Life Long Learning Strategy

The Government White Paper on adult education, Learning for Life, published in 2000, reflects the role of education in society and also set out principles, policies and strategies for the development of a lifelong learning approach to provision. It marked the adoption of lifelong learning as a governing principle of education and training policy in Ireland. The Lifelong Learning strategy perspective includes the following six education and training policy approaches:

- Providing a firm foundation of high quality relevant initial education (encompassing early childhood, primary and post-primary education), developing key competences, broadening curricular choice in post-primary schools, providing a range of options to meet different abilities, interest and needs, and strengthening the language, technical and vocational dimensions of curricula;

- Prioritising State investment towards those most at risk and tackling disadvantage in terms of special attention to literacy and numeracy, preventing and addressing early school leaving, tackling unemployment, and providing second chance education and training for those with low skills;

- Ensuring a supply of high quality manpower to address skills needs, including through the promotion and resourcing of training at all levels for those seeking employment and for those in employment and generally widening access to lifelong learning in the context of an integrated approach to education and training;

- Addressing access barriers through a strengthening of financial supports, guidance, counselling, childcare services and increased flexibility of provision;

- Enhancing the quality of provision through investing in the initial and continuous professional development of teachers and trainers;

- Embedding education and training provision within a national framework of qualifications, providing for quality standards, streamlined progression pathways, mechanisms for credit accumulation and accreditation of prior and work based learning, and including learning in formal, non formal, community and workplace environments.
The White Paper on Adult Education laid out a policy framework for the development and delivery of adult, further and community education. Its definition of adult education as systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education and training is a broad one which allows for the inclusion of a wide and varied cohort of adult learners.

The White Paper set out targets for the development of adult literacy provision, as well as new part-time programmes to address the needs of those with low initial levels of formal education. It prioritised the development of community education and a National Adult Literacy Programme, in recognition of the crucial role that this sector had played in reaching large numbers of participants in disadvantaged settings, as well as pioneering new approaches to teaching and learning in non-hierarchical community based settings. Some ten years on from the publication of the White Paper, many key developments have taken place including the establishment of the National Adult Literacy Programme, the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) and the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI). These programmes have succeeded in increasing significantly the numbers of adults participating in education and training.

The introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) has made it easier for learners to understand how the education system works and how one award can lead on to another. It helps the learner map out the route that their education will take and clarifies for prospective employers that the NFQ is a system of 10 levels ranging from basic education at level 1, to doctorate level at level 10.

The publication of a National Skills Strategy in 2007 identified new targets and proposed a vision of Ireland in 2020 in which a well-educated and highly skilled population would contribute to a competitive, innovation driven, knowledge based participative and inclusive society. The Strategy also recommends that literacy and generic basic skills should be integrated into all public funded education and training programmes as far as possible. International evidence highlights the efficacy of an integrated or embedded literacy strategy, as it removes unnecessary literacy barriers to access, persistence (completion rates), and achievement, enables greater numbers of adults to raise their literacy levels, and achieve targets and raises capacity of providers to deal with literacy issues across all programmes and levels, delivering programmes more inclusively and effectively. The most recent update on the Strategy highlights the significant progress in meeting the targets set for adults with higher education qualifications but emphasises the significant challenge that remains to be faced in upskilling those at Levels 1-3 to Levels 4 and 5 by 2020. Because of the present economic situation, a major priority of the Government is in relation to investment in learning opportunities for those who have found themselves unemployed or underemployed. The recent Jobs Initiative will deliver almost 16,000 education and training places in a range of part-time and full-time further education and training and higher education programmes at all levels of the NFQ.