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IMPLEMENTING THE 'EDUCATION AND TRAINING 2010'

WORK PROGRAMME

2005 Progress Report



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*Modernisation of the Education and Training Systems
towards the 2010 common goals*

Preparation of the 2006 Joint Council/Commission Report

IRELAND

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared as part of work being carried out on the implementation of the *Education and Training 2010 Work Programme* by the Commission and the Member States. It follows the format and structure proposed by the Commission in its *Guidance Note for Member States*. As such, it should be read as a response to the specific requests for information and suggestions for topics contained in the *Note* and is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the Irish education and training systems.

The report will form one of the inputs to a draft joint report covering progress in all the Member States, which will be prepared by the Commission for submission to the Council of Ministers. As requested by the Commission, it focuses on those education and training strategies and policies (current or in the planning stage) which are directly relevant to the *Lisbon* agenda or to the *Bologna* or *Copenhagen* processes. Examples of particular innovations are also included to illuminate the practical reality of particular policies and, in certain cases, because the specific measures may be of interest in the wider European context.

The numbering of sections is as proposed in the *Guidance Note* and, for that reason, the text should be read in conjunction with the *Note*. A list of acronyms for Irish organisations and programmes appearing in the text is attached.

Section 1: THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL POLICIES AND THE LISBON AGENDA

1.1.1 Targets

While the European reference levels ('Benchmarks') have not been explicitly incorporated into national policy initiatives, those benchmarks closely reflect several of those previously set out in the *National Anti-poverty Strategy* (NAPS), originally published in 1997 and revised in 2002. In addition to setting out targets for increasing student and adult literacy and for the reduction of early leaving which closely mirror those identified by the Benchmarks, the NAPS led to the publication of the Government's policy paper *Adult Education – Learning for Life* in 2000.

The NAPS targets are:

- To halve the number of pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2006.
- To reduce the proportion of the population aged 16-64 with restricted literacy to below 10 - 20 per cent by 2007.
- To reduce the number of young people who leave the school system early, so that the percentage of those who complete upper second level or equivalent will reach 85 per cent by 2003 and 90 per cent by 2006.

As can be seen, these are, in fact, more ambitious targets (with reference to national data) than those set out in the Council Conclusions of 05 May 2003.

In relation to the Benchmark referring to graduates in the sciences, a *Task Force on the Physical Sciences* was established in 2000 to devise and recommend additional measures to address the issue of low take-up rates in the physical sciences in schools. The recommendations of the *Task Force* were accepted by Government and a number are currently being implemented¹.

1.1.2 Lisbon Objectives

As will be described in more detail in the relevant sections of this report, the objectives and goals decided by the Council in Lisbon have played a significant part in the development of the policies and priorities of the education and training systems. The influence of the Lisbon agenda on its policy development is specifically acknowledged in the most recent Department of Education and Science *Strategy Statement* and the *Bologna* and *Copenhagen* processes have been drivers of development in the higher education and VET sectors, respectively.

Since Ireland is a small, open economy it is heavily reliant on inward investment for its continued economic growth. Successive governments have seen the development of human capital as a key element in ensuring the country's continuing economic progress and, as a result, the benefits of fully participating in processes having the overall goal of enhancing and modernising education and training systems are evident to all parties in the process.

Equally, Ireland has consistently been strongly committed to the European ideals of building a caring and inclusive society and to achieving real and sustained social and economic progress. As a result, Ireland has approached these processes (*Education and*

¹ A brief description of the work and recommendations of the *Task Force* is included in Section 2

Training 2010, Bologna and Copenhagen) in a positive and proactive way and, both during the Irish Presidency and on a continuing basis, has participated fully in the many structures and discussions related to the achievement of their objectives.

1.1.3 International Studies

Because the Government has set an overall target of ensuring that the Irish education and training systems meet the highest international standards for the achievement of participants, participation in international studies and analyses has a high priority for the relevant educational and training agencies.

The PISA results provide a welcome confirmation that student achievements in several key competencies areas compare well with best international practice. The poor results attained by Irish participants in the *International Adult Literacy Study* (IALS) in the mid 90s acted as a significant stimulus to the preparation of the education targets set out in the NAPS and to a range of initiatives targeting reading and literacy generally across the education and training sectors.

In 2003 the OECD undertook a review of career guidance in its member countries, later extended to include remaining EU Member States and certain countries in receipt of World Bank assistance. The findings of the Irish review and of the study generally have had a major impact on the development of guidance in Ireland. This is described in more detail in Section 5.

The recently completed OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland offers an example of the influence of international studies on policy development. The recommendations of this review have been widely studied within the higher education sector and the Government has now accepted several of the key recommendations of the OECD Examiners, as is described in Section 4.

1.3 Visibility

Three events were organised during 2003 related to the 2010 Work Programme. In June, a conference entitled *The Europe of Knowledge – the Future Objectives of Education and Training in Europe* was held in Dublin, attended by the principal Irish stakeholders. Following this, in July, a seminar on the Bologna process was organised and, in October, a Forum on the Implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration on Enhanced European Co-operation in Vocational Education and Training was held in Dublin.

The importance of education and training in achieving the Lisbon goals was a priority of the Irish Presidency in 2004² and a brochure on the Lisbon Agenda entitled *Growth, Jobs and Social Cohesion, what Europe is Doing for You* was published for general distribution. Major conferences were held in Dublin on guidance in the context of lifelong learning and on ICT in education. In addition, a significant European conference involving the main stakeholders in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training was held in Dublin Castle in March 2004 which discussed common themes in both sectors and gave a significant impetus to the development of a comprehensive European Qualifications Framework.

² Further details of the Irish Presidency programme are available at www.eu2004.ie

Also during 2004, a conference entitled *Optimising Leonardo* took place, which gave project promoters and national agencies an opportunity to meet and to transfer the learning from projects.

A publication entitled *European Mobility - A Boarding Pass to Opportunity*³ which was produced by Léargas, the Irish National Agency for the *Socrates* and *Leonardo* programmes, was launched in November 2004.

The Forum on the Workplace of the Future, established by the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCP), examined how both public and private sector workplaces can proactively adapt to competitive pressures, improve the delivery of services and meet the changing needs of employees. An Taoiseach (The Prime Minister) launched the *Report of the Forum on the Workplace of the Future*⁴ in March 2005. The Report contains recommendations which focus on developing the five strategic priorities, including the area of upskilling and developing skill sets to meet the challenges of globalisation and new technological developments.

A conference on developments in the Bologna process and its implications for the Higher Education Institutions was also held in Dublin in March 2005. Later in the year (October), a European conference on *Models and Practices in Quality Assurance of Vocational Education and Training* will be held in Dublin. The overall goal of this conference is to advance the aims of the European Union as set out in the Copenhagen Declaration (November 2002) and the Council Conclusions on Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (May 2004).

³ <http://www.leargas.ie/documents/LeargasEuropeanMobility.pdf>

⁴ [Forum on the Workplace of the Future](#)

Section 2: INVESTING MORE AND MORE EFFICIENTLY: FOCUSING REFORM ON THE KEY AREAS

2 Introduction

Overall Government education and training priorities are intended to contribute to a range of policies developed by the Government to address issues of national strategic importance. These policies are set out in the National Development Plan 2000-2006, *Sustaining Progress* (the current national economic and social agreement between the Government and the social partners); the National Anti-Poverty Strategy; the National Children's Strategy; the National Health Strategy; the Information Society Strategy and the National Spatial Strategy. A further policy context is provided by the *Concrete Future Objectives...* and the Lisbon agenda.

These priorities may be summarised as follows:

- Recognising that future prosperity is dependent on Ireland becoming a learning society, putting the necessary life-long learning systems in place to ensure that all its citizens have access to the learning opportunities they need at whatever stage and in whatever circumstances are appropriate to them;
- Engaging with the learner (and, in the case of younger students, their parents), through the establishment of consultative fora, Boards of Management, Student Councils and other structures for ensuring that learners are active participants in all aspects of both the planning and delivery of their learning provision;
- Ensuring equality of access and provision at all levels for all learners, with special supports for individuals experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, disability, and ethnic marginalisation;
- In order to maintain and enhance Ireland's international competitiveness, ensuring that the education and training systems promote the development of human capital, especially through the identification of future key skills needs and the putting in place of appropriate related learning opportunities;
- Promoting quality throughout the education and training systems through on-going curricular, pedagogic and assessment reform, including the incorporation of the new information and communication technologies into teaching, learning and the administration of provision;
- Allied to this, ensuring that these systems are of world-class standard through setting goals and benchmarks matching best international practice, especially EU benchmarks, and as identified by international studies and surveys.

2.1.1.1 The development of skills

A key role for the education sector in developing the human capital required for Ireland's productivity and employment growth in the modern economy is in responding to current and future labour market requirements for skilled graduates.

