



Consultation on Statement of Strategy 2016-2018

Submission to the Department of Education and Skills



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Social Justice Ireland welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the consultation process for the new Strategy for Education and Skills 2016-2018. We welcome the commitment to education as a means to improve society and the lives of Ireland's citizens.

At a time when decisions will have to be made regarding the prioritisation of expenditure and the direction of education policy it is crucial that informed decisions are made based on sound data and evidence. It is clear that education expenditure will have to increase over the term of the 32nd Dáil, even if just to cope with demographic pressures alone. In order to fulfil the ambition of the Programme for a Partnership Government, to transform the education system, to ensure it has the capacity to improve society and make people's lives better, then consideration must be given as to how best available resource should be prioritised to meet the long term goal of developing a strong economy and a fair and just society.

This submission is *Social Justice Ireland's* contribution to ensuring these decisions are made based on evidence, analysis and coherent policy recommendations. In this submission we outline the present situation, identify areas for prioritisation and make relevant policy proposals that work towards providing relevant education for all people throughout their lives, so that they can participate fully and meaningfully in developing themselves, their community and the wider society. We would be happy to discuss this submission with the Department at any stage.

Introduction

Education allows people to live a full life. Living a full life requires both knowledge and skills appropriate to age, environment, and social and economic roles, as well as the ability to function in a world of increasing complexity and to adapt to continuously changing circumstances without sacrificing personal integrity (Department of Education and Skills, 1995). Education makes a fundamentally important contribution to the quality and well-being of our society. It is a right for each individual and a means to enhancing well-being and quality of life for the whole of society (ibid). Investment in education at all levels and throughout the life cycle can deliver a more equal society and prepare citizens to participate in a democracy. Education is one of the key policy areas that must be addressed urgently as part of the Policy Framework for a Just Ireland we set out in Chapter 2 of *Social Justice Ireland's* annual Socio-Economic Review (Healy et al: 2016, pp. 19-35) under the pillar 'Decent Services and Infrastructure'. Education must also be available as a right as envisaged in the Governance pillar of our policy framework, set out in the same chapter.

If these objectives are to be achieved *Social Justice Ireland* believes that Government should:¹

- Commit to increasing investment in Early Childhood Care and Education by 0.1 per cent of GDP annually to meet the OECD average by 2021.
- Set an ambitious adult literacy target.
- Commit to reach the lifelong learning target set out in the National Skills Strategy and ensure sufficient resources are made available.
- Develop a long-term sustainable funding strategy for education at all levels.

¹ Much greater detail on these and related initiatives is provided later in this submission.

Education in Ireland – the numbers

Despite Ireland having the youngest population in Europe with 28 per cent of the population aged 0-19, Ireland spends relatively limited amounts on education. Government expenditure on education as a proportion of total government expenditure is the ninth lowest in Europe (Eurostat, 2015)

There are just over one million full-time students in the formal Irish education system. Of these 555,134 are at primary level, 343,972 are at second level and 173,649 are at third level.

The Department of Education has begun to use the population projections by the CSO based on the census results to plan for future education needs, timing and spatial distribution. This is a very welcome development in education policy making. Using these figures, the Department of Education now projects the following possible increases in enrolment across the system:

- an additional 25,000 places will be needed at primary level between now and 2017 with enrolments to peak at over 574,000 by 2018;
- an additional 15,000 places will be needed at second level between now and 2017 with significant increases projected in the years 2021-2025, to peak at an enrolment of over 400,000 in 2025;
- at third level, the number of full-time students is expected to continue to rise every year between 2015 and 2028; reaching 203,562 by 2028.

As outlined above Ireland is facing significant demographic pressures at all levels of the education system. This will require sustainable capital and current expenditure on education at all levels in the medium and long term. Ireland's expenditure on education equalled €7,869 billion in 2013. Over much of the last decade, as national income has increased, the share allocated to education has slowly increased; a development we strongly welcome. Real expenditure per student, (i.e., expenditure adjusted for inflation), increased by 9.6 per cent at primary level and by 5.5 per cent at second level over the period 2004-2013. However at third level there was a decrease of over a fifth (-20.4 per cent) in real expenditure per student over the same time period (CSO, 2015).

Investment and planning for future education needs

The fundamental aim of education is to serve individual, social and economic well-being and to enhance quality of life. Policy formulation in education should value and promote all dimensions of human development and seek to prepare people for full participation in cultural, social and economic life. It should also aim to fully accommodate the needs of all students within the education system. This requires investment in education at all levels, from early childhood right up to lifelong learning.

The National Risk Assessment (Department of An Taoiseach, 2015) identifies the lack of investment in education as one of the seven social risks facing Ireland. The report singles out human capital as an area for investment as our future economic performance will depend on the quality of Ireland's human capital.

Education is widely recognised as crucial to the achievement of our national objectives of economic competitiveness, social inclusion and active citizenship. However, the overall levels of public funding for education in Ireland are out of step with these aspirations. This under-funding is most severe in early childhood education and in the areas of lifelong learning and second chance education – the very areas that are most vital in terms of the promotion of greater equity

and fairness. The projected increased demand outlined earlier in all areas of our education system must be matched by a policy of investment at all levels that is focussed on protecting and promoting quality services for those in the education system.

Skills development

Skills are the currency of the modern global knowledge-based economy. Failure to invest in skills development could lead to lower levels of innovation, high levels of unemployment and lower prospects for economic growth. OECD research (OECD, 2015) has stressed the necessity of fostering human capital for generating economic development. Education and adult learning are important drivers of economic, social and individual development. With changes in technology and globalisation, a failure to invest in education, skills development, and life-long learning could result in high levels of both vacant jobs and unemployment. For instance, the European Union has estimated that by 2020, 16 million more jobs will require high qualifications, while the demand for low skills will drop by 12 million jobs (European Commission, 2010).

