

Ireland introduction

While the macro policy framework for adult education in Ireland remains focused on education for employability, there have been important developments that may impact future policy and progress development in late 2019/2020.

Recent developments in Ireland

In the past year, two significant state strategies were released and a third has begun development.

First of all, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) released a new 'Action Plan for Education 2019' early on in the year. This followed the appointment of a new Minister of Education, Joe McHugh, in October 2018. The new plan restated its commitment to existing strategies and regulations, supporting the EU Upskilling Pathways initiative, and to a programme called 'Skills to advance', which was launched in April 2019 and is meant to support retraining and upskilling of employees in low-skilled or economically vulnerable spheres of work.

Secondly, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services, launched their new strategy in 2019. The new strategy continues the traditions of QQI and highlights that in 2019-2021 the organisation will be working on

1) Authorising the use of the International Education Mark by providers of higher education and English language education to international learners. As part of the new strategy, QQI created a new learner-protection fund. This new fund requires contributions from non-state education providers into a fund which can be used to compensate learners in the event that a provider stops operation and a learner is left unable to complete their education. This fund was created in response to English language schools who charge large fees and have often stopped operations, leaving students with large costs and no certification for their efforts. However, AONTAS, EAEA member in Ireland, is concerned about the impact this new fund could have on non-formal/not-for-profit education providers who do not charge for their courses but may otherwise be required to pay into the fund. The Department of Education and Skills has made a public commitment that organisations like this will not have to pay into the fund however until implementation begins the true impact will be unknown.

2) Developing a new regulation that would allow bodies other than QQI and state funded higher education institutions to access the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The reasoning behind this initiative is rooted in the existing gap between the qualifications that people obtain in most cases from educational organisations, such as City and Guilds (an organisation that offers professional and personal development training) and the recognition of the qualifications by the NFQ.

This year the government also started the development of the New Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024. In Ireland, state-funded and organised adult education is principally separated into two categories, Further Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education (Third Level). FET is planned and coordinated by SOLAS, an agency of the Department of Education and Skills. The civil society is invited to have a say on the new strategy: SOLAS has developed a consultation document to be commented on as well as held a public consultation with members of our EAEA member in Ireland,

AONTAS - the National Adult Learning Organisation.

Important political changes also happened last year. County elections were held across the state, which may influence the creation of new Boards of Directors for the sixteen Education and Training Boards across the country. This is the first election to impact the structure of Education and Training Boards since they were first created in 2014 as County Councillors make-up slightly more than half of the members of the Education and Training Boards.

In May 2019, the Joint Education and Skills Committee of the Oireachtas (national parliament) published a report titled "Report on Education Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education". This report recommends that education opportunities are made more widely available throughout the country and focus not just on education for employment, but more broadly on education for social well-being, health, and issues like addiction recovery and reduction of homelessness. The report was drafted and supported by all members of the Committee which includes representation from every major political party in the parliament, both from governing and opposition parties. The report will act as a valuable reference source for the upcoming general election in Ireland.

Links to EU and international policy in Ireland

The state regulations reflect the country-specific recommendations for SDG and Upskilling Pathways initiative. AONTAS is working on strengthening the initiatives, and in 2019 the organisation created a new strategic plan for 2019-2022 that will focus on:

- Learner Voice for Action: Creating an inclusive lifelong learning society
 - A Thriving Community Education Sector
 - Lifelong Learning for Sustainability
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Challenges and recommendations in Ireland

AONTAS, an EAEA member from Ireland, suggests that the government addresses the need to create a recognised and accepted system for measuring the outcomes of non-formal education, specifically community education in Ireland.