The Kok report emphasises the importance of the ability of Member States to anticipate their future skills needs. A recent FÁS⁵/ESRI⁶ study estimated that the numbers in the

⁵ <http://www.fas.ie/>

work force with third-level qualifications will need to rise to some 680,000 by 2010 - a threefold increase on the number in 1991. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) was established by Government in 1997 to develop national strategies to tackle the issue of skills needs, manpower estimating, and training for business and education in Ireland⁷. As a consequence of the Group's recommendations there has been significant expansion in the funding provided in 2005 for schemes aimed at upskilling persons in employment.

2.1.1.2 The *Office of Science and Technology* (OST), within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, is responsible for the development, promotion and co-ordination of Ireland's Science, Technology and Innovation policy and Ireland's policy in relation to European Union and international research activities. A Chief Science Advisor, who was appointed with effect from 1 September 2004, provides independent advice to Government on all aspects of Science, Technology and Innovation. The OST also supports and monitors the integrated awareness programme, Discover Science & Engineering, with the aim of increasing the numbers of students taking science as a career and promoting science literacy generally.

2.1.1.3 Take-up of Science and Technology

A *Task Force on the Physical Sciences* was established by the Minister for Education & Science in 2000, following a recommendation from the Royal Irish Academy's National Committee for Physics. The Task Force had some 40 members, representative of a wide spectrum of industry and education. The brief of the *Task Force* was to devise and recommend additional measures to address the issue of low take-up rates in the physical sciences in schools. The *Task Force* was also asked to examine how the involvement of industry in the promotion of physics and chemistry in schools could be encouraged and enhanced.

Following Government approval of the recommendations of the *Task Force*, progress has been made in the implementation of a number of the recommendations:

- Revised syllabi have been introduced at primary and at both junior and senior secondary levels, supported by national in-service programmes for teachers and equipment grants for schools.
- Laboratories continue to be refurbished as part of the ongoing schools building programme.
- Reviews of grading of subjects in the Leaving Certificate, gender equity issues in science, and initial reports on teacher training have been undertaken.
- The Discover Science and Engineering programme was launched in October 2003 to bring together existing science awareness activities in a unified strategy.

More recently, plans for an interactive science centre for children and adults were announced. The centre will be designed to give visitors a hands-on experience and understanding of science, and to be an education and outreach centre for teachers and pupils.

⁶ [ESRI](#)

⁷ Further information on the work of the EGFSN is provided in Section 3.

2.1.1.4 The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)⁸ was established in 2001, with assistance from the European Social Fund to improve access, promote flexible assessment and accreditation processes, and enhance mobility across the further and higher education and training sectors. In addition, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)⁹ and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)¹⁰ were established in the same year, with ESF support. Following a detailed consultation process with stakeholders, the Authority introduced a National Framework of Qualifications in October 2003, which is now being implemented across the education and training sectors. The framework is intended to encompass all education and training awards in Ireland, providing recognition for all learning achievements. As described by the Authority, the national framework of qualifications is "the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards".

The need for a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications arises in the main from the national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society', in which learners will avail of learning opportunities at any or all stages throughout their lives. Because the diffuse nature of the existing qualifications systems does not easily support portability of recognition for learning, the development of the framework and its implementation were identified as national priorities in the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) and in the Report of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning (2002).

The establishment of the national framework of qualifications represents a new departure in Irish education and training, with the needs of the learner taking priority, and provides a unique opportunity to develop the awards system for education and training in an innovative and creative way, ensuring that Ireland is at the leading edge of international developments in this area. The work of the Authority also takes account of and contributes to developments at the European and international levels to increase the comparability and transparency of qualifications, including the development of a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

The framework's role in facilitating progression through different levels and forms of learning (e.g. from schools to the workplace and from further to higher education and training) and transfer into new fields of learning also meets the need for a flexible, responsive labour force.

2.1.1.5 The recently launched *Teaching Council* is an independent, statutory agency to regulate the teaching profession and to maintain and enhance teaching standards. The Council has a statutory role in relation to the regulation of the teaching profession and the professional affairs of teachers and an advisory role in relation to other teacher-related matters. As a result, responsibility for issues such as the qualification requirements for new entrants to the profession, the accreditation of teacher training

⁸ [NQAI](#)

⁹ [FETAC](#)

¹⁰ [HETAC](#)

courses, the promotion of further in-career development for teachers and the addressing of disciplinary problems within the profession will largely lie with the teaching profession itself, working through the Teaching Council. The Council is representative of the teacher unions, Colleges of Education and relevant Universities and 3rd level institutions, school management organisations, national associations of parents, together with nominees of the Minister for Education and Science, including representatives of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation.

2.2.1.1 Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) are intended to make a significant contribution to the delivery of priority economic infrastructure projects under the National Development Plan and to the provision of quality public services. Delivering the NDP programme within the required time frame and the achievement of value for money for the taxpayer are integral elements of the Government's strategy for maintaining competitiveness and sustaining strong economic growth and social progress over the long term.

A ***Public Private Partnership Unit*** was established within the Department of Education and Science to promote the development of capital projects under the Government's Public Private Partnership programme. This programme provides infrastructure projects through a structured arrangement between public sector organisations and private sector investors, rather than through the traditional procurement mechanisms by the State.

In the case of education projects, the intention is primarily to free up school/college management from the responsibility for the management and maintenance of buildings and allow them to concentrate on their core educational management functions. In addition, PPPs provide a test bed for a value-for-money approach to school provision over a longer period, as well as encouraging the development of output-based approaches to new school design.

A number of projects are currently either in planning or have been completed, including the Cork School of Music, currently at the planning stage, the national Maritime College, completed and opened in 2004 and five second-level schools, completed in 2002. The operation of PPP in relation to these schools is currently being reviewed.

2.2.1.2 A ***Social Inclusion Unit*** within the Department of Education and Science is responsible for developing and promoting a co-ordinated response to tackling educational disadvantage at all levels of the formal and non-formal education sectors. The Unit co-ordinates the Department's response to the education actions of national programmes aimed at combating social exclusion, including the revised National Anti-Poverty Strategy, 2002-2007, and the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2003-05, as well as the social partnership agreement *Sustaining Progress*. Following on the work of the Educational Disadvantage Committee, a new policy framework for tackling educational disadvantage has been prepared.

1. ***National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion*** (NAPS/incl)

In order to achieve the targets described on page 2, the following key educational priorities have been identified:

- Ensuring that all young people leave the education system with a high quality education and related qualifications to support their full participation in society and in the economy.

- Providing early intervention to support children with literacy difficulties and to retain young people within the education and training system until such time as they achieve their full potential.
- Ensuring that all those who have already left school have opportunities to address any lack of educational and related qualifications that militates against their ability to participate fully in society, the economy and employment.
- Prioritising investment in educational provision in favour of those most at risk so as to optimise access, participation and outcomes for disadvantaged groups at every level of the system.
- Implementing targeted pilot initiatives on workplace basic education, literacy, numeracy and ICT literacy in those sectors where the need is greatest.

Under the mid-term reviews of the programmes, a number of areas have been prioritised for action, including clearer target setting for improving literacy and numeracy at primary and post-primary levels, assessment and expansion of provision of adult literacy programmes and enhanced targeted interventions at both primary level and with disadvantaged youth.

2. *Sustaining Progress*

The latest social partnership agreement, Sustaining Progress has ten *Special Initiatives* aimed specifically at strengthening social cohesion. One of the Special Initiatives is directed specifically at tackling educational disadvantage through literacy, numeracy and Early School Leaver programmes.

Under the mid-term reviews of the agreement, a number of areas have been prioritised for action, including: improved monitoring of literacy attainment, intensive interventions to improve literacy attainment in schools, targeting adult-learning opportunities at those in disadvantaged communities and continuing to address early school leaving and the needs of disadvantaged youth.

3. *New action plan for educational inclusion*

DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), an action plan for educational inclusion, was launched by the Minister for Education and Science on 30th May 2005. This new action plan will focus on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education (3 to 18 years).

The aim of the action plan is to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed. Its core elements comprise:

- a standardised system for identifying, and regularly reviewing, levels of disadvantage
- a new integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which will bring together, and build upon, existing interventions for schools and school clusters/communities with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage. The differences between urban and rural disadvantage will be taken into account in targeting actions under the programme.

The action plan will be implemented on a phased basis over five years and will involve an additional annual investment of some €40m on full implementation. It will also involve the creation of about 300 additional posts across the education system generally.

2.2.1.3 The *Gender Equality Unit* of the Department of Education and Science was established under the National Development Plan in 2002 and is co-funded by the ESF. The task of the Unit is to assist in the mainstreaming of gender equality throughout the education system, from pre-school through to post-graduate education and adult learning, for both sexes.

