Key Features of the Education System in Ireland

Context

Ireland exited an EU/IMF bailout in 2013. The economy is recovering and unemployment has fallen to 6.4% (Quarterly National Household Survey Q2 2017) from a high of 15.0% in 2012. Challenges remain regarding the high level of public debt, uncertainties as to the impact of Brexit, youth unemployment (13.2%), housing shortages (affecting student accommodation, mobility of workers and homelessness) and balancing the need for financial stability against demands that cuts to pay and services made during the Recession will be restored.

In the third quarter of 2017, the level of GDP increased by 4.2% relative to the previous quarter (on a seasonally adjusted basis). As a result, GDP was 10.5% higher year-on-year (D/Finance Monthly Economic Bulletin January 2018).

Key challenges for the education system are to:

- Cater for a rapid growth in enrolment in schools;
- Promote a more pluralist school system which better caters for diversity, particularly religious diversity, in line with the changing profile of the population;
- Address the high levels of youth unemployment (16.5% in Q2 2017, having fallen from 31.2% in 2012);
- Re-structure the Further Education Sector to better meet the needs of business and the unemployed, and continue to modernise the higher education sector;
- Adapt the education system to/for an economy and society transformed by digital technology with availability of apprenticeships and traineeships in emerging areas of skills (School Excellence Fund);
- Continue to enhance quality, relevance and achievement at every level of the system.

There are further areas where the government is anxious to make progress including:
• Large scale reform and continued roll-out of junior cycle to ensure that students will benefit from this broader, more holistic, student-centered approach to education and form of assessment with achievement of the Junior Cycle Profiles of Achievement (JCPA) (in place of the current junior certificate programme);

• Achievement levels in science;

• Take-up of gateway subjects;

• The growing participation of children with Special Educational Needs in the Education System and the capacity of the education system to better support their full participation and progression to ensure that they are given the opportunity to reach their full potential. The estimated total Students with SEN across school settings has increased by some 21% since 2011. The number of Special Classes has increased by 120% with over 600 new special classes opened since 2011, bringing the total number of such classes to over 1,100. The government expects that the total number of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) will be 14,100 + by the end of the school year 2018. In 2018, almost €1.7 billion will be invested in Special Education, nearly one fifth of the overall Education budget with €468m of this on the SNA scheme. This is a 32% increase since 2011. A new model for allocating Resource Teachers to schools has been successfully introduced, with 900 additional teacher allocated from September 2017 to support the model and to ensure that children with special needs can access additional teaching supports. There are 700 more children with special needs entering third level now than two years ago, up 31%;

• Teaching of foreign languages - Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026 [4] sets out a roadmap towards ensuring Ireland is prepared for a changed European dynamic and to prepare Ireland for Brexit. It sets out targeted measures for improving fluency, increasing the number of languages taught, improving proficiency, diversity and increasing immersion programmes. The targets will be achieved through increasing the number of post-primary schools offering two or more foreign languages by 25% and doubling the number of foreign language assistants in schools. Implementation of this ambitious strategy will require significant changes to how foreign languages have been taught in the past and will require extra resources;

• Quality Assurance is becoming an area of growing strategic importance to Irish HEIs. Quality within Higher Education [5] is a summary report of the quality assurance and quality enhancement activities in publicly funded higher education institutions pertaining to the previous academic year. A report produced by the Professional Association Research Network (PARN) provides a clear picture of the professional accreditation landscape in Irish higher education. The report, Professional Body Accreditation in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland [6], highlights the benefits to higher education institutions of accreditation activity but also identifies that these engagements can be resource intensive.

Key Features of the Irish education system include:

• A large number of small schools (of the 3,250 primary schools, approximately 200 are 2-
teacher schools, 200 are 3-teacher schools and 200 are 4-teacher schools);

- All children in Ireland are entitled to free primary and post-primary education. Most primary schools are funded by the state and the vast majority of children attend these schools. The school system is mainly private in the sense that all primary schools and the majority of second level schools are not public schools, but are locally owned by organisations or religious denominations. There are approximately 27 fee-paying primary schools and 55 fee-paying second level schools. Education is compulsory for children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen or until students have completed three years of second-level education. State-funded education is available at all levels, unless parents/guardians choose to send their child to a private institution;

- An early childhood education and care sector (outside of infant classes in primary schools) that began to receive significant State investment only since 2000. These services are delivered outside the formal education system in Ireland by a diverse range of private, community and voluntary interests that are described variously as crèches, nurseries, pre-schools, naíonraí (Irish language pre-schools), playgroups and daycare services. Government investment in such provision is primarily implemented by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs [7](DCYA);

- A lack of intermediate structures at local or regional level to coordinate the activities of all primary schools and the majority of second level schools;

- Two official languages, Irish and English. English is the medium of instruction in the majority of schools, while Irish is also taught. However, in designated Gaeltacht schools along areas of the western and southern seaboard, Irish is the medium of instruction, with English also being taught. There are also a limited number of Irish medium schools in urban areas outside the Gaeltacht.