The skills that are easiest to automate or outsource are the skills that are easiest to teach, routine cognitive skills. Educational success is now about creative and critical approaches to problem solving and decision making, and applying the knowledge that we have to different situations. It is about the capacity to live in a multifaceted world as an active and engaged citizen². The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2015) have identified key skills required in Ireland, many of which have been developed since the current workforce completed formal education. Areas such as ICT, Big Data and Analytics, medical devices and biopharma all require continuous upskilling.

Despite recognition of the need for investment in education and human capital in the National Risk Assessment 2015, Government policy to date has been more focussed on reducing expenditure rather than increasing it. Capital grants at primary, post primary and further education level were cut in successive budgets from 2011 to 2015 as was the core pay and none core pay funding for Higher Education Institutions. The policy of expenditure cuts pursued during this period is at odds with a strategy of increasing investment in human capital. Investment is required at all levels of our education system. In reality this will mean increased expenditure, both current and capital at all levels and over a period of time.

In terms of planning for demographic pressures the Government has allocation €3.8 billion to education in the Capital Plan 2016-2021. The key objective of this plan is to meet the demand for new places at all levels. The Final Report of the Expert Group on Funding Higher Education points out that funding requirements for higher education should be benchmarked against the funding in those countries we aspire to emulate and compete with.

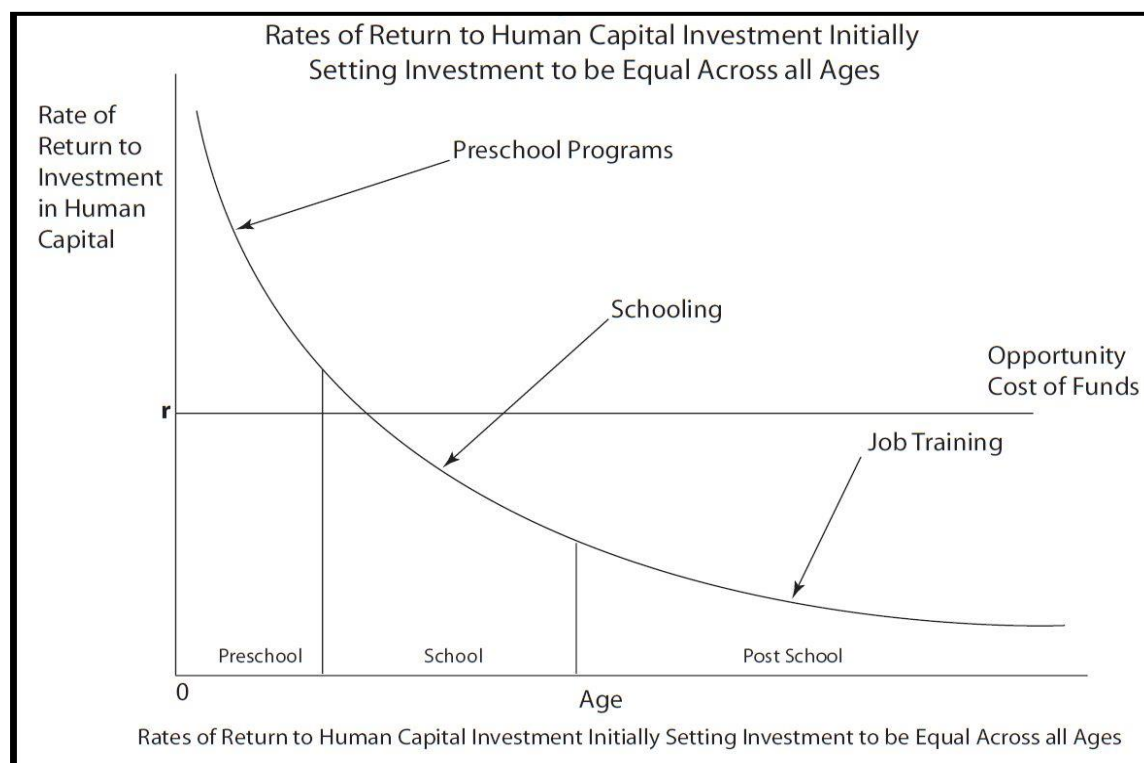
Early Childhood Care and Education

It is recognised that early childhood education and care has a profound and long-lasting impact on individual lives and on societies. It means that later learning is more effective and more likely to continue throughout life, lessening the risk of early school-leaving, increasing the equity of educational outcomes and reducing costs for society in terms of lost talent and of public spending on social, health and even justice systems (European Commission 2011). Early childhood education is associated with better performance later on in school. A recent OECD study found that 15 year old pupils who attended pre-primary education perform better on PISA testing (Programme for International Student Assessment) than those who did not, even allowing for

² <http://oecd.org/general/thecasefor21st-centurylearning.htm>

differences in their socio-economic backgrounds (OECD, 2012: 338). This is mirrored in the PISA 2012 results for Ireland which show that Irish students who attended pre-school scored significantly better than those who did not (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). It is also well recognized that the highest return from investment in education is between the ages of 0 to 5 (see figure 8.1). In short, early childhood is the stage where education can most effectively influence the development of children and help reverse disadvantage (European Commission, 2011).

