

**Aspects of Post-compulsory
Education and
Training in
Ireland**

**INTERNATIONAL
REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1999-00**

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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Commentary

1 This report is based on a visit to Ireland by inspectors from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) in March 1999. The group was joined by the director of funding and strategy at the FEFC and a senior official from the further education support unit at the Department for Education and Employment. The main purpose of the visit was to study aspects of post-compulsory education and training and to consider arrangements for assuring quality in the curriculum. The themes used to guide the visit included: the organisation of post-compulsory education; qualifications and standards; investing in young people and widening participation.

2 Features which characterised the Irish economy in the 1980s such as a very large national debt, high unemployment and declining population have altered in the last few years. The tremendous growth in the Irish economy has created skill shortages in a number of key areas, particularly in information technology (IT).

3 The group explored how Ireland was addressing education and training provision in a growing economy. The Irish government has set goals to widen participation, improve achievement and promote the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills.

4 Some of the factors and issues covered in the report are as follows:

- Ireland has used funding from the European Union (EU) to develop education, training and employment opportunities
- the population of Ireland is around 3.6 million with over one-third living in Dublin. There are few other large centres of population and most people live in small towns and villages in predominantly rural settings

- the proportion of each age-group participating in post-compulsory education and training is high although absolute numbers remain modest.

For example in 1997:

- 91.8% of 16 year olds were in full-time education
- 80.6% of 17 year olds were in full-time education
- 63.0% of 18 year olds were in full-time education
- 47.7% of 19 year olds were in full-time education
- 19.1% of 20-25 year olds were in full-time education

- although compulsory schooling finishes at 15 years of age, most pupils stay in education until 18. The proportion progressing to higher education has increased dramatically in recent years
- in 1995, the number of students aged five and over enrolled in primary and lower secondary education per 100 persons in the population aged five to 29, was higher than in any other country in the EU
- funding for schools and most post-compulsory education and training comes from the department for education and science (DES). Lines of accountability to the DES are clearly defined. The system is highly centralised
- much post-compulsory education up to second level takes place in schools. Schools have different ways to encourage students to remain in education and to succeed. For example, an alternative curriculum is offered to those pupils who have not succeeded in the junior leaving certificate at 15 years old. This transition year allows students to try a number of different vocational areas before further training or study

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- work-based training, including apprenticeships is co-ordinated and funded through the Foras Aisenna Saothair (FAS), the national training and employment agency, which funds 17,000 apprenticeships across 25 trades. Training takes place in the workplace, in training centres and in institutes of technology. Students may attend institutes of technology for a broader educational input during periods of block release
- the size of population and the central role played by the DES and other government departments allows the DES to respond quickly to national skills shortages
- at the time of the visit, the implications of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill 1999 were being considered. The bill proposes a single national qualifications authority to oversee a national post-16 qualification framework
- the DES is developing a clear qualification structure with few national awarding bodies. The system is responsive to emerging demands from new students and to the economy
- institutes of technology are required to demonstrate to the DES how they have contributed to regional regeneration through community initiatives
- the DES has put in place a number of initiatives to promote social inclusion and widen participation by attracting members of disadvantaged groups. Many of the initiatives build flexibly on the existing modular qualifications structure and involve a number of partners. A number of initiatives such as the transition year are not solely geared to the achievement of qualification
- most of the qualifications offered in the post-compulsory sector are modularised, allowing students to accumulate units towards full qualifications.

Scope of the Visit

5 In a short visit it would not be appropriate to make judgements about the overall quality of provision, nor was this attempted. We aimed to consider those aspects of practice which might inform thinking in the further education sector in the United Kingdom (UK). Because of the closeness of the two countries and their similar priorities for education and training, an invitation was extended to our hosts for a reciprocal visit.

6 The group visited three institutes of technology, three vocational education committees (VECs), one community college, a technology institute, one local community school, a travellers' training centre, and a vocational training opportunities scheme. In addition, the group received excellent briefings from the DES, and other national agencies such as the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA), the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA), and the National Certification Authority (TEASTAS) in Dublin. About half the visit was spent in Dublin; the rest divided between visits to Galway, a small city with a population of 57,000 some 130 miles from Dublin, and Tralee, a small town with a population of 18,000 some 170 miles from Dublin. Both Tralee and Galway experienced a rapid growth in population of over 12% between 1991 and 1996.

