



**OECD Skills Studies**

# **OECD Skills Strategy Ireland**

**ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**REPORT SUMMARY**



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# Foreword

Developing relevant skills and using them effectively is crucial for Ireland's ability to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world.

Globalisation, the digital transformation, the green transition and demographic change are combining to change and increase the skills needed to thrive in Ireland's workplaces and society. People will need a stronger and more well-rounded set of skills, including cognitive, social and emotional, and job-specific skills, to flourish in life both in and outside of work. The coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis has accelerated the digitalisation of learning and work, making upskilling and reskilling even more critical for many adults.

Ireland has achieved relatively strong skills performance in many areas. Youth are achieving high levels of skills performance; the tertiary attainment level among young adults is among the highest across the OECD; and Ireland performs better than the EU average in terms of digital skills, with strong growth in recent years. Ireland also does a good job at activating people's skills in the labour market, and their skills contribute to high levels of innovation.

However, Ireland still faces a number of important skills challenges. A concern is that many adults do not have the skills to succeed in economies and societies of the future, and participation in lifelong learning lags behind top European Union (EU) performers. Skills imbalances in the labour market are also relatively high, and workplaces could be better designed to stimulate the use of workers' skills. Furthermore, the governance of Ireland's skills system is complex and requires strong collaboration and co-ordination across government and with stakeholders.

Skills policy is already a priority in Ireland. In 2016, the National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025 was launched, which sets a comprehensive vision for skills policy for the period up to 2025. A key element of the NSS 2025 was the establishment of new bodies, such as the National Skills Council and nine Regional Skills Fora, that make Ireland a leader in developing advanced skills governance arrangements.

Since setting the ambitious objectives of the NSS 2025 in 2016, Ireland has been profoundly transformed by the continuing impacts of global megatrends, the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine. To ensure that its NSS 2025 is still fit for purpose, Ireland should take stock of current policy priorities and review how the NSS 2025 might need to be adapted. To support Ireland in this endeavour, the OECD has conducted a collaborative and tailored OECD Skills Strategy project.

Building on detailed analysis and widespread engagement with stakeholders, this report presents 24 tailored recommendations for Ireland, which provide high-level strategic policy directions for Ireland across four priority areas. The guidance contained in this report provides Ireland with a strong foundation on which to build a further strengthened skills system. The OECD stands ready to support Ireland as it seeks to implement better skills policies for better lives.

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# Executive summary

## OECD-Ireland collaboration on the OECD Skills Strategy project

This OECD Skills Strategy Assessment and Recommendations project reviews how Ireland's existing skills strategy – the National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025 – might need to be adapted to ensure that it is still fit for purpose. Through desk research and active engagement with government and stakeholder representatives in multiple workshops, group discussions and bilateral meetings, the project identifies priority areas for action and provides tailored recommendations for improving Ireland's skills outcomes. This report is not positioned as an implementation plan. Further work is required by Irish stakeholders to sequence and prioritise investments in order to move forward on the areas for action identified.

## Key findings and opportunities for improving Ireland's skills system

People's skills have made an important contribution to Ireland's well-being and strong economic performance and will continue to be an important driver of continued improvement in the future. However, Ireland faces some critical challenges today, and others are visible on the horizon. Significant labour shortages are apparent in Ireland; regional inequalities have been rising; rising housing prices create affordability concerns; and several sectors have not experienced growth in labour productivity in recent years. In addition, the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine has resulted in a large inflow of Ukrainian refugees, and the conflict contributed to a surge in energy and food prices that will cut households' real incomes, dampen consumption growth and fuel uncertainty. The coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis has accelerated the digitalisation of learning and work, making digital skills increasingly a prerequisite to actively participate in a more complex, interconnected world. At the same time, new skills are needed to adapt to climate change and to limit global warming, loss of biodiversity and pollution.

The scale and pace of change globally is such that Ireland's skills ecosystem is now required to take a leap forward. People will need to leave education with the skills needed not only to meet the needs of the labour market and society of today but for those of tomorrow as well. Adults will need opportunities to upskill and reskill to perform new tasks in their existing jobs, assume the duties of new jobs and adapt to new modes of work, behaviour, consumption and participation in society. Firms will have to adopt more creative and productive ways of using their employees' skills, and robust governance structures will be needed to ensure that reforms are sustainable.

It is timely that Ireland now considers how to build ambitiously on its strengths to put skills at the centre of a broad policy response and significant investment to tackle the challenges facing the country and seize the opportunities of the future. This OECD Skills Strategy project is the foundation for Ireland to achieve this objective. Four overarching priority areas and key findings are summarised below.

### ***Priority 1: Securing a balance in skills through a responsive and diversified supply of skills***

In the context of rapidly changing skills needs, it will be essential for Ireland to develop a skills system that helps to secure a balance between skills demand and supply. Ireland needs to ensure that its skills system is flexible and responsive to address skills shortages and mismatches as they emerge and plan for future skills needs. A diversified supply of skills is also needed to build adaptability and resilience in the face of societal and economic change. To better secure a balance in skills, Ireland should:

- improve information and guidance for individuals on learning and career pathways
- strengthen learning and career pathways over the life course
- make education and training provision more responsive to changing skills needs.

### ***Priority 2: Fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the workplace***

Encouraging a culture of lifelong learning is crucial to ensuring that individuals actively engage in adult learning after leaving the compulsory education system. In turn, participation in different forms of adult learning results in a wide range of benefits, including higher wages for individuals, higher productivity for firms and higher levels of social trust. Across countries, there is a growing need to upskill and reskill regularly over the life course to adapt to labour market and societal developments. To foster greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the workplace, Ireland should:

- strengthen incentives to participate in lifelong learning for individuals
- strengthen incentives to participate in lifelong learning for employers
- make lifelong learning more flexible and accessible.

### ***Priority 3: Leveraging skills to drive innovation and strengthen firm performance***

Optimally using people's skills is associated with higher wages and job satisfaction for employees, high rates of productivity and innovation within firms, and stronger growth of the economy. Better leveraging skills will therefore be central to supporting economic growth, promoting resilience to global megatrends, and ensuring Ireland can achieve its aims of digital leadership and a just transition. To better leverage skills to drive innovation and strengthen firm performance, Ireland should:

- better utilise Ireland's research talent and public research and innovation system to drive innovation within firms
- promote the continuous improvement of leadership and management skills within enterprises
- incentivise and enable enterprises to make better use of the skills of their workers through innovative workplace solutions.

### ***Priority 4: Strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem***

Well-functioning skills governance arrangements are the bedrock of a "joined-up" skills ecosystem, where skills policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation are impactful, mutually reinforcing and rooted in an extensive and robust evidence base. The complexity associated with skills policies, compounded by the uncertain and rapidly changing environment in which skills policy decisions are made, makes strong skills governance essential. To strengthen skills governance for a more joined-up skills ecosystem, Ireland should:

- promote a whole-of-government and strategic approach to skills policy
- support effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle
- strengthen the collection, exchange and use of skills information.

# Key insights and recommendations for Ireland

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This Report Summary describes the key insights and policy recommendations of the OECD Skills Strategy Assessment and Recommendations project for Ireland. It applies the OECD Skills Strategy Framework to assess the performance of Ireland's skills system, describes the policy context, and introduces the four priority areas for action, including key findings and high-level strategic recommendations for each. Chapters in the full report describe each priority area in greater detail, highlighting the opportunities for improvement, good practices and recommendations for improvement.

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## Skills matter for Ireland

Skills<sup>1</sup> are vital for enabling individuals and countries to thrive in an increasingly complex, interconnected and rapidly changing world. Countries where people develop strong skills, learn throughout their lives, and use their skills fully and effectively at work and in society, are more productive and innovative. They also enjoy higher levels of trust, better health outcomes and a higher quality of life (OECD, 2019<sup>[11]</sup>).

### ***Getting skills policies right is critical for ensuring societal well-being and inclusive and sustainable growth in Ireland***

The skills of Irish people have made an important contribution to Ireland's well-being and strong economic performance and will continue to be an important driver of continued improvement in the future. After the shock of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, there has been a broad-based recovery, with Ireland's gross domestic product (GDP) projected to grow 3.8% in 2023 and 3.3% in 2024, and an unemployment rate at its lowest since the economic crisis in Ireland over a decade ago (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>; 2022<sup>[3]</sup>). Foreign direct investment (FDI) has been a key driver of growth, with many multinational enterprises (MNEs) setting up offices in Ireland in the last decade (IDA Ireland and DETE, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>). Ireland also scores well on diverse measures of societal well-being, with high levels of reported life satisfaction, strong community engagement, high-perceived personal security and one of the lowest gender wage gaps among OECD countries (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>).

However, Ireland still faces some important challenges today, and others are visible on the horizon. An immediate challenge is the Russian Federation's (hereafter "Russia") invasion of Ukraine. Ireland has welcomed more than 73 000 Ukrainian refugees, who need to be supported with housing, jobs and education (OECD, 2022<sup>[6]</sup>). The conflict also contributed to a surge in energy and food prices. These inflationary pressures, exacerbated by disruptions in global value chains, will cut households' real incomes, dampen consumption growth and create fuel uncertainty. These challenges add more risks to a sustained recovery. Significant labour and skills shortages are apparent in Ireland; regional inequalities have been rising (e.g. the income gap between leading and lagging regions has widened); rising housing prices create affordability concerns; and several sectors have not experienced growth in labour productivity in years (OECD, 2022<sup>[7]</sup>; 2020<sup>[5]</sup>). The United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (EU) "Brexit" adds uncertainty and continues to create risks to Irish firms' competitiveness (OECD, 2022<sup>[6]</sup>; 2020<sup>[5]</sup>). OECD-led efforts to reform the international tax system will also affect Ireland and its large number of MNEs. From 2024 onwards, many MNEs (with global revenues over EUR 750 million) will be subject to a global minimum effective tax rate of 15%. Responding to these social and economic challenges, Ireland should develop skills policies that help to foster inclusive and sustainable growth and strengthen well-being.

### ***A number of megatrends are changing the skills needed for success in work and society***

Global megatrends such as globalisation, technological change, climate change and population ageing will continue to affect Irish society and economy, transforming jobs and how people consume, interact and spend their time. To thrive in the world of tomorrow, people will need a stronger and better-rounded set of skills, and better use of their skills will need to be made in the labour market and workplaces.

