



## **COUNTRY REPORT ON THE ACTION PLAN ON ADULT LEARNING: IRELAND**

**(March 2011)**

This report - as well as the reports from 30 other countries that were represented in the working group on the Adult Learning Action Plan - has been carried out, on behalf of the European Commission, by GHK in cooperation with Research voor Beleid.

This product has been more specifically drawn up on the basis of country-experts' analysis of existing national literature and the Confintea IV-report. In finalising the report, comments and feedback from the National Authority have been taken into account as much as possible; however, the report does not necessarily reflect an official position of the Member State.



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## 1 CONTEXT

### 1.1 Socio-economic context

The worldwide economic recession has had a significant detrimental effect on the Irish economy and employment trends since 2008. The impact has been exacerbated by the crash in the Irish property market and by the banking crisis. The background to the current economic situation and the major changes in Ireland's economic status over the previous twelve years is well documented. In that period, the annual GNP growth rate averaged seven per cent. This economic boom was aided greatly by foreign direct investment and an influx of multinational firms utilising the highly skilled workforce and an attractive corporate tax rate. Growth in employment and output was largely in the enterprise sector and specifically in the knowledge intensive industries, especially in information technology, and the internationally traded sector. The rapid growth in the second half of the 1990s led by exports was followed in the early years of the past decade by high levels of house building and construction.<sup>1</sup> In addition domestic services employment grew substantially in response to consumer demand. Ireland's particularly severe downturn was precipitated by a substantial housing market correction and sharp deceleration of export growth occurring simultaneously<sup>2</sup>, with the average unemployment rate rising from 4.6 per cent in 2007 to 13.4 per cent in December 2010<sup>3</sup> as opposed to the EU average of 10.1 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

As might be anticipated it is the lower-skilled jobs that have suffered the most, with the male dominated construction industry representing the largest occupational group (craft and related) on the Live Register of Unemployment in December 2010 (26 per cent). Those in the under 25 age group continue to be at the greatest risk of unemployment. The unemployment rate for under 25s is reported as being more than twice that recorded for those aged 25-54.<sup>5</sup>

Those sectors that experienced the largest increases in employment during the 'second wave' of the employment boom that began in 2004, namely construction and wholesale and retail, have also accounted for the biggest falls in employment over the last two years.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that there will not be enough jobs for everyone in the next few years and as a result unemployment will rise further. To date, most of the impact in Ireland has been on the private sector, but the CEDEFOP VET 2009 report suggested that the Government now needed to make major reductions to its projected budget deficit, to include reductions in public sector spending on services and staffing, as outlined in

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<sup>1</sup> NESC The Irish Economy in the early Twenty First Century, Dublin, 2008

<sup>2</sup> National Economic and Social Council: Ireland's Five Part Crisis: An Integrated National Response, Dublin, March 2009.

<sup>3</sup> [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)

<sup>4</sup> <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>

<sup>5</sup> FORFAS, 2010, National Skills Bulletin.

<sup>6</sup> FAS Quarterly Labour Market Commentary, Spring/Summer 2010

the report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of the recession is set against a continuing increase in population. The population in Ireland increased by 17.2 per cent to almost 4.34 million in the period 1998-2007. This was the highest rate of increase in the EU 27. The continuing high birth rate together with immigration by workers (albeit slowing in recent years – there has been a particularly strong decline in the number of persons from the EU12 2004 accession countries' nationals working in Ireland<sup>8</sup>) will impact on the future demographic profile. There is a further complexity as a result of the ageing population such that, by 2060, Ireland will have an old-age dependent population - by 2010 17 per cent and by 2060 44 per cent of the population will be over 65.

## 1.2 Historical-ideological context

Over 85 per cent of students in Ireland go on to complete upper second level education or equivalent, and over 55 per cent of students progress directly to third level education<sup>9</sup>. Publicly-funded adult and further education and training is predominately related to providing educational opportunities for young people and adults who have either left school early or who need further vocational education and training to enhance their employment prospects and to enable them to progress their education up to a standard equivalent to upper secondary level. There is no comprehensive national database for adult participation in lifelong learning available. Ireland is currently reporting a participation rate of 6.3 per cent against an EU average of 9.3 per cent (Labour Force Survey) in 2009<sup>10</sup>. The National Adult Learning Organisation, AONTAS has estimated that approximately 300,000 adults participate across the whole spectrum of formal and non-formal education activities each year in Ireland. This figure, which represents approximately seven per cent of the adult population, has been compiled from a variety of sources.

Ireland held the Presidency of the European Union in 1996, which was also the European Year of Lifelong Learning, and the Irish Presidency placed lifelong learning high on its agenda. The Irish economy was then poised to enter a phase of unprecedented rapid growth. The background research, strategy documents and debates on lifelong learning that evolved under the Presidency therefore had immediate relevance at national level. The necessity to increase the quality of education and training provision, fine-tune its responsiveness to the needs of individuals and a changing society and economy and ensure equality of access to learning opportunities for all were perceived to be critical by economists, political leaders, enterprises and the social partners'<sup>11</sup>

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was conducted in over 20 countries over a period of three years between 1995 and 1998 in cooperation with the OECD. The Irish survey was conducted in 1995 and the national report was published in 1997. Results showed Ireland in a relatively poor light, with one quarter of adults (16-65) having Level 1 on the IALS scale for document literacy compared to

<sup>7</sup> [www.finance.ie/documents/pressreleases](http://www.finance.ie/documents/pressreleases); Barry, Margaret, ReferNet Country Report: Ireland 2008, CEDEFOP.