It is currently supporting two major initiatives in this area:

- ***Encouraging females into science, engineering and technology***

An interim report on this action is currently being prepared. This will be discussed with the education partners and other relevant agencies with a view to identifying issues to be prioritised in its final report.

- ***Encouraging males into primary teaching***

A final report on this initiative is expected in mid-2005. Among other related activities, a research report has been commissioned on the attitudes of both male and female entrants to the profession over the last 10 years.

In addition, the Unit has funded research in a number of gender-related areas in education and has supported a number of conferences and seminars to increase awareness of the importance of gender equality across the educational system. It is also working with a curriculum development agency to develop a resource for teachers on encouraging democratic participation entitled *VOTE: Gender, Participation and Democracy*.

2.2.2 Student Support in Further and Higher Education

There are a range of student support schemes which provide means-tested financial assistance to students in further and higher education. There are four maintenance grant schemes which are administered by the local authorities and the Vocational Education Committees (VECs). In addition, tuition fees are either not charged or remitted for undergraduate students in the Higher Education Sector, at a cost of €270m in 2004. Approximately 37% of third level students qualify for maintenance grants, with some €180m being expended on these grants in 2004.

There are also a number of dedicated measures to promote access and participation opportunities for students, including disadvantaged and mature students and students with disabilities, in higher education and on Post Leaving Certificate or Further Education Courses. These measures include:

- Special Rates of Maintenance Grants for Disadvantaged Students
- The ESF-aided Student Assistance Fund
- The ESF-aided Fund for Students with Disabilities
- The ESF-aided Millennium Partnership Fund for Disadvantage
- The National Office for Equity of Access to Third Level Education¹¹

¹¹ Established in August 2003, its remit is to facilitate inclusive and equitable access to higher education by under-represented groups, in particular those who are socially or economically disadvantaged, mature learners and those with a disability.

Since 1997, spending on third level access measures which are funded by the Department of Education and Science increased from €0.5m to €35m in 2004. In addition to this expenditure, in excess of €7m was allocated in 2004 by the Higher Education Authority under its Strategic Initiatives Scheme for access initiatives. Enhancing access for mature students is a key element of these access initiatives and a range of innovative actions are now successfully established in the colleges.

2.2.3 Support for trainees

The *National Training Fund* was established under the National Training Fund Act, 2000, as a dedicated fund to finance a range of schemes aimed at:

- raising the skills of those in employment;
- providing training to those who wish to acquire skills for the purposes of taking up employment;
- providing information in relation to existing, or likely future skills requirements in the economy.

The Fund is resourced by a levy on employers, calculated as a percentage of employee earnings. The Fund supports a range of training schemes operated by FÁS, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Shannon Development, HEA, IEI and Skillnets. The Fund also supports new initiatives in the area of lifelong learning, as well as the work of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and the FÁS Skills & Labour Market Research Unit.

2.3.1 Monitoring and evaluation of educational and training policies

The principal contributors to the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational system are:

- A high standard of entry into teacher training, and teacher pre-service programmes. Teaching in the State sector is a regulated profession where qualifications are nationally prescribed and it is a priority to maintain the attractiveness of teaching as a profession, in terms of pay, working conditions, career progression and professional support.
- A national curriculum for first and second level schools developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in collaboration with the stakeholders in education and informed by international research. Students' progress is monitored through national externally marked examinations at the end of lower and upper second level education, across all subject areas, implemented by the State Examinations Commission.
- A comprehensive range of support services for schools in terms of resourcing, teacher professional development, psychological, learning and ancillary supports. These services are provided by specialist agencies and support services and are subject to ongoing monitoring by the national authorities.
- Ongoing planning, self appraisal and review at individual school level. This is promoted through the National School Development Planning Initiative, the obligation on schools to make publicly available a school plan and through the provision of tools for self-review.
- External monitoring, evaluation and inspection by the Inspectorate. Reports from inspection provide balanced information on the effectiveness of schools, and assist schools in self-review and improvement. In addition, reports based on an analysis of inspection data from large numbers of schools identify general trends and common

issues for improvement in schools and the educational system, and contribute to policy review and formulation.

- Participation in international studies of pupil achievement provide essential benchmarks against which to measure students' and schools' achievements in an international and, especially, EU context.
- Management information systems and other data collection procedures provide managers and policy makers with information on progress from both individual and system levels. One such system is currently being developed to track the participation of different groups in further and higher education, in order to support the targeting of resources and as an aid to decision making.
- Finally, a feature of educational provision at all levels is the maintenance of a continuous dialogue with the wide range of stakeholders involved in education, including higher education interests, industrial development agencies and the social partners, as well as management, teacher, parent and student organisations.

2.3.2 A considerable amount of data is currently collected within both the education and training sectors. Ireland is an active participant in the international reporting of education and training data to EUROSTAT, the OECD and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. A key challenge is the need to provide for adequate co-ordination among data collectors both within education and between education agencies and their training counterparts. Within education, there is a lack of individualised data at primary and tertiary level and a lack of linkage between different databases within and outside the DES. In order to tackle some of these issues, a Primary Pupil Database is currently in development, with ESF support and a Third Level Student Record System is currently being introduced for all Third Level colleges.

The problem of inadequate co-ordination and standardisation of data collection has been recognised by the Irish authorities and is currently being addressed through a national cross-departmental strategy to improve the quality, comparability and policy-relevance of administrative data. As part of this strategy, referred to as the SPAR project (The Statistical Potential of Administrative Records), government departments are now requested to incorporate data strategies for monitoring performance into their multi-annual strategy statements. These strategies include the integration of existing data sets, the use of standard classifications and coding systems as widely as possible, the importance of structuring data to support the National Spatial Strategy and the provision of regional data generally.¹²

¹² For more information see <http://www.nsb.ie/publications/StrategyforStatistics2003-2008.pdf>

Section 3: PUTTING IN PLACE TRULY COHERENT AND COMPREHENSIVE LIFELONG LEARNING STRATEGIES

3.1.1.

Government policy on lifelong learning is primarily a joint responsibility of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. A Government White Paper on adult education, *Learning for Life* was published in 2000. The White Paper reflected on the role of adult education in society and, in setting out principles, policies and strategies for the development of a life-long learning approach to provision, built on the wide consultation process which followed from the publication of an earlier Green Paper *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*. The publication of the White Paper could be said to mark the adoption of life-long learning as a governing principle of education and training policy in Ireland. The policy approaches set out in these papers were confirmed in the Report of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning¹³ in 2002. Many of the strategies being introduced are across education and training and are linked with the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications.

These policy approaches, together with a series of reports and legislative instruments, have described and highlighted the priorities for the implementation of a coherent policy. These are:

- Providing a firm foundation of high quality relevant initial education and broadening curricular choice in second level schools and providing a range of options to meet different abilities, interest and needs, and strengthen the language, technical and vocational dimensions of curricula;
- Prioritising state investment towards those most at risk, and tackle disadvantage in terms of key 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 skill needs and 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 and childcare services and increased flexibility of provision;
- Enhancing the quality of provision through the development of staff and through research and evaluation;
- 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 embracing learning in formal, non formal, community and workplace environments.

As can be seen by comparing the overall Government's education and training priorities identified in Section 2, the promotion of life-long learning is at the core of all developments throughout the education and training systems.

¹³ see Section 3.1.2

A National Adult Learning Council (NALC) was set up (funded through the Department of Education and Science) in 2002 to promote a co-ordinated strategy to the development and delivery of adult learning across the various levels and sectors. The Council includes representation from education, training, social partner, community and voluntary and learner interests. The operation of the NALC is currently under review.

The EGFSN¹⁴ has identified emerging skills gaps and recommended a range of strategies to address them. The *Group* has had a major impact on investment in education and training in such areas as ICT, languages, the physical sciences and engineering.

Provision for training in the workplace has been significantly enhanced and developed by FÁS in collaboration with a wide range of employer organisations and professional bodies. An enterprise-led approach to up-skilling those in employment, the *Skillnets* Training Networks Programme, piloted in 1999, is now moving to a new phase of dissemination, building on the experience of over 2,300 companies in 60 networks.

Inter-departmental/inter-agency working groups operate at a national level between government departments and the social partners as part of the National Social Partnership process. This ensures an integrated approach to the delivery of education, training, welfare, social inclusion and industrial development policies.

3.1.2

Responsibility for policy making in the area of lifelong learning is shared across a number of Government Departments:

- Responsibility for early childhood education is shared between the Departments of Education and Science¹⁵, Health and Children (certain disadvantaged groups), and Justice Equality and Law Reform (Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme), and the private sector (largely through crèche and playgroup provision).
- The Department of Education and Science is responsible for provision in first and second-level schools, and providers of further and higher education;
- The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is responsible for the industrial training sector and for supporting enterprise.
- Certain other sector-specific training activities are the responsibility of other government departments, e.g. *Fáilte Ireland* (Department of Arts, Sport & Tourism); *Teagasc* (Department of Agriculture & Food).