Government and Economy

7 Ireland has a population of 3.6 million. In the late 1970s, the country experienced net immigration of about 10,500 persons each annum. In the 1980s this was reversed and reached a peak in 1987 when 37,000 persons migrated each year. Once again, in the latter half of the 1990s the country is enjoying net immigration. The effect of these movements in population is reflected in the age structure of Ireland. The proportion of people aged 0 to 14 is 21%, 67% are aged 15 to 64, and 12% are aged 65 or over.

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8 The proportion of young people aged up to 14 is predicted to decline beyond 2000 whilst the proportion of those aged 15 to 64 will increase. The labour force is projected to grow by 22% each year to 2000 and 11% each year thereafter. It is predicted that agriculture employment will decrease by about 4% whilst employment in manufacturing, international and local services, including tourism, is predicted to grow substantially in the period to 2010.

9 The workforce is expected to grow by around 35,000 people each year until 2003. The greatest rises are predicted for professional and managerial workers (38%), associated professionals (35%) and service workers (30%). In addition, more semi-skilled technical workers will be needed. Ireland has the lowest density of population at an average of 50 inhabitants per square kilometre, of all countries in the EU. There has been considerable drift from rural to urban centres.

10 The number of those in the workforce aged 15 to 65 has increased from 1.3 million in 1986 to 1.5 million in 1997. This represents about 54% of those eligible for work. The participation rate for men is 70% whilst for women it is 39%. Labour force participation rates are linked to the level of educational achievement. The figures for male and female participation rates hide important trends. For example the aggregate male labour force participation rate has fallen from 76% in 1981 to 69% in 1997. In the same period, female participation has increased from 29% to 39%. Economic commentators predict that the rise in female participation will account for over 25% of the increase in labour supply.

11 The unemployment rate has fallen considerably since 1976 when it stood at over 18% of the workforce. The seasonally adjusted rate for 1997 was 10.3%. This rate has continued to fall and at the time of our visit was less than 5%. However, long-term

unemployment remains a stubborn and pernicious element of the rates. In 1997, 28% of those people registered as unemployed had no qualifications and a further 35% had only completed junior leaving certificates at 15 years of age.

12 The public and foreign debt reached dangerously high levels in 1980 culminating in a balance of payments crisis, high inflation and high taxation. In line with many other countries, cutbacks in public expenditure became a feature of life in subsequent years. Since 1987, the economy has staged a significant recovery with a surplus trade balance, annual growth rates of 2% to 4%, reduced interest rates, low inflation and greatly increased export earnings.

13 Local elected authorities include 27 county councils, five county boroughs, six borough corporations, 49 urban district councils and 30 boards of town commissioners.

14 The Irish language is the national language and the first official language. Irish is spoken in the Gaeltacht areas which are predominantly in the west of the country. English is the mother tongue of the majority of the population and is recognised as the second official language.

15 Ireland joined the EU in 1973 and is developing growing links with Europe. It retains many cultural and social links with England, the United States, Canada and Australia. Links with Europe are growing rapidly.

Organisation of Schools and Second Level Education

16 The three main levels of the Irish educational system are primary (aged 5 to 12), secondary (aged 12 to 17) and third level higher education comprising the universities, colleges of education and 13 institutes of technology. Schooling is compulsory between the ages of six and 15 years.

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17 The education and training system is highly centralised. The functions of the DES include policy formulation and review, resource allocation and monitoring of expenditure, evaluation of performance, quality assurance, advice and support.

18 All funding for schools comes from the DES. The main secondary examinations (the junior and senior school leaving certificates) are set and marked centrally. The DES has a sizeable corps of professional staff, including school inspectors to enable it to manage the operational aspects of the system.

19 The roles of different organisations in the Irish educational system have been clarified recently in the *Education Act 1998*. The act provides, for the first time, a clear statutory framework within which the rights and roles of the DES, the schools inspectorate, principals, teachers, parents and other interested parties are clearly defined.