<sup>8</sup> FAS Quarterly Economic Commentary Spring/Summer 2010 [www.fas.ie](http://www.fas.ie)

<sup>9</sup> [www.education.ie/statistics](http://www.education.ie/statistics)

<sup>10</sup> Eurostat (2010) Lifelong learning (1) (per cent of the population aged 25 – 64 participating in education and training. [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php?title=File:Lifelong\\_learning\\_\(1\)\\_\(%25\\_of\\_the\\_population\\_aged\\_25\\_to\\_64\\_participating\\_in\\_education\\_and\\_training\).png&filetimestamp=20101210173611](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php?title=File:Lifelong_learning_(1)_(%25_of_the_population_aged_25_to_64_participating_in_education_and_training).png&filetimestamp=20101210173611)

<sup>11</sup> Department of Education and Science, 2001, EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning: Report on the National Consultation Process.

corresponding figures of 23 per cent, 9 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively, for the United Kingdom, Germany and Denmark.<sup>12</sup>

The results of the IALS survey were met with shock and disbelief in Ireland and prompted an immediate response from the Department of Education and Science through increased funding for adult literacy services at local level. The adult literacy policy agenda was further pursued through a number of key documents that were produced by the Department of Education and Science as well as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. *The Green Paper on Adult Education: Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (Department of Education and Science 1998) began a national debate and informed Government policy with regard to the ideological place and role of adult education in meeting the challenges then confronting Irish society. It espoused a holistic and inclusive system of education within an overall national policy commitment to lifelong learning. The rationale for investment in adult and community education, as explicated in the Green Paper, was not based '...entirely on economic considerations and issues of disadvantage, but also on the role of learning in creating a more democratic and civilised society by promoting culture, identity and well-being and by strengthening individuals, families and communities' (Department of Education and Science 1998).

The publication of the Green Paper was followed by an extensive consultation process. The resulting publication of the White Paper on Adult Education in 2000<sup>13</sup> and the Report of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning<sup>14</sup> in 2002 provided a platform for a range of initiatives by the Department of Education and Science and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, designed to increase participation of adult learners, with a specific focus on widening access for marginalised groups.

An Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, representing education, social partners and community and voluntary sector interests, reported to the Minister for Education and Science in 2001 on the development of a coordinated framework to promote access by mature and disadvantaged students and students with disabilities to third level education<sup>15</sup>. A number of key recommendations set out proposed criteria for a National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, a special rate of maintenance grant, targeted at disadvantaged students most in need, as well as eligibility criteria and the White Paper's proposals on fees for part-time students.

The strategic political context in Ireland within which lifelong learning is situated has been dominated for a number of years by the system of 'national partnership', involving the government and the social partners. Every three years these actors agree a national programme for social and economic development that covers policy issues such as pay, taxation, social welfare, the environment and education and training. The current programme 'Towards 2016' (Department of the Taoiseach 2006) runs from 2006-2016. VET is seen both in policy and structural terms as one of the main pillars for building and maintaining a skilled workforce.

**The National Skills Strategy** published in 2007 highlighted that if Ireland was to be successful in tackling the challenge of unemployment and see a return to sustainable export-led growth, it was vital to concentrate on developing the skills base of the labour force. The strategy set a long-term target for 500,000 adults to increase their

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<sup>12</sup> Government of Ireland, 1997, International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland, Dublin, Department of Education and Science.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Education and Science (2000) Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education. Dublin: Stationery Office. [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/fe\\_adulted\\_wp.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/fe_adulted_wp.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (2002) Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning. Dublin: Stationery Office. <http://www.deti.ie/publications/labour/2002/lifelonglearning.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Action Group on Access to Third-level Education (2001) Report of the Action Group on Access to Third-level Education. Dublin: Stationery Office. [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/tl\\_3rdlevel\\_accessreport.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/tl_3rdlevel_accessreport.pdf)

levels of education attainment by at least one level on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). 70,000 would need to advance from NFQ levels 1 and 2 to NFQ level 3 (EQF Level 2), with a further 250,000 needing to progress to levels 4 and 5. (EQF levels 3 and 4). Finally, 170,000 would need to progress to levels 6-10 (EQF 7 and 8). An implementation statement for the Skills Strategy, circulated by the Department of Education and Skills in March 2010, found that while good progress had been made towards meeting the Skills Strategy objectives, more needed to be done with a significant challenge to be met in upskilling those at Levels 1-3 to Levels 4 and 5 on the Irish NFQ (EQF levels 3 and 4).

Ireland's National Reform Programme 2008-10 Progress Report (October 2009)<sup>16</sup> stresses the need to support employment and job creation by improving the skills levels of the workforce and in particular the unemployed through the National Skills Strategy<sup>17</sup>, and other partnership initiatives. In this context it mirrors the report of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC)<sup>18</sup> that underlines the need to respond to the social challenge posed by the current economic crisis. The NESC stresses the critical importance of insulating the most vulnerable from the worst effects of the recession and of a continued focus on measures designed to tackle social deficits. It advocates integration and innovation in how Ireland's educational system, training and labour market policies and welfare policies respond to and suggests that "21<sup>st</sup> century equivalents" to the special labour market programme introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s should be introduced.

Although little practical policy development is in evidence in the report, it notes that 'from existing analyses, we know many ways in which our systems of social policy, activation, training and education are not sufficiently supportive of participation, upskilling and inclusion'. The report poses a challenge to Government and all other economic, social and policy actors in the context of the case it makes for an integrated, nationally-supported approach which would be embedded in forthcoming fiscal and budgetary decisions.