In order to bring coherence to policy and delivery of provision and to drive the process forward, a *Task Force on Lifelong Learning* was established in 2002, with representatives of the eight government departments with responsibility for education, training, welfare and community development policies, the social partners, the community and the voluntary sectors. The report of the Task Force focused more specifically on learning for those in the workplace and emphasised the importance of

¹⁴ see Section 3.1.3.1

¹⁵ Much early childhood education is provided within primary (first-level) schools. Over 50% of 4-year-olds and almost all 5-year-olds avail of full time educational provision in Infant Classes in primary schools. Extra educational provision for 3-5 year old children in areas or communities experiencing severe educational disadvantage (Early Start programme and Pre-schools for Traveller Children) is also provided by the DES.

ensuring basic skills for all in the context of a National Framework of Qualifications, addressing delivery, access and funding issues and providing a comprehensive Guidance and Counselling service as an integral part of LLL provision. The Task Force saw a particular need to improve the opportunities available for part time flexible learning across the education and training sector.

The work of the Task force is being continued by an interdepartmental Steering Committee. The committee produces regular "Status Reports" (four to date) in which it interrogates the recommendations of the Task Force and reports on progress in their implementation. This highlights the successful implementation of elements of the strategy, as well as ensuring that all partners in the process and policy makers are made aware of shortfalls in provision, funding or infrastructural deficits.

3.1.3.1 Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN)¹⁶, referred to earlier, is the body appointed by the Irish Government to advise it on aspects of education and training related to the future skills requirements of the enterprise sector of the Irish economy. The Group was established in 1997 and is composed of representatives from business, employees, education, government departments and State agencies. The EGFSN carries out studies into the supply and demand for skills in individual business/industrial sectors and occupations. The Group reports to both the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Minister for Education and Science.

The Group has produced four main reports to date and a series of sectoral reports. These have resulted in a number of skills initiatives in the higher education sector¹⁷ aimed at responding to the wider developing needs of the economy. One of the major relatively recent initiatives, on foot of the third report, was the establishment of an Information Technology Investment Fund, aimed at developing ICT education and training at a number of levels. In addition, the Group's recommendation concerning the establishment of a comprehensive national training/trainers database has been addressed.

In 2004, the mandate of the Expert Group was widened to incorporate the mandate previously held by the National Training Advisory Committee. This mandate requires the Expert Group to advise on the priority training needs for the enterprise sector, best practice in enterprise training and on a strategy for enterprise training. The EGFSN will continue its core role of advising on projected skills and labour market requirements. Skills and education & training priorities identified by the Enterprise Strategy Group will be reflected in the Expert Group's work. It will also progress the "One Step Up" initiative¹⁸ proposed by the Enterprise Strategy Group.

ICT

¹⁶ [EGFSN](#)

¹⁷ Courses provided as part of these initiatives are ESF aided

¹⁸ This initiative seeks to engage with the workforce as a whole, but is particularly targeted at persons with low levels of qualifications and in low-level occupations, who are least likely to receive sufficient access to learning opportunities. Training must be based on identified needs and is directed at the workforce in the private sector.

The first *Information Society Commission*¹⁹ was established in 1997 and has published a number of documents outlining priorities for reaching the goal of "access for all." However, many of the barriers to an inclusive information society remain, despite the work and recommendations of two Information Society Commissions. In particular, implementation has been hindered by a lack of alignment between information society policy and other policy areas, notably social inclusion policy and employment policy mechanisms for inclusive information society development.

The National Action Plan Against Poverty and Society Exclusion (referred to in Section 2) is the core policy mechanism for developing an inclusive information society in Ireland. The Action Plan provides a mechanism that articulates Irish policy for an inclusive information society, addressing EU social policy objectives.

In addition, the Employment Action Plan (EAP) and social partnership agreements also progress the information society agenda. Both the last two social partnership agreements and the current agreement *Sustaining Progress* have contained information society objectives, with *Sustaining Progress* having "Including everyone in the Information Society" as a goal for the first time. In relation to education specifically, both the White Paper on Adult Education and the Task Force on Lifelong Learning (2002) recognised ICT literacy as a basic skill and highlighted the importance of integrating ICT into education and training programmes for adults. The 2002 report states that adults need to be in a position to undertake ICT training either within the workplace to keep abreast of changing technologies, or for those outside the workforce, in education and training centres where they can train in order to gain access to opportunities.

3.1.3.2 ICT in Schools

In the *Action Programme for the New Millennium* the Government committed itself to a programme aimed at achieving computer literacy throughout the school system. The *Schools IT 2000 –A Policy Framework for the new Millennium-* launched in 1998, enhanced by the three year strategy Plan from 2000 to 2003 *Blueprint for the Future of ICT in Irish Education* specifically targeted investment (over €130m) in ICT in primary and secondary schools. The goals of these initiatives were the establishment of a school ICT infrastructure, the development of teacher ICT skills and support facilities, and the integration of ICT into teaching and learning. Since 1998, pupil/computer ratios have been reduced from 35:1 to less than 11:1 at primary level and from 16:1 to less than 9:1 at second level. Progress has been made in relation to teacher ICT skills, and classroom usage of the technologies.

Currently the Department of Education & Science is developing a new policy framework in order to both continue the general progress made to date and to target specific areas of concern highlighted in a recent census of ICT provision. The key objectives identified are:

- Further enhancing and maintaining computer facilities in schools and ensuring that schools have appropriate internal networks put in place;
- Providing broadband to all schools and establishing a centrally managed schools network with appropriate back-up support services for this purpose by the end of the current year;
- Re-focusing training and development programmes on pedagogical use of ICT;

¹⁹ <http://www.isc.ie>

- Ensuring that ICT has a more central role in the curriculum and in student assessment;
- Promoting the development of quality educational resources online for use in learning and teaching;
- Facilitating and encouraging industry/school collaboration on ICT issues;
- Monitoring the impact of ICT at school level and ensuring that ICT resources contribute effectively to learning outcomes. [The DES Inspectorate is currently undertaking a national evaluation of the impact of ICT at both primary and secondary levels]

A Government decision in February 2004 authorised the Ministers for Communications, Marine & Natural Resources and Education & Science to enter into an agreement with the telecommunications industry on the provision of high-speed broadband connectivity, moderated through a central National Schools Broadband Network, to all 4,000 first and second level schools nationwide. The agreement provides for the establishment of an €18m industry/government fund for broadband services to schools over a three year period, with industry contributing €5m per annum and the Government €1m per annum. Following the establishment of the National Network and the completion of a public procurement process for local connectivity installation of service to schools is commencing in Autumn 2005.

3.1.3.3 e-Learning in the workplace

FÁS has developed an e-learning system which enables all FÁS providers, from Training Centres to Community Services officers, to register clients for courses online. *FÁS eCollege*²⁰ enables the organisation to provide access to over 100 courses to every home and company (equipped with a computer and, preferably a broadband connection) in the country.

It provides an online testing facility in cooperation with Certification & Standards. Currently, online testing for certain elements of the training of apprentice electricians is in place and further online tests for other apprentice trades are being planned.

FÁS eCollege has a range of learning material from which it will develop copyrighted courseware for the betterment of the organisation, its employees and the people it serves. In addition, *FÁS eCollege* coordinates the sourcing of courseware for FÁS and ensures that the organisation obtains value for money when contracting for the supply of third party e-learning materials and courseware.

In addition, the *FÁS eCollege* encourages and supports Instructors who have completed the relevant qualification to write, design and update course content in an e-learning format.

3.1.3.4 National Digital Learning Repository

The *National Digital Learning Repository* (DLR) project will investigate and develop a framework to enable development and sharing of digital learning resources between Irish Universities. The Repository will contain digital teaching and learning resources, typically an image, a map, a piece of film or audio, a piece of text, an assessment, a simulation, a segment of interactive multimedia, or a combination of more than one of

²⁰ [eCollege](#)

these. The project is multi-annual, and expected to last some 3 years in total. Initially the focus of the project will be to develop the repository and associated technical issues. Thereafter, it is also envisaged that the project will look at the application of e-learning to specific disciplines, particularly those identified as relevant to national priorities

3.1.3.5 Skillnets

Skillnets²¹ is an enterprise led training body established by DETE to stimulate and support in-company training. The organisation (Skillnets Ltd) is a company limited by guarantee with stakeholders from employer and employee bodies i.e. Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), Chambers of Commerce of Ireland (CCI), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) Construction Industry Federation (CIF) and Small Firms Association (SFA), as well as appointees of the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Employment.