Figure 8.1: The Heckman Curve



Source: Carneiro and Heckman, 2003

The most striking feature of investment in education in Ireland relative to other OECD countries is its under-investment in early childhood education. Ireland spends 0.1 per cent of GDP on pre-primary education compared to an OECD average of 0.5 per cent (OECD 2012: 339). The introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme in 2010 represented a positive first step in addressing this. The present ECCE scheme provides every child (between ages 3 years and 5 years and 6 months) with free pre-school education (that is, three hours of pre-school care for thirty-eight weeks in each year free of charge) for up to two years. It is important to make the distinction between early childhood care and education and quality and affordable childcare. ECCE, also known as the 'free pre-school' package is designed as an educational measure to better integrate the educational experience of young children. It is not to be confused with providing families with quality and affordable childcare. The issue of childcare is discussed in chapter 9.

ECCE in Ireland – some key data:

- In Ireland 46 per cent of 3 year olds are in ECCE compared with the OECD average of 74 per cent (OECD, 2015).

- Ireland has the highest rate of all OECD countries of children attending pre-primary education in private, non-government dependent institutions.
- Ireland is the only country in the EU with no public provision of ECCE for either age group (under 3 or over 3) (Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).
- In Ireland CDP (continuous professional development) is not compulsory for educational and care staff in the ECCE sector (Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).
- The percentage of graduates working in the sector, at 15 per cent, is below the 60 per cent recommended level (European Commission, 2016)

The Inter-Departmental Working Group on Future Investment in Early Years and school aged care has recommended that Government policy in this area should be developed over a number of years focussing on three areas (i) incremental investment in fee subsidisation through existing and new programmes (ii) ensuring adequate supply to meet future demand and (iii) embedding quality in the sector. The working group estimates that based on current GDP, every 0.1 per cent increase in public expenditure on childcare and early education would require an additional expenditure of about €180m. Over a 5 year period, to reach the OECD average of 0.5 per cent GDP this would cost €720m.

The importance of investment in education is widely acknowledged and the rewards for both individuals and the state are clear. The Oireachtas Spotlight on Early Childhood Education and Care details that the return on investment can be as much as €7 for every €1 invested in a child. Longitudinal studies internationally also show returns of between three and ten times the original investment in children. Investment in the provision of quality and accessible universal early childhood education services for children will provide an economic and social return for many years to come. In order to provide such services investment is also needed in the area of staffing and staff qualifications. Consideration must also be given to the remuneration of this sector and how to attract and retain qualified and committed staff. Our success in educating future generations of pre-school children will be a major determinant of our future sustainability.

Primary Level Education

There are 555,134 students enrolled at primary level. Ireland has a pupil teacher ratio (PTR) of 16.2 at primary level and 15.0 at second level (CSO, 2013), the eight highest and the fifth highest in the EU respectively. The average class size in Ireland at primary level is 24.4, the second highest in the EU. Government should address this issue and take action to reduce class sizes at primary level.

Recent research from the Educational Research Centre (ERC) (2015) examined English Reading and Mathematics at 2nd and 6th class in primary schools. Students' performance has improved significantly, for the first time at primary level since the early 1980s. These very welcome improvements were evident in both DEIS and non DEIS schools. These results show that the targets set out in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2021 for children at primary level have already been achieved. This strong performance gives the Minister for Education scope to set an ambitious new target following the interim review of the strategy in 2015. There is ample evidence to support more ambitious targets following the interim review. The ERC study also shows that there is still significant scope for improvement. The large proportion of very low achievers in reading in DEIS band 1 schools is worrying (44 per cent of pupils in 2nd class in DEIS band 1 schools performed at or below the lowest proficiency level on overall reading) and there is

room for improvement on mathematics and problem solving across all schools.

Literacy standards in disadvantaged primary schools

One of the most alarming statistics from the OECD PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) study is that the children of parents with low levels of education have significantly lower proficiency than those whose parents have higher levels of education, thus continuing the cycle of disadvantage. This complements research by the Education Research Centre which finds around 30 per cent of children in socially disadvantaged areas have serious reading difficulties. The inter-generational transmission of low levels of skills and educational qualification underscores the need for high-quality initial education, second chance educational pathways and improve the access and relevance of lifelong learning opportunities (with both academic and vocational tracks). Ongoing work with parents of children who have reading difficulties will be key in addressing this issue.

Second Level Education

343,972 students are enrolled in second level education in Ireland.

Irish second level students performed relatively well in the 2012 PISA tests in reading, literacy, mathematics and science. The performance of Ireland's fifteen-year-olds shows a significant improvement on the 2009 performance. However, when compared with 2003 PISA results, the overall performance showed very little progress. Students from fee paying schools significantly out-performed those from non-fee paying schools, and students who never attended pre-school performed less well than those who attended pre-school (Perkins et al, 2013). The PISA findings suggest that while reading levels among the school-going population are better than the population generally, this difference is much smaller than might be expected. The fact that the proportion of male students unable to read at the most basic level (Level 2 PISA) is almost unchanged since 2000 (Perkins et al., 2013:143) must be a cause of considerable concern for policymakers. It is clear that fundamental reforms are needed to Ireland's education system to address this problem.

Progress on meeting the targets for second level set out in the national literacy and numeracy strategy at second level is slower than that at primary level. The impact of the measures to improve literacy and numeracy at second level (including Project maths) should be seen in the next round of PISA 2015. The strategy also proposes fundamental changes to teacher education and the curriculum in schools and radical improvements in the assessment and reporting of student progress at student, school and national level. Progress on this issue is overdue and budgetary and economic constraints must not be allowed to impede the implementation of the strategy.