The digital transformation has been reshaping Ireland's society and economy. Digital skills are fast becoming a prerequisite to actively participate in more complex, interconnected societies and are needed in most professions. As firms adopt more and more digital technologies to conduct their work, certain job tasks and, in some cases, entire jobs can become automated. Before the pandemic, the OECD estimated that in Ireland 16% of workers faced a high risk of seeing their jobs automated, compared to an OECD average of 14% (Nedelkoska and Quintini, 2018<sup>[8]</sup>). A more recent OECD study using a more precise methodology finds an even higher risk of automation across the OECD (Lassébie and Quintini, 2022<sup>[9]</sup>). Moreover, a study by the Economic, Social and Research Institute estimated that skills-displacing



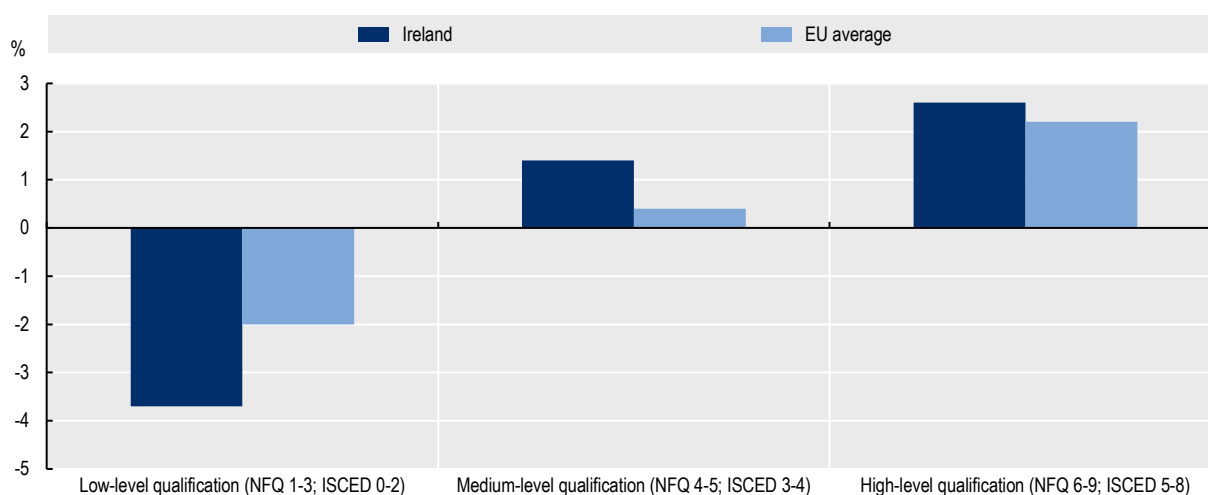
technological change affects 21% of employees in Ireland (McGuinness, Pouliakas and Redmond, 2021<sup>[10]</sup>). Research undertaken by the Expert Group on Future Skills Need (EGFSN) shows that one in three jobs in Ireland are at high risk (a probability greater than 70%) of being disrupted by the adoption of digital technologies (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2018<sup>[11]</sup>). The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) finds that over 370 000 people in Ireland work in occupations at high risk of automation and further 600 000 are in jobs considered at medium risk of automation (SOLAS, 2020<sup>[12]</sup>). Technological change can help drive productivity and overcome skills shortages. However, it also means that many people will need to develop skills for new jobs or upgrade their skills for existing ones.

At the same time, new skills are needed to adapt to climate change and to limit global warming, loss of biodiversity and pollution. Climate change has an impact on both consumer demand and how and what economies produce and, by extension, the skills people need for work and living (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>). Employment in the green economy will become more significant, with specialist jobs arising in sectors impacted by climate change adaptation (Indecon Economic Consultants, 2020<sup>[13]</sup>). A study by the EGFSN anticipates strong future skills demand in jobs related to onshore/offshore wind energy and residential retrofitting activities (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2021<sup>[14]</sup>).

Overall, the digital and green transitions will transform the types of skills required in society and the economy for the foreseeable future, and the impact of these megatrends is already evident. Higher levels of skills have become increasingly important for success in the labour market, and this trend is expected to continue (SOLAS, 2021<sup>[15]</sup>). Ireland is already among the EU countries with the largest shares of people indicating that tertiary degrees are needed for their jobs (CEDEFOP, 2022<sup>[16]</sup>). Projections show that demand for workers with higher-level qualifications will continue to grow, while demand for workers with lower-level qualifications will decline (Figure 1) (CEDEFOP, 2023<sup>[17]</sup>). Sectors such as construction, arts and recreation, and health and social care are projected to grow the most, while sectors such as agriculture, forestry and fishing, and mining and quarrying are expected to decline (CEDEFOP, 2023<sup>[17]</sup>). These trends emphasise the need to effectively support workers' job transitions, especially workers in declining sectors, and to develop the skills for future societies and economies.

**Figure 1. Projected labour force growth in Ireland by qualification, 2018-30**

As a percentage of the annual rate



Note: ISCED: International Standard Classification of Education.

Source: CEDEFOP (2023<sup>[17]</sup>), *Skills Forecast*, [www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/skills-intelligence/future-annual-employment-growth](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/skills-intelligence/future-annual-employment-growth).

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The Irish population is ageing fast. While the overall population is projected to increase by 8% between 2018 and 2030, the population aged over 65 is expected to grow by 41% (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>). This will pose significant challenges to the structure of the Irish economy since population ageing can lead to labour shortages, with fewer qualified workers entering the labour force. It could also negatively affect economic growth (OECD, 2019<sup>[1]</sup>). Furthermore, more money from a proportionally smaller tax base will be required to fund pensions, healthcare and other services for the elderly. Improving productivity will, therefore, become even more important to continued economic growth in Ireland.

Sudden shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic also have important skills implications. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated changes in the economy that were already underway, forcing firms to move their operations on line and introduce or expand teleworking practices in ways that are making digital skills increasingly essential skills (OECD, 2022<sup>[7]</sup>). The crisis has also brought significant interruptions to learning, both in initial education and adult education and training. This is happening at a time when learning is all the more important for keeping pace with a fast-changing world.

### ***Skills policies should be at the core of Ireland's response to these trends***

The Irish skills system will need to support the development and effective use of a diversified supply of skills to tackle the challenges and seize the opportunities of a rapidly changing world. People will need to leave education with the skills needed not only to meet the needs of the labour market and society of today but for that of tomorrow as well. Adults will need opportunities to upskill and reskill to perform new tasks in their existing jobs, assume the duties of new jobs and adapt to new modes of work, behaviour, consumption and participation in society. In addition, firms will have to adopt more creative and productive ways of using their employees' skills, and robust governance structures will be needed to ensure that reforms are sustainable. While a broad range of policies is required to address these challenges, skills should be at the core of Ireland's policy response.

Building on a tradition of skills strategies, Ireland is in a unique position to put skills at the centre of a broad policy response that aims to tackle the challenges facing the country and seize the opportunities of the future. This OECD Skills Strategy aimed to support Ireland in achieving this objective.

## **The OECD Skills Strategy project in Ireland**

In this OECD Skills Strategy project (Box 1), the OECD worked collaboratively with Ireland to achieve a number of objectives.

First, it reviewed how Ireland's existing skills strategy – the National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025 (Box 2) – might need to be adapted to ensure that it is still fit for purpose. Since setting the ambitious objectives of the NSS 2025 in 2016, Ireland has been profoundly transformed by the continuing impacts of global megatrends, the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and the war in Ukraine. The NSS 2025 should be the cornerstone of Ireland's efforts to chart a course through these realities and toward a prosperous and healthy future. The review of the NSS 2025 should equally help ensure that skills remain at the top of the policy agenda.

Second, this project identified the current policy priorities for Ireland, which was achieved by assessing the most important challenges and opportunities facing Ireland's skills system. Through desk research and active engagement with stakeholders consulted during this Skills Strategy project (hereafter "project participants"), four overarching priority areas were identified, and recommendations were developed (see Priority areas and recommendations). This process started in March 2022 with an Extraordinary Meeting of the National Skills Council (NSC). An Assessment Mission took place in June 2022 to identify potential opportunities to improve performance, and a Recommendations Mission was held in October 2022 to test and refine a list of Potential Policy Directions. Overall, in regional and national

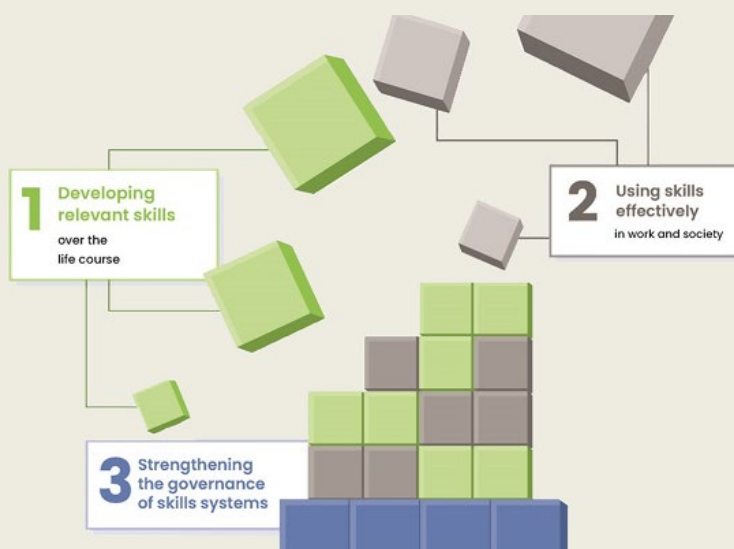
workshops in Dublin, Athlone, Limerick and Cavan, as well as in various group discussions and bilateral meetings, the project engaged over 250 project participants, representing government departments and organisations, employer organisations, educational establishments, research institutions and other interested parties (see Annex 1.A in the full report for an overview of the engagement activities).

### Box 1. The OECD Skills Strategy Framework

OECD Skills Strategy projects provide a strategic and comprehensive approach to assess countries' skills challenges and opportunities and build more effective skills systems. The OECD collaborates with countries to develop policy responses tailored to each country's specific skills challenges and needs. The foundation of this approach is the OECD Skills Strategy Framework (Figure 2), the components of which are:

- **Developing relevant skills over the life course:** To ensure that countries are able to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world, all people need access to opportunities to develop and maintain strong proficiency in a broad set of skills. This process is lifelong, starting in childhood and youth and continuing throughout adulthood. It is also "life-wide", occurring both formally in schools and higher education (HE) and non-formally and informally in the home, community and workplaces.
- **Using skills effectively in work and society:** Developing a strong and broad set of skills is just the first step. To ensure that countries and people gain the full economic and social value from investments in developing skills, people also need opportunities, encouragement and incentives to use their skills fully and effectively at work and in society.
- **Strengthening the governance of skills systems:** Success in developing and using relevant skills requires strong governance arrangements to promote co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration across the whole of government; engage stakeholders throughout the policy cycle; build integrated information systems; and align and co-ordinate financing arrangements. The OECD Skills Strategy project for Ireland adopted this approach by forming a Cross-Departmental Project Team (CDPT) to support the whole-of-government approach to skills policies and engaging a wide variety of project participants.

Figure 2. The OECD Skills Strategy Framework



Source: OECD (2019<sup>[1]</sup>), *OECD Skills Strategy 2019: Skills to Shape a Better Future*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264313835-en>.

## Box 2. The National Skills Strategy 2025: “National Skills Strategy: Ireland’s Future”

In 2016, Ireland launched its comprehensive National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025. It builds on findings presented in the advisory report, *Tomorrow’s Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy Tomorrow’s Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*, by the EGFSN, as well as various national and international policy papers, evaluations and strategies on skills and talent development, innovative education and training, and forecasts of current and future skills needs. A high-level Steering Group supported the development of the new strategy, and more than 120 stakeholders provided input to a consultation paper in 2015.

The NSS 2025 was developed in the context of a significant reform in the education and training sector to develop a more dynamic, responsive and high-quality system that provides all learners with the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in society and the economy. To support the achievement of this vision by 2025, the strategy took a comprehensive stock of Ireland’s skills performance and outlined six strategic objectives, the realisation of which counts on the support and co-operation of a wide array of stakeholders:

1. Education and training providers will place a stronger focus on providing skills development opportunities relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy.
2. Employers will participate actively in the development of skills and make effective use of skills in their organisations to improve productivity and competitiveness.
3. The quality of teaching and learning at all stages of education will be continually enhanced and evaluated.
4. People across Ireland will engage more in lifelong learning.
5. There will be a specific focus on active inclusion to support participation in education and training and the labour market.
6. There will be support for an increase in the supply of skills to the labour market.

Source: Department of Education and Skills (2016<sub>[18]</sub>), *Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025 – Ireland’s Future*, [www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/).

## The performance of Ireland’s skills system

### *Developing relevant skills*

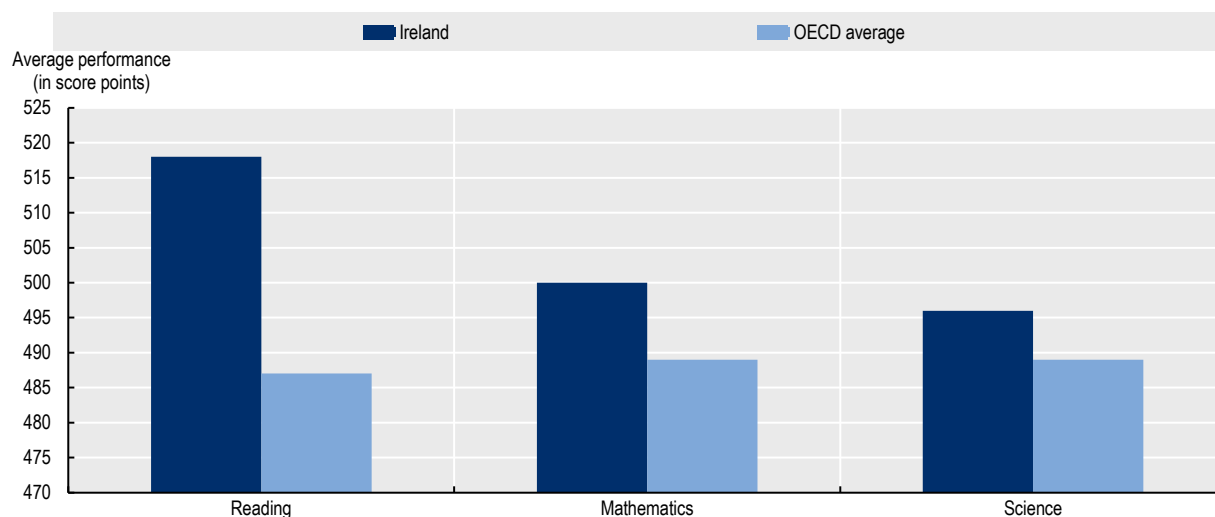
To ensure that countries are able to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world, all people need access to learning opportunities to develop and maintain strong proficiency in a broad set of skills. This process is lifelong and “life-wide”, occurring formally, non-formally and informally.

*Overall, youth are achieving high levels of education and skills performance*

Ireland has done a good job of developing its youths’ foundational skills. According to results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 15-year-olds in Ireland score above the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science (Figure 3) (OECD, 2019<sub>[19]</sub>). In fact, the reading skills of Irish 15-year-olds rank among the highest in the world, and Ireland is the only OECD country where PISA reading performance improved significantly for both advantaged and disadvantaged students between 2008 and 2018 (OECD, 2019<sub>[20]</sub>). In addition to strong foundational skills, Ireland’s education system should provide youth with a balanced set of social and emotional skills to prosper in today’s

demanding, changing and unpredictable world. The current reform (“redevelopment”) of the Senior Cycle already acknowledges the need for developing these skill sets and the role of education systems in developing the knowledge, skills, values and dispositions for future generations (Department of Education, 2022<sup>[21]</sup>).

**Figure 3. Performance in reading, science and mathematics, 15-year-olds in Ireland, 2018**



Source: OECD (2019<sup>[19]</sup>), *PISA 2018 Results*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/19963777>.

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Many young people in Ireland attend higher education. For instance, the share of young adults with a tertiary degree increased considerably in recent decades and is now significantly above the OECD average (63% of 25-34 year-olds progressed to tertiary education in 2021, compared to the OECD average of 47%), ranking Ireland 5<sup>th</sup> out of the 38 countries for which data are available (OECD, 2023<sup>[22]</sup>). With this expansion, it will be important for Ireland to safeguard the quality of learning in both further education and training (FET) and HE. Tertiary institutions need to prepare students for an increasingly complex and rapidly changing economy and society and provide them with a broad set of skills. The Irish National Employer Survey from 2018 showed that employers are generally content with the skills of graduates. However, they indicate that some types of skills could be strengthened, including commercial awareness, entrepreneurial skills and language capability (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2019<sup>[23]</sup>). In addition, while many students are completing their studies in tertiary institutions, challenges remain. For example, about three out of every four undergraduate entrants to HE finish their degree, but completion rates vary significantly across sectors, educational institutions, fields of study and student cohorts (Higher Education Authority, 2021<sup>[24]</sup>).

Overall, the generally positive outcomes of the initial education system bode well for the future of Ireland’s skills system. With higher levels of skills, young people are in a better position to progress to HE, access good quality jobs in the labour market and continue learning throughout life.

*Many adults do not have the skills to succeed in an increasingly complex and interconnected world*

The tertiary attainment level among young adults in Ireland is comparatively high, as noted above, which is positive. However, educational qualifications are not perfect proxies for the actual skills that adults possess. Evidence shows that many Irish adults are at risk of falling behind in an increasingly complex and interconnected world since they do not have the right skills to thrive in their current jobs and are unprepared for changes in the world of work. For instance, only 27% of adults feel that their skill sets prepare them “very well” for future roles as the workplace evolves (Accenture, 2021<sup>[25]</sup>). Moreover, while data on the breadth and depth of adult skill levels could be improved, there are some indications that the skills of many adults could be improved. For example, the Survey of Adult Skills (a product of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, PIAAC) shows that only 25% of adults had problem-solving skills at Levels 2 or 3 in 2012 – meaning that they can navigate across pages and applications to solve a problem or use digital tools to facilitate or make progress towards the solution of a problem. This is well below the OECD average of 31% (OECD, 2019<sup>[26]</sup>). The next round of PIAAC data, available in 2024, will allow Ireland to see if its performance has improved in the intervening years.

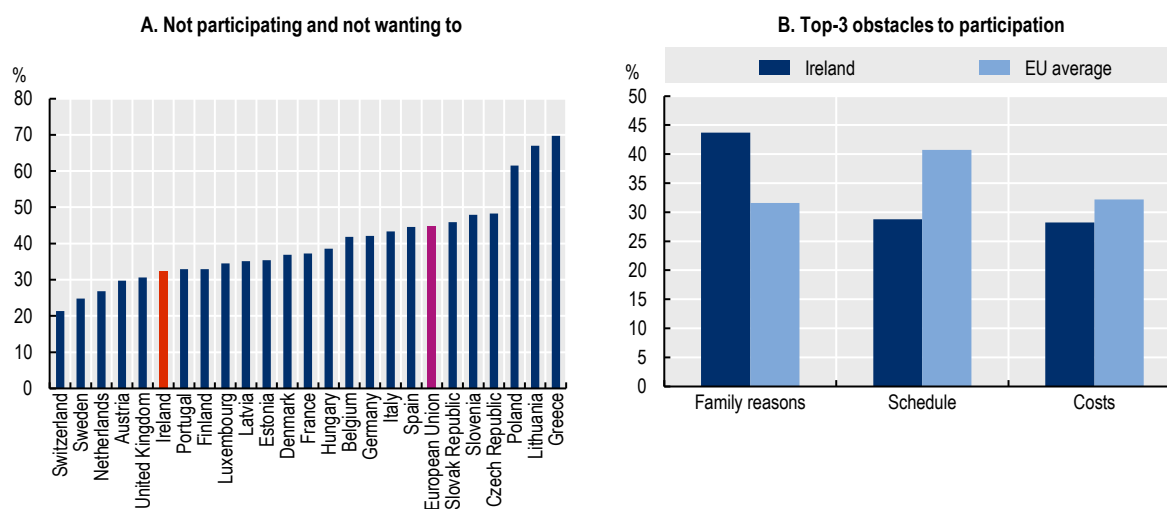
In addition, while Ireland performs above the EU average in terms of digital skills – scoring fifth overall in the Digital Economy and Society Index 2022, with strong growth in recent years (European Commission, 2022<sup>[27]</sup>) – only 30% of adults have less than basic digital skills (including information and data literacy, digital content creation and more) (Eurostat, 2022<sup>[28]</sup>). In addition, it is particularly worrying that adults with comparatively weak socio-economic profiles (e.g. lower social classes, low education levels) self-report that their digital skills are below average (Accenture, 2022<sup>[29]</sup>).

*Participation in lifelong learning in Ireland lags behind top EU performers*


Lifelong learning (i.e. learning by adults no longer engaged in initial education) will be essential to equip all adults with the skills needed in current and future labour markets. While lifelong learning opportunities in Ireland are generally perceived as being of high quality, participation in lifelong learning in Ireland is not as high as might be expected. Some 14% of Irish adults participated in formal and non-formal education and training (in the last four weeks) in 2021, which is slightly above the EU average of 10.8%, but far behind top EU performers, such as Finland (31%) or Sweden (35%) (Eurostat, 2021<sup>[30]</sup>). With regard to informal learning (e.g. learning on the job), over 62% of adults in Ireland reported engaging in informal learning in the last 12 months, which is similar to, but slightly surpasses the EU average (60%) (Eurostat, 2022<sup>[31]</sup>). Some groups of adults are participating more in lifelong learning than others. Younger cohorts, higher educated, and employed adults are most likely to participate in learning activities (SOLAS, 2022<sup>[32]</sup>).

While a lack of motivation is one of the main reasons for not participating in learning activities, the willingness to learn is comparatively high in Ireland. The share of people who did not and did not want to participate (32%) is among the lowest in the European Union (Figure 4, Panel A). For the adults who are motivated to learn, there are a number of obstacles that prevent them from participating. The three main reasons adults cite for not participating are family reasons, schedule and costs (Figure 4, Panel B) (Eurostat, 2016<sup>[33]</sup>). Additionally, while information on lifelong learning is readily available, and most people agree that it is easy to find, project participants concur that navigating training offers constitutes a barrier to entering training, requiring further guidance (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2019<sup>[23]</sup>).

A large share of employers in Ireland provides continuing training to employees; however, support varies considerably between various types of businesses. Employer support is lower in indigenous companies (85%) compared to multinationals (91%), in manufacturing (80%) compared to service (87%) industries, in small enterprises (84%) compared to larger ones (93%), and outside of Dublin (83%) compared to in Dublin (91%) (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2019<sup>[23]</sup>). Adult learning is often driven by work-related needs, with about one in two adults participating in non-formal learning activities for work-related reasons (SOLAS, 2022<sup>[32]</sup>).