The Department of Education and Skills [8](DES) is responsible for policy, ensuring provision, funding and regulation of education at all levels of the system. Since 2010, responsibility for the vocational training sector rests with the DES.

**Early Learning**

Early learning has been, until recently, comparatively underdeveloped in Ireland outside of the infant classes in primary schools. Significant progress has been made towards the establishment of high quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provision in Ireland in recent years. The DES operates a split system of governance and regulation with the DCYA in the implementation of early childhood education. Government investment and responsibility for early childhood education and care is shared across the DES and is primarily implemented by the DCYA. Since 2000, with EU support, a programme of investment in childcare has been expanded progressively.

In the national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures [9], the Government committed to continue to increase investment in high-quality early years care and education for all children, prioritising families on low incomes.

A 'free' Pre-School Year scheme of 38 weeks (Early Childhood Care and Education, or ECCE
scheme) was first introduced in January 2010. Since September 2016, this was extended to a maximum of two free-of-charge pre-school years for all children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months in September of the relevant year with entitlement to appropriate programme-based activities in the year/s prior to starting primary school. Apart from subsidies to early learning centres in disadvantaged areas to enable parents to access childcare at nominal cost, childcare below age 3 has been generally funded by parents. However, in a move towards a more broadly based wrap-around childcare service, a Universal Childcare Subsidy [10] was introduced from September 2017 for children aged 0-36 months, and a targeted tapered childcare subsidy is being introduced for low income families, catering for children up to 15 years of age.

Primary Schools

The DES has responsibility for primary education. While the compulsory school age for primary school is 6 years, children as young as 4 years may enrol in primary schools. There are some 3,250 State funded primary schools. These are managed locally by boards of management representing teacher, parent, community and patron interests, and are funded directly by the DES.

The primary education sector includes state-funded primary schools, special schools and private primary schools. State-funded primary schools include:

- Religious schools, such as Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Muslim;
- Non-denominational schools;
- Multi-denominational schools;
- Gael scoileanna (schools that teach through the Irish language).

Single sex schools teach boys and girls separately. Coeducational schools teach boys and girls together. A number of special schools cater for particular types of disability and special needs (see: Special services and extra support).

In addition to this, there are an estimated twenty-seven private (fee-paying) primary schools which receive no funds from the State.

Early years’ education is provided by trained teachers in infant classes in primary schools. The compulsory school age in Ireland is 6 and all forms of pre-primary education are optional. However, children from the age of 4 can be enrolled in infant classes in primary schools. Nearly 40% of 4-year-olds and virtually all 5-year-olds attend primary school, where early education is provided in infant classes.

Second Level Schools

The post-primary education sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools, all of which have somewhat differing management structures and historical origins. Some 711 post primary schools provide lower and upper secondary education. Some 55 secondary schools are fee-paying, privately owned and managed. Their staffing costs are funded by the Department to an agreed level (less than other State-funded schools), but must, as a rule, meet their own overheads and capital costs. Voluntary Secondary Schools are schools under the trusteeship of religious orders,
dioceses or Boards of Governors. The overarching national managerial authority for these schools is called the Joint Managerial Body [11].

34% of second-level schools called vocational schools, are state-established and operated regionally through a network of 16 Education and Training Boards [12]. Many vocational schools offer Further Education and Training programmes in addition to their second level activities.

All second level schools have a board of management while community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions. The board of management includes representatives of parents, teachers, trustees or patron, the principal and the community. All schools now offer a mix of academic and vocational subjects, and are subject to the same State Examinations.

All state funded primary and second level schools, early learning centres and some third-level colleges are subject to inspection by the DES Inspectorate [13]. Reports are published on the Department's website.

Further Education and Training

ETBs, mentioned above, are statutory authorities (Education and Training Boards Act 2013) that have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs establish, maintain, manage and operate second-level schools, further education colleges, multi-faith community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes.

In their regionally-based, functional areas they are responsible for policy, planning, co-ordination, funding, review and monitoring of:

- The vocational schools offering second level education;
- Recognised schools or centres for education maintained by them;
- Education or training facilities maintained or resourced by them;
- Children detention schools;
- Prisons and facilities maintained by other public service bodies;
- Provision of Further Education and Training. This sector covers all activity outside of primary and post primary schooling, and which is not part of higher education. This includes adult literacy, vocational education and training, second chance programmes for early school leavers and the unemployed, adult and community education. It covers awards at levels 1-6 of the national framework of qualifications (EQF Levels 1-5). Provision is mainly in vocational schools and other adult learning centres. Provision may also be contracted out to community or private sector providers.