The Hunt Report on Higher Education (January 2011) makes proposals for a national strategy for higher education until 2030 and sets out recommendations for a new funding model that aims to eliminate the disadvantages experienced by part-time adult learners.<sup>19</sup>

Historically, Ireland has had a strong community-based adult education sector underpinned by high levels of volunteerism. As a consequence, social forces have always been viewed as key drivers, alongside the economic forces at play, in the promotion of lifelong learning agenda. Lifelong learning is seen as key to personal development and social inclusion as education empowers individuals to participate fully and creatively in their communities.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, looking back at the above historical developments with an impact on adult education and adult learning in Ireland since the European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996, it is clear that they have been led by implicit ideologies of economic development coupled with a focus on equity and social inclusion through the provision of compensatory and second-chance learning opportunities for adults without upper-secondary qualifications. A focus on the role of adult education as an instrument of social cohesion and active citizenship has also underpinned developments, but to a lesser extent than the economic and social inclusion focus. These goals have been

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<sup>16</sup> [www.taoiseach.ie](http://www.taoiseach.ie)

<sup>17</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*, FORFAS, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> National Economic and Social Council (2009) *Ireland's Five Part Crisis: An Integrated National Response*. Dublin: author.

<sup>19</sup> [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)

<sup>20</sup> Department of Education and Science, 2000, *Learning for Life -White Paper on Adult Education*, Dublin.

given practical expression in the growing financial priority within the overall education and training budget given to adult education in the period. Substantial increases in Exchequer revenues prior to the recession helped to provide the fiscal resources to support the implementation of new policies, processes and practices.

## 2 POLITICAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Until recently, two Ministers were responsible for the two main government departments with responsibility for adult learning: the Minister for Education and Science and the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Employment. A Minister of State for Adult Education was appointed for the first time in 1997. The appointment of a Minister of State with responsibility for Lifelong Learning in 2007, replacing the Minister of State for Adult Education and working across the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment indicated an increased emphasis on the link between knowledge, skills and employment and between general and vocational adult learning. The appointment was intended to facilitate a more cohesive approach to the development of lifelong learning in Ireland. The Minister of State for Lifelong Learning has responsibility for the coordination and implementation of the National Skills Strategy.

Adult learning is the responsibility of the Further Education Section of the education department. In early 2010 the renamed Department of Education and Skills was given responsibility for skills and training policy in addition to its existing responsibility for further education which includes adult education and post-secondary education for young people who have recently completed upper secondary education. The Further Education Section aims to promote the provision of high quality Further Education opportunities that will:

- Enable learners to access, transfer, gain accreditation and progress to employment or further studies
- Provide learners with the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, confidence and competence to participate more fully in society and the economy;
- Further enhance access to Lifelong Learning opportunities for all.<sup>21</sup>

Other government departments also fund a range of programmes and community providers, as well as having responsibility for the human resource development of their own staff and external personnel working under their aegis. These include the Department of Social Protection; the Department of Justice and Law Reform; the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; the Department of Tourism, Culture and Sport.<sup>22</sup>

The Office for Social Inclusion (OSI) is the Government Office, based in the Department of Social Protection, with overall responsibility for co-coordinating and driving the Government's social inclusion agenda, which includes the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 – 2016 (NAP inclusion) and the social inclusion elements of the National Social Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016* and the National Development Plan 2007-2013. The Office coordinates social inclusion processes across departments, agencies, regional and local government, and implements key support functions. Groups that are specifically targeted by the OSI are lone parents, Travellers, long-term unemployed, homeless, migrants, ethnic minorities, older people and people with disabilities. These groups are targeted for

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<sup>21</sup> Department of Education and Science, Statement of Strategy 2008-10.

<sup>22</sup> See [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)

assistance in a variety of sectors, such as health, housing, welfare and employment, and not just in the education sector.

At local level, 33 statutory bodies including the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) with local political, non-governmental and community representation especially in the *ad hoc* Adult Education Boards, have responsibility for implementation adult education policy and for delivering adult education programmes funded by the Department of Education and Skills within their geographical area of responsibility.

Legislation related to the Irish education and training policy framework includes:

- The Universities Act (1997) – includes the objective of facilitating lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education by universities
- The Education Act (1998) – promotes equality of access and opportunities for adults who did not avail of education in schools
- The Qualifications Act (1999) – provides the legislative basis for the development of the National Framework of Qualifications and associated bodies. Under the Qualifications Act, Quality Assurance agreements are obligatory for all education and training providers offering access to awards on the National Framework of Qualifications.
- The VEC Amendment Act (2001) – provides effective and efficient structures and procedures for Vocational Education Committees with a greater emphasis on subsidiary and devolvement of responsibilities to local level.

Government policy for lifelong learning with a particular focus on adult education was first set out in detail in the White Paper on Adult Education (DES 2000). The White Paper does not set out adult education as a right but proposes a framework for action, particularly for those with low educational levels. The publication of the White Paper marked the adoption of lifelong learning as the governing principle of education policy.

The White Paper focused on 3 core principles:

- **Systemic approach:** policies must embrace the life cycle, and reflect the multiplicity of sites, formal and informal in which learning can take place
- **Equality of access:** proactive strategies are required to counteract barriers arising from differences of socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability. Target investment at those most at risk
- **Interculturalism:** policy and practice to serve a diverse population are required

The White Paper contained proposals for increased investment for those with low levels of literacy and education, for community education, and for the development of an adult guidance service. It also set out proposals for new coordination structures at national and local level.

A framework for the development of lifelong learning is also set out in the Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2002). The Taskforce's recommendations focused on:

- Workplace education including adult basic education;
- Provision of coherent and integrated guidance and information services;
- Speedy implementation of the qualifications framework;
- Greater attention to ICT and e-learning;



- Reform of the funding system for part-time students through the extension of the free fees scheme to them and paid educational leave. No agreement was reached on this issue. However, new measures announced in 2009 to address the needs of unemployed people do provide for fee waivers for 2500 part-time places in higher education.

### **3 STRUCTURAL AND FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK**

Ireland provides a mix of public service and market models of adult learning. State involvement promotes adult learning and education and sets policy while public providers roll out implementation.

The adult learning sector in Ireland is highly diverse, with a broad range of stakeholders involved. Political responsibility for adult learning in its entirety is dispersed across a number of government departments (see section 2 above). Structures, frameworks and funding mechanisms for this broad range of provision differ widely.