**Figure 4. Motivation and obstacles to participating in education and training in Ireland, 2016**

Source : Eurostat (2016<sup>[33]</sup>), *EU Adult Education Survey 2016*, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/adult-education-survey>.

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### **Using skills effectively**

To ensure that countries and people gain the full economic and social value from investments in developing skills, people also need opportunities, encouragement and incentives to use their skills fully and effectively at work and in society.

#### *The skills of some adults could be more fully activated in the labour market*

Compared with most OECD countries, Ireland does a good job activating people's skills in the labour market. Labour force participation is above the OECD average and above the rates prevailing in the 1990s (OECD, 2022<sup>[7]</sup>). However, while Ireland's employment rate (73% in Q4 2022 for people aged 15-64) is above the OECD average (70%), it is well below that of top performers, such as Iceland (82%), the Netherlands (82%) and New Zealand (80%) (OECD, 2023<sup>[34]</sup>) (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2023<sup>[35]</sup>). In addition, while long-term unemployment has shown a strong downward trend in the last decade – with 30% of unemployed adults in 2021 – it is still significantly higher than in top-performing OECD countries, such as New Zealand (11%) and Canada (16%) (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>). There are also several groups for which the activation of skills could be further improved, including adults with low levels of education, women, people with disabilities, and more (OECD, 2022<sup>[7]</sup>; 2020<sup>[5]</sup>). Integrating disadvantaged groups into the labour market is crucial to ensure no groups are left behind and improve Ireland's overall employment performance (OECD, 2018<sup>[36]</sup>).

#### *Skills imbalances in the labour market are relatively high*

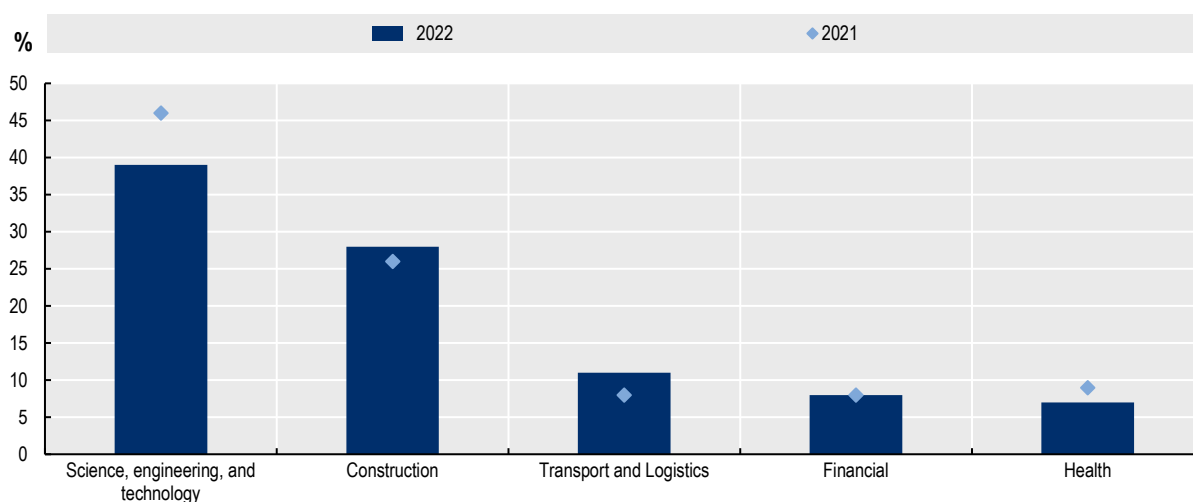
Skills imbalances are evident in the Irish economy. These imbalances concern not only skills shortages and surpluses but also skills mismatches, which occur when a worker's skills exceed or fall short of those required for the job under current market conditions.

Irish employers express great concern about labour and skills shortages. Strong economic growth and a large inflow of FDI have been driving an increase in demand for labour, which is not fully met by the domestic supply. In recent years, Ireland had a steadily increasing ratio of new job vacancies to



unemployed (a measure of labour market tightness) that reached a new high in Q2 2022 but which dropped slightly in more recent months (OECD, 2022<sup>[7]</sup>). While shortage pressures are significant, they are less severe than in many other EU countries. For example, the job vacancy rate (defined as the number of job vacancies as a share of total job positions) is below the EU average (1.5 versus 2.9 in Q3 2022) and far below rates in countries such as Austria (5.0) and the Netherlands (4.9) (Eurostat, 2023<sup>[37]</sup>). SOLAS' Difficult-to-fill Vacancies Survey among recruitment agencies indicates that it is especially difficult to find workers for science, engineering and technology occupations, as well as for construction occupations (Figure 5) (SOLAS, 2022<sup>[38]</sup>). Migrants play an increasingly important role in Ireland's skills landscape and help reduce labour pressures, especially in information and communications technology, which accounts for 34% of all employment permits issued.

**Figure 5. Vacancies that are difficult to fill in Ireland, by sector, 2021-22**



Source: SOLAS (2022<sup>[38]</sup>), *Difficult-to-fill Vacancies Survey*, [www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/2702562088/solas-difficult-to-fill-vacancies.pdf](http://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/2702562088/solas-difficult-to-fill-vacancies.pdf).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/zt9m6b>

In addition to an insufficient number of people available or willing to take up work in specific roles or sectors, the labour force also does not always have the skills required for available jobs. Project participants indicate there are particularly significant shortages of digital skills (e.g. software, coding, data analytics); science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills (e.g. engineering, construction); and management skills (e.g. project management, change management and leading multicultural teams), among others.

There is also considerable evidence of qualification mismatches in Ireland leading to productivity loss and wage penalties for individuals. A certain degree of skills mismatch within Ireland's labour market had already been evident prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and has been further reinforced by the impacts of global megatrends (e.g. the digital and green transition, etc.) (DETE, 2022<sup>[39]</sup>). In particular, a comparatively large share of workers is over-qualified (i.e. have a higher qualification than required for the job), affecting 28% of individuals, compared with 22% across the European Union. Only Greece, Türkiye and Spain have larger shares (Eurostat, 2020<sup>[40]</sup>). While some level of over-qualification appears to be voluntary (McGuinness and Sloane, 2011<sup>[41]</sup>), a large part is involuntary, and a long list of factors appears to explain cross-country variation in over-qualification rates, ranging from the demand for skills in the labour market and how workplaces are organised, to the design of the education system and the availability of career information and guidance (McGuinness, Bergin and Whelan, 2018<sup>[42]</sup>; Delaney et al., 2020<sup>[43]</sup>; Nugent, 2022<sup>[44]</sup>). This finding suggests that there is scope to make better use of the skills that Ireland is already developing.

*Workplaces could be better designed to stimulate the use of workers' skills*

The intensive use of employees' skills in the workplace is strongly associated with higher levels of productivity and better business performance (OECD, 2019<sup>[11]</sup>). Data from PIAAC suggest that on measures of skills use in the workplace, Ireland performs in line with the OECD average but lags behind countries like Australia, Finland, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States, where firms tend to use the skills of their employees more intensively (OECD, 2019<sup>[26]</sup>).

Various factors affect the extent to which skills are effectively used in the workplace, but especially high-performance workplace practices (HPWPs) – such as work flexibility, teamwork and performance-based pay – are positively associated with skills use. Evidence suggests a mixed picture of workplace practices in Ireland. Compared with firms across the European Union, Irish firms are more likely to communicate their vision and mission to staff and to assign greater value to training. However, they are less likely to use financial levers, such as variable pay, to motivate staff or to offer employees autonomy over their time and when they schedule tasks (Eurofound, 2020<sup>[45]</sup>). Strong leadership and management capabilities are important drivers of organisational change, helping to optimise the use of skills in workplaces and drive innovation, productivity and firm performance. Previous studies have highlighted a need to improve management capability in Ireland, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (OECD, 2019<sup>[46]</sup>).

Overall, there appear to be large differences in the use of skills and the adoption of best practices between MNEs and smaller, often locally-owned SMEs. For instance, differences in the adoption of new technologies contributed to significant productivity gaps between foreign-owned and locally-owned enterprises, which translated into large wage differentials between the two types of firms (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>).

Strengthening research and innovation (R&I) is important for skills use, partly because it could help raise the demand for skills. While Ireland is classed as a strong innovator (ranked sixth out of the EU countries in 2022), there are indications that Ireland could better use its talent to drive innovation (European Commission, 2022<sup>[47]</sup>). For instance, Ireland has comparatively low rates of innovation within enterprises (43% versus 49% EU average) (Eurofound, 2020<sup>[45]</sup>). Moreover, Ireland's place in the Global Innovation Index fell from 7<sup>th</sup> in 2016 to 23<sup>rd</sup> in 2022 out of 132 countries (WIPO, 2022<sup>[48]</sup>). This decrease over time is attributed to reduced relative performance on measures of government support for business research and development (R&D), business R&D and non-R&D innovation expenditures, employment in innovative enterprises, product innovators, patent and trademark applications and environment-related technologies (European Commission, 2022<sup>[47]</sup>).

### ***Strengthening the governance of the skills system***

Sound public governance of skills systems is contingent upon a government's ability to co-ordinate, steer, monitor, communicate and work horizontally (across departments and institutions within government) and vertically (with regional and local authorities and with external public and private stakeholders) (OECD, 2019<sup>[11]</sup>).

*Ireland's complex skills system requires strong collaboration and co-ordination across the government*

The governance of Ireland's skills system is complex. Multiple departments and various governmental bodies and agencies at national, regional and/or local levels play a role in skills policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. To manage the complexity of its skills system, compounded by the fast pace with which new skills policies, programmes and initiatives are being introduced, Ireland should apply a whole-of-government approach to skills with the active engagement of multiple departments.

While several governance structures in Ireland's skills ecosystem, such as the NSC, Regional Skills Fora (RSF), or the EGFSN (see more below), are seen as international good practices (2020<sup>[49]</sup>; 2021<sup>[50]</sup>; 2021<sup>[51]</sup>; OECD, 2019<sup>[1]</sup>), there are significant opportunities for further improvement in the governance of Ireland's skills system, which need to be seized to help realise Ireland's ambition of evolving from a strong to a top performer in terms of skills outcomes. Taking a bold approach to addressing existing skills governance challenges is equally important for setting Ireland's skills ecosystem on a path of continuous improvement and building up ample capacity to meet future skills challenges and opportunities.

According to the Bertelsmann Foundation's Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI), Ireland ranks below the OECD average on formal inter-ministerial co-ordination, yet above the OECD average on informal inter-ministerial co-ordination (across all policy areas) (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022<sup>[52]</sup>). In skills policy specifically, not all departments in Ireland perceive skills from a holistic, life course perspective and, therefore, as necessitating close cross-departmental collaboration, but rather as an exclusive domain of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Equally, more departments should be taking a more active role in and greater ownership of addressing skills pressures (such as skills shortages) in collaboration with DFHERIS and other relevant actors. Despite the NSC's mandate to, among others, facilitate cross-departmental co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration on skills in the Irish skills ecosystem, the NSC does not sufficiently support such collaboration and co-ordination across departments. In addition, there are challenges in co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration at the regional and local levels, which arise due to overlapping mandates and lacking communication between actors who engage with employers on reskilling/upskilling on the ground, despite the existence of regional one-stop-shops (RSF) for employer engagement on skills. While it is positive that Ireland is planning to prepare a follow-up to the NSS 2025 with the view of further supporting a whole-of-government approach to skills, there are lessons to be learned from the implementation of the NSS 2025 itself to ensure effective implementation of the NSS 2025 follow-up.