The Skillnets mission is to develop an enterprise-led, networked and partnership approach to the provision of in-company training and to expand and develop that approach by supporting innovative methods of enhanced workplace learning. The overall objective of the initiative is to improve learning activity in the workplace, leading to enhanced skills, employability and competitiveness.

The main initiative managed by Skillnets is the ‘Training Networks Programme’. Over the last 5 years, 100 enterprise-led training networks have been established in Ireland involving over 5000 enterprises and 30,000 trainees. Networks are groups of companies who come together to address their training needs, develop training solutions, and collaborate in the design, delivery and management of shared solutions to key skills needs. Training Networks are therefore a ‘bottom-up’ initiative led by enterprises themselves, with Skillnets acting as a support structure and facilitator in order to bring learning stakeholders and industry into a shared process. There are, currently, 58 operational networks.

Training networks can be sectoral, geographical or small business focussed. Many networks have been formed to meet the training needs of micro-enterprises and develop owner-manager skills and, in peripheral regions, where less provision is available, networks are providing new access to flexible local training. A number of networks are also based on partnerships between employers and trade unions.

Each Training Network comprises of a unique set of partners drawn together to meet the specific network objectives. All networks are based on a group of enterprises which come together to co-operate and collaborate. Networks range in size from 15 up to 200 companies in any individual network. The enterprise networks form a range of partnerships with other actors such as industry associations, chambers of commerce, trade unions, training providers, public agencies, certifying bodies and educational institutions so as to create industry relevant training strategies. In order to ensure that all actions are closely aligned to business needs, all decision making within a networks rests with the enterprisers who co-opt or collaborate with a series of other actors to meet particular objectives.

²¹ www.skillnets.com/

3.1.3.6 Adult Education Guidance Initiative

The Adult Education Guidance Initiative²² (AEGI) is one of a number of measures supported under the NDP. It is a pilot programme intended to contribute to the development of a more skilled and knowledge-based workforce through the development of a dedicated educational guidance service for adult learners. It focuses particularly on those returning to education on the Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS), Adult Literacy programmes and those engaging in local community education²³.

The AEGI consists of 24 projects located throughout the county in both urban and rural areas. It provides information, advice and guidance on an individual and a group basis, in educational and community settings to assist adults to make informed education choices and successful transitions. It is intended to develop as an integrated adult educational guidance service and work alongside and with existing adult education providers. Each project is expected to liaise closely with the local VEC, adult education programme co-ordinators and with other key personnel supporting adult education.

A National Advisory Group, representing DES, FÁS, adult education providers and other main stakeholders assists in the monitoring and implementing the AEGI. Resource materials have been developed and are regularly up-dated and guidance practitioners and other staff in the projects have contributed to the development of these materials.

3.1.4 Links between VET and Higher Education

There has been a consistency between developments under the Copenhagen and Bologna processes and within the future objectives process and the developing policy approach within Ireland to qualifications and qualifications-related issues. For example, the Berlin Communiqué of European higher education ministers in 2003 called for the establishment in each country of a National Framework of Qualifications, as is in place in Ireland. Furthermore, there is a parallel call in the Copenhagen Process for the establishment of a set of reference levels on an outcomes basis to assist in the comparison of qualifications internationally and Ireland has such a national arrangement in place. In addition, the quality assurance approaches in both the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes are reflected in Irish developments and representatives of Irish quality assurance agencies have been involved in the development of these policy approaches. The Further Education and Training Awards Council will host what is hoped to be the first meeting of a network of quality assurance agencies in vocational education and training in October 2005.

3.2 Obstacles/areas for further progress

Progression ladders

While very considerable progress has been made towards establishing a unified system of accreditation and qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications, difficulties still remain in relation to crossovers between providers and the linkages between providers in the different sectors ('progression ladders'). Though good linkages and crossover mechanisms have been developed separately within the education and

²² www.ncge.ie/adult_aegi.htm

²³ These initiatives were developed with assistance from the ESF.

training sectors (between, e.g. schools and colleges or external trainers and FÁS training centres), there is a need to build on these further to ensure that there increased progression opportunities available for those within traditional training sectors. This absence of linkages can even extend to the exchange of basic information on courses and availability, with local providers working in the training sector often not having ready access to databases of information on further education courses in their area. As a result, the establishment and full implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications is a national priority, since it represents a commitment both to bring about a coherent and cohesive policy approach to all qualifications on an outcomes basis across education and training and to ensure that the qualifications-related supporting structures are in place for the development of a lifelong learning society.

An area of particular focus for the future will be the extent to which employers engage with the NQAI structure in seeking to develop qualifications for those members of their workforce who have acquired considerable technical skills in the workplace but who have no recognised qualifications. There will also be an emphasis on encouraging employers to seek accreditation for specific staff training programmes which they operate themselves.

Learning ethos

The importance of understanding the different needs of adult learners is highlighted by the radical change in the employment market in Ireland over the last ten years. Following the oil shocks of the seventies, unemployment in Ireland began to rise inexorably, peaking in the late eighties and only falling significantly with the growth of the so-called “Celtic Tiger” economy from the mid-nineties to date. Against this background and the introduction of full access to second-level education ("free education") in the late sixties, the priorities of both education and training providers was catering for the demand from a rapidly growing youth population for both basic and further education and training.

As a result, the prevalent ethos of providers in both sectors was that of requiring learners to come to them and accept the values and expectations of the provider on pain of exclusion, since demand, for the most part, exceeded supply. Equally, provision was largely front-end loaded with an almost exclusive emphasis on programmes for young persons immediately post school and/or in the early months of unemployment and with little or no provision for adults, returning learners or, indeed, persons either in or out of the workforce for a long period.

As articulated in Government policy described earlier, the concept of LLL is founded on the primacy of the learner and on the requirement that providers match learners’ needs, expectations and ambitions and not the opposite, to which providers had become accustomed during the long years of high unemployment. Consequently, there is a need for the reinvention of learning provision at all levels, but most particularly in the area of adult education, where the imperative for providers is that of creating a learning culture or ethos in which putative learners – and in this model all adults are learners – are encouraged, enticed and ultimately supported to continually upskill and broaden their knowledge in whatever way best suits their needs and lifestyles.

Discretionary learning and individual interests

The promotion of a healthy work-life balance is increasingly appreciated by employers as a means of significantly enhancing the productivity and adaptability of their workforce. In a LLL context, this can mean a broadening of learning provision in the workplace and elsewhere to include modules or courses that stimulate and support the

interests of individual learners, even if these are not directly related to their immediate employment needs. However, since the priorities for employers in relation to lifelong learning are the continuous upskilling and flexibility of their workforce, the critical demand on providers is that of motivating learners to keep learning, so that when their life circumstances change, either voluntarily or involuntarily, they have the understanding and motivation to effectively self-manage their learning and career paths.

It is also widely recognised that e-learning should be developed in a way that provides a mix of delivery methods and learner supports to meet the diverse needs of individual learners. FÁS has introduced a 'blended' learning approach, entailing a mix of traditional methods and new opportunities opened up by web-enabled learning technologies. In using a blended solution the learner moves between an appropriate mix of traditional classroom work, use of new technology and web-enabled e-learning. As a result, the selected modalities are used to underpin learning and support and motivate the learner.

Knowing the learner

Since the key to successful lifelong learning provision is ensuring that the learning opportunities provided meet the needs and circumstances of the learner at any given time, accurate and comprehensive information systems are an essential underpinning of effective delivery systems. As has already been described, a very considerable amount of data and information are currently available, much of it arising from international reporting, as well as improved data collection within the sectors. In addition, international surveys of reading, mathematics and science have been conducted at primary and second level in recent years – adding to the volume of international comparisons and in-depth analysis. A key weakness is the absence of adequate co-ordination among data collectors (both within the education sector and between that sector and training agencies), the lack of individualised data at primary and tertiary level and the lack of linkage between different databases within and outside DES.

Some well-developed databases exist: FÁS has very comprehensive database of information on persons using its training and guidance services; equally, within education, the post-primary pupil database contains a very considerable volume of information tracking pupil progress through the second-level system. However, because current cross linkages are poor, essential data is often lost in transfer across sectors or levels within sectors. In addition, the focus of a number of existing databases is on provision and process, rather than on the progress of individual learners, making them less than optimal as supports for a comprehensive lifelong learning provision. It must, however, be emphasised that the development of such comprehensive information systems would raise significant issues relating to data protection and the rights to privacy of individuals which can only be addressed in a wider societal context.