Reform of the education system at second level is being implemented with the phased replacement of the Junior Certificate examination with the new Junior Cycle Student Award incorporating a school-based approach to assessment. This award was developed in response to weaknesses in the current model highlighted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and to address the issue of second level students not achieving their potential and the wake-up call in Irish education of students failing PISA tests. Social Justice Ireland welcomes the new student centred approach to the Junior Cycle and the emphasis on helping students who are not performing well in Irish schools. In particular we welcome the emphasis on learners thinking for themselves, being creative in solving problems and applying their learning to new challenges and situations. It is important that such reforms be followed through to the Leaving Certificate to ensure policy coherence and a truly student centred approach in the second level education

system. It is equally important that policymakers, whilst implementing a reform agenda, remember that the primary focus of education is to prepare students for life, not just for work.

Early School Leaving

Despite making progress Ireland still faces challenges in the area of early school leaving and young people not engaged in employment, education or training.

The proportion of persons aged 18-24 who left school with, at most, lower secondary education in Ireland was 6.9 per cent in 2013. However in disadvantaged schools this rate can be as high as 18 per cent³. The early school leaving rate has been decreasing steadily since 2002 and this is a very positive trend. In 2010 Ireland adopted a target of a reduction in the number of early school leavers to 8 per cent by 2020 as part of the EU2020 Strategy. Given that Ireland's percentage of early school-leavers was 11.5 per cent in 2010, when the European 2020 Strategy was adopted, the 8 per cent target adopted by the Irish Government was not at all ambitious, something that Social Justice Ireland has argued for years. Students from low economic backgrounds are twice as likely to be low performers in the education system which is associated with a lack of inclusion and fairness that they experience (OECD 2012). Early school leaving not only presents problems for the people involved, but it also has economic and social consequences for society. Education is the most efficient means by which to safeguard against unemployment and social exclusion. The risk of unemployment increases considerably the lower the level of education. Participation in high quality education has benefits not only for young people themselves but also for taxpayers and society. These benefits typically last over the course of individual's lifetime. A review of the economic costs of early school leaving across Europe confirms that there are major costs to individuals, families, states and societies (European Commission, 2013). That study showed that inadequate education can lead to large public and social costs in the form of lower income and economic growth, reduced tax revenues and higher costs of public services related, for example, to healthcare, criminal justice and social benefit payments.

Furthermore, there is a recognised cyclical effect associated with early school leaving, resulting in the children of early school leavers experiencing reduced success in education (European Commission, 2011). A recent study by the ESRI on the vulnerability of children in Ireland found a strong association between persistent poverty and lone parenthood as well as lower levels of parental education (Watson et al 2015). This they argue points to the importance of education and skills acquisition, particularly for those at risk of early school leaving. It also points to the importance of addressing intergenerational issues at all levels and within the lifelong learning framework.

Ireland's early school leaving rate must also be viewed in light of a very high NEET rate (young people aged 15-24 neither in education, employment nor training). Ireland has a NEET rate of 15.2 per cent (2014), which is higher than the EU-28 average of 12.4 per cent. When we look at the age group 18-24 years who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs), the rate was higher at just under 20 per cent in 2014, while the EU-28 average was 16.3 per cent. Thus the very significant disadvantages that flow from early school leaving and Ireland's relatively high NEETs rate suggests that early school leaving is an issue that requires attention from public policy. It may be time to try alternative approaches aimed at ensuring that people affected attain the skills required to progress in the future and can participate in society.

³ <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/Retention-Rates-of-Pupils-in-Second-Level-Schools-2008-Cohort.pdf>

Ireland's National Reform Programmes (2011, 2014 and 2015) refer to the DEIS scheme (Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools) as a key measure in supporting the achievement of the national target in regard to early school leaving. Evaluation suggests that the DEIS programme is having a positive effect on educational disadvantage – including on retention rates (to Leaving Certificate) (Government of Ireland, 2013; 2014, 2015). However, unfortunately the DEIS scheme suffered cut-backs in Budget 2012, which were subsequently only partially rolled-back. More generally, capitation grants for schools have been cut by 10 per cent following the economic crisis in 2008 and were cut again in Budget 2015 and not restored in Budget 2016 (Social Justice Ireland 2014; 2015). This was done at a time of demographic change which means that there are increasing pressures on this budget.

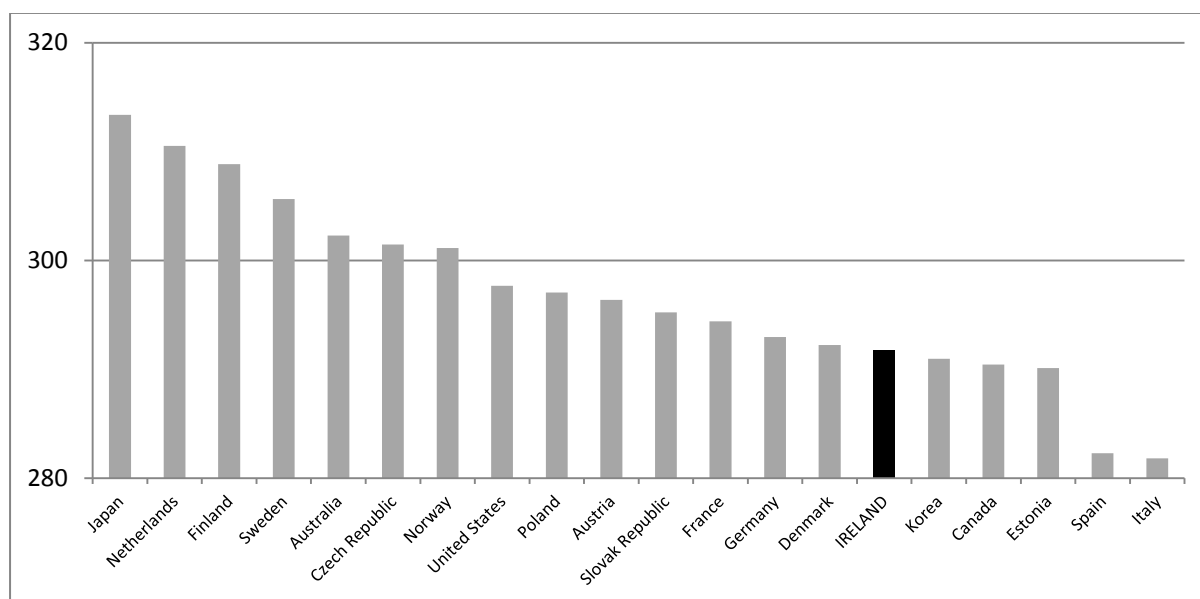
Social Justice Ireland welcomed certain measures included in Budgets 2015 and 2016 (such as the increase in teaching posts); these are necessary to keep pace with demand due to demographic changes. Overall, we believe that the situation calls for a long-term policy response, which would encompass alternative approaches aimed at ensuring that people who leave school early have alternative means to acquire the skills required to progress in employment and to participate in society. Approaches in the area of adult literacy and lifelong learning are important in this context, something that we will come to later in this chapter.

Higher Education

Full-time enrolment in higher education has increased by 25 per cent in the last decade to 173,649 students (CSO, 2015). Over the past seven years there has been a 20.4 per cent reduction in the amount of funding per student and a 30 per cent decline in the staff to student ratio. The future funding of higher education in Ireland has been considered by an Expert Group who released a series of reports in 2015. The group noted that the purpose and value of higher education is its ability to add to the understanding of, and hence flourishing of, an integrated social, institutional, cultural and economic life. It contributes to both individual fulfilment and the collective good. The group also highlighted the contribution that investment in higher education makes to society, and the social and economic returns of this investment in the form of higher tax contributions, lower call on welfare benefits, the contributions of graduates to social and economic development of the state and enhanced social mobility (Expert Group on Funding for Higher Education, Discussion Paper 1 January 2015).

Literacy levels for HEI Graduates

The findings for Irish HEI graduates from the OECD PIAAC survey are very disappointing. While the country might have one of the highest tertiary attainment rates for Europe and is well on its way of meeting the Europe 2020 target, the literacy findings from the PIAAC study are a cause of concern. The PIAAC finding of mean literacy and numeracy score for adults with tertiary education is low relative to other participating countries (see chart 8.1). Ireland is the sixth lowest country in the mean literacy scores, out of 20 participating countries. The high labour costs in Ireland means most future employment will probably come from high skilled highly paid jobs. The limited skills of HEI graduates could impact on the country's chances of returning to full employment and steady and sustainable economic growth. Basic literacy skills are required for higher-order skills and 'learning to learn' skills, which are necessary for participating and engaging in the economy.

Chart 8.1: Mean literacy score for adults with tertiary education

Source: OECD PIAAC

Funding higher education

The purpose of higher education and how it is to be funded has become a topic of much discussion in Ireland. The CSO population projections indicate that considerable investment is required to ensure that the higher education sector in Ireland can continue to cope with the projected increased demand. However public funding for higher education in Ireland has been decreasing since 2009 despite steadily increasing enrolments both full and part time.

A report by the Oireachtas Library and Research Service outlines the changing purpose and nature of higher education and how the higher education sector has developed over time in Ireland. This report also outlines some of the challenges Ireland faces in terms of future funding for the sector. An Expert Group was established to examine the Future Funding of Higher Education in Ireland. This group produced a series of discussion papers examining various elements of the system and a final paper with recommendations in late 2015. In the discussion papers the expert group noted the need for benchmarking funding requirements against the funding in those countries we aspire to emulate and compete with. The Group outlined the funding challenge in terms of moving towards the levels of investment in countries such as Finland, the Netherlands, the US, Denmark and Sweden. The report outlined options available to Government such as student fees, a graduate tax, student loans and the Government remaining as the sole provider of funding for higher education (Discussion Papers June and October 2015). This is an issue that Government should develop a framework for sustainable funding revenues over the next five years with a roadmap to 2028. This framework should have clear medium and long term targets. Investment will have to increase significantly over the next decade, regardless of which option or funding model that Government decides to implement.

One of the recommendations of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 is to establish some form of student loan system to make the financing of higher education sustainable. There are strong arguments from an equity perspective that those who benefit from higher education and who can afford to contribute to the costs of their higher education should do so. This principle is well established internationally and is an important component of funding strategies

for many of the better higher education systems across the world. People with higher education qualifications reap a substantial earnings premium in the labour market which increases with age (OECD, 2012:140). The earnings premium in Ireland for those with higher education has increased by 22 percentage points since 2010. Third-level graduates in employment in Ireland earn on average 64 per cent more than those with a leaving certificate only (OECD, 2011). Ireland is one of the few countries where the relative earnings of 25-64 year olds with qualifications from tertiary type A (largely theory based) and advanced research programmes are more than 100 per cent higher than the earning of people with upper secondary or post-secondary education (OECD, 2013).

There has been much discussion regarding the future funding for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and how they might be configured in the future. In the 'National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030' the Higher Education Authority (HEA) discusses broadening the base of funding for HEIs and sets out in detail how a student contribution framework might be developed and managed. Various policy options for student contributions are discussed in a report to the Minister (Department of Education, 2009) and the fiscal impact of these options are outlined in detail. Further research concludes that an income contingent student loan rather than a graduate tax system would be the most equitable funding option for Ireland (Flannery & O'Donoghue, 2011).

There are also arguments against the introduction of fees for third level education, particularly in light of the absence of any complimentary strategy to ensure the long term future funding for the sector. These arguments relate to the possible costs of administering such a scheme, the risk of escalation in tuition fees and the prospect of there being no immediate saving to public expenditure as Government's loan guarantee would be recorded as General Government Expenditure (Healy and Delaney, 2014). Fees for part-time higher education courses are a barrier to people who wish to upskill or reskill throughout their lifetime. The policy challenge posed by these arguments is made more difficult by the lack of any alternative funding strategy for higher education. The Expert Group discussion paper on funding models for higher education details the advantages and disadvantages of a number of funding models including state funding, student fees, a graduate tax and employer contributions. Given the projected increases in student intake it is difficult to see how public spending on higher education can be curtailed and it would be extremely difficult to fund the sector on student loans alone. The sector will require long-term, sustainable Government funding to ensure that it can deliver what is expected of it in terms of human capital and engaging with society.

Adult Literacy

Literacy is defined as the capacity to understand, use and reflect critically on written information, the capacity to reason mathematically and use mathematical concepts, procedures and tools to explain and predict situations, and the capacity to think scientifically and to draw evidence-based conclusions (OECD, 2015). The OECD PIAAC study 2013 provides the most up to date data on adult literacy in Ireland.

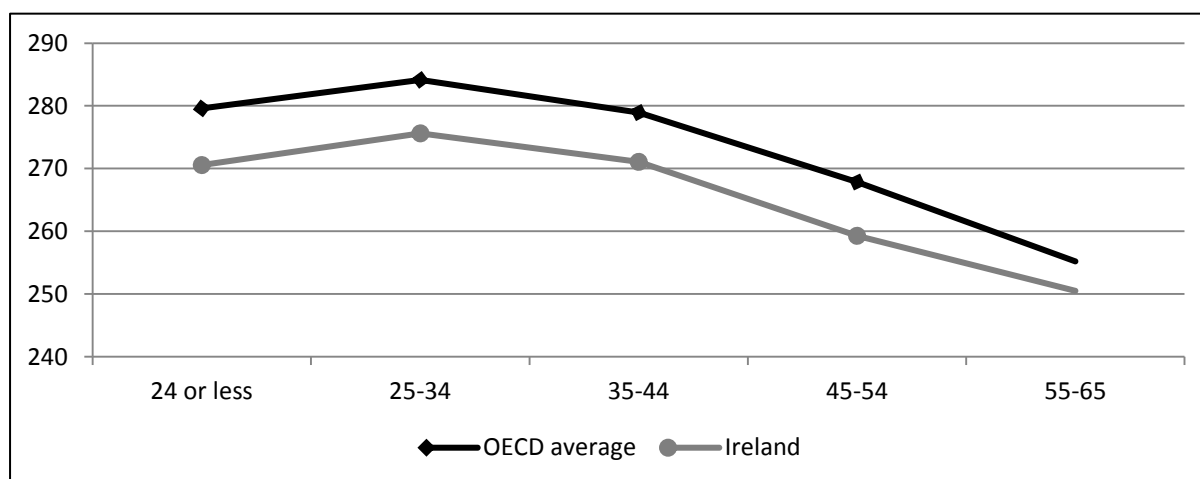
On literacy, Ireland is placed 17th out of 24 countries with 18 per cent of Irish adults having a literacy level at or below level 1. People at this level of literacy can understand and follow only basic written instructions and read only very short texts (OECD, 2013). On numeracy, Ireland is placed 19th out of 24 countries with 26 per cent of Irish adults scoring at or below level 1. In the final category, problem solving in technology rich environments, 42 per cent of Irish adults scored at or below level 1. In other words, a very significant proportion of Ireland's adult population does not possess the most basic literacy, numeracy and information-processing skills considered

necessary to success in the world today. The disappointing PIAAC results for Ireland reflect a significant section of Irish section imprisoned by vicious cycle of low skills-unemployment-poverty. Individuals with low skills levels in literacy are more than twice as likely to be unemployed; less likely to engage in skills development and training, experience poorer health, and less likely to participate in civic and political life.

In terms of literacy mean scores, Ireland is consistently below the OECD average see figure 8.2), in every age cohort. While significant progress has been made between the younger cohorts (15-35) compared to the older cohort (55-65), the gap between Ireland and the OECD average has increased. There is a larger difference between Ireland and the OECD average for younger people than for older people. This poor result undermines Ireland's long-term capacity to compete with other countries in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy.

The report also found that there is no statistical difference between average literacy scores of adults in Ireland from IALS in 1994 and PIAAC in 2012. In other words, the adult literacy strategy implemented by successive governments in the intervening years was grossly inadequate in terms of dealing with Ireland's adult literacy problem.

Figure 8.2: Averages for literacy OECD and Ireland 2012



Source: OECD PIAAC

The target for adult literacy policy set out in NAPInclusion was that 'the proportion of the population aged 16-64 with restricted literacy will be reduced to between 10 per cent to 15 per cent by 2016 from the level of 25 per cent found in 1997'. It seems that the targets in the NAP Inclusion were destined for attainment without any policy action on adult literacy (because of the trend for younger people to have overall better literacy levels) (Dorgan, 2009). This target was completely unacceptable and unambitious at the time and showed a lack of interest in seriously addressing the problem. The recent PIAAC results confirm this analysis.

A new Further Education Strategy ('FET strategy') 2014-2019 published by SOLAS in 2014 includes reference to the issue of literacy and numeracy and includes 12 actions described as a 'literacy and numeracy strategy'. Key amongst these is a promotional campaign to elicit higher levels of engagement (SOLAS, 2014, p.100). However, it is disappointing that the FET strategy fails to set specific literacy targets or to commit additional funding. The serious issue of adult literacy deserves a detailed high-level strategy, one that is more comprehensive than the commitments incorporated in the FET strategy. The case for ambitious literacy targets and investment in education and lifelong learning are further highlighted by Ireland poor performance in PIAAC. Social Justice Ireland recommends that new ambitious adult literacy

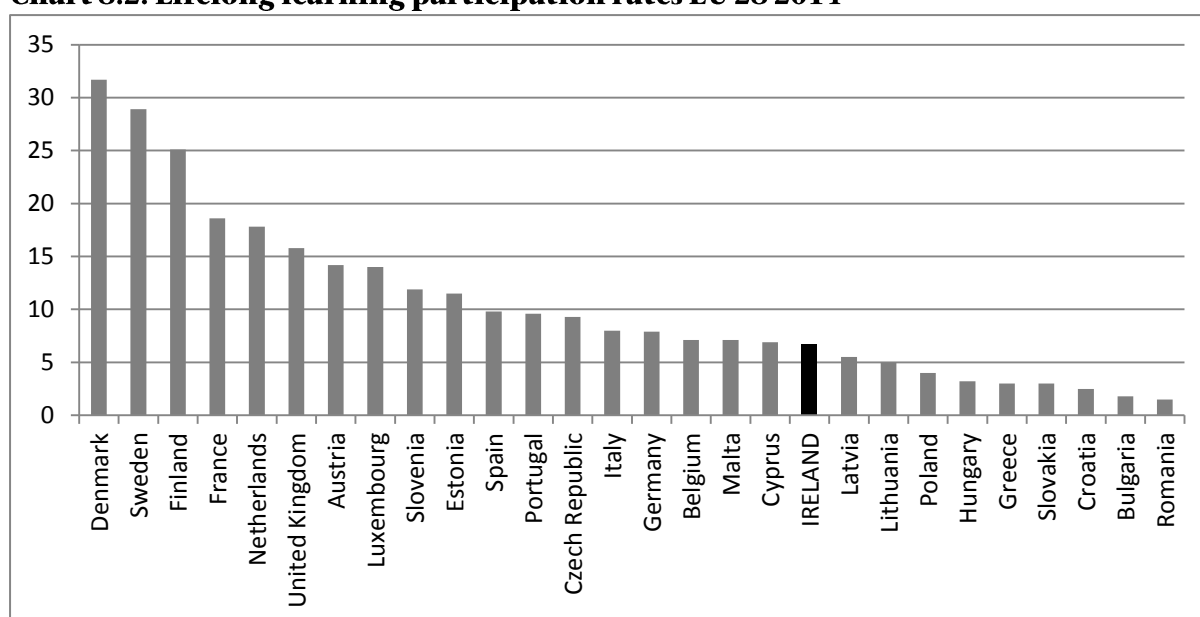
targets be set in the context of the future social and economic development of Ireland, and that the necessary funding is provided to ensure that these targets are met.

Lifelong Learning

Equality of status is one of the basic democratic principles that should underpin lifelong learning. Access in adult life to desirable employment and choices is closely linked to level of educational attainment. Equal political rights cannot exist if some people are socially excluded and educationally disadvantaged. The lifelong opportunities of those who are educationally disadvantaged are in sharp contrast to the opportunities for meaningful participation of those who have completed a second or third level education. Unlike the rising earnings premium and earnings rewards enjoyed by those who have completed higher education, the earnings disadvantage for those who have not completed upper secondary education increases with age. Therefore, lifelong education should be seen as a basic need. In this context, second chance education and continuing education are vitally important and require on-going support.

Lifelong learning and community education also brings major social and health benefits to participants outside the labour force and this non-vocational element must also be resourced⁴. Ireland is significantly behind in lifelong learning participation rates compared to other European countries, see chart 8.2. The Lifelong participation rate in Ireland is 7.3 per cent. To put this into perspective, the participation rate target for the EU Lisbon strategy (2000-2010) was 12.5 per cent and Europe 2020 is 15 per cent. The fact that Ireland is not meeting the EU target for 2010, not to mention the 2020 target, illustrates how much progress Ireland needs to achieve.

Chart 8.2: Lifelong learning participation rates EU 28 2014



Source: Eurostat, 2014

The OECD recommends that lifelong learning opportunities should be accessible to all through systems that combine high-quality initial education with opportunities and incentives for the entire population to continue to develop proficiency in reading and numeracy skills, whether outside work or in the workplace, after initial education and training are completed. It notes that the joint impact of investing in the skills of many individuals may exceed the sum of the

⁴ <http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/publications/community-education-more-than-just-a-course-2010/>

individual parts (OECD, 2015).