*Effective and efficient stakeholder engagement mechanisms are essential for a strong skills system*

Ireland has developed several mechanisms for engaging non-governmental stakeholders on skills policy. These mechanisms are overseen by different departments, touch upon skills-related topics to varying extents and create opportunities for engaging stakeholders for various purposes (e.g. to shape skills policy priorities, provide input into training design, etc.).

While establishing these mechanisms is a step in the right direction, there remains ample space for further improving Ireland's approach to stakeholder engagement on skills issues. The NSC has not yet succeeded in developing an influential role and a strong voice in Ireland's skills ecosystem commensurate with skills and workforce challenges. NSC meetings, in practice, could facilitate better engagement with non-governmental stakeholders on shaping skills policy priorities. The NSC also needs more representative and diverse non-governmental membership, stronger accountability mechanisms, sufficient resourcing and visibility. Equally, the current functioning of the National Training Fund Advisory Group (NTFAG), established to support greater involvement of employers in decisions surrounding the National Training Fund (NTF), could provide more opportunities for stakeholders to provide advice and input into decisions on NTF expenditure. In addition, despite many positive examples of engaging stakeholders in the co-design of education and training programmes, such engagement could be more systematic, inclusive (particularly of SME voices), efficient and better co-ordinated.

*A strong skills evidence base should inform skills policy making and individuals' and firms' skills choices*

While Ireland has a rich evidence base for informing skills policy making and individuals' skills choices, there are important opportunities for further improvement. A variety of administrative and survey data are used to produce insights on Ireland's skills supply and demand, including by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) and the EGFSN, who are the key actors responsible for skills assessment and anticipation in Ireland.

The skills evidence base needs to be further strengthened, including by greater coordination between the bodies responsible for the collection of data and information in this regard. The range of information on (not only) skills needs collected from employers could be further expanded, and the granularity of such information further improved. Information on outcomes of learners in FET is not collected systematically, while available economy-wide skills forecasts are not fully reflective of the specificities of the Irish labour market. The collection of data on skills needs directly from employers requires better co-ordination to enable more effective use. At the same time, technical challenges complicate skills data exchanges within the government and with stakeholders. A strong evaluation culture is also needed to support evidence-based policy making, underpinned by well-resourced evaluation structures and a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to skills policy evaluation. Bertelsmann Foundation's SGI suggest that Ireland's *ex post* evaluation of public policies is relatively under-developed.

## The policy context in Ireland

Ireland has a history of applying a strategic approach to skills policy. In 2016, Ireland launched the *National Skills Strategy: Ireland's Future* (the NSS 2025 – see Box 2), which sets the overall vision for skills policy for the period up to 2025 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016<sup>[18]</sup>).

A key element of the NSS 2025 was the establishment of new bodies, such as the NSC and nine RSF, which work as the single contact points in each of Ireland's regions to guide employers to find and connect with services and support available across the education and training system (Regional Skills Ireland<sup>[53]</sup>). These bodies were introduced to provide a coherent national architecture that also incorporates the regional structures (Department of Education and Skills, 2016<sup>[18]</sup>).

Implementing the NSS 2025 required co-operation and action by numerous stakeholders – government departments and agencies, employers and educational establishments, among others. For each of the six strategic objectives, the NSS identified broad action areas and concrete measures for implementation.

In addition to the NSS 2025, many governmental strategies and strategic documents cover aspects of skills policy (see Table 5.4 in Chapter 5 of the full report for an overview of these strategies). Some of these strategies address specific sectors of Ireland's education and training system. Examples are the national FET strategy for 2020-24, entitled *Future FET: Transforming Learning* (SOLAS, 2020<sup>[54]</sup>) and the *Action Plan for Apprenticeship, 2021 to 2025* (DFHERIS, 2022<sup>[55]</sup>). Other strategies highlight more specific objectives for Ireland's skills system. For instance, *Adult Literacy for Life – A 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy* (DFHERIS, 2021<sup>[56]</sup>) aims to strengthen adults' literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. Likewise, the *Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027* aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to successfully navigate the evolving digital world (Department of Education, 2022<sup>[57]</sup>). Additionally, reform of the post-primary curriculum (e.g. with the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle) emphasises the acquisition of knowledge, complementing the application of skills, to best demonstrate the breadth of student learning (Department of Education, 2022<sup>[21]</sup>). Furthermore, the *National Access Plan 2022-2028* aims to ensure that the students entering, participating in and completing HE at all levels reflect the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population (Higher Education Authority, 2022<sup>[58]</sup>).

Skills policies are also touched upon in strategies that are less directly linked to the skills system. Examples are Ireland's national R&I strategy, *Impact 2030*, which describes the important role of skills to maximise

the impact of R&I in Ireland (DFHERIS, 2022<sup>[59]</sup>), and the *National Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027*, which aims to bring coherence to regional research, development and innovation (RD&I) planning and advancing its agenda both regionally and nationally (DETE, 2022<sup>[60]</sup>). Ireland's National Digital Strategy, *Harnessing Digital – The Digital Ireland Framework*, aims to advance the use of digital technology in the delivery of public services, the adoption of digital technology in enterprises and across the education and training system, and increase the share of adults with at least basic digital skills to 80% by 2030 (Department of the Taoiseach, 2022<sup>[61]</sup>). Skills are also a key part of Ireland's *White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030*, which describes Ireland's vision for its enterprises to succeed through competitive advantage founded on sustainability, innovation and productivity, delivering rewarding jobs and livelihoods (DETE, 2022<sup>[39]</sup>). Furthermore, *Languages Connect* is Ireland's strategy for foreign languages in education for 2017-26 and aims to increase and diversify the teaching and learning of foreign languages (Department of Education, 2022<sup>[62]</sup>).

The COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in several strategic documents to support the recovery, with skills being a central element of the policy mix. Examples are the *Economic Recovery Plan* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2021<sup>[63]</sup>), which specified actions across four pillars – one of which is dedicated to helping people get back to work, including through upskilling and reskilling – and the *Recovery and Resilience Plan*, which outlined several targeted reforms and investments for several specific areas of upskilling and reskilling, with funding through the European Union's Recovery and Resilience facility (DPER, 2021<sup>[64]</sup>).

In 2020, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation (DFHERIS) was established. With a mandate on tertiary education and research and innovation, (functions which were previously discharged within the Departments of Education and of Enterprise), DFHERIS has responsibility for talent and skills development across the life course in Ireland.

## Priority areas and recommendations

Based on the assessment of the performance of Ireland's skills system and discussions with the Government of Ireland, four priority areas have been identified for this OECD Skills Strategy project:

1. securing a balance in skills through a responsive and diversified supply of skills
2. fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the workplace
3. leveraging skills to drive innovation and strengthen firm performance
4. strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem.

Building on in-depth desk analysis, stakeholder workshops, online surveys, discussion groups and bilateral meetings, the OECD has made 24 recommendations (Figure 6), which provide high-level strategic policy directions for Ireland across these four priority areas. The recommendations are accompanied by specific actions, translating these high-level strategic policy directions into more concrete policy interventions (see Annex 1.B in the full report for an overview of the 24 recommendations and related specific actions).

The guidance contained in this report provides Ireland with a strong foundation on which to build a concrete implementation plan for further strengthening its skills system. Further work is required by Irish stakeholders to sequence and prioritise investments in the context of the fiscal framework. In addition, in some cases additional work will need to be undertaken to determine how the prioritised recommendations can best be implemented. Irish stakeholders will need to continue their fruitful collaboration to identify who will have leadership and responsibility for design and implementation of prioritised actions. The OECD stands ready to support Ireland with these next steps.

The summaries below present an overview of the key findings and recommendations, whereas Chapters 2-5 in the full report describe the assessment and recommendations for each of the four priority areas in greater detail.

**Figure 6. OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Overview of recommendations**

**1. Securing a balance in skills through a responsive and diversified supply of skills in Ireland**



**Opportunity 1:** *Improving information and guidance for individuals on learning and career pathways*

1. Strengthen the co ordination of lifelong guidance to support a strategic approach moving forward.
2. Consolidate and improve online information on learning opportunities and careers to improve navigability, accessibility and relevance.
3. Expand and strengthen guidance services to ensure that everyone can access high-quality guidance over the life course.



**Opportunity 2:** *Strengthening learning and career pathways across the life course*

4. Promote and strengthen pathways from schools into further education and training and apprenticeships to develop a well-balanced tertiary system and diversified supply of skills.
5. Improve pathways between further education and training and higher education to support the move towards a truly unified tertiary system.



**Opportunity 3:** *Making education and training provision more responsive to changing skills needs*

6. Ensure that the provision of further education and training and higher education is aligned with strategic skills needs and responds to changes in demand.

**2. Fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside of the workplace in Ireland**



**Opportunity 1:** *Strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for individuals*

1. Incentivise adults to participate in lifelong learning to improve the prominence of lifelong learning in Ireland's society.
2. Provide tailored and targeted support to disadvantaged groups to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning.



**Opportunity 2:** *Strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for employers*

3. Establish a clear and robust lifelong learning guidance and support system for employers to efficiently match them with training that meets their needs.
4. Reform the National Training Fund to better foster lifelong learning in workplaces.



**Opportunity 3:** *Making lifelong learning more flexible and accessible*

5. Promote greater flexibility in the lifelong learning offer to help individuals and employers incorporate ongoing learning into daily life.
6. Improve the recognition of non-formal and informal learning for individuals and enterprises to make lifelong learning more accessible to all.

**3. Leveraging skills to drive innovation and strengthen the performance of firms in Ireland**



**Opportunity 1:** *Better utilising Ireland's research talent and public research and innovation system to drive innovation within firms*

1. Develop skills for innovation across the education system to strengthen Ireland's adaptive capacity and competitiveness.
2. Better activate the skills of graduate and doctoral researchers in the workforce to strengthen the innovation capacity of Ireland's economy.



**Opportunity 2:** *Promoting the continuous improvement of leadership and management skills within enterprises*

3. Extend flexible, subsidised and customisable development opportunities available to Ireland's managers to maximise the accessibility, relevance and value of support.
4. Strengthen incentives for management development to raise the motivation of Ireland's managers to upgrade their skills and participate in lifelong learning.



**Opportunity 3:** *Incentivising and enabling enterprises to make better use of the skills of their workers through innovative workplace solutions*

5. Reinvigorate the strategic focus on workplace innovation in Ireland as a key vehicle to improve firms productivity and performance.
6. Foster peer-to-peer learning and communities of practice to promote the diffusion of leading-edge organisational practices between Ireland's multinational enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises.

**4. Strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem in Ireland**



**Opportunity 1:** *Promoting a whole-of-government and strategic approach to skills policy*

1. Strengthen the commitment to and efficiency of adopting a whole-of-government approach to skills to help achieve a step change in Ireland's skills system.
2. Prepare a follow-up to the National Skills Strategy 2025 to help place skills at the top of Ireland's policy-making agenda and enable effective implementation.