At national level, there are a number of key organisations that contribute to co-ordination in the adult education/lifelong learning sector in Ireland.

Three statutory agencies currently have responsibility for the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has responsibility for developing and implementing the national framework. Two Awards Councils were also established under the Qualifications Act – the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) for Levels 1-6 of the framework and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) for levels 6-10 of the framework. Under proposals recommended by the public service review group amalgamation of these three agencies is underway.

FÁS is Ireland's national training and employment authority. The organisation aims to promote a more competitive and inclusive knowledge-based economy, in collaboration with its stakeholders, by enhancing the skills and capabilities of individuals and enterprises. FAS offers a wide range of apprenticeships, training for the unemployed and training in the workplace. FÁS has 20 training centres, and also operates centres and programmes in partnership with Institutes of Technology. Its structures are currently under review.

IVEA (Irish Vocational Education Association) is the national representative body charged with representing Vocational Education Committees. The IVEA is charged with protecting, promoting and enhancing the interests of vocational education and training within Ireland and Europe.

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a voluntary membership organisation supported in the main through public funding. Its main goal is the promotion of the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education, which is accessible to and inclusive of all.

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a membership organisation with voluntary status mainly supported through public funding. NALA lobbies for policy development in adult literacy in Ireland and provides a range of services to adults with literacy difficulties and to adult literacy staff in the VECs and other bodies.

At local level, there are currently 33 Vocational Education Committees throughout the country with responsibility for the delivery of further and adult education within their area. In November 2010, the Department of Education and Skills announced that the

number of VECs would be reduced to 22. There is also a multiplicity of non-statutory and community providers at the local level.

The diverse nature of the adult learning sector in Ireland poses challenges in relation to governance – most particularly in relation to coordination, communication and monitoring. At national level, there is on-going consultation between government departments, statutory providers and NGOs through the social partnership process and other agreed national channels. At local level, there is local coordination through County and City Development Boards, or local partnership companies and arrangements. For example, local cooperation agreements between VECs and FAS regional offices are in place in many areas. In addition, the *ad hoc* Adult Education Boards of the VECs facilitate statutory, non-governmental and community representation in relation to adult education provision within the VECs. The White Paper on adult education (2000) set out proposals for a national coordinating body, the National Adult Learning Council, (NALC), through DES, but this structure was formally wound down in 2009 after having ceased to operate in practice within approximately two years of its establishment in 2003. The White Paper also proposed local adult learning boards, but to date these have not been put in place.

### ***Funding***

Funding for adult education and training has been substantially increased since 2000, with specific emphasis on a range of existing and new initiatives designed to improve the participation of adults with low levels of educational attainment. Historically many of these initiatives were co-financed through the European Social Fund, but since 2000 the main source of funding for adult education is the Irish Exchequer.

Central government funds providers directly through the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Innovation. The Departments of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, Health & Children, Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Tourism, Culture and Sport and Justice and Law Reform also provide funding. Funding for work-based learning is also provided through the National Training Fund administered by FAS.

**Projected spending for adult education in 2009 was €420,497,000. This represents 0.27 per cent of GNP.** (In 2008, funding of over €9.3 billion was available to the education sector. Of this, approximately €182m was provided for Adult/Further Education. This equates to approximately 1.96 per cent of the overall allocation.)

Total education expenditure as percentage of GNP is 6.08 per cent - as set out below:

#### **Further and Adult Education Spending 2009**

Adult Education Spending 2009**	€420,497,000
Total Expenditure on Education 2009**	€9,627,557,000
Gross National Product 2009**	€158,400,000,000

Adult Education Spending as a per cent of GNP	<b>0.27%</b>
Total Expenditure on Education as a per cent of GNP	<b>6.08%</b>
Adult Education Spending** as a per cent of Total Expenditure on Education**	<b>4.37%</b>

\*\* Projected Spend

*Note: These figures do not take account of spending by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment on vocational training, the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, other government departments and spending through the private sector (e.g. National Training Fund).*

Transfers to stimulate the demand side are made by means of direct financial support to individuals from specific priority groups (e.g. early school-leavers and Travellers) through the payment of training allowances and training-related benefits, and some childcare and transport costs. Given the scale of the up-skilling challenge as outlined in the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs Report, the Interdepartmental Committee established to overview the implementation of the National Skills Strategy is currently exploring the potential of different forms of individual learning accounts.

The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is a scheme for unemployed people, lone parents and people with disabilities who are getting certain payments from the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The allowance can be paid to people who wish to undertake approved second or third level courses of education. BTEA is not an unemployment payment and participants get a standard rate of payment that is not means-tested.

There is broad range of self-financed adult education available to learners provided by schools and private organisations, generally in the evening time. These are mainly short-term courses lasting 10-15 weeks duration. The fees charged are at the discretion of the provider.

## 4 PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION IN ADULT LEARNING

Ireland's submission to the UNESCO ALE (Adult Learning and Education) report<sup>23</sup> identified the main challenges in the sector as:

- Increasing the education levels within socially disadvantaged areas and groups;
- Catering for the basic educational needs of the increasing number of non-English speaking migrant workers and programme and convention refugees;
- Improving the educational levels of the workforce to meet the evolving nature of the economy as outlined in the National Skills Strategy;
- Developing an integrated service-based provision, as opposed to the current programme-based provision;
- Developing a career structure for personnel employed, based on both IPD and CPD;
- Monitoring and evaluating publicly-funded adult learning to support evidence-based policy-making.

Educational attainment in Ireland is still strongly influenced by social class; the proportion of older adults with at least upper second level education is significantly below that of other EU countries. While younger cohorts of the Irish population have benefited from the rapid increase in participation in tertiary education, older cohorts of

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<sup>23</sup> The Development and State of the Art of Adult Learning and Education (ALE): National Report of Ireland, Department of Education and Science, Ireland, July 2008.  
[http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UIIL/confintea/pdf/National\\_Reports/Europe%20-%20North%20America/Ireland.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UIIL/confintea/pdf/National_Reports/Europe%20-%20North%20America/Ireland.pdf)

the Irish workforce remain less qualified than the OECD average. A relatively large share of the working age population (34 per cent in 2005) has no more than lower second level education<sup>24</sup>.