One of the six core objectives of the National Skills Strategy 2025 is increasing the number of people engaged in lifelong learning. The strategy commits to promoting and supporting lifelong learning, particularly in the workplace. The Strategy has set a national target of 15 per cent of adults engaged in lifelong learning by 2025 from a baseline of 6.7 per cent (National Skills Strategy, 2015:117). Participation rates in lifelong learning for employees in Ireland are less than half of the EU average (5.5 per cent compared to 11.4 per cent). The Strategy commits to improving adult and community education across Ireland, promoting the benefits of lifelong learning, increase opportunities for those in employment to engage in lifelong learning and giving greater recognition to workplace learning.

The commitment to lifelong learning in the national skills strategy is a very welcome development. As outlined earlier Ireland has a poor track record in lifelong learning participation. A focus on lifelong learning and the promotion of skills is a very welcome development when people now 'work for life' rather than have a 'job for life'. It is important to equip people with the skills they need to adapt to changing economic and social conditions throughout their lifetime. Without the necessary investment it will be difficult to meet the target of 15 per cent in 2025. It is important to sufficient resources are allocated to this strategy on a multiannual basis.

Various reports identify generic skills and competences as a core element of the lifelong learning framework. The report 'Sharing our future: Ireland 2025' (Forfas 2009) highlights the increasing range of generic skills that individuals require to operate within society and the economy. These include basic skills such as literacy, numeracy, use of technology, language skills, people related and conceptual skills. The report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs 'Tomorrow's Skills – Towards a National Skills Strategy' (2007) indicates that there is substantial evidence to show that employers regard generic skills as equal to, if not more important than, technical or job specific skills.

Eight key competences for lifelong learning⁵ have been identified by the Council of Europe and the European Parliament (Council of Europe, 2006):

- Communications in the mother tongue (reading, writing, etc.);
- Communication in foreign languages;
- Mathematical and basic competences in science and technology;
- Digital competence;
- Learning to learn;
- Social and civic competences;
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
- Cultural awareness and expression

These key competences are all interdependent, with an emphasis in each on critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem solving, risk assessment and decision making. They also provide the framework for community education and training programmes within the European Education

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/competences_en.htm

and Training 2010 work programme and the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020) (European Commission 2011). These key competences should be included as part of the reform of apprenticeship programmes.

Many of these key competences are already included in one of the recommendations of the report of the review group of apprenticeship training which recommends that apprenticeship programmes should provide for the appropriate integration of transversal skills, particularly literacy, numeracy, maths, science and ICT. These competences could also form the basis of a system to recognise the enhanced skills of the flow of returning migrants. These migrants have gained significant and diverse skills whilst in employment abroad and a system to formally recognise this non-formal skill development will be needed.

SOLAS, the Further Education and Training (FET) authority published the new FET strategy in 2014. The publication has brought some strategic planning to the delivery of further education and training that had been lacking previously. The implementation of the strategy will be challenging and more needs to be done at government level to ensure that the further adult and community education sector achieves parity of esteem with other sectors within the formal system. This is particularly important when one considers that it is expected to respond to the needs of large sections of the population who have either been failed by the formal system or for whom it is unsuitable as a way of learning.

A Forfas (2014) report urged Government to invest in developing FET and Apprenticeship systems in order to ensure the delivery of more high quality, flexible and responsive education and training programmes that explicitly meet the needs of the learner and the employer and are flexible to local needs. The same report notes that skills development across all levels of the education and training system must remain priority and that managers be suitably upskilled to that they can recognise the value of education and training in terms of upskilling those who are in employment as well as those seeking employment.

The newly reformed Apprenticeship System will be important in terms of providing training and lifelong learning opportunities to those who are low skilled or those who are early school leavers. Twenty-five new apprenticeship proposals were approved in 2015 and an allocation of €10.5 million was made in Budget 2016 to support the expansion of the Apprenticeship system. A reformed system has the opportunity to provide flexible training, relevant skills and meaningful and clear progression paths to those involved. It can contribute to a strategy to help long-term unemployed people whose skills are now redundant to retrain for employment opportunities that have been identified in particular regions. It could also provide an opportunity to provide people with opportunities to upskill throughout their working life and contribute to a strategy to combat labour market polarisation.

Access to educational opportunity and meaningful participation in the system and access to successful outcomes, are central to the democratic delivery of education. Resources should be made available to support people who wish to engage in lifelong learning, in particular those people who completed second level education but who chose not to progress to third level education at that point. Social Justice Ireland welcomed the provision in the Technological Universities Act 2014 that a combined minimum of 30 per cent of all enrolments are to be in flexible learning programmes; professional or industry based programmes or mature learners. It is important that enrolment policies for higher education are revised and amended in conjunction with the reforms to further education and training and the targets for lifelong learning.

Conclusion

Education can be an agent for social transformation. The primary focus of education is to prepare students for life enabling them to participate in and to contribute to society. Social Justice Ireland believes that education can be a powerful force in counteracting inequality and poverty while recognising that, in many ways, the present education system has quite the opposite effect. Education and training are also crucial to achieving the objective of an inclusive society where all citizens have the opportunity to participate fully and meaningfully in social and economic life. The development of the education and skills of people is as important a source of wealth as the accumulation of more traditional forms of capital.

Key Priorities on Education and Educational Disadvantage

- Invest in universal, quality early childhood education.
- Commit to increasing investment in Early Childhood Care and Education by 0.1 per cent GDP annually to meet the OECD average by 2021.
- Set an ambitious adult literacy target and ensure adequate funding is provided for adult literacy programmes.
- Commit to reach the lifelong learning target set out in the National Skills Strategy and ensure sufficient resources are made available.

Develop a long-term sustainable funding strategy for education at all levels (primary, post-primary and higher education).

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Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of individuals and groups throughout Ireland who are committed to working to build a just society where human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected.

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