Practical obstacles to participation

Adults wishing to avail of LLL opportunities often face a range of practical obstacles. In particular, those working full-time have difficulty in accessing education courses that are available in flexible formats compatible with their needs and family responsibilities. While many large companies and businesses are facilitating workers seeking to engage in LLL and support in-company learning opportunities, smaller companies are less willing to encourage in-company learning or to release workers to participate off-site.

Many programmes are still not available in modular formats and at times and locations to meet the needs of the adult learners. As an example, most higher education courses require full-time attendance. Courses offered by educational institutions in 'outreach' locations nationally often have inadequate facilities to support active and participative learning, to provide library services or student support services, including essential guidance and career counselling support to maximise participation. Moreover, the particular needs of parents of young children for child-care facilities and time flexibility are often not recognised.

There are also economic obstacles to participation in LLL. Since higher education courses provided on a part-time basis are not grant funded, adults in the workforce wishing to improve their educational skills and competences must finance their own learning. Since supported and financed study leave is not widely available in most employments, those wishing to acquire new skills or change careers must finance retraining personally or become unemployed for 12-15 months to qualify for state funded grant support. These issues were identified by the LLL Task Force, referred to earlier, as serious impediments to access.

Section 4: REFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION

4.1 As mentioned earlier, the OECD recently completed a *Review of Higher Education in* Ireland. The Review contains a range of recommendations for change and development of the higher education system and within higher education institutions. The Review emphasises the critical importance of lifelong learning in society and, in this context, it recommends that the Government should develop an overarching strategy for the higher education sector, through the establishment of a new National Council for Tertiary Education, Research and Innovation, to be chaired by An Taoiseach.

Further recommendations include:

- The diverse roles of the universities and institutes of technology should be maintained as part of a dynamic higher education system;
- The current fragmentation within the sector should be addressed by the establishment of a new Tertiary Education Authority which would have policy and funding responsibility for all higher education institutions;
- The Institutes of Technology should be allowed operate with far greater managerial autonomy than before.

Also recommended are measures to increase participation in higher education from all socio-economic backgrounds, part-time, mature and overseas students.

The Government has accepted the broad thrust of the proposals contained in the Review and has agreed to progress the drafting of legislation to bring the Institutes of Technology within the aegis of the Higher Education Authority. It has also agreed to provide financial incentives to higher education institutions in order to promote and reward change within the sector.

As has already been described, the development and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications within higher education is a key reforming strategy of the Government. Since publication of the Framework in October 2003, there has been significant development of existing programmes and awards within higher education and implementation arrangements were announced in July 2004, with new Framework awards being made in many cases from autumn 2004 onwards and to be fully in place by autumn 2005. The Framework emphasises the development of learning outcomes rather than the traditional approach of setting out requirements in relation to the duration of programmes. The implementation of the Framework is being undertaken in a manner consistent with the Bologna cycles of higher education.

4.1.1/2 Ireland is currently embarking on a new strategy to promote the attractiveness of Irish higher education to non-EU countries. Ireland has traditionally had a small but important level of overseas student representation in higher education, most notably in the area of medicine. A new strategy of easing access to Irish higher education (through new visa and work permit arrangements) and enhancing the marketing of Irish higher education is now being implemented, with a medium term target of much greater overseas student participation in Irish higher education generally.

4.1.3.1 A strategic decision has been made to invest heavily in research and development as a key means of assuring future economic and social development. Under the National Development Plan 2000-2006, some €2.5 billion is being invested in R&D. This investment is creating new centres and research programmes through the higher

education sector, providing valuable new labour market skills through the development of researchers and providing opportunities for academic-industry research collaborations. Funding for research projects, programmes, postgraduate research students and fellowships is provided by two research councils established in 2000 - the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) and the Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology (IRCSET).

The largest single programme, the PRTL²⁴ (see below) managed by the HEA, will see investment of over €600 million in creating research infrastructure and capacity, and supporting a range of research programmes across all disciplines. A separate institution, Science Foundation Ireland, will invest a similar amount in the strategic areas of biotechnology and information and communications technology.

In terms of future plans, Ireland is very much committed to the Barcelona target of increased investment in R&D and has set a national target of 2.5% of GDP spending on R&D by 2010. This will mean that some €1.1 billion will be spent on R&D in the HE sector alone, with a further €2.5 billion in the private sector. A key challenge for the higher education sector will be the creation of a skilled labour force (particularly at PhD level) to undertake this research. Currently Ireland's graduate rate is ranked well below top level OECD countries (0.8% vs. 2.8% for the top ranked country).

4.1.3.2 *The Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions* (PRTL) is the principal component of research support. Its aim is to support a strategic approach by third-level institutions to the long-term development of their research capabilities. Of the overall amount of €605 million announced to date under three cycles of funding, private financing has accounted for €190 million. These awards involve capital and current expenditure²⁵. Proposals are required to promote excellence in research and are made by institutions rather than by specific faculties or individuals. The emphasis is on assisting institutions to enhance and develop research capabilities. Research in a wide range of areas is eligible for support, including humanities, science, technology and the social sciences. Proposals are evaluated by an independent international panel of leading academics and researchers.

Funding for co-operation with Northern Ireland involves support for cross-border collaborative initiatives between third-level institutions. Expenditure in 2003 on the 21 successful awards was approx. €300,000, while the full annual cost is approx €2 million. Each project promotes cross-border collaborative initiatives between third-level institutions.

The HEA has recently published an impact assessment of the PRTL. The report takes a positive view of the impact of the PRTL to date and strongly recommends its continuation well beyond the current NDP. It makes a number of recommendations for Government, the HEA and institutions in the future management of the programme. In addition, as has already been described, the Government has agreed proposals for an overarching framework for research policy, and has appointed a Government Chief Science Adviser.

²⁴ [PRTL](#)

²⁵ Capital expenditure under the PRTL is co-funded by the ERDF.

4.1.4 The HEA has for several years provided small dedicated funding on a competitive basis to the universities to support innovation in areas of strategic interest (c. €10 million per annum). In recent years, funding has been provided for innovation in teaching and learning in the universities, as well as measures to support the development of e-learning in the institutions. This has helped support new techniques in teaching and learning, as well as new strategies for the development of e-learning. The HEA is currently in the process of developing a new recurrent funding mechanism. Under the new model, it is proposed that provision be made for strategic funding allocated on a competitive basis to be increased to 10% (potentially rising to 15%) of the overall block grant for universities.

4.1.5 The Universities Act 1997 requires each university to establish procedures for quality assurance aimed at improving the quality of education and related services provided by the university. In addition, a review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures is also regularly carried out by the universities in consultation with the HEA. In recent years, the seven Irish Universities have co-operated in developing their quality assurance systems and in presenting their approach nationally and internationally as a model appropriate to the needs of the Irish Universities. Further collaboration is now being achieved by the establishment by the governing authorities of the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). The HEA and universities have recently commissioned the European Universities Association (EUA) to conduct a full review of the effectiveness of these quality assurance procedures and their report was published in April 2005.

All higher education institutions associated with HETAC are responsible for establishing quality assurance procedures in accordance with HETAC guidelines and criteria. In 2002 HETAC published Guidelines and Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures in Higher Education and Training. These require providers to establish quality assurance procedures and agree those procedures with HETAC. A review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures will commence in 2005.

4.1.6 Widening participation in higher education is a key policy goal in Ireland. The Department of Education and Science provides financial assistance to students from disadvantaged background to access higher education and in addition, under-graduate students benefit from free tuition. The HEA also provides small amounts of targeted financial support for each university in this area. Each university now has a range of measures in place to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education. These include measures such as access programmes, awareness and induction programmes, and targeted assistance to students at greater risk of drop out.

4.1.7 The investment in research and development noted above is supporting wider economic development. A state development agency, Enterprise Ireland²⁶, has a key role in creating a link between Irish based companies and academia, to support knowledge transfer to the market place. A recent review of national industrial strategy has recommended that Enterprise Ireland should develop a new structure to focus on market

²⁶ <http://www.enterprise-ireland.com/>

led applied research and technological development and leverage increased enterprise investment. This recommendation is being considered at present.

4.2.1 Access to higher education

The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, proposed by the Action Group on Access to Third Level education, was established within the Higher Education Authority in 2004 with ESF support. The remit of the National Office is to facilitate inclusive and equitable access to higher education from under-represented groups and promote improved participation by students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with a disability and mature “second-chance” students. The National Office, in consultation with education agencies, learners and the social partners recently completed a national, multiannual plan to promote equity of access to higher education. The plan was launched in December 2004 and will be progressed during the current year.

4.2.2 Mobility issues

All third-level students in receipt of means-tested maintenance grants have the option of utilising those grants while pursuing approved full-time undergraduate courses of not less than two years duration in a university or third level institution which is maintained or assisted by recurrent grants from public funds in Ireland and in any other EU Member State. Eligible students for 3rd level maintenance grants schemes in Ireland include, inter alia, students from other EU Member States who satisfy the conditions of the schemes. For incoming students the availability of courses through English is a major attraction.