As reported in Section 1.2 above, 25 per cent of Irish adults were found to score at Level 1 in the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey. Research documents that people with literacy and numeracy difficulties are less likely to participate in education and training. This situation compounds the 'Matthew effect' whereby people who need most assistance are the least likely to access provision, thus compounding inequalities.<sup>25</sup>

Many education bodies are still primarily designed and structured to serve the needs of full-time students<sup>26</sup>, despite the introduction of a range of part-time learning opportunities (see below). There are also significant challenges to be addressed in upgrading the ICT skills of the adult population.

Irish research studies from 2000 indicate that the reasons for non-participation in adult education are complex and varied. According to an AONTAS study, both tangible (situational, informational and institutional) and intangible (attitudes and perceptions) barriers are experienced<sup>27</sup>. In the AONTAS study, personalised learning is specifically highlighted as a means of facilitating students to identify the direction they wish to take, by setting and reviewing goals and the skills and competencies that they need to acquire to achieve their aims. The inclusion of professional guidance is highlighted as crucial. A further 'contextual' barrier, identified by Ronayne, is noted by Owens in this study. This barrier relates to the prevailing labour market conditions, policy priorities and the ensuing range of targeted programmes.

Research undertaken on behalf of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) found that non-participation in adult education may be due to embarrassment and fear of the unknown<sup>28</sup>. A recent study that examines the re-engagement of adults in learning through media campaigns<sup>29</sup> reports that "there has been a perception that people do not attend literacy and other basic skills training because they simply do not know about the service"

In the period 2000-2006, the Department of Education and Science funded the Education Equality Initiative (EEI) through the National Development Plan (2000-2006) with support from the European Social Fund. EEI supported a range of action research projects to generate policy and practice lessons to address educational disadvantage among adults, including participation challenges. Findings confirmed that adult educational disadvantage is a multidimensional reality incorporating economic, social, cultural, psychological and educational elements and the result of a combination of factors working together to marginalise men and women and impede access to structured learning. Barriers to participation may be informational, provider-related, situational or dispositional. EEI projects demonstrated that supporting participation requires the removal of these barriers and a focus on, for example, immediate housing, welfare, health, transport, child/elder care and/or learning support needs in tandem with learning needs. This conclusion suggests that agencies need to

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<sup>24</sup> National Competitiveness Council, Statement on Education and Training, February 2009, Dublin, FORFAS.

<sup>25</sup> National Adult Literacy Agency, 2009, Seeking a Refreshed Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, Dublin 2009.

<sup>26</sup> National Competitiveness Council, Statement on Education and Training, February 2009, Dublin, FORFAS.

<sup>27</sup> See Owens, T. (2000) Men on the Move: A study of barriers to male participation in education and training initiatives, Dublin AONTAS.

<sup>28</sup> Bailey, I. and Coleman, U. (1998) Access and Participation in Adult Literacy Schemes, Dublin, NALA.

<sup>29</sup> Nevala A M, EU Framework Contract 30, 2008.

collaborate closely in the interests of their service users. Thus, the major policy lesson from EEI activities was that an integrated national and local approach is the only effective way to address educational disadvantage.

A recent publication by IBEC, the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation, shows that despite the economic recession and a period of intensive restructuring, Irish companies remain committed to staff development and regard training as a critical tool for improving competitiveness. Accreditation on the National Framework of Qualifications was considered to be either 'important' or 'very important' by 70 per cent of respondents.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the proposals set out in the White Paper (2000) and the report of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning (2002) have not been advanced, particularly those proposing the establishment of local adult learning boards and the issue of fees for part-time students. AONTAS (the National Agency for Adult Education) asserts that this lack of progress has in part been due to a lack of overall coordination and the failure of the Department of Education and Science to support the full operation of the National Adult Learning Council (NALC) during its brief existence. The White Paper (2000), which recommended the establishment of NALC, saw it as an agency that would provide overall coordination and development for the entire adult learning sector<sup>31</sup>.

However, since the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education and the report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning, there have been significant political and legal developments in relation to adult learning in Ireland, as well as greatly increased funding. The developments that have increased opportunities for adult learning in Ireland and for the adult education sector generally include:

- Designation of a Minister of State with responsibility for lifelong learning;
- Establishment of the National Education Welfare Board to address early school-leaving;
- Implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications;
- Establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education which facilitates and monitors participation of under-represented groups in higher education;
- Greatly increased funding for adult literacy services with the appointment of Adult Literacy Organisers nationwide;
- Recruitment of 33 Community Education Facilitators nationwide who actively promote links between formal and informal adult education providers;
- Establishment of the Adult Education Guidance Initiative in 40 centres nationwide;
- Establishment of the Back to Education Initiative which complements existing full time provision and provides flexible part time learning options for adults with less than upper second level education;
- Piloting of workplace learning initiatives;
- Transfer of responsibilities for training to a re-named Department of Education and Skills, from the Department of Enterprise Trade and Innovation;

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<sup>30</sup> IBEC, 2010, Education and Skills Survey, Dublin. [www.ibec.ie](http://www.ibec.ie)

<sup>31</sup> Department of Education and Science, 2000, Learning for Life -White Paper on Adult Education, Dublin.

- Formal cooperation agreements established between key statutory education and training providers.

## **5 CLUSTERS OF MEASURES: STRATEGIES AND INSTRUMENTS TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION**

The aim of Further and Adult Education provision is to offer access, transfer and progression opportunities to adult learners. Although courses are open to all, the main purpose is to provide a range of supports to people who left school early or need further vocational education and training to enhance their employment prospects and to enable them to progress their education up to a standard equivalent to upper secondary level. This facilitates the re-entry of jobseekers to the workforce.

Full-time programmes funded by the Department of Education and Skills in 2010 include:

- Youthreach, for early school leavers aged 15 – 20 years;
- The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) for adults who are over 21 years and are unemployed;
- Post-Leaving Certificate Courses which offer students generally aged 18+ accreditation at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 5 and 6;
- Senior Traveller Training Centre programmes for adult members of the Traveller community.

Part-time provision funded by the Department of Education and Skills in 2010 includes:

- Community education, particularly for adults considered hard-to-reach and who are accessing non-formal education as a first continuing step in lifelong learning;
- Literacy and numeracy for adults with specific needs in this area, including catering for the English language needs of migrants who wish to learn the language or improve their proficiency in English. Adult literacy provision now includes the option of intensive provision, where 6 hours of tuition is available per week instead of the usual two hours;
- Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) which enables adults to access part-time education options;

The main providers of the above programmes are the Vocational Education Committees (VECs). Support services include the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) and the provision of childcare support for participants on Youthreach, Senior Traveller Training Centres, VTOS and BTEI.

Self-financed provision usually through evening classes is available in public or private colleges and training establishments including those run by VECs.

FAS, the National Training Authority, provides a wide range of training and work placement places, including specific active labour market programmes designed to assist the unemployed in improving their prospects of securing employment by improving their skill levels and building up work experience.

A number of specific initiatives to facilitate unemployed people to access further and higher education have been put in place since 2009, as part of supplementary measures announced by the Government. These include the Labour Market Activation Fund, which funded a wide range of providers, to a total of Euro 32 million,

to up-skill adults in 2010. Under a changed remit since 2010, the Department of Social Protection works in close cooperation with education and training providers to identify appropriate education and training programmes.

**The Back to Education Initiative** provides an example of part-time provision designed to increase access for specific low-skilled target groups:

The Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) funded by the Department of Education and Skills and mainly delivered by the VECs aims to increase the participation of young people and adults with less than upper secondary education in a range of flexible part-time learning opportunities, leading to certification through the National Framework of Qualifications. The BTEI is intended to make further education provision more accessible and to prioritise individuals and groups that experience particular and acute barriers to participation, and are more difficult to engage in the formal learning process. The flexibility of the funding mechanism which has led to a significant expansion of learning options, particularly in rural locations, is highlighted by providers. Best practice guidelines for Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) service providers have been produced<sup>32</sup>

**VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme)** provides an example of full-time provision to address the needs of the unemployed:

The Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS) is a full-time second chance education and training initiative for unemployed people aged 21 years or over. The scheme is managed and delivered locally by VECs and is offered to more than 5000 people per year. Courses between levels 3 and 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications are offered to VTOS students. Tuition, stationery and books are provided free of charge. A childcare grant is also available to VTOS students and they can access the adult guidance service. VTOS has proved very successful in opening up learning and progression opportunities for people who have been unemployed with 72 per cent of students, who completed the two-year VTOS programme in summer 2007, moving into employment or further education courses. The employment outcomes of the programme have been affected by the increase in unemployment since that year.

**Skillnets** provides an example of employer led provision:

**Skillnets** (enterprise-led learning networks) are established groups of three or more enterprises that cooperate to provide collaborative projects or activities, including addressing the training and development needs of employees, including the low-skilled and low-qualified. Established in 1999, Skillnets may include industry associations and federations, employer organizations and trade unions. Skillnets are funded from the National Training Fund through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation and the European Social Fund. Skillnets evaluation reports highlight the development of training programmes in areas where universities and third level institutes have found it difficult to meet the needs of rapidly changing industries. There is also a focus on the evaluation of training courses and learning outcomes in terms of "Return-on-Investment" for companies.

The two national NGOs for adult learning, AONTAS and NALA, provide examples of initiatives aimed at the mobilization of learners.

**AONTAS** organises an annual Adult Learning Festival which aims to:

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=10900&ecategory=14965&language=EN>

- celebrate adult learning and the achievements of adult learners
- showcase the work of adult education providers
- promote the work of the adult learning sector
- ensure that adult learning and education is recognised as playing an important role in the economic and social future of Ireland.

**NALA**, the National Adult Literacy Agency, has developed a distance learning service to increase literacy awareness levels, encourage greater participation and provide non-traditional learning opportunities. The agency has produced a number of TV series that deal in different ways with the issue of adult literacy. A distance tutoring telephone service also operates supported by a website with learning materials leading to awards on the National Framework of Qualifications.

## 6 PRIORITIES OF THE ACTION PLAN ON ADULT LEARNING

The Action Plan on adult learning *It is always a good time to learn* (2007)<sup>33</sup> set five priority actions for the development of adult learning in Europe to 2010. Developments in adult learning in Ireland related to the implementation of the Action Plan are set out below.

### 6.1 Analyse effects of reforms in all educational sectors on adult learning

After protracted and wide-ranging consultation, the Irish National Framework of Qualifications was formally launched in 2003, along with accompanying policies on access, transfer and progression. This initiative was warmly welcomed and seen as a hugely important and beneficial development in the further education and training sector in Ireland. The Framework has enabled greater understanding and navigation through the diverse layers of awards and qualifications that existed in Ireland prior to 2003. It is the single structure through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way. The ten NFQ levels are defined by 'indicator' statements set out in terms of expected learning outcomes.

A study designed to evaluate the extent of the implementation and impact of the National Framework of Qualifications in the Further Education and Training sector was completed in September 2008. The findings highlight that the Framework has had significant impact for learners and opportunities offered in the Further Education and Training Sector, in terms of quality of service, access, transfer and progression. It has also contributed greater clarity and coherence to awards in the sector. The evaluation also concludes that, in order to ensure full implementation and greater integration, there is a need for further work in relation to the placement and classification of existing awards, improved quality assurance and improved access, transfer and progression.

