recognising a legal right to paid training leave).

While the three policy sketches would support the strengthening of some of the elements that constitute a sustainable enabling framework in the context of the ILA Recommendation (i.e. better guidance for learners; access to a single repository/platform), they would leave out other crucial component, such as validation arrangements. Indeed, none of the policy sketches would directly impact access to validation or ensure that validation opportunities, including skills assessment opportunities are available and accessible to every learner, aside from perhaps being able to access information on this via a revamped and more user-friendly online portal.²⁰¹ Furthermore, and most importantly, none of the policy sketches, either on its own or in combination with the other two, would be sufficient to implement a fully-fledged ILA-type measure.

While not mutually exclusive, not all policy sketches benefit from the same level of support at the national level. Policy sketch 1 stands out as the scenario that corresponds to current policy developments more closely, and that was supported by the vast majority of stakeholders across the board. As mentioned above, the Irish government has already started a consultation process to establish a new strategy for career guidance to improve the provision of guidance services, including through the establishment of a single or main digital platform as a reference point for learners. Furthermore, the need for a more coherent and consolidated approach to online information on learning opportunities and careers through a centralised portal that includes accessible, user-friendly and tailored information, including on skills shortages and mismatches, learning outcomes, and pathways represents a key recommendation stemming out of the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, para 16.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, para 1(b)

²⁰¹ Ibid, para 12.

recent OECD review of Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025.²⁰² As the review process was initiated at the request of the Irish government, the probability that steps will be taken to follow up on this recommendation is generally high.

Following policy sketch 1, policy sketch 2 seems the most likely to be implemented on the ground, at least in terms of providing support to the current momentum for micro-credentials. As mentioned in previous sections, micro-credentials have gained increased popularity within the HE and the FET sectors, increasingly penetrating the training offer, due to their inherent flexibility which allows to meet both learners' and employers' needs, at a time when it is crucial to participate in upskilling and reskilling to navigate labour market changes, while ensuring that employers can continue to count on their workforce to recover from yet another socio-economic crisis. While Policy Sketch 2 was met by a certain amount of scepticism due to its focus on an individual type of offer, it is still likely that the provision of micro-credentials will continue to grow and that bite-size learning opportunities will keep attracting learners²⁰³.

Lastly, policy sketch 3 remains the least likely to be implemented, at least in the short term. Out of the three possible scenarios, the recognition of a legal entitlement to paid training leave was the one that was met with the most concern by stakeholders across the board. This is due to its financial implications, and current lack of evidence on its potential impact on access and participation levels. This indicates that, while Policy Sketch remains a possibility in the long term, it is unlikely to a priority in the short to medium term.

²⁰² OECD (2023), *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en>

²⁰³ To this end, it is relevant that the OECD review also recognised the relevance of micro-credentials, recommending lifelong learning providers to offer more flexible learning opportunities (e.g. online, modular, 'bite-size' micro-credentials), and strengthening their recognition and stackability.

CHAPTER 9. Conclusion and reflections for policy-making

Ireland is one of the strongest performers in the EU when it comes to its economy. Despite consecutive crises (i.e. 2008-2011 financial and economic crisis; the COVID-19 pandemic; Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine), the Irish economy has shown resilience, with unemployment – including youth unemployment – rates sitting well below the EU average²⁰⁴; a growing participation rate in lifelong learning; and a good level of adaptability to the digital transformation compared to other EU Member States.²⁰⁵

Furthermore, Ireland is already in a strong position in terms of the range and depth of the supply-side offering available to employed and unemployed people in Ireland. There is good strategic coordination between the principal stakeholders and providers of training and learning opportunities, as evidenced by the national level, multi-stakeholder initiatives such as EGFSN and sectoral initiatives such as the Tourism and Hospitality Careers Oversight Group (COG).

While a strong socio-economic context is conducive to a well-functioning skills ecosystem, challenges remain. For instance, differences in participation in adult learning according to educational attainment, age, and employment status persist. Furthermore, interviews have shown that engagement in further education and training is often affected by the complexity of the Irish system, where multiple several public and private actors being involved in the provision of further education and training opportunities at national, regional, and sectoral level, often competing for the same learners, particularly at the higher levels of the NQF.

In this complex landscape, navigating the rich mosaic of offers through multiple portals, with little coordination or insufficient guidance, becomes an arduous task. This, in turn, affects outreach and participation, particularly from prospective and current learner groups that are further away from the labour market. Furthermore, while there is a steady flow of supply-side funding supporting the expansion of the FET offer, particularly through the NTF, it has also created tensions among employers who are keen to see a return on

²⁰⁴ Eurostat. Unemployment statistics. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Unemployment_statistics_and_beyond#Trends_in_the_unemployment_rate

²⁰⁵ European Commission. Digital Skills & Jobs Portal - Ireland: a snapshot of digital skills. <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/latest/briefs/ireland-snapshot-digital-skills>

investment – particularly at a time when ongoing transformations in the labour market call for rapid adaptability to new trends to remain competitive.

Despite these challenges, consecutive policies, strategies, and investments demonstrate that skills are at the very centre of Irish policymaking. This represents a solid foundation to further build upon, to ensure that Ireland's workforce is best placed to respond to the labour market and society needs of today and tomorrow; and that employers' buy-in is secured to ensure the long-term sustainability of the FET sector.