20 The second level of the education system is represented by secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Around 370,000 students study in 770 schools. Almost 450 secondary schools cater for 60% of second level students; 246 vocational schools educate 24% of second level students; whilst 77 community and comprehensive schools educate 13% of the cohort. The remaining students follow courses in 38 other aided and non-aided schools. Statutory education takes place between the ages of six and 15, although participation rates for four and five year olds is 85% and over 90% of 16 year olds remain in education.

Post-compulsory and third level education

21 Key features:

- there is strong central direction from the DES
- a further education sector which is new and which has been grafted on to secondary education
- vocational education which, in the absence of a national legislative framework, has evolved in response to local demand
- separation between the organisation and funding of education and training programmes.

22 There is not a separate further education sector which would correspond with the English further education system. The main providers of general education and vocational courses for both 15 to 17 year olds and adults are community schools and colleges (ie. secondary schools) which have grown beyond their original function of secondary education. A decline in the secondary school population and a simultaneous rise in demand for vocational courses led these institutions to change their mission and curriculum. Most community schools and colleges are schools which have concentrated on the vocational pathway. In many of these schools, students aged 15 to 17 are the majority. Many community colleges share premises and staff with secondary schools. The higher education sector is also involved in some further education provision; off-the-job training for apprentices is provided by the institutes of technology.

23 Funding for provision in the community colleges is routed through VECs which were established in 1930 to develop continuing and vocational education at a local level. For example, the largest VEC in Ireland, the City of Dublin VEC, manages and funds a range of vocational courses in 16 schools and colleges

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across the city. There is a mix of local political representation (local councillors) on the VECs and representatives who are drawn from business and education.

24 Traditionally the third level education system has comprised the university sector, the technological sector and colleges of education, all of which are substantially funded by the state and are autonomous and self-governing. Numbers of students in this sector have grown rapidly from 18,500 in 1965 to over 100,000 in 1997.

25 There are four universities in Ireland: the National University of Ireland (with constituent universities in Cork, Dublin, Galway and Maynooth), the University of Dublin (Trinity College), Dublin City University and the University of Limerick. Currently they account for around 40,000 students.

26 Institutes of technology (formerly regional technical colleges) correspond most closely to the former polytechnics in England. They provide higher level vocational courses at certificate, diploma and degree level.

27 The Dublin Institute of Technology is the largest third level institution in Ireland with 22,000 students. It has six constituent colleges and has the power to award its own degrees and other qualifications. It is funded directly by the DES and was established by its own act of parliament. At the time of our visit, the institute had received notification that its application for university status had been turned down.

28 There are 12 other institutes of technology. They offer education and training for trade and industry over a broad spectrum of occupations and levels. Courses are provided from foundation level to degrees and most qualifications are accredited by the NCEA. There are currently around 40,000 students in these institutions. Funding for the institutes of technology comes directly from the DES.

29 Given the small size of the population, and the central role of the DES, it has been possible to quickly respond to national skills shortages. For example, in response to a perceived national shortage of IT technicians, a national task force was established in August 1997. Working with the 13 institutes of technology and the NCEA, the DES was able to develop a new qualification, a national certificate in IT, which enrolled its first trainees in January 1998.

Qualifications and standards

30 The school leaving certificate is regarded as the gold standard by students, employers and parents. There are two leaving certificates. The junior leaving certificate is taken at the end of compulsory education at 15. The senior leaving certificate is generally studied over two years and forms the basis for entry to third level higher education and increasingly to employment. It is taken in six subjects which must include mathematics, English and Irish and can be taken at ordinary or honours level. It is broadly equivalent in demand to a three-subject general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) course. Each subject is assessed through externally set and marked examinations. The leaving certificates are awarded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) which prepares syllabuses and oversees the invigilation of examinations and the moderation of grades.

31 In order to meet the needs of more students at the senior level, two variations of the senior leaving certificate have been developed. The leaving certificate (vocational) includes at least two vocational subjects. The leaving certificate (applied) is designed for those not intending to go to third level higher education and emphasises key transferable and personal skills. These certificates are growing in popularity.

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32 The government has set an ambitious target of retaining 90% of students in education after completing the senior leaving certificate. In addition to developing vocational and applied variations to the senior leaving certificate, a transition year programme is available to all students after completing compulsory schooling. The transition year is interdisciplinary and is based around the needs of individual students. It is designed to offer a broad educational experience to students whilst encouraging them to continue with further education or employment training. Teachers design curricula, modules and short courses which are tailored to the specific needs of their students, and a wide variety of active learning methods is used to increase students' motivation. The programme includes non-examined elements such as Irish language, equal opportunities, social and political education, European developments and creative arts.

33 The DES considers that increasing the range of courses available between the ages of 15 and 18 years will provide for the development of all students, foster their self-esteem, and encourage the self-reliance and innovation which will enable students to shape the social and economic future of Ireland. The junior and senior school leaving certificates remain popular with adults returning to education; they often choose these in preference to vocational qualifications.

34 About 50% of the age group do not achieve sufficient points in the senior leaving certificate to progress to higher education. Many of these stay on at school and complete courses collected under the umbrella of the post-leaving certificate. Students may take a range of qualifications including retaking the leaving certificate, or vocational certificates. Many of the schools or community colleges offering these courses establish links with an institute of technology to aid students' progression. There is also a higher education links scheme which enables holders of NCVA awards to join certificate and diploma courses in institutes of technology.

35 There are two national agencies concerned with awarding qualifications in the post-compulsory sector. Both are funded by the DES. The NCEA validates certificate, diploma and degree programmes in the institutes of technology. These third level higher education programmes are devised by the institutes within an overall awards structure determined by the NCEA. The NCVA sets, monitors and certifies standards for vocational education and training programmes.

36 The NCEA is the statutory award-giving authority for third level education in institutions outside the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology. It was formed in 1972 and offers qualifications at four levels: foundation certificate; national certificate; national diploma; and degree. National certificate courses generally involve two years of full-time study with a minimum entry requirement of moderate success in the leaving certificate. A national diploma course often comprises one year of further study. The NCEA is responsible for developing the qualifications, and monitoring and reporting on standards.

37 The NCEA accredits some degree and postgraduate degrees which can be offered at institutes of technology. Some of these degrees reflect the specialism developed in the regional institute. For example, Althone Institute of Technology offers degrees in polymer technology and toxicology whilst the Institute of Technology, Tralee offers travel and tourism.

38 Courses are modular and each module is designed to be studied over one year. Credit accumulation allows students to study full time and build up an award over time. Credits can be transferred to other institutes of technology offering the same course. NCEA also offers a one-year foundation course which provides access to a range of national certificate courses for adults returning to education. Assessment is by a mixture of examinations and continuous assessment. Examination papers are written and marked by teachers and moderated by

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external examiners appointed by NCEA. Awards are set at pass, merit or distinction. Students study between 20 and 26 hours each week.

39 All NCEA awards are located in one of four programme areas: business; humanities; engineering and technology; and science and computing.

40 The NCVA was set up in 1991. It has established a vocational qualification framework with four levels. Foundation level is for those students with no qualifications; level 1 provides an introduction to general vocational skills; level 2 is offered in a range of specific vocational areas. Success at this level can provide a route to higher education as well as to employment. Level 3, at master crafts/advanced vocational skills level is being developed. Each award includes a vocational core plus broader skills (key skills) in such areas as communication and problem-solving.

41 The standards for national vocational certificates are set by one of five boards of study, drawing on the expertise of industry, providers, trade unions and others. Some modules may be devised to meet local or regional needs. Much work has been done to align standards with those developed in the EU for skilled and master crafts training.

42 Certificates are built around eight modules. At level 2, they comprise five vocational modules, two general studies modules (comprising communication, IT, numeracy and a foreign language) and a preparation for work module which includes structured work experience. Students may attend full time or part time and they may accumulate modules towards a full certificate. A module represents around 80 hours of directed learning time.

43 National vocational certificates allow students to progress to employment. Owing to recent economic growth, more than 90% of successful level 2 students find work. Although a number of students leave courses early to take

up employment and pass rates for full certificates are low, many principals, employers and other commentators in Ireland consider the achievement rate to be satisfactory.

44 In general, awards from the two national councils are used in various combinations in many of the initiatives, including Youthreach, to meet the needs of specific groups such as adult unemployed or travellers.

45 There are no separate national training organisations to set industry standards. The two aspects, setting standards and designing national vocational qualifications, have been brought together in the one national body, the NCVA. The view was expressed that standards are inextricably linked to qualifications and no merit could be seen in having separate employer organisations to identify standards. In effect, the NCVA draws together employers and educational interests through its council and its five boards of studies to consider both the standards and the qualifications.

46 Some vocational provision is based on English awarding and professional bodies such as City and Guilds of London Institute and the Association of Accounting Technicians. In general, however, foreign awarding bodies play a minor role.

47 The issue of a national qualifications framework has recently been the subject of a government inquiry by TEASTAS – the National Certification Authority. It has proposed the establishment of a national qualifications authority with a higher education arm and a further education and training arm. The proposed authority will manage the national framework, which will include all qualifications outside the university sector. A government bill to enact these recommendations has been introduced.

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48 Issues of retention and achievement and external quality control have not been as prominent as in England. Funding is not linked to retention or achievement. However, the government has recently announced an inquiry into the unacceptably high rate of non-completion in full-time third level education. Recent figures suggest that around 30% of students do not complete their third level course.

49 In a similar initiative, the Dublin Institute of Technology has worked closely with schools and the voluntary sector to re-engage school pupils before they leave compulsory education. Three factors were seen as critical to success: the power of IT to motivate disaffected pupils (the institute has received funding to establish IT centres in local schools); using specialist staff (educational psychologists) and parents to tackle low self-esteem; and using students from the institute as mentors, who are able to communicate with pupils more effectively than staff. The institute has also developed an extensive community education programme which includes programmes for disadvantaged individuals and groups.

50 Vocational training, including apprenticeships, is also undertaken by a number of government departments responsible for agriculture, tourism, sport and recreation and nursing. The national training and employment agency (FAS) operates a range of training and employment programmes. It works with education, employers and trade unions to design apprenticeships and identify appropriate standards. Currently FAS provides 17,000 apprenticeships across 25 trades. Apprenticeships last four years and combine training on and off-the-job and education, often in institutes of technology.

Quality Assurance in Ireland

51 The government and the DES are beginning to place a greater emphasis on accountability and transparency. Improved arrangements to assure quality and tighter controls on the overall education system are being planned. The measures proposed include more comprehensive reporting by the DES, a restructuring of the role of the schools inspectorate, greater responsibility and public accountability of school boards of management, the introduction of standardised testing for all schools, the use of performance indicators, and public reports for institutes of technology and universities.

52 The quality of management and education in schools is monitored by the inspectorate which is part of the DES. The inspectorate is led by a chief inspector, assisted by two deputy chief inspectors; one for primary level and one for secondary level.

53 Inspectors are the main link between the schools and the DES. Their duties include the inspection and evaluation of teachers, advice on the planning of curricula and the administration of tests and examinations. The inspectorate does not monitor standards of attainment in a systematic way or report on whether standards are improving or deteriorating. However, since the publication of annual reviews of the leaving certificate examinations, much greater analysis takes place. The inspectorate now reviews the levels of success and failure in each subject annually.

54 The inspectorate is also responsible for the organisation of, and participation in, in-service training courses, liaison with colleges of education, and the interviewing of teachers for some posts. Inspectors also act as information officers on behalf of the department. At senior level, inspectors have a policy advisory role.

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55 Institutes of technology, universities and others providing third level provision do not have the same level of inspection. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill 1999, proposes to establish a comprehensive programme for the development of pedagogic skills for third level teachers.

56 The government sees a national assessment and certification system as the key to providing a high-quality vocational education and training system.

57 The setting, monitoring and maintenance of standards in vocational and third level qualifications outside of universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology is the responsibility of the NCVA and the NCEA.

58 In order to ensure the quality of its courses and monitor standards the NCVA invests heavily in experts to develop and assess its qualifications. Modules are outcome-based and they are assessed against criteria. Individual examinations are scrutinised by a chief examiner who reports annually through one of five boards of study to the council of the NCVA. Centres offering NCVA qualifications are visited annually by external examiners who monitor the system of assessment and moderate students' results. The NCVA makes an annual report to the DES which includes a section on standards.

59 The NCEA is responsible for ensuring standards in its courses and their practical relevance and career orientation. It uses an approach familiar to polytechnics in the UK prior to 1993 where panels of experts from industry and education visit colleges to accredit new courses. NCEA is committed to reviewing all courses and qualifications in programme areas every five years using reviews by trained peers together with NCEA officers. Panels review the course organisation and coverage of the syllabus, teaching and assessment methods and student achievement, though there are no systematic observations of teaching or assessment. It is planned that institutions are to

be reviewed every five years. In reality, the timetable for institutional reviews are between eight and 10 years. For example, one institution visited during our visit was reviewed in 1990 and 1998. Institutional reviews are based on self-assessment, and consider cross-college organisational issues. Academic issues are considered in programme area reviews.

60 Most courses and modules are assessed by internally set and marked examination papers. Practical work and assignment work, however, is increasingly being used in addition to written papers. Examination papers are drawn up by each centre and submitted to external examiners appointed by NCEA. The examiners are usually teachers and managers from other third level institutions and sometimes, where appropriate, from industry. Teachers are paid for setting and marking examination papers. External examiners visit the college after the examinations and moderate a range of scripts. An examination committee composed of all teachers on the course and the external examiners, confirm the marks to be proposed to the NCEA. There is no publication of results nationally.

61 In addition to courses provided in third level institutions, a wide range of vocational education and training courses is offered within the education sector to students who have completed second level. Post-leaving certificate courses are principally aimed at those who have completed senior cycle education at age 18 and who do not have sufficient points to enter higher education or who wish to undertake specific vocational training. Their objective is to provide skills to meet the needs of the economy, to equip young people with the vocational and technological skills necessary for employment, to provide progression to higher education and training, and to foster innovation and adaptability in participants. NCVA validates and assures the quality of many of these courses. Some others, including the transition year programme are evaluated and reported on by the schools inspectorate.

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62 All education providers are becoming more concerned about the impact of participation, attendance and achievement on the quality of provision. Some institutes of technology have introduced induction procedures in order to try to improve student retention rates. A national research group is to look at the whole issue of student retention across third level institutions. A study on retention on engineering courses at Athlone Institute of Technology concluded that, because students are allocated to courses by the central admissions office on the basis of points gained in the senior leaving certificate, it is difficult to assess the level of commitment of students who have low entry points. Prospective students are not interviewed to determine if they display any aptitude for particular courses. In addition, students who may have made an incorrect initial choice do not have much opportunity to transfer to another course within the same institute.

63 Some post-compulsory education providers have developed local partnerships to raise the quality of provision. In Galway, a set of initiatives has been designed by the VEC in partnership with education and training institutions to improve levels of participation and achievement in vocational education and training.

64 The Dublin Institute of Technology is a statutory awarding body in its own right. Its awards structure is broadly the same as that of the NCEA. The institute's quality assurance is based on encouraging individual lecturers to achieve excellence in teaching and learning, by ensuring that each course committee improves the quality of each course through regular formal review procedures. All courses are validated using peer review and evaluation.

65 FAS organises training for the unemployed and has established a system of assessment and certification which is based on standards within a framework of ascending levels of skill. This framework is designed to correspond with the

agreed European training levels to enable transfer between the training and education systems in EU countries. It was not possible in the time available to look in detail at the arrangements for assuring the quality of these courses.

Widening Participation

66 Ireland has lower levels of education and qualification amongst its adult population than most other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The *International Adult Literacy Survey* (OECD, 1997) identified a major literacy problem, with about 25% of the Irish population scoring at the lowest level (level 1). The survey indicates that 15,300 people annually need literacy support. At present, 5,000 adults are involved in literacy programmes. The budget in 1998 was £4 million. A national adult literacy programme is proposed in the green paper *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (November 1998). It recognises that all adult literacy programmes will have to address underachievement at school. In 1996, only 45% of the Irish population aged between 25 and 64 years had experienced upper secondary education compared with 74% in the UK.

67 Ireland also has lower levels of participation and investment in adult and second chance education compared with most other OECD countries. UK statistics show that 54% of first-year enrolments in third level courses in 1995-96 were over 23 years of age and that 37.7% of all students were part time. In third level colleges in Ireland, mature students only account for 5.4% of full-time entrants to higher education and only 18.5% of all students are part time. The target for 2010 is that 16% of full-time enrolments should be mature students.

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68 Although the DES spent in excess of £65 million on adult education in 1998, widening participation in Ireland has suffered from a lack of structures and of systematic investment. Investment in childcare, adult guidance and counselling has not been a priority to date. Debate is concerned with providing alternatives to the leaving certificate as the gold standard and the key to entering higher education institutions. It is expected that the proposed green paper will raise the level of debate and lead to changes which will widen participation.

69 Ireland continues to have a very high drop-out rate among young people at second level. As a result, a large proportion of students leave school without any formal qualifications. It is estimated that each year approximately 23% of the second level school-leavers are either unqualified or have only the minimum junior leaving certificate. Currently, there are approximately 120,000 young people with minimal or no educational qualifications and these increase by approximately 8,000 a year. The majority of these young people come from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Youthreach

70 Of the 23% of 15 year old school-leavers who do not achieve a school-leaving certificate, the majority live in inner city areas. There are parallels with the UK experience in that low levels of achievement are linked to unemployment, poor housing and cycles of family disadvantage. The number of people in this group is projected to grow throughout the next 20 years.

71 In response to the needs of such people, a national programme directed at young unemployed school-leavers has been devised. Youthreach is a joint initiative between the DES and the department of enterprise, training and employment, with substantial European Social Fund support. The programme is full time and runs throughout the year. There are 130 Youthreach centres based in out-of-school

settings. Currently 3,000 students are enrolled on courses. Youthreach is targeted at school-leavers aged 15 to 18 who have been out of school for at least six months and who have few, if any, qualifications. The potential group comprises around 7% of the cohort. A foundation phase, usually lasting one year helps to overcome learning difficulties, builds self-confidence and develops the skills needed for further learning. A progression phase provides for more specific education, training and work experience. The centres have been successful. Over 67% of those completing courses have progressed to further study, training or work. The curriculum is flexible, tailored to individual needs, and designed to encourage students to continue with their learning. Courses are accredited where appropriate, often through the foundation award from NCVA. Curriculum designers and other professionals have built the programme around the personal development needs of students rather than the drive for the attainment of qualifications. Elements of the programme mirror those of good New Start initiatives in the UK.

Vocational training opportunities scheme

72 Ireland has a large number of adults who left school after the primary stage, and many of these have been unemployed for a long time. The government recognises their specific needs and has developed a national programme to draw long-term unemployed back into education and training.

73 The vocational and training opportunities scheme (VTOS) provides second chance education and training to adults over the age of 21. The scheme is operated by each of the 33 VECs throughout the country. Courses are offered in schools or in one of the 96 dedicated VTOS centres. The scheme currently attracts around 5,000 students each year. Up to 1998 there was a 10% limit on places which could be allocated for lone parents, people on disability

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allowance or dependant spouses. This has now been removed in an attempt to widen participation. Courses range from foundation level through to national vocational certificate, or a post-leaving certificate at level 2. Participants may elect to study for the leaving certificate or for other vocational qualifications.

74 Training allowances are paid instead of unemployment benefit. Unemployed people between the ages of 21 and 25 who do not take up an offer of a place, may lose their unemployment benefit. The programme focuses on the development of technology skills, vocational skills, enterprise training, personal development and general studies. Currently, courses in IT are the most popular, and the most likely to lead to jobs.

75 The scheme is demanding and completion rates are low. Experience shows that adults joining the scheme need a long orientation programme to acquire the study habits which underpin successful learning. The scheme is expensive, accounting for expenditure of £25 million each annum.

76 Post-leaving certificate courses are also being increasingly pursued by mature adults outside the VTOS scheme. They facilitate lifelong learning by providing the higher skills needed for employment.

Traveller training centres

77 Traveller training centres offer a programme for travellers over 15 years with no or minimal qualifications which is designed to provide the skills needed for further learning or employment. Students often aim for certification provided by NCVA at foundation level; they can also study for a junior or leaving certificate. Traveller training centres are run by local management committees with funding and teaching resources provided by the VECs and FAS.

78 Childcare was introduced for the first time in 1998 as a subject on Youthreach, travellers and VTOS programmes. As Youthreach accepts participants up to 18 years and VTOS those who

are 21 years and over, there is a gap in the provision available to those aged 18 to 21. FAS partly fills the gap by providing programmes of training, work experience and apprenticeships. It also provides training to re-integrate those socially excluded from the labour market.

Adult and continuing education

79 Other schemes to widen participation include the back to education allowance. Disadvantaged adults over 21 years and unemployed for six months may join existing courses at second, further and third level while retaining an allowance in lieu of social benefits. In 1998, 4,200 people took part. A women's education initiative supports 13 projects dealing with educationally disadvantaged women. Area-based partnerships of statutory and voluntary agencies provide a range of education and training in designated areas of disadvantage. Dublin inner city, an employment black spot with 80% unemployment and low educational achievement, was one of the first areas to have such an area-based partnership.

80 Adult literacy schemes, such as the adult literacy community education scheme (ALCES) which operates through the VECs, provide literacy tuition and basic education in local communities. Over 14,000 disadvantaged adults pursue the courses free or at reduced rates. Voluntary bodies such as the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), working under the umbrella body for adult education (AONTAS), promote and support adult literacy work.

81 Each institute of technology has a growing department of adult and continuing education. In Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology enrolments have grown from 473 in 1972 to 2,283 in 1998. Courses are offered in a range of subjects; about a third lead to a national qualification. All courses have to be self-financing to cover teaching costs and overheads. Each course has two places available at half fee for the unemployed. Most courses take place in the evenings and some run on Saturday mornings. Each institute is required by statute to work on projects which

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contribute to local and regional regeneration. For example, in Tralee the institute works closely with the National Folk Theatre and has led the development of a number of tourist and cultural attractions.

82 Currently the country's 33 VECs are central to the provision of adult education and widening participation. Each has an adult education organiser and most an adult education board. A new structure is proposed in the green paper. A national adult learning council would be responsible for policy development, co-ordination and liaison while local adult learning boards would co-ordinate adult education in their own areas. The paper emphasises the role of adult education as a vital component in the continuum of learning and dovetails with the national anti-poverty strategy adopted in 1997. It concludes that poverty is not just about unequal distribution of wealth but about a lack of education which excludes people from decisions that impact on their lives and leads to isolation.

83 Most community education activity has been provided voluntarily. It has been enhanced in recent years by European-driven programmes focusing on rural development, social inclusion of young people and opportunities for women. Adult education for personal and social development has a long tradition in Ireland but it is often undertaken by the better educated. The government now proposes to bring community education into a framework for lifelong learning and to target those who are most in need. The government plans to establish more outreach centres.

84 The green paper proposes a national qualifications framework to streamline provision in adult education. It would enable the accreditation of adult learning regardless of course and give parity of esteem to qualifications from different awarding bodies. The qualifications system would promote adult lifelong learning through a modular structure to post-compulsory qualifications. The green paper proposes that third level universities and

institutes of technology introduce a system of quotas for mature students to increase participation and seek additional funding to provide outreach and distance learning opportunities, access and guidance.

Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill, 1999

85 At the time of our visit, the minister for education and science, Michael Martin TD, presented the above bill to the Dáil. It received its second reading on 18 May 1999.

86 The main elements of the bill include:

- the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to develop the qualifications framework, establish and maintain standards and promote access, transfer and progression
- the establishment of two new awarding bodies, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. They will make national certification available for all state education and training other than that provided in the primary (first level) and the post-primary (second level) institutions, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities.

87 The aims of the bill are to create a national framework in which institutions working with two awarding bodies provide qualifications which allow learners to achieve their full potential in terms of their career paths and in the context of lifelong learning.

Organisations Visited

Department for Education and Science

National Council for Vocational Awards

TEASTAS – National Certification Authority

City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee

National Council for Educational Awards

Dublin Institute of Technology

Institute of Technology, Tralee

Tralee Community College

Galway Vocational Education Committee

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology

Galway Technical Institute

Galway Travellers Centre

Galway Vocational Training Opportunities
Scheme

Athlone Institute of Technology