A further implementation and impact study of the entire National Framework of Qualifications has been published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (September 2009). The Study covers the first five years (2003-2008) of the operation of the National Framework of Qualifications. As regards the implementation and impact of the Framework, the study finds that while considerable progress has been made in relation to the inclusion of existing and legacy awards, work on the deeper implementation of the learning outcomes approach is progressing at variable speeds. As regards the impact of the framework on learners, there is evidence that progression routes into higher education and training have increased. While there is

<sup>33</sup> European Commission (2007) Action Plan on adult learning *It is always a good time to learn*. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2006:0614:FIN:EN:PDF>



considerable interest in and demand for the recognition of prior learning, there are still inconsistencies in policies and use of validation. The report emphasises the need to continue to promote the learning outcomes approach, particularly with regard to assessment practice. In relation to the Framework's currency and visibility, the report concludes that its use in relation to the labour market is dependent on the extent of its implementation in different sectors and that there is scope to more closely align public funding with the Framework, as this acts as a driver for implementation.

## **6.2 Improve the quality of provision and staffing**

Quality assurance of further education and training programmes and awards is regulated by the Qualifications Act 1999 and administered by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). FETAC's role in this regard includes responsibility to determine national standards for qualification awards, validate providers' learning programmes, monitor the quality of programmes and ensure providers operate fair and consistent assessment of learners.

An accreditation process of all publicly-funded providers is covered under the Qualifications Act 1999. FETAC is also responsible for the accreditation of further education and training providers according to explicit quality criteria. Providers are required to demonstrate their commitment and capacity to maintain and improve the quality of their programmes and services, using a framework supplied by FETAC. This process is accompanied by an internal monitoring and evaluation system, as well as external monitoring by FETAC.

Under the quality assurance procedures required by the Qualifications Act 1999, all further education and training providers are required to demonstrate that their staff has sufficient experience and expertise to fulfil their designated roles. While increasing numbers of staff working in the sector do have appropriate qualifications, particularly those working in full-time programmes, there is a need to enhance the professionalism of the service through the development of specific pre-service courses for practitioners, the contractual recognition of qualifications gained and the systematic provision of comprehensive continuing professional development opportunities.

However, there is no standard profile for adult education and training staff as personnel tend to come from a variety of backgrounds, and may be on short-term contracts or perhaps are tutoring as an additional responsibility over and above other work. As adult learning professionals often join the profession later in life after gaining work experience elsewhere the provision of training needs to be particularly flexible and respectful of past experiences. Initial training may be less relevant or appropriate.<sup>34</sup>

Providers reported that there were 3,201 volunteers and 1507 paid tutors providing adult literacy tuition in 2009, with 13 per cent of participants accessing 1:1 tuition with a volunteer and 87 per cent accessing group tuition with a paid tutor. Paid tutors are likely to hold a higher education qualification, including a specific adult literacy qualification. It is strongly recommended that all tutors working in adult literacy, either as volunteers or paid tutors should have completed at least an initial tutor training course which is accredited through the Waterford Institute of Technology which offers a range of awards in Adult Literacy, at levels 6-8 of the National Framework of Qualifications. The Joint Oireachtas (Parliamentary) Committee on Education and

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<sup>34</sup> Research voor Beleid (2008) *ALPINE – Adult Learning Professions in Europe, A study of the current situation, trends and issues*. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/adultprofreport\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/adultprofreport_en.pdf)

Science recommended in 2006 that a professional structure be developed for adult literacy tutors.<sup>35</sup>

Community education tutors may or may not hold a higher education qualification – much will depend on the subject area. Part-time self-financing evening classes are delivered by a range of staff including qualified post-primary teachers doing extra work, professionals who hold down day jobs in their professional area and a range of other people with particular skills and experience in the subject area they are teaching such as crafts, language learning, personal development, specific skills and hobby/leisure activities.

In-service support and training for adult education personnel is funded by the Department of Education and Skills and delivered by the Further Education Support Service and/or the VECs, which receive a grant from DES towards training in the specific programmes. In addition, support is provided through a number of professional and non-governmental organisations specialising in areas such as literacy and guidance.

### 6.3 Increase the possibilities to achieve a qualification at least one level higher

The primary groups targeted by publicly-funded further education programmes are those who have not had the opportunity to benefit fully from the formal education service, the aim being to provide these groups with a second chance to achieve a recognised qualification and to contribute in a meaningful way to the community and society in general. The initiatives available with participation rates are given in the table below.

*Participation rates in Department of Education and Skills funded further education initiatives. (Further Education Section, Department of Education and Skills 2011))*

Further Education Statistics 2009 – Total participants by gender			
Programme	Total	Male	Female
Youthreach	3,452	1,952	1,500
STTCs	1,020	135	885
PLC	38,614	14,633	23,981
VTOS	5,775	2,496	3,279
<b>Total full time</b>	<b>48,861</b>	<b>19,216</b>	<b>29,645</b>
BTEI	28,194	8,085	20,109
Adult Literacy	35,614	14,586	21,028
Community Education	53,822	11,889	41,933
ESOL	9,885	4,064	5,821
Intensive Literacy Provision	2,101	1,042	1,059
<b>Total part time</b>	<b>129,616</b>	<b>39,666</b>	<b>89,950</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>178,477</b>	<b>58,882</b>	<b>119,595</b>

<sup>35</sup> Houses of the Oireachtas: Joint Committee on Education and Science: Fourth Report – Adult Literacy in Ireland, May 2006.

The launch of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in Ireland in 2003 enhanced transparency in relation to awards and progression opportunities for learners. Following the launch of the framework, all available awards were migrated to the new framework and allocated to a level in accordance with pre-determined criteria and required learning outcomes. Since 2007 new awards have been developed at Levels 1 and 2 of the framework.