Studies at international and national level have confirmed that the key issues affecting mobility of Irish students are, in common to those in other countries, funding, linguistic ability, academic/institutional barriers (credit transfer, recognition, course structures) as well as inadequate information systems in regard to the options available. The *Euro Student Survey 2000 – Irish Report* showed that while the desire to improve language skills is often the main reason for students going abroad, over half the students surveyed declared that they had little or no competence in a foreign language.

The implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications will also assist with student mobility. In autumn 2004, the Qualifications Authority established principles in relation to a national approach to credit and guidelines on the use of credit in higher education in a manner consistent with the National Framework of Qualifications and with the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System.

Section 5: INCREASING THE QUALITY AND ATTRACTIVENESS OF VET

5.1 Progress on many of the measures identified in this section of the Commission's *Guidance Note* has been described in earlier sections of this report. Consequently, the focus, here, is on actions and initiatives not described elsewhere.

5.1.1.1 The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has formally been designated the Irish National Europass Centre (NEC). The Qualifications Authority has established an Implementation Advisory Group, representative of stakeholders with responsibility for different elements of the Europass. The Advisory Group is assisting the Authority in the development of an implementation strategy for the NEC and is to assist in its implementation.

During the Irish Presidency of the European Union, common principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning were adopted. A range of such procedures is already in place in Ireland. In seeking to bring about a coherent national approach, the NQAI is consulting with stakeholders on the accreditation of prior learning and is aiming to establish principles and operational guidelines in summer 2005.

5.1.1.2 Further Education and Training

The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) was established in 2001 and is now the single national awarding body in Ireland for further education and training. It makes awards previously made by FÁS, Fáilte Ireland, Teagasc and the NCVA. The National Framework of Qualifications, referred to earlier, comprises 10 levels. In January 2005 FETAC, in agreement with the NQAI, placed over 300 former and existing awards on the National Framework of Qualifications over levels 3-6.

The NQAI also defined four award types: *Major, Minor, Special Purpose* and *Supplemental*. These represent the types of awards that FETAC can make. Each of these award types have specified features which will bring greater coherence and consistency to awards made in Ireland. FETAC is currently developing New Awards consistent with the requirements of the framework and plans to publish a Directory of New Awards consistent with the above requirements in early 2006.

FETAC is also currently developing common processes for the development of awards for the future, covering all fields of learning from levels 1-6 of the Framework. It has recently published (April 2005) a policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning. This policy provides for the formal recognition of informal and non-formal learning, where so ever acquired. Guidelines for Providers and an Information Guide for Learners are currently being developed regarding the Recognition of Prior Learning. FETAC plans to facilitate the recognition of prior learning by autumn 2005.

5.1.1.2 Quality issues

Arrangements for quality assurance in vocational education and training were put on a statutory basis in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. Following a period of consultation with stakeholders and an externally evaluated test phase, FETAC published its policy on Provider's Quality Assurance in summer 2004. The policy incorporates a Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF) for providers. This was

significantly influenced by the Council Conclusion of May 2004 on promoting a CQAF within and across member states.

FETAC's quality assurance policy became operational in January 2005 and involves the evaluation by FETAC of providers' quality assurance procedures against published criteria. Agreement by FETAC on the potential efficacy of a provider's quality assurance procedures is a prerequisite for gaining and retaining registration to offer FETAC awards. Existing providers of education and training (e.g. Fáilte Ireland, FÁS, Teagasc, and the broad further education sector, including industry and employers) are currently working with FETAC to ensure smooth implementation of this new quality assurance process.

In relation to the training sector, the FÁS Statement of Strategy provides a strategy for the organisation to respond to training and labour market needs within a changing environment. Eight Priority Goals are identified to provide a clear focus to the delivery and achievement of the strategy, including Goal 5, which states that FÁS ... “set and promote world- class standards in training and employment services, within a framework of total quality, continuous improvement and accreditation.”

FÁS has developed national quality assurance policies and procedures that govern all FÁS delivered, funded and procured training programmes. The national quality assurance approach adheres to the requirements of the Qualifications Act 1999, as well as those outlined in the FÁS Statement of Strategy and EU targets in relation to training and education. As required, FAS will agree their quality assurance procedures with FETAC and HETAC.

This work builds on existing good policy and practice in relation to FÁS training provision and is also consistent with other national quality assurance systems. The approach is intended to set out the parameters within which FÁS Divisions will operate and provide evidence which confirms and verifies adherence to the organisation's national quality assurance policies and procedures.

5.1.1.3 Flexibility, etc.

As has been described earlier, the NQAI is developing an integrated system of awards for all levels and types of educational and training programmes which will promote both vertical and horizontal flexibility, individual educational and training pathways and modularisation of courses. In addition, a priority for the Authority is the development of processes for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning through an outcomes-based awards system and accreditation independent of the learning site.

5.1.1.4 Career Guidance

The Education Act 1998 requires that schools must ensure that “all students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices” (Section 9(c)). The National Development Plan also refers to the provision of guidance and counselling in second level schools as being vital to enable each pupil to gain the maximum benefit from the education system. Following a consultation process with the education partners, the DES is currently finalising guidelines for second level schools on students' access to appropriate guidance.

New programmes within the school curriculum have significant guidance modules – the Transition Year Programme (TYP), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has established a Committee to develop a curriculum framework in guidance for post-primary schools. The work of the Committee began in the autumn of 2003 and is ongoing at present.

A major review of career guidance in Ireland was completed in 2003 by the OECD, as part of its study of guidance in OECD countries (later expanded in collaboration with the EU and the World Bank). Amongst its recommendations was that there was a need to put in place a stronger developmental approach to career assistance, to give students skills in career decision making, improve their knowledge of the world of work, and better prepare them for upper secondary subject choice. An additional allocation of posts for guidance teachers has recently been announced by the Minister for Education and Science, reflecting the heightened awareness of the importance of this provision following the adoption of the resolution on guidance during the Irish Presidency in 2004.

A *National Guidance Forum*²⁷ was established in June 2004. The Forum is a joint initiative of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. It aims to facilitate collaboration between guidance providers and to make lifelong guidance a reality. There are 30 members, including representatives of guidance policy makers, practitioners, trainers, social partners, parents and consumers.

Part of the brief of the Forum is to carry out a consultative process with a wide range of stakeholders on key issues in guidance, including those identified in the OECD Review referred to earlier. Recommendations on this consultation will be submitted to the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Most recently, a draft proposal has been prepared by the Forum on how it might collaborate with the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs.

5.1.3 Further Education Developments

The establishment of the NQAI and related agencies and structures, as described above and earlier, are seen as measures that will enhance both the attractiveness and status of VET courses and qualifications.

- The recommendations of a 2003 (McIver) report on the organisational, support, development, technical and administrative structures and resources required for the provision of post Leaving Certificate courses are currently being considered by DES.

The recommendations in the report are wide-ranging and encompass proposals that extend beyond PLC provision, including issues which impact on the shaping of structures for the delivery of further and adult education into the future, and on other sectors of the education system.

The *Back to Education Initiative*, which was initiated in 2002, provides for an expansion of flexible part-time options across further education. It prioritises all adults with less than upper second level education. Under BTEI, over 6000 places per annum have been made available to date, of which 10% are exclusively for the community sector. A target of 20,000 extra places under BTEI by 2006 is a published commitment in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness and the National Development Plan. This initiative has been very well received by both participants and providers (VECs) because of its flexibility.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to develop adult education services to a stage where the State will offer a "Second-Chance Guarantee". Under the guarantee every person who left school without completing the junior-cycle at second level will be offered the chance to participate on an adult education course.

²⁷ www.ncge.ie/ngf.htm

5.1.5 Competence Development Programme

The FÁS Statement of Strategy 2000-2005 has as a priority "To promote investment in training by employers and to accelerate the development and delivery of a comprehensive range of programmes and services, for employers and those in employment, based on identified labour market needs".

The aim of the Competency Development Programme is to raise the competency level of targeted employees in particular occupations within specific sectors to ensure that the national stock of skills matches the national human resource requirements for continuous economic growth. The programme provides training subsidies to enhance the competency level of the company's workforce and enable employees to cope with frequent and ongoing changes in work practices.

The proposed training will be targeted at a number of key skill needs which will be identified by research and consultation with the relevant industry/business stakeholders and other agencies. Funding priority will be given towards the development of employees in the general operative category and Management Development.

Training can be delivered through either Commissioned Training, where tenders are sought from approved training organisations to design, develop, organise, promote and deliver training programmes, or Open Market Training, where financial support will be targeted at training programmes which already exist in the market place. In both Commissioned and Open Market Training the training organisation must be on the National Register of Trainers for delivering the specific programme.

