

Ireland: Toward a Unified Tertiary Education System

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For Ireland, focus on higher education attainment has led to social and economic success. But it has also led to an imbalance in the postsecondary system and other challenges. Higher education (HE) is seen as the primary route to personal and career success while further education and training (FET) is seen as second best. The policy response is to develop a strategy for a unified tertiary system for learning, skills, and knowledge, whereby, irrespective of where learners enter FET, HE, or a research career, they are in a single system that responds to individual talents, ambitions, and motivations.

A National Policy Focused on Higher Education Attainment...

Ireland is typical of what [Dirk van Damme](#), in his article in this issue, refers to as high-income countries where over half of the young age cohorts hold a qualification from a postsecondary institution. Indeed, Ireland in many ways leads this field. Ninety-one percent of students complete secondary-level education, one of the highest shares among high-income countries according to the OECD, and approximately 66 percent of school leavers participate in higher education. According to [The Educational Attainment Thematic Report for 2022](#), 63 percent of the 25-to-34-year age group in Ireland have higher education qualifications. Ireland ranks third in the OECD and second in the European Union for tertiary education attainment.

In contrast, we estimate that only about 20 percent of school leavers attend further education. The [NEET \(not in employment, education and/or training\) rate](#) (15–24 years) is about 13.4 percent, which places Ireland above both the EU rate and the OECD average.

Along with membership of the European Union, this level of participation in higher education has led to the dramatic transformation of Ireland's economy. From having been heavily dependent on protectionist policies and agriculture, Ireland now has one of the most open economies in the world and one of the best performing in the European Union. Without question, adoption of the knowledge economy paradigm has transformed Ireland, with huge implications for tertiary education. The implications for Irish society have also been profound, with the move from a highly conservative, inward-looking society to one characterized by a more open-minded, liberal democratic ethos.

Over the decades, the big story has been massification; quite simply, for a country lacking natural resources, the aim has been to get more people well educated. Since 2012, that process has been supported by the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, which supported strategic steering and shaping of the higher education landscape

Abstract

Ireland is aiming to develop a strategy for a unified tertiary system for learning, skills, and knowledge. Why, and what are the challenges it faces?

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to create a coordinated and “coherent” system of larger and more diverse HE institutions, referred to as “directed diversity.”

... But One Leading to Imbalance in the Postsecondary System and Other Challenges

But increasingly, there is a realization that overfocusing on growing the level of higher education attainment has resulted in hollowing out the FET sector. This has created a culture, especially among young people and their parents, where university education is regarded as the only route to personal and professional success. This biased view, that FET is a second-best choice and primarily for lower socioeconomic groups, has also been fed by how secondary schools are regularly ranked by the media according to the proportion of students who transfer to higher education.

At fault too is national policy and investment. For example, while higher education campuses have enjoyed significant investment in landmark buildings, the FET sector has made do with port-a-cabins and poor equipment.

HE graduate economic returns remain significant. But, as Dirk van Damme notes, there is growing evidence of perverse effects of high attainment rates. For instance, the graduate premium cloaks underemployment and labor mismatch. According to a [recent study](#), in 2019 approximately 333,500 workers, or 15 percent of the labor force, were overqualified graduates. Of the new jobs created in the period from 2008 to 2019, almost three-quarters were filled by graduates underutilizing their skills. Women are most likely to be overqualified, comprising 56 percent of all overqualified workers. The most significantly overqualified workers studied in four broad areas: business, administration and law; arts and humanities; engineering, construction and manufacturing; and health and welfare.

Labor market polarization is also a current reality for Ireland. Despite high levels of employment (unemployment registering 4.3 percent in January 2023), there are [major skills shortages in key areas](#), such as all health professions, finance, teachers and educational professionals, bus drivers, construction and engineering professionals, etc. There is a real concern that Ireland does not have the range of knowledge and skills to meet future challenges and opportunities. This polarized skills structure can, as noted by van Damme, lead to growing income inequality. As yet, this has not translated into significant levels of social tension, but such inequality, combined with the level of unfulfilled ambition of graduates, shortage of housing, high rents, and the rising cost of living poses a threat to the social contract.

Ireland’s demographic profile is also changing. While it still has a relatively young population, it is aging faster than anywhere else in Europe, putting pressure on the health service but also raising questions about the education and training system. Like many countries, Ireland has a linear educational structure whereby students progress from primary to secondary to tertiary and then into work—but the fact that people are living longer and that the requirements of the labor market are increasingly volatile requires a different, more flexible education and training system. Yet only 12.6 percent of adults aged 25–64 years participate in learning, which is below the EU target of 15 percent.

The Policy Response

In May 2022, the minister of further and higher education, research, innovation and science (DFHERIS) published a [Policy Platform: Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge](#). A strategy is to be published during 2023–2024.

The objective is to create a system whereby, irrespective of where learners enter FET, HE, or a research career, they are in a single system that responds to individual talents, ambitions, and motivations. The system should provide opportunities for reskilling, upskilling, and repurposing qualifications best suited to the learner’s age, stage of development, interests, and life circumstances. All institutions in such a system would be differentiated according to their mission, role, and responsibilities, but would work collaboratively within a single knowledge, skills, and innovation system.

Thus far, attention has been focused on creating greater connectivity between the FET and HE sectors. However, attention to pathways (such as enabling students to begin their studies in FET colleges and then to transfer to universities) simply reinforces

the view that a university education is the main goal. In addition, the creation of thousands of new university places has led to a sharp fall in FET enrollment.

As more focus is placed on skills, developing work-based learning, and undertaking more applied research, there is growing competition for students and investment between FET colleges, technological universities, and research-intensive universities. At the system level, this is creating potential tensions around mission clarity and boundaries.

Ireland has positioned itself as a high-skills economy, but it will need to develop, fund, and implement a more balanced education and skills strategy for the future. In particular, more attention will need to be placed on strengthening FET, addressing the skills imbalance, as well as challenging deeply ingrained cultural biases. ▲

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