A review of the National Skills Strategy in January 2010 found that while significant progress has been made in meeting the objectives as set out, particularly for those with higher education qualifications, the most significant challenges for the period 2020 is upskilling those with low skills or qualifications from levels 1-3 of the framework to levels 4 and 5 (upper second level equivalence).

#### **6.4 Speed up the process of assessing and recognising non-formal and informal learning for disadvantaged groups**

The development of the EQF and the NQFs is driving a shift towards learning outcomes with consequences for the adult learning sector. This is particularly significant for a Priority Action 4 of the Action Plan, namely, the validation of non-formal and informal learning, since a learning outcomes approach focuses on the outcomes of a learning process rather than the particular features of the process itself.

It is recognised to a greater and greater extent that traditional systems must be transformed to become much more open and flexible so that learners can find individual learning pathways, suitable to their needs and interests, and thus genuinely take advantage of opportunities throughout their lives. Accordingly, a range of interventions is needed to ensure that adults who left school without adequate formal qualifications and who wish to restart or continue their basic education at any time throughout their lives, should be supported to gain recognition of their non-formal and informal learning.

Ireland has a framework and legislation in place for the recognition of prior learning (RPL). RPL is promoted in relation to entry to programmes, exemptions from programme requirements and for eligibility for a part or full award within the framework of qualifications.

Awards councils for both further education and training (FETAC) and higher education (HETAC) have published guidelines and procedures for providers in order to facilitate the access, transfer and progression of learners.

A number of pilot projects in RPL were undertaken in 2006, most notably by Fáilte Ireland for workers in the hospitality industry. During the pilot projects some 50 learners achieved FETAC awards and a small number of providers now have policies and procedures in place to facilitate RPL. Participant providers included a college of further education, a sector industry body, a voluntary organisation, a community education provider and two private providers. The project evaluation (completed in 2007) indicated that offering RPL for awards was very resource intensive and would require providers to build capacity in this respect. The report also concluded that a rigorous process was needed to ensure the achievement of standards and maintain the credibility of FETAC awards, and not all providers have the capacity or the resources to do so.

Critical factors for the effective implementation of RPL for providers were an appropriate assessment of time required for planning and development tools; the need for experienced staff and the need for employer commitment. Barriers to progress also arise from a lack of understanding of the concept.

In the higher education sector an increasing number of institutions are now offering RPL for entry, credit and/or exemptions and a number have institution-wide policies in place. This promotion of RPL is being driven by demand from the workplace and a more diverse student body. Currently it is unknown how many students have accessed RPL as such data are not collected on a systematic basis.

As regards the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), the development of the NFQ with four award types (including major, minor supplemental and special purpose awards) is a key structure to facilitate the development of credit transfer and recognition of the learning outcomes of individuals. There is, however, still considerable progress to be made in relation to the facilitation of credit.

While RPL is considered very important in Ireland, providers are also conscious that not all adult learners wish to gain awards, at least at the initial stages of their structured learning journey. For example, Community Education programmes may not lead to a formal award, but the importance of these programmes both to the learner who may be venturing into education following an extended absence and to the community is recognised. Thus DES provides a dedicated budget and funds a network of Community Education Facilitators in the VECs to support such learning.

Furthermore, research into the provision of non-accredited 1:1 adult literacy provision in 2007 showed that significant literacy progression takes place in these contexts. Students and tutors described the specific strategies they had developed through tuition as well as the practical changes in their lives, particularly with regard to the uses of literacy in everyday contexts as family members, workers or citizens.<sup>36</sup>

## **6.5 Improve the monitoring of the adult learning sector**

The Government of Ireland, through the National Development Plan, the National Skills Strategy and Social Partnership agreements sets targets for participation in education and training and up-skilling of the workforce. The Social Partnership includes government, unions, employers and community representatives. Until 2008, the Department of Education and Science regularly published targets for expanding on the levels of service available. These targets were set out in documents such as the Department's Annual Output Statement and took into consideration the level of service and the resources available. The Social Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016* (Department of Taoiseach, 2006) set targets for the expansion of the adult literacy service, Youthreach programme and the Back to Education Initiative between 2007 and 2009. The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion set a target for reducing the number of people of working age with literacy difficulties levels by 2016. The adult literacy programme is co-funded by the EU. There are participation targets built into the funding provision on which progress is reported bi-annually.

The National Skills Strategy set out an economic imperative for the up-skilling of workers with low or no qualifications by setting targets for improving the levels of education then in existence by 2020. The National Skills Strategy also made the recommendation that literacy and numeracy development should be embedded in all publicly-funded education and training programmes.

Benchmarks in relation to the outcomes of adult education and training are in place through the National Strategies. Progression towards these targets is monitored on an on-going basis and reviewed in accordance with new policy developments. Currently there is no specific adult learner database in place in Ireland. Targets are

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<sup>36</sup> Murray, Kathleen, 'One by One': A Case Study of One to One Adult Literacy Tuition in the Dublin Adult Learning Centre, Dublin Adult Learning Centre, 2007.

monitored through local arrangements, through figures from the National Awards Councils and the National Coordinators for the individual programmes, and by the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Skills. .

Learning outcomes and learners' achievements are measured in a number of ways. The NFQ provides an easily accessible standard of measurement of achievement for learners who choose to access awards. For those programmes where awards may not be appropriate, programmes are monitored and reviews of programmes are undertaken. These reviews typically include feedback from co-ordinators, tutors and learners undertaking the programme at any one time.

Monitoring of the sector faces a number of challenges, not least its diversity. Overall, there is need for reliable, timely data on the whole adult learning sector to allow an informed assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, as well as to ensure that policy is evidence-based and addresses the needs of learners, providers, employers and other key stakeholders. Relevant evidence could also help to promote equitable access to and participation in adult education and training.