Since 2013, policy, funding and co-ordination of the sixteen regional ETBs is undertaken by a new Further Education Authority, called SOLAS [14] (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus
SOLAS also contracts out VET services to providers in private and community settings under a range of special initiatives, based on competitive tendering.

**Higher Education and Training**

The Higher Education system is principally a binary system with universities and institutes of technology. The higher education sector offers awards at levels 6-10 of the national qualifications framework (EQF levels 5-8).

A Higher Education Authority (HEA) is responsible for policy, funding and research in these institutions, while respecting academic autonomy. The HEA leads the strategic development of the Irish higher education and research system with the objective of creating a coherent system of diverse institutions with distinct missions.

Since 2015 it is possible to offer apprenticeships in either further or higher education settings.

**Stages of the Education System**

Education is compulsory for children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen or until students have completed three years of second-level education. In practice, however, the norm is to start school at age 4, and 99% of all children are in school by age 5. Some 90% complete upper secondary education.

Children normally attend primary schools for 8 years from age 4 to 12. They transfer to a second level school of their choice and follow:

1. A **3 year programme of lower secondary education**, for students generally aged 12-15, leading to the award of the Junior Certificate. (This is a national examination overseen by the State Examinations Commission.) With effect from 2017, the title of this award has been changed to a Junior Cycle Programme of Achievement, combining both school based and State examinations assessment.

2. An **optional one year programme called the Transition Year** – an estimated 68% follow this option, which forms part of upper secondary education. Those who do not follow this programme may move directly into (3)

3. A **two year Leaving Certificate programme** culminating in a national Leaving Certificate examination operated by the State Examinations Commission. This marks the end of upper secondary education. Leaving Certificate students are generally aged 16-18 years.

Early school leavers may enter a 2 year Youthreach programme in the Further Education Sector.

Following completion of the Leaving Certificate programme, the majority of students enter Higher Education (c 55%) or Further Education or Training (c 28%), following certificate, diploma and/or degree programmes of varying lengths.
Structure of the National Education System

Useful links

1. The Department of Education and Skills [8] is a department of the Irish state with responsibility for education and training. The Programme for Government states that “Education is the key to giving every child an equal opportunity in life. No child should be left behind in economic recovery and we should use our strengthening economy to become a leader in the provision of world-class education and skills.” The Department’s central vision is that the Irish education and training system should become the best in Europe over the next decade. The mission of the Department, through five high-level goals, is to facilitate individuals through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development (Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 - Department of Education and Skills Strategy Statement) [18].

2. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [19] (NCCA) works with learners, teachers, practitioners and parents to develop research-based curriculum and assessment. Its vision is to lead innovation in education for living, learning and working in a changing world. The Strategic Plan 2015-2018 [20] sets out the vision and mission of the organisation and identifies six strategic goals that set the direction of the Council’s work over that time.

3. The National Council for Special Education [21] is a statutory body established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 [22]. The Council has embarked on a wide-ranging programme of research on the provision of special education which helps to formulate policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills and also advises on educational provision for persons with special educational needs, with a particular emphasis on children.
4. The **State Examinations Commission** [23] was established in March 2003. It is responsible for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state: the Junior Certificate - operating at the end of lower second level education - and the Leaving Certificate operating at the end of upper second level education.

5. The function of **SOLAS** [14] is to manage, co-ordinate and support the delivery of integrated further education and training by the 16 national Education and Training Boards (ETBs). It also monitors delivery and provides funding based on reliable, good quality data and positive outcomes, and promotes further education and training provision that is relevant to individual learner needs and national skills needs. This includes the needs of business and future skills requirements. Provision is made available to over 300,000 people annually in Ireland.

6. The **Higher Education Authority** [24] is the statutory agency responsible for policy, co-ordination and funding to the universities, institutes of technology (IoTs) and other higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland.

7. **Quality and Qualifications Ireland** [25] (QQI), was established in November 2012 as a new independent, integrated agency to replace a number of other boards and councils. QQI is responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland and for the maintenance, development and review of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ [26]), covering all awards in the State across the education and training sector in public, private, workplace and community settings. It is also the external quality assurance agency for further and higher education and training awards. QQI is responsible for external quality assurance of further and higher education and training (including English language provision). It validates programmes and makes awards for certain providers in these sectors. It is also responsible for developing an International Education Mark and code of practice for institutions catering for international learners from outside the EU/EEA.

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