While the interviewees showed did not foresee or desire the introduction of an ILA-type of measure along the lines of the French CPF, they clearly showed that, to a large extent, consensus is there for strengthening (and introducing, where necessary) elements of the 'enabling framework' as set out the ILA Recommendation. To this end, this case study has identified several priority areas for action in Ireland to improve the existing training offer and the provision of services, including:

- Simplifying and streamlining information for prospective learners: The current plethora of course providers and information available through multiple portals affects participation by discouraging perspective learners from engaging. Ongoing multi-stakeholder consultations should lead to the rationalisation of existing digital portals, either through the creation of a single point of entry, or by building more efficient and clear links between existing platforms, to better support learners to navigate the offer. This process should also consider making use of new technologies (e.g. generative AI) to provide up-to-date information on labour market developments, skills gaps/needs, and career profiles, etc.
- Strengthening the provision of online and in-person career guidance in a systematic way: The case study identified career guidance as an area for further improvement (state education, FET, and HE), across the lifelong guidance system. To this end, better coordination between providers to define clear roles and responsibilities, and increase the outreach to more vulnerable groups, as well as investments in adequate training for career practitioners including guidance counsellors can positively impact on the provision of quality education and career guidance to learners.
- Ensuring that the provision of further education and training is responsive to the needs of learners and the labour market: The case study has shown that there is a clear appetite for more micro-credential offerings that can lead to a recognised/certified qualification. There appears to be increasing cooperation between FET and HE institutions to meet this demand, particularly in the newly established Technological Universities.

The Irish FET sector could build on this momentum, to incentivise the offer of flexible pathways that allow learners to gain new skills quickly, and employers to benefit from a better skilled workforce faster.

- Incentivising the participation of learners through increased support through sustainable training leave: Ireland is as one of the few EU Member States not recognising a legal right to paid training leave. For the future, efforts could be made to further investigate the feasibility and potential impact of the introduction of a paid training leave entitlement and different modalities for its integration in the Irish FET system.
- Increasing outreach to vulnerable groups: The case study showed that vulnerable groups represent the hardest to reach through existing information and guidance services. To this end, efforts could be made to increase awareness among these groups through better and tailored information provision, in-person guidance and services, and financial support for training as needed.
- Strengthening RPL through awareness raising and standards: The case study revealed that more efforts are needed to increase awareness among learners and providers of the importance and modalities of RPL. Furthermore, the research highlighted differences in approaches, which call for more standardisations of procedures and processes.
- Increasing awareness among employers on the benefits of lifelong learning: As mentioned above, employers' buy-in plays a crucial role in the Irish FET system. However, interviews carried out for this case study showed that employers, and SMEs in particular, struggle to promote further education and training opportunities among their employees due to direct/indirect costs associated with freeing up their staff, particularly in a post-COVID-19 economy. To this end, awareness raising efforts could be directed at increasing employers' understanding of the long-term benefits of investing in lifelong learning. Better and more streamlined information and guidance, also for employers, as well as ensuring the FET offer is relevant to current and future labour market needs, could contribute to this.
- Ensuring existing funding streams are fit to support lifelong learning: Consultations pointed to the current NTF surplus as a key factor affecting employers' willingness to further invest in FET and encourage employees to participate in training. Consultations to identify solutions to unlock the NTF surplus to facilitate lifelong learning, potentially through better incentives for employers, could be considered.

- Continuing to foster effective cooperation and trust among stakeholders: The case study highlighted the complex governance of the Irish FET system. A possible next step could be to strengthen cooperation both within governmental departments, and across stakeholder groups by ensuring that existing structures for collaboration (e.g. National Skills Council; Regional Skills Fora) can act as meaningful spaces for exchange and participatory policy making, to reduce duplication and competition, and promote increased synergies, transparency and trust.
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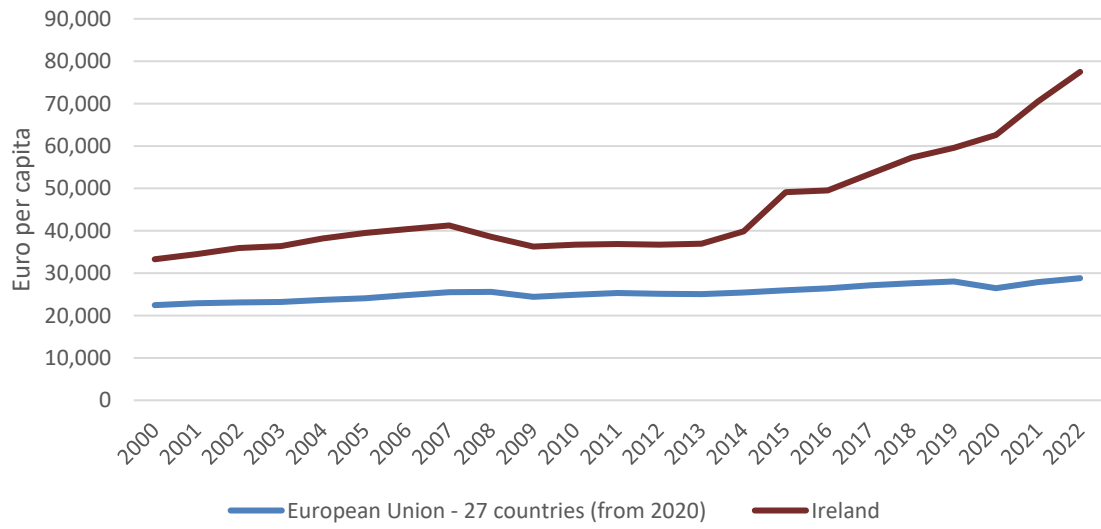
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Annex

Further figures on Ireland's socio-economic context

Figure A2 Real GDP per capita – Ireland, 2000-2022



Source: Eurostat (2023), National accounts indicator (ESA 2010)