**Opportunity 2:** *Supporting effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle*

3. Strengthen the National Skills Council and other stakeholder bodies to enable stakeholders to more effectively shape Ireland's skills policy priorities.
4. Scale up existing good practices and promote a more inclusive, efficient and co ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in the co-design of education and training.



**Opportunity 3:** *Strengthening the collection, exchange and use of skills information*

5. Improve the range and granularity of information on current skills needs, strengthen information on training outcomes and enhance skills forecasting.
6. Enable more effective exchange and use of existing skills data and promote systematic skills policy evaluation to support evidence-based skills policy making.



### **Priority 1: Securing a balance in skills through a responsive and diversified supply of skills (Chapter 2 in the full report)**

In the context of rapidly changing skills needs, it will be essential for Ireland to develop a skills system that helps secure a balance between skills demand and supply. Ireland needs to ensure that its skills system is flexible and responsive in order to address skills shortages and mismatches as they emerge, as well as to plan for future skills needs. A diversified supply of skills is also needed to build adaptability and resilience in the face of societal and economic change.

Three opportunities to better secure a balance in skills were selected based on input from the literature, desk research, discussions with the CDPT, discussions in national and regional workshops, group discussions, and several related meetings.

#### *Opportunity 1: Improving information and guidance for individuals on learning and career pathways*

Many project participants considered the need for effective career guidance as one of the main areas for improvement in the Irish skills system. Effective career guidance can help steer young people towards career or learning pathways for which they are well suited and hold good employment prospects. In addition, career guidance can help adults successfully navigate a labour market characterised by rapidly evolving skills needs. Improving career guidance is already a priority for the Government of Ireland, but despite an extensive provision of career guidance services, there are still a number of areas for improvement.

There is strong support in Ireland for strengthening a lifelong approach for career guidance. The delivery of guidance is fragmented, and more could be done to ensure everyone can access guidance at all stages in life. Work by the National Policy Group for lifelong guidance on developing a coherent, long-term strategic framework for lifelong guidance provides a good starting point. Ireland should continue actively involving all relevant actors in developing this framework and strengthen national co-ordination of lifelong guidance services, including by establishing clear roles and responsibilities. Ireland could also better consolidate and improve online information on learning opportunities and careers to improve its navigability, accessibility and relevance. To this end, Ireland should develop a centralised online portal, make information more user-friendly and tailored to individual learners' needs, and include more information on skills shortages and mismatches, learning outcomes and pathways. In addition, Ireland should expand and strengthen guidance services to ensure that everyone can access high-quality guidance over the life course. This can be achieved by better supporting guidance counsellors, making guidance counselling services in schools more widely available, and covering a wide range of possible learning and career pathways. Finally, institutional support and guidance for adults could be improved, especially for groups most distant from the labour market and at risk of unemployment.

Recommendation	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 1: Improving information and guidance for individuals on learning and career pathways</b>	
1. Strengthen the co-ordination of lifelong guidance to support a strategic approach moving forward	1.1. Continue actively involving all relevant actors in developing a coherent, long-term strategic framework for lifelong guidance. 1.2. Strengthen national co-ordination of lifelong guidance services, including by establishing clear roles and responsibilities.
2. Consolidate and improve online information on learning opportunities and careers to improve navigability, accessibility and relevance	2.1. Develop a centralised online portal for all information on learning opportunities and careers by better co-ordinating and consolidating information. 2.2. Ensure that online information is user-friendly and tailored to individual learners' needs by using filters, self-assessment tools and direct access to advisors. 2.3. Improve the dissemination of information on skills shortages and mismatches, learning outcomes and pathways.



Recommendation	Specific actions
3. Expand and strengthen guidance services to ensure that everyone can access high-quality guidance over the life course	3.1. Strengthen the quality of guidance counselling services in schools by giving guidance counsellors appropriate time and resources and involving employers further in the provision of guidance services. 3.2. Strengthen guidance counselling services in schools by making them more widely available and covering a wide range of possible learning and career pathways. 3.3. Improve the availability and accessibility of independent and comprehensive career guidance services beyond initial education by strengthening institutional support for adults. 3.4. Target guidance services for adults to groups most distant from the labour market and at risk of losing jobs.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 2 and Annex Table 1.B.1 in the full report.

### *Opportunity 2: Strengthening learning and career pathways over the life course*

In addition to improving information and guidance on learning and career pathways, the pathways should be clear, flexible and accessible to all students and adults. These pathways are relevant for aligning skills demand with supply since a well-balanced education and training system with flexible and permeable pathways (i.e. the ability to progress to programmes at a higher level, regardless of the pathway already chosen) will facilitate the development of an adaptable and diversified supply of skills that will make society more responsive to changes in skills demand. Ireland provides students with a diverse range of learning pathways, but there are indications that their flexibility and permeability could be improved.

To start, Ireland should continue to promote and strengthen pathways from schools into FET and apprenticeships to develop a well-balanced tertiary system and diversified supply of skills. At present, there is arguably too much emphasis on pathways towards HE. Ireland should aim to change perceptions of FET and apprenticeships through improved guidance counselling services, more active outreach, and exposing second-level students to more practical or vocational courses and modules. The take-up of apprenticeships specifically could also be increased by identifying and overcoming financial obstacles for employers and by continuing to address non-financial obstacles for employers to take on apprentices. Ireland could also strengthen pathways between FET and HE to support the move towards a truly unified tertiary system. Overall, Ireland needs a more joined-up approach for FET and HE, where the sectors work together more actively, better align programmes and improve pathways between them. This can be achieved by developing universal and consistent criteria for facilitating transitions between FET and HE and cross-system credit recognition. In addition, building on the newly established National Tertiary Office, Ireland should expand the co-development and co-delivery of programmes by FET and HE. A joined-up approach could possibly be facilitated by more place-based networks (or partnerships) between FET and HE to strengthen local collaboration on pathways.

Recommendation	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 2: Strengthening learning and career pathways over the life course</b>	
4. Promote and strengthen pathways from schools into further education and training and apprenticeships to develop a well-balanced tertiary system and diversified supply of skills	4.1. Change perceptions of further education and training and apprenticeships through improved career guidance, communication and rebranding. 4.2. Better promote pathways into further education and training and apprenticeships by strengthening work-based learning in schools and developing a unified application process. 4.3. Increase take-up of apprenticeships by identifying and overcoming financial obstacles for employers. 4.4. Continue to address non-financial obstacles for employers to take on apprentices by providing employers with practical support and information and promoting more flexible forms of apprenticeship.

Recommendation	Specific actions
5. Improve pathways between further education and training and higher education to support the move towards a truly unified tertiary system	<p>5.1. Develop universal and consistent criteria for facilitating transitions between further education and training and higher education and cross-system credit recognition.</p> <p>5.2. Expand the co-development and co-delivery of programmes by further education and training and higher education, by supporting the newly established National Tertiary Office, among other initiatives.</p> <p>5.3. Better promote the development of “place-based” networks (or partnerships) between further education and training and higher education to strengthen local collaboration on improving pathways.</p>

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 2 and Annex Table 1.B.2 in the full report.

### *Opportunity 3: Making education and training provision more responsive to changing skills needs*

Education and training provision needs to respond effectively to changes in the labour market and society, providing people with the knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes needed to be adaptable and resilient in a rapidly changing world. To this end, the responsiveness of education and training systems at all levels will need to be assessed and improved as necessary. A responsive education and training system provides adequate incentives to institutions to offer courses in areas that are currently and anticipated to be in high demand and to encourage and incentivise students to enrol in these courses.

Ireland could further strengthen the responsiveness of its FET and HE provision in various ways, including by engaging stakeholders in the co-design of education and training (see Priority 4). In addition, Ireland should establish a vision for long-term strategic skills needs. Based on high-quality skills forecasting and workforce planning, Ireland should identify its strategic skills needs and use this information to incentivise and support education and training providers to offer skills development opportunities in these areas. To improve responsiveness, Ireland should also remove incentives for education institutions to keep students in their own system for as long as possible. Instead, Ireland should make learning pathways more permeable so that students can easily adjust their learning plans in response to evolving needs and expand flexible learning opportunities (e.g. part-time learning, modular courses) to facilitate the quick acquisition of new skills in response to changing skills needs. In this context, Ireland can build on ongoing work to further improve FET and HE funding models, as described in the FET Funding Model review and the HE funding and reform framework presented in *Funding the Future*.

Recommendation	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 3: Making education and training provision more responsive to changing skills needs</b>	
6. Ensure that the provision of further education and training and higher education is aligned with strategic skills needs and responds to changes in demand	<p>6.1. Establish a vision for long-term strategic skills needs in Ireland to inform and strengthen further education and training and higher education performance frameworks and funding models.</p> <p>6.2. Better incentivise education institutions to offer permeable learning pathways and flexible learning opportunities that allow individuals to acquire new skills quickly in response to changing skills needs.</p>

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 2 and Annex Table 1.B.3 in the full report.

### **Priority 2: Fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the workplace (Chapter 3 in the full report)**

Encouraging a culture of lifelong learning is crucial to ensuring that individuals actively engage in adult learning after leaving the compulsory education system. In turn, participation in different forms of adult learning results in a wide range of benefits, including higher wages for individuals, higher productivity for firms and higher levels of social trust. Across countries, there is a growing need to upskill and reskill regularly over the life course to adapt to labour market and societal developments.

### *Opportunity 1: Strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for individuals*

The most direct way to foster greater participation in lifelong learning in Ireland is to encourage more individuals to participate in lifelong learning opportunities. This involves reducing barriers people face and increasing their motivation to participate. Policy makers use a number of tools to promote participation in lifelong learning by making it worthwhile for individuals to invest in learning opportunities. These include subsidies, savings or asset-building mechanisms, tax measures, subsidised loans, time accounts and training leave entitlements. While Ireland already has a number of measures in place to encourage participation in lifelong learning among individuals, there remain opportunities for improvement that are both universal and specific.

To start, Ireland could better incentivise adults to participate in lifelong learning by conducting a comprehensive study to assess the feasibility of individual learning schemes and paid training leave in Ireland's context. Moreover, Ireland could expand programmes or financial incentives that already effectively engage adults in lifelong learning (e.g. Springboard+, eCollege), and possibly, these measures could be complemented with a public awareness campaign to raise awareness about the importance and benefits of lifelong learning for all. Ireland should also aim to raise the participation of the most disengaged individuals. To better understand who these learners are, learner profiles could be developed that provide a more granular picture of the different types of adult learners or potential learners. Finally, Ireland could also improve holistic support for parents and carers to address the time-related obstacles to participation (e.g. with information, additional financial support and on-site service) and increase support for vulnerable groups by providing targeted guidance and financial supplements to address the indirect costs of learning.

Recommendations	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 1: Strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for individuals</b>	
1. Incentivise adults to participate in lifelong learning to improve the prominence of lifelong learning in Ireland's society	1.1. Assess the feasibility of individual learning schemes and paid training leave in Ireland's context. 1.2. Evaluate and expand programmes or financial incentives that effectively engage a wide range of individuals in lifelong learning by extending their scope, target audience and/or allocated resources (e.g. Springboard+, eCollege). 1.3. Implement a public awareness campaign to raise awareness about the importance and benefits of lifelong learning for all.
2. Provide tailored and targeted support to disadvantaged groups to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning	2.1. Develop detailed profiles of different types of lifelong learners and potential lifelong learners. 2.2. Improve holistic support for parents and carers to participate in lifelong learning through information, additional financial support and on-site services. 2.3. Increase support for vulnerable groups to participate in lifelong learning by providing targeted guidance and financial supplements to address the indirect costs of learning.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 3 and Annex Table 1.B.4 in the full report.

### *Opportunity 2: Strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for employers*

Participating in lifelong learning is beneficial not only for individuals in Ireland, no matter their employment status, but also for employers. Nonetheless, employers in Ireland and other countries face numerous challenges in providing education and training opportunities to their employees, including financial and time constraints, fears of poaching and lack of clarity about the training opportunities available to them or support for participating in such opportunities.

Ireland should establish a clear and robust lifelong learning guidance and support system for employers to efficiently match them with training that meets their needs. To this end, Ireland should move towards a more formalised and co-ordinated system for lifelong learning guidance for employers, including by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the feasibility, of different models of service integration. As part of this broader lifelong learning guidance system, Ireland should also design an online portal tailored to employer needs. Employers should also be better supported to map out the skill set of their employees and their future skills needs (e.g. with methodological guides, manuals, tools, etc.).

Additionally, a work plan for more targeted guidance to SMEs could be developed since they face particular challenges in providing or supporting lifelong learning. The National Training Fund (NTF) could also be reformed to better foster lifelong learning in workplaces. Ireland should unlock surplus NTF funds, improve structural incentives for employers to take advantage of NTF-funded education and training, establish a discretionary fund as part of the NTF for the regional/local/sectoral level, and increase NTF support for upskilling and reskilling for SMEs.

Recommendations	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 2: Strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for employers</b>	
3. Establish a clear and robust lifelong learning guidance and support system for employers to efficiently match them with training that meets their needs	3.1. Formalise a system of lifelong learning guidance for employers by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the feasibility, of different models of service integration. 3.2. Design an online portal tailored to employer needs and integrate this portal into a potential broader lifelong learning guidance system for employers. 3.3. Strengthen support to employers to map out their employees' skill set and future skills needs (e.g. methodological guides, manuals, tools, etc.). 3.4. Develop a work plan to provide targeted additional guidance to small and medium-sized enterprises, beginning with a pilot programme in sectors of national priority.
4. Reform the National Training Fund to better foster lifelong learning in workplaces	4.1. Unlock surplus National Training Fund funds to facilitate greater investment in lifelong learning in Ireland. 4.2. Improve structural incentives for employers to take advantage of education and training funded by the National Training Fund. 4.3. Establish a discretionary fund as part of the National Training Fund to be distributed at the regional/local/sectoral level. 4.4. Increase National Training Fund support specifically allocated for upskilling and reskilling for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 3 and Annex Table 1.B.5 in the full report.

### *Opportunity 3: Making lifelong learning more flexible and accessible*

Improving the flexibility and accessibility of lifelong learning is important for Ireland since many adults face time-related obstacles. International evidence suggests that flexibility in format and design helps overcome time-related barriers, especially for medium- to high-skilled workers. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) can also help adults upskill and reskill by personalising learning pathways to fit learners' individual needs and shortening the time individuals spend in a training programme (thus addressing time barriers) since learners will only focus on their specific skill gaps.

Ireland could promote greater flexibility in its lifelong learning offer to help individuals and employers incorporate ongoing learning into daily life. To this end, Ireland should encourage lifelong learning providers to offer more flexible learning opportunities (e.g. online, modular, "bite-size") and strengthen the recognition, accreditation and stackability of lifelong learning opportunities (e.g. through stackable micro-credentials, digital badges, etc.). Building on the expansion of online learning and support for online learning instructors and providers could be strengthened to improve the quality of online courses and widen their scope and reach. Moreover, since expanding incentives for non-formal and informal learning can make engaging with lifelong learning more appealing and accessible to both individuals and employers, Ireland should improve their recognition. This could involve strengthening the capacity of education and training providers to offer RPL (e.g. with national guidelines for RPL), improving awareness of and access to RPL (e.g. with tools for individuals to accumulate and display their learning experiences), as well as implementing a mechanism for stimulating on-the-job learning provided by employers.

Recommendations	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 3: Making lifelong learning more flexible and accessible</b>	
5. Promote greater flexibility in the lifelong learning offer to help individuals and employers incorporate ongoing learning into daily life	5.1. Encourage lifelong learning providers to offer more flexible learning opportunities (e.g. online, modular, “bite-size” microcredentials). 5.2. Strengthen the recognition, accreditation and stackability of lifelong learning opportunities in line with the National Framework of Qualifications (e.g. through stackable micro-credentials, digital badges, etc.). 5.3. Strengthen support for online learning instructors and providers to improve the quality of online courses and enable further expansion of remote lifelong learning.
6. Improve the recognition of non-formal and informal learning for individuals and enterprises to make lifelong learning more accessible to all	6.1. Strengthen the capacity of education and training providers to offer recognition of prior learning, including by establishing national guidelines outlining the procedures and processes of RPL. 6.2. Improve awareness of and access to recognition of prior learning, including tools for individuals to accumulate and display their non-formal and informal learning. 6.3. Implement a mechanism for recognising and rewarding informal, on-the-job learning provided by employers.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 3 and Annex Table 1.B.6 in the full report.

### ***Priority 3: Leveraging skills to drive innovation and strengthen firm performance (Chapter 4 in the full report)***

Optimally using people’s skills is associated with higher wages and job satisfaction for employees, high rates of productivity and innovation within firms and stronger growth of the economy. Better leveraging skills will therefore be central to supporting Ireland’s economic growth, promoting resilience to global megatrends and ensuring Ireland can achieve its aims of digital leadership and a just transition.

#### *Opportunity 1: Better utilising Ireland’s research talent and public research and innovation system to drive innovation within firms*

Investment in research, development and other knowledge-based assets, such as Higher education institutions (HEIs) and research centres, plays an important role in securing the success of advanced economies, developing high-level cutting-edge skills and supporting firms’ innovation activities through knowledge transfer and spillovers. Ireland’s public research system is one of its key strengths. However, R&D intensity in Ireland is still comparatively weak, and rates of innovation in firms, particularly among small, indigenous enterprises, are relatively low.

To strengthen Ireland’s adaptive capacity and competitiveness, Ireland should develop skills for innovation across the education system. This involves strengthening the strategic positioning of skills and improving connectivity with wider policy domains (e.g. R&I, industrial development and regional growth). Ireland could also improve the development of transversal skills for innovation (e.g. creativity, critical thinking and communication) across the education system and strengthen and systematise the process for identifying and responding to emerging technical skills needed for innovation (e.g. by assigning this task to regional sectoral clusters supported through Ireland’s new National Clustering Programme). In addition, Ireland could better activate the skills of research talent. For instance, incentives and resources for R&I institutions and highly-skilled research talent to engage with small enterprises could be strengthened. It also would be important to better understand enterprise demand for research graduates and the mobility of research talent between academia, industry, the public and voluntary and community sector. Finally, Ireland should improve career guidance for researchers and better integrate transversal skills development into research training at all levels.

Recommendations	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 1: Better utilising Ireland's research talent and public research and innovation system to drive innovation within firms</b>	
1. Develop skills for innovation across the education system to strengthen Ireland's adaptive capacity and competitiveness	1.1. Strengthen the strategic positioning of skills for innovation and improve connectivity with wider policy domains. 1.2. Improve the development of transversal skills for innovation across the education system, including lifelong learning. 1.3. Strengthen and systematise the process for identifying and responding to emerging technical skills needed for innovation in areas of strategic importance to the economy.
2. Better activate the skills of graduate and doctoral researchers in the workforce to strengthen the innovation capacity of Ireland's economy	2.1. Strengthen incentives and resources for research and innovation institutions and highly-skilled research talent to engage and collaborate with smaller enterprises. 2.2. Advance further research to better understand current and future demand for research graduates and the mobility of research talent between academia, industry, the public and voluntary and community sector. 2.3. Strengthen career guidance for research graduates and better integrate transversal skills development into research training at all levels.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 4 and Annex Table 1.B.7 in the full report.

### *Opportunity 2: Promoting the continuous improvement of leadership and management skills within enterprises*

Strong management and leadership skills are vital to the success of firms. Well-managed firms tend to perform better across a range of indicators: they are more productive, grow faster and have higher survival rates. Skilled managers are also more likely to innovate, adopt quality-orientated product market strategies and implement HPWPs. In addition, managers' attitudes, particularly in small firms, have been shown to significantly influence the prioritisation of and investment in training for workers.

Promoting the continuous improvement of leadership and management skills requires actions on both the supply and demand side. Regarding the supply of learning opportunities, Ireland should extend flexible, subsidised and customisable development opportunities for Ireland's managers to maximise accessibility, relevance and value of support. Moreover, despite a well-developed landscape of management training in Ireland, there is evidence of an unmet need for management development. Ireland should address management training gaps, particularly for mid-sized, locally traded service companies and community, voluntary and social enterprises, scale up successful existing programmes (e.g. Mentors Work, Spotlight on Skills) and review how to support the expansion of flexible, subsidised and customisable management training. Regarding the demand for learning by managers, Ireland could strengthen incentives for management development to raise their motivation to participate in lifelong learning. This could involve strengthening evidence on the business benefits of management development for productivity, innovation and business performance, as well as introducing a new management standard and associated quality marks to professionalise management in Ireland.

Recommendations	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 2: Promoting the continuous improvement of leadership and management skills within enterprises</b>	
3. Extend flexible, subsidised and customisable development opportunities available to Ireland's managers to maximise the accessibility, relevance and value of support	3.1. Address gaps in management training for mid-sized, locally traded service companies and community, voluntary and social enterprises. 3.2. Advance new flexible, subsidised and customisable management training and scale up successful existing programmes.
4. Strengthen incentives for management development to raise the motivation of Ireland's managers to upgrade their skills and participate in lifelong learning	4.1. Strengthen evidence on the business benefits of management development for productivity, innovation and business performance. 4.2. Introduce a new management standard and associated quality marks to professionalise management in Ireland. 4.3. Advance incentives for Irish firms to take up new management standards and quality marks.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 4 and Annex Table 1.B.8 in the full report.



*Opportunity 3: Incentivising and enabling enterprises to make better use of the skills of their workers through innovative workplace solutions*

The way in which firms organise their workplaces has a significant impact on their ability to stimulate ideas from the workforce, transform these into innovation and facilitate the absorption of knowledge from other firms and research organisations. The positive impact of participative forms of work organisation on firm-level productivity is well documented. The mixed picture of workplace practices in Ireland, relatively poor rates of innovation in firms, and the well-evidenced uplift in the productivity and performance of firms associated with HPWPs suggest that work organisation warrants considerable focus in Ireland.

It is important for Ireland to reinvigorate its strategic focus on workplace innovation as a key vehicle to improving the productivity and performance of firms. This could be achieved by adding the modernisation of Irish workplaces as an explicit policy priority in the NSS 2025 follow-up. Ireland could also ensure that management development opportunities strengthen their focus on workplace transformation and HPWPs, and an awareness campaign for small firms could be considered to support them with the adoption of better work organisation practices. In addition, to promote the diffusion of leading-edge organisational practices between Ireland's MNEs and SMEs, Ireland should foster peer-to-peer learning and communities of practice. To this end, Ireland could better embed organisational practices and HPWPs within its well-established mechanisms for peer learning (e.g. Skillnet Ireland's Business Networks, Plato Business Development Networks, Innovation Exchange) as well as develop new programmes that seek to promote innovation diffusion between MNEs and smaller enterprises in their supply chains. Furthermore, Ireland could review the existing landscape of networks and forums to identify opportunities to strengthen collaborative business learning networks that seek to promote innovative workplace solutions.

Recommendations	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 3: Incentivising and enabling enterprises to make better use of the skills of their workers through innovative workplace solutions</b>	
5. Reinvigorate the strategic focus on workplace innovation in Ireland as a key vehicle to improve firms productivity and performance	5.1. Position the modernisation of Irish workplaces as an explicit policy priority in Ireland's refreshed National Skills Strategy. 5.2. Review Ireland's portfolio of management development opportunities to strengthen its focus on workplace transformation and high-performance workplace practices. 5.3. Advance awareness campaigns that build an understanding of the steps that small firms can take to stimulate better work organisation practices.
6. Foster peer-to-peer learning and communities of practice to promote the diffusion of leading-edge organisational practices between Ireland's multinational enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises	6.1. Review the potential to embed organisational practices and high-performance workplace practices more strongly within Ireland's well-established mechanisms for peer learning. 6.2. Develop new programmes that seek to promote innovation diffusion between multinational and smaller enterprises in their supply chains. 6.3. Strengthen collaborative business learning networks or communities of practice that seek to promote workplace innovation.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 4 and Annex Table 1.B.9 in the full report.

**Priority 4: Strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem  
(Chapter 5 in the full report)**

Well-functioning skills governance arrangements are the bedrock of a "joined-up" skills ecosystem, where skills policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation are impactful, mutually reinforcing and rooted in a wide and sound evidence base. The complexity associated with skills policies, compounded by the uncertain and rapidly changing environment in which skills policy decisions are made, makes strong skills governance essential.



### *Opportunity 1: Promoting a whole-of-government and strategic approach to skills policy*

A whole-of-government approach aims to promote horizontal (at the national level) and vertical (between national and subnational levels) co-ordination of government activity in order to improve policy coherence and use of resources and minimise overlaps and gaps in public programmes. A whole-of-government approach thus capitalises on synergies and innovation that arise from involving and engaging with a multiplicity of governmental actors while also providing seamless public service delivery to individuals and businesses. Strategies and action plans are key enabling mechanisms that support a whole-of-government approach to skills policy. They are essential for setting goals, priority groups and targets, clarifying roles for government and stakeholders in skills policy, articulating the challenges that require co-operation and allocating roles and responsibilities.

Ireland should consider establishing new processes for collaborating on the development, use and governance of skills over the life course in areas of strategic need while avoiding duplication. Departments facing strong skills pressures in their respective areas of oversight should establish processes for collaboration with DFHERIS and/or other relevant departments and agencies to work jointly to address these pressures. Ireland is planning to prepare a follow-up to the NSS 2025, which is positive. For the NSS 2025 follow-up, Ireland should apply a whole-of-government approach to the follow-up's design and implementation, prioritise a smaller number of high-impact priority areas in the NSS 2025 follow-up, consider a more flexible structure, and establish clear accountability mechanisms to support progress reporting on and evaluation of measures implemented.

Recommendations	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 1: Promoting a whole-of-government and strategic approach to skills policy</b>	
1. Strengthen the commitment to and efficiency of adopting a whole-of-government approach to skills to help achieve a step change in Ireland's skills system	1.1. Adopt processes to support cross-departmental collaboration on addressing skills challenges in areas of strategic importance. 1.2. Reduce duplication and promote synergies by mapping, monitoring and raising awareness of existing processes to support cross-departmental collaboration on addressing skills challenges.
2. Prepare a follow-up to the National Skills Strategy 2025 to help place skills at the top of Ireland's policy-making agenda and enable effective implementation	2.1. Apply a whole-of-government approach to the design and implementation of the National Skills Strategy 2025 follow-up. 2.2. Prioritise a smaller number of high-impact priority areas in the National Skills Strategy 2025 follow-up and consider a more flexible structure. 2.3. Establish clear accountability mechanisms to support progress reporting on and evaluating measures implemented under the National Skills Strategy 2025 follow-up.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 5 and Annex Table 1.B.10 in the full report.

### *Opportunity 2: Supporting effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle*

Engaging with stakeholders supports policy makers in dealing with the inherent complexities of skills policies. Stakeholders are uniquely positioned to provide policy makers with valuable insights into the real-world effects of skills policies. Ireland has several mechanisms for engaging stakeholders in shaping skills policy priorities (i.e. providing input into the strategic direction of skills policy). These mechanisms include public consultations run by different departments, as well as a range of bodies, with the NSC aiming to be Ireland's key stakeholder engagement mechanism dedicated to skills policy specifically, with skills policy understood holistically.

Ireland could strengthen the NSC to enable stakeholders to shape skills policy priorities more effectively. First, the role of the NSC should be clarified to primarily position it as a stakeholder advisory body to the government on skills policy instead of as a discussion forum for governmental officials. Furthermore, the visibility of the NSC should be improved, and the NSC secretariat should be adequately resourced. A wider range of relevant non-governmental stakeholders should be represented at the NSC, gender balance in membership should be promoted, and accountability to stakeholder advice should be fostered. The

workings of the NTFAG should similarly be improved to create better opportunities for stakeholder input. To better engage stakeholders in the design of education and training (i.e. in shaping the content of new courses and updating existing curricula), Ireland should scale up existing good practices and promote a more inclusive, efficient and co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in the training co-design. For example, conditional upon demonstrating overall satisfactory outcomes, skills development programmes and initiatives such as Skills to Advance and Springboard+, as well as Skillnet Ireland Networks, should be further expanded. Ireland could also consider the establishment of “curriculum” hubs in selected education and training boards (ETBs) to better focus ETBs’ stakeholder engagement efforts. Equally, Ireland should ensure adequate co-ordination between the plethora of actors who engage with stakeholders for the purposes of course co-design on the ground.

Recommendations	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 2: Supporting effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the skills policy cycle</b>	
3. Strengthen the National Skills Council and other stakeholder bodies to enable stakeholders to more effectively shape Ireland’s skills policy priorities	3.1. Revise the National Skills Council’s terms of reference, improve its visibility and adequately resource its secretariat. 3.2. Ensure that a wider range of relevant non-governmental stakeholders is represented at the National Skills Council, promote gender balance in its membership and foster accountability with regard to its advice. 3.3. Convene more regular National Training Fund Advisory Group meetings and provide adequate opportunity for stakeholder input.
4. Scale up existing good practices and promote a more inclusive, efficient and co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in the co-design of education and training	4.1. Expand successful skills development programmes and initiatives where collaboration with enterprises is core to the course design and/or where receiving funding is conditional upon collaboration with enterprises – and encourage input from small and medium-sized enterprises. 4.2. Consider the establishment of “curriculum hubs” in selected education and training boards to better focus their stakeholder engagement efforts in further education and training. 4.3. Ensure adequate co-ordination between actors who engage with stakeholders in course co-design.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 5 and Annex Table 1.B.11 in the full report.

### *Opportunity 3: Strengthening the collection, exchange and use of skills information*

Comprehensive, reliable and accessible skills information can help a variety of actors within and outside the government form a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to skills, which helps underpin effective governmental co-ordination and stakeholder engagement. Skills information is equally essential for supporting evidence-based skills policy making, guiding individuals’ skills choices and supporting the work of guidance counsellors, among others.

Ireland has a rich collection of skills information (i.e. information on skills supply and demand), but it could take steps to strengthen it further. In particular, Ireland could improve the range and granularity of information on current skills needs, strengthen the information on training outcomes and enhance quantitative skills forecasting. For example, to improve information on skills needs, the scope of the National Employer Survey could be expanded, and the emphasis on skills in the Recruitment Agency Survey could be strengthened. Ireland could also collect information on the outcomes of FET graduates more systematically and consider reinitiating the development and systematic maintenance of a regular sectoral forecasting model to produce more relevant and accurate economy-wide forecasts by occupation and level of education. In addition, Ireland should enable more effective exchange and use of existing skills data and promote systematic skills policy evaluation to support evidence-based skills policy making. Among other actions, Ireland could support the development of digital solutions to facilitate an easier exchange of skills data and support the development and adequate resourcing of dedicated evaluation structures.

Recommendations	Specific actions
<b>Opportunity 3: Strengthening the collection, exchange and use of skills information</b>	
5. Improve the range and granularity of information on current skills needs, strengthen information on training outcomes and enhance skills forecasting	5.1. Expand the scope of the National Employer Survey to collect more information on skills needs and skills use and implement the Survey on a regular basis. 5.2. Enable systematic collection of information on employees' skills gaps via the Skills for Growth initiative and strengthen the emphasis on skills in the Recruitment Agency Survey. 5.3. Support systematic collection of information on the outcomes of further education and training graduates. 5.4. Consider reinitiating the development and systematic maintenance of a regular sectoral forecasting model.
6. Enable more effective exchange and use of existing skills data and promote systematic skills policy evaluation to support evidence-based skills policy making	6.1. Support the development of digital solutions to facilitate easier exchange of skills data. 6.2. Enable more effective use of data from employer skills audits by promoting co-ordinated reporting and centralising the collected data. 6.3. Support the development and adequate resourcing of dedicated evaluation structures and promote a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to skills policy evaluation.

Note: Full descriptions of the recommendations and specific actions can be found in Chapter 5 and Annex Table 1.B.12 in the full report.

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## Note

1. The *OECD Skills Strategy 2019* identifies a broad range of skills, including: 1) foundational skills (e.g. literacy, numeracy and digital literacy); 2) transversal cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (e.g. critical thinking, complex problem solving and self-regulation); 3) social and emotional skills (e.g. responsibility, empathy and self-efficacy); and 4) professional, technical and specialised knowledge and skills needed to meet the demands of specific occupations (OECD, 2019<sup>[1]</sup>).



**OECD Skills Studies**

# **OECD Skills Strategy Ireland**

## **ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

Skills are the key to shaping a better future and central to the capacity of countries and people to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world. Megatrends such as digitalisation, globalisation, demographic change and climate change are reshaping work and society, generating a growing demand for higher levels and new sets of skills.

OECD Skills Strategy projects provide a strategic and comprehensive approach to assess countries' skills challenges and opportunities and help them build more effective skills systems. The OECD works collaboratively with countries to develop policy responses that are tailored to each country's specific skills needs. The foundation of this approach is the OECD Skills Strategy Framework, which allows for an exploration of what countries can do better to: 1) develop relevant skills over the life course; 2) use skills effectively in work and in society; and 3) strengthen the governance of the skills system.

The report, *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations*, identifies opportunities and makes recommendations to secure a balance in skills, foster greater participation in lifelong learning, leverage skills to drive innovation and improve firm performance, and strengthen skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem in Ireland.