5.1.7 Trainers Network

The Trainers Network²⁸ was initiated by FÁS with *ADAPT* funding in 1998 in order to develop the profession of training in Ireland. The Trainers Network brings together trainers and learning facilitators from all sectors, public and private, specialist and mainstream, to share learning and experiences in relation to best practice, recent innovations, quality standards and continuing professional development. The network is directed and supported by a Consortium incorporating many of the organisations involved in the training of trainers.

Launched in 1998, the network has over 500 members across four regions in Ireland, including Northern Ireland. Network members have contributed to and participated in over 50 local, regional, national, and European networking and learning opportunities. Network Leaders are in place to facilitate and consolidate local networking groups.

The Trainers Network is a significant resource available to all facilitators of learning and feeds into mainstream policy and structures. A key strength is its capacity to access on-the-ground responses from network members and Consortium organisations. The results of the network will contribute to ensuring the best international standards for Irish training and effectively respond to the ever-changing needs of the workforce. In addition, it will help to instil a lifelong learning culture within the training and education profession.

²⁸ www.trainersnetwork.ie

Section 6: CONSOLIDATING THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

6.1.1 The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) has established, in consultation with stakeholders, an integrated national policy approach to the recognition of international qualifications in Ireland. This integrated approach is through the *Qualifications Recognition – Ireland* service within the Authority. The Authority is the Irish centre for the recognition of international awards, and represents Ireland in ENIC/NARIC (European National Information Centre/National Academic Recognition Information Centre) and NRP (National Reference Point). A Recognition Implementation Group has also been formed comprising representatives of the Authority, the Department of Education and Science, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the universities. This group is responsible for assisting in the management of the implementation of the national policy approach to the recognition of international awards.

6.1.2 The Department of Education and Science, in conjunction with Léargas²⁹, actively supports the implementation of the *Comenius* actions of *Socrates* and the *Procedure A – Mobility* measure of *Leonardo da Vinci*. In addition, the Department of Education and Science, together with the Department for Education in Northern Ireland, has undertaken a number of initiatives to promote co-operation and mobility between teachers and schools North and South of the border.

6.1.3 A pilot project for the teaching of modern foreign languages in primary schools was begun in September 1998, under the NDP. The *Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative* involves the teaching of one of four languages—French, German Spanish or Italian—in the last two years of primary school. In the current school year, 394 schools (approximately 12.5% of all primary schools) are participating. The initiative provides for teacher in-service courses and ongoing support by project officers, who also develop teaching materials. The NCCA have carried out a feasibility study which recommends that a decision on the future of modern foreign languages in primary schools be taken when the new primary curriculum has been implemented in full, expected to be in 2007.

Also under the NDP, the *Post Primary Languages Initiative* has been in place since September 2000. It aims to broaden the range of languages offered in second-level schools, and to support schools which wish to offer less widely taught languages. The target languages are Italian, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. The initiative assists teachers in acquiring new language skills or upgrading dormant skills. It also produces teaching materials for the target languages. In the current school year there are 360 participating schools.

²⁹ Léargas is the national agency for the management of national, European and international co-operation programmes involving Education and Lifelong Learning, Vocational Education and Training, Youth and Community Work and Guidance in Education.

6.2 In recent years and, especially, with the growth in mobility and exchange programmes between Irish schools and their counterparts across the Union, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of incorporating a knowledge and understanding of Europe, its culture, ideals and the importance of European integration into all aspects of the school curriculum. At national level, apart from the encouragement given to the learning of European languages (through the modernisation of curricula and learning methods), curricula in subjects such as history now reflect European issues in their content and schools are encouraged to incorporate a European dimension in as many aspects of their formal and non-formal learning activities as possible.

6.2.1 The Department of Education and Science funds Léargas and the Higher Education Authority as the National Agencies that run different actions of the *Socrates*, *Leonardo da Vinci* and *Youth* programmes. In addition, the Department of Education and Science ensures other bilateral and international programmes³⁰ are also coordinated by Léargas in Ireland.

Through meaningful exchanges and contact between teachers and pupils throughout Europe, there is now a greater appreciation of the European Dimension in education. This has been supplemented by the role of Language Assistants³¹ and by the in-service components of *Comenius 2*. Narrative reports submitted by the teachers have indicated that there has been an increased motivation among staff participating in projects. Projects have also had a profound effect on students. Reports consistently mention that there has been an increased motivation among pupils in their subject areas when the subject areas are taught using a project approach. In addition, students' voices speak of a growing sense of responsibility for their own learning.

6.2.2.1 Civil, Social and Political Education (CSPE)

CSPE is a course in citizenship based on human rights and social responsibilities that is offered in all second-level schools in the final years of compulsory education. It aims to develop active citizens who have a sense of belonging to the local, national, European and global community; a capacity to gain access to information and structures in which they live; and an ability to fully participate in democratic society.

6.2.2.2 Intercultural Education in Schools

Guidelines on the intercultural dimension of every aspect of school life, from enrolment policies, to play time, to teaching, learning and assessment have been prepared by the NCCA and are being launched in May 2005. Similar guidelines for second-level schools are currently in preparation.

³⁰ e.g. NcompassS (www.ncompass.org), IAESTE (www.iaeste.ie) and East-West Schools (<http://www.leargas.ie/education/eastwest.html>), netd@ys (www.netdaysireland.ie), eTwinning (www.etwinning.net) and the Europa Diary (www.generation-europe.org)

³¹ Language Assistants are student language teachers seconded from the country of their mother tongue for periods of up to one year and hosted by Irish schools to assist their own staff in promoting a communicative approach to the teaching of the foreign language.

In addition, guidance is currently being developed to support teachers in English-medium schools who are responsible for meeting the learning needs of children for whom neither English nor Irish is the language spoken in the home. This guidance outlines approaches and methodologies for teaching and learning English and other curriculum subjects.

6.2.2.3 The Modern Languages Initiatives at both primary and secondary level have also facilitated and improved the inter-cultural dimension of teacher training. Schools receive grants for the payment of visiting teachers and for the purchase of materials and resources. Teachers whose schools are participating in the Languages initiative or who are undertaking the relevant training courses may apply for funding under *Comenius 2.2*. All teachers participating in the courses are encouraged to undertake a period of training abroad and many have funded this training from personal funds.

Over 600 schools are participating in both initiatives and are receive grants for the purchase of materials and allocation of supplementary teaching hours. The Certificate and Diploma in Modern Language Teaching courses run by several Institutes of Technology are an outcome of the Language Initiatives. *Comenius* projects, in particular, have been well integrated into primary school curricula.

6.2.3 The Léargas report on Mobility, referred to earlier, identified a number of key issues requiring further development in order to consolidate the European dimension within the Irish education and training systems. Its recommendations included:

- The development of a comprehensive national strategy and policy on mobility, allied to a effective mechanisms to ensure the systematic integration of transnational mobility into all strands of the formal and non-formal education and training systems;
- The provision of a transnational dimension to initial or in-service training of teachers, trainers and youth workers;
- Significant development and simplification of funding structures for both students and trainers at both national and EU;
- The removal of the remaining legal and administrative barriers to mobility, including ensuring the transferability of qualifications, skills and experience gained from mobility.

ACRONYMS

This list is of acronyms for Irish organisations and programmes. It does not include common international acronyms.

AEGI	Adult Education Guidance Initiative
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CCI	Chambers of Commerce of Ireland
CFI	Construction Industry Federation
CQAF	Common Quality Assurance Framework
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CSPE	Civil, Social and Political Education programme
DES	Department of Education & Science
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
DLR	(National) Digital Learning Repository
EAP	Employment Action Plan
EGFSN	Expert Group on Future Skills Needs
ENIC	European National Information Centre
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EUA	European Universities Association
FÁS	National Training & Employment Authority (Foras Áiseanna Saothair)
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IALS	International Adult Literacy Study
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
IRCHSS	Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences
IRCSET	Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
IDA	Industrial Development Authority
IEI	Institute of Engineers of Ireland
IUQB	Irish Universities Quality Board
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied programme
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NALC	National Adult Learning Council

NALS	National Adult Learning Strategy
NAPS	National Antipoverty Strategy
NAPS/incl	National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion
NARIC	Network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCPP	National Centre for Partnership and Performance
NCVA	National Council for Vocational Awards
NDP	National Development Plan
NEC	National Europass Centre
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NRP	National Reference Point
OST	Office of Science and Technology
PLC	Post-Leaving Certificate programmes
PPP	Public Private Partnership
PRTL I	Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions
SFA	Small Firms Association
SPAR	Statistical Potential of Administrative Records project
SPHE	Social Personal Health Education programme
TYP	Transition Year Programme
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme