

# Case study Ireland

This case study determines background factors that support or obstruct the use of e-services in the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) regarding education, training, and career opportunities in Ireland. To this end, it provides an overview of (a) the structure of the vocational and educational training (VET) system in Ireland, (b) the IAG System, and (c) the status of digitalisation. Thus, the case study provides insights into why the expected logic of intervention of GeGS ultimately might succeed or fail in the specific Irish context.

## The VET System<sup>1</sup>

In Ireland, the most common pathways of vocational education and training are apprenticeships, Further Education and Training (FET) courses, and Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. In addition, the programme Youthreach offers general as well as vocational training for school-leavers without any formal qualifications. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (QQI) is responsible for validation and recognition processes.

### Structure

Apprenticeships are structured programs that combine on-the-job training with classroom-based learning. Until 2016, formal apprenticeship training was restricted to 27 trades, mostly concentrated in the construction and engineering sectors. Following a review from 2013, the apprenticeship system was expanded to other sectors of the economy, which lead to two programme types: **(a) pre-2016 craft apprenticeships** and **(b) post-2016 apprenticeships**. In both apprenticeship programme types, apprentices sign an employment contract with the employer and, therefore, have the legal status (and associated rights and responsibilities) of employees.

The **pre-2016 craft-based apprenticeship programmes** usually have a duration of four years and normally consist of seven phases: three off the job and four on the job. Phases 1, 3, 5 and 7 take place with the employer, while phases 2, 4 and 6 take place at an education and training board (phase 2) or an institute of technology (phases 4 and 6). The total duration of off-the-job phases is approximately 40 weeks. The employer pays the apprentice for the on-the-job phases, while the State pays a training allowance to apprentices during the off-the-job phases. On completion of apprenticeship training, a qualified apprentice receives a craft certificate.

**Post-2016-apprenticeships** must be a minimum of two years in duration and lead to awards spanning levels 5-8 on the national framework for qualifications (EQF levels 4-6). In addition,

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<sup>1</sup> Cedefop; SOLAS - Further Education and Training Authority (2022). Vocational education and training in Europe - Ireland: system description [From Cedefop; ReferNet. Vocational education and training in Europe database].

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/ireland-u2>

there are a number of apprenticeships at various stages of development; they have a duration of two to four years and lead to qualifications in the range of levels 5-10 in the national framework for qualifications (EQF levels 4-8). The employer pays the apprentice for the duration of the apprenticeship and the apprentice does generally not pay fees. However, a student contribution is levied on all students (including apprentices) attending institutes of technology (i.e., phases 4 and 6 of apprenticeship training).

Besides apprenticeships, there also exists a **system of traineeship**. Traineeships are not regulated by law (i. e., there are no official occupation profiles) and tend to be developed in response to local employer needs. They must have a work-based learning component of at least 30%. The development of the traineeship system has been the result of recognising the need for skills development. Since 2017 they are also available to school leavers and the employed, while previously only unemployed could join. There are no age restrictions for trainees, and the programmes are free of charge to participants.

**Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses** offer a range of vocational and academic options in areas such as business, healthcare, art and design, IT, and more. They generally last one to two years and focus on providing practical training and hands-on experience. Some courses may include work placements or apprenticeships. PLC courses are offered at level 5 or 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Successful completion leads to a certification recognized by employers. Moreover, some PLC courses are recognized by universities and institutes of technology as entry condition to specific higher education programs. PLC courses can thus provide an alternative pathway into higher education for individuals who may not have achieved the desired results in their Leaving Certificate or who want to explore vocational options before committing to higher education.

**Further Education and Training (FET)** in Ireland refers to a wide range of educational and training opportunities. The sector is highly diversified in terms of the type of programme, level and learner. In terms of level, FET courses range from level 1 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The programmes can be general, vocational or mixed; they include part-time, full-time, evening, online, and blended learning. This flexibility makes them accessible for various target groups, be it young people who have recently completed upper secondary education, adult learners, early school leavers, the employed, the unemployed, asylum seekers and learners with special needs. The FET sector thus plays a crucial role in addressing skill gaps, promoting lifelong learning, and enhancing employability. FET courses usually have a duration of one year if taken full-time. Successful completion of FET programs can lead to various qualifications and certifications, such as awards, certificates, and diplomas.

### Key players and stakeholders

The Irish VET system operates under the guidance of several key institutions: **SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna)** is the national agency responsible for funding, planning and coordinating further education and training. It collaborates closely with the 16 **Education and Training Boards (ETBs)** spread throughout the country. The ETBs provide training opportunities in the context of e.g. PLC and FET. They also play a role in coordinating apprenticeship programs in their regions, working closely with **industry stakeholders** and **employers** to facilitate practical training and classroom-based learning.

In its Strategy<sup>2</sup> for 2020-2024, SOLAS identified **three strategic priorities** for the enhancement of further education and training (FET). These are (1) **building skills**: The wide variety of vocationally focused programs in FET are to be replaced by an effective, low-bureaucracy program. (2) **fostering inclusion**: Due to the different barriers to inclusion, e.g. language problems of migrants or mental problems of the long-term unemployed, there is a need for close cooperation between the ETBs and other stakeholders involved. Technology can also help to personalize the learning experience and address individual support needs. (3) **creating pathways**: The current complex structure of FET in Ireland can form an access barrier which is to be removed. In this context, information, advice and guidance (IAG) services play a pivotal role: FET needs to be continuously promoted and explained in schools as a valid option. Also, IAG for all is needed to facilitate lifelong learning pathways in FET and other (tertiary) education options.

### The IAG System<sup>3</sup>

In Ireland, Information, Advice and Guidance services regarding education, training, and career opportunities are provided by various institutions. In secondary schools, IAG services are provided by trained teachers who have obtained an additional qualification in educational and career counselling. In the Higher Education sector, the student support services include amongst other things careers offices, mature student and access offices. Outside of the education and training system, a variety of institutions provide IAG services, most notably

- the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs),
- PLC providers,
- the public employment service centres (Intreo),
- the offices of the Adult Educational Guidance and Information Service (AEGS).

While so far, a substantial part of IAG services has been provided by public entities, a shift towards externalizing them into the private sector is currently taking place. Admission to private

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<sup>2</sup> SOLAS (2020). Future FET: Transforming Learning – The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy. [https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas\\_fet\\_strategy\\_web.pdf](https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Cedefop (2020). Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices - Ireland. CareersNet national records. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/inventory-lifelong-guidance-systems-and-practices-ireland>

service providers will exclusively happen via referral from the **Department of Social Protection**. Thus, the drop-in and face-to-face counselling will be reduced.

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) used to support the **Department of Education** in the development of guidance services in all areas of education and provided information on the various guidance activities as well as publications and research reports. Amidst recent changes, the Government made the decision to disband the NCGE in September 2022 and started a public consultation process on the idea of lifelong guidance. This consultation process resulted in the publication in December 2023 of the **National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024-2030)**. The Framework and accompanying National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance: Strategic Action Plan (2024 – 2030) were developed by the **National Lifelong Guidance Policy Group**<sup>4</sup>, which was established in 2022.<sup>5</sup>

The **Department of Social Protection (DSP)** provides a free Public Employment Service to jobseekers, employers, employed people, and job changers. These services provide access to employment services, Intreo partners, work-experience programmes and employer opportunities.

**Intreo offices** (the local office for job seekers and accessing social welfare supports) identify the clients' probability of exit from the labour market (PEX) which allows the Intreo case officer to determine the appropriate support required. The Public Employment Service provides employment supports delivered initially through Intreo and subsequently by **Intreo Partners** who are contracted by the DSP. Intreo Partners will build on the supports provided to the jobseeker to continue the progression to become job ready.<sup>6</sup>

In the **further education and training sector**, access to guidance is currently provided via the **Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS)**, based within the regional structures of the regional Education and training boards (ETBs). The AEGS services work with adults and those early school leavers aged over 16. The service is free and provides information and guidance counselling services. It is provided in group settings and on a one-to-one basis to adults attending various FET (further education training) courses. Information on adult education and progression opportunities is provided to the general public. The services are aimed at target groups within the social inclusion agenda.

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<sup>4</sup> The National Lifelong Guidance Policy Group comprises senior officials from five government departments: the Department of Education, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Social Protection, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The Department of Education chairs the group.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/0f219-ministers-for-education-and-further-and-higher-education-research-innovation-and-science-publish-strategy-for-lifelong-guidance/>

<sup>6</sup> Government of Ireland (2023). National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024-2030).

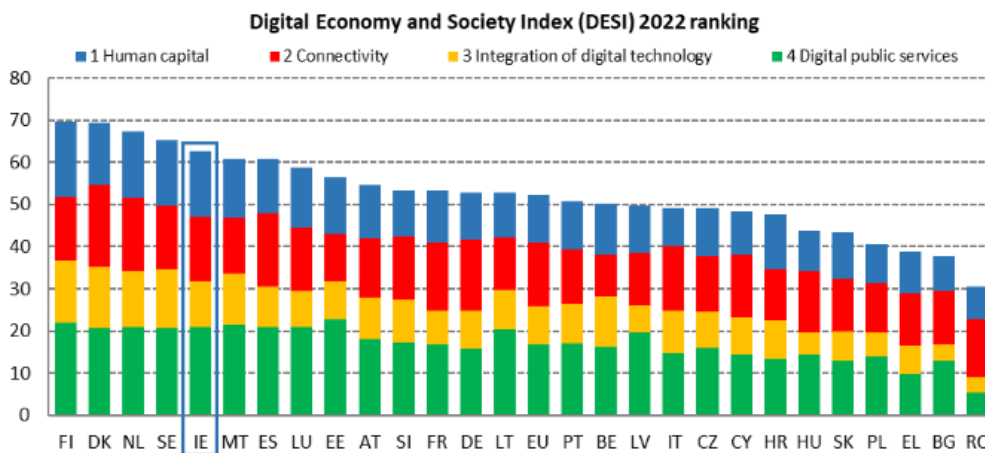
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/02452-guidance-in-schools/?referrer=https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/63c5f-guidance-counselling-in-schools/>

These on-site services are complemented with several digital services, e.g.:

**FETCHCOURSES.ie** is the national portal for education and training programmes within the FET Sectors. Managed and provided by SOLAS and co-funded by the EU, information is provided on all courses offered by ETBs regionally.<sup>7</sup>

## Digitalisation

Ireland achieves an above-average level of digitization compared with the rest of Europe: With a score of 62.7, it ranks fifth in the 2022 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI).<sup>8</sup>

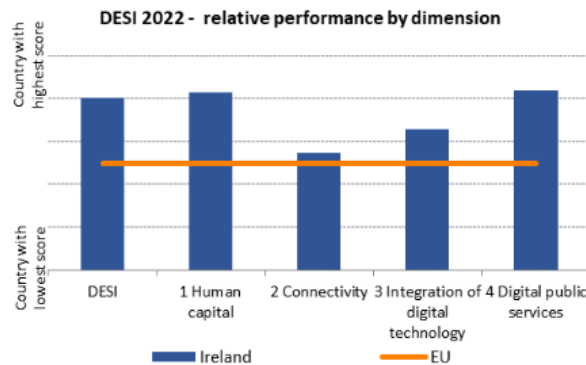


Source: Digital Economy and Society Index 2022 Ireland

Ireland performs especially well regarding the human capital dimension (rank 3 of the 27 EU countries): The share of people with basic digital skills and digital content creation skills, as well as the share of ICT specialists and of ICT graduates is well above the EU average. In terms of connectivity, Ireland ranks 6<sup>th</sup>, with rural areas being almost as well connected as urban ones. The integration of digital technologies in enterprises is rather widespread in Ireland (7<sup>th</sup> of the 27 EU countries), with almost two in three small and medium-sized enterprises having at least a basic level of digital intensity. The public services provided to businesses and citizens in Ireland are highly digitalised and a large proportion of internet users engage actively with e-government services: While in the 2021 DESI report, the share of e-government users was 67 %, it was reported to be 92 % in 2022. Ireland also performs well in digital public services for both businesses and citizens, and scores high in open data.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/inventory-lifelong-guidance-systems-and-practices-ireland>

<sup>8</sup> European Commission: Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022 – Ireland.



Source: Digital Economy and Society Index 2022 Ireland

Ireland is committed to achieving the target of 80 % of adults having at least basic digital skills by 2030, as well as increasing the number of graduates with high-level digital skills by 65 % to over 12,400 by the end of 2022, aiming to further increase this number over the coming years.<sup>9</sup> To this end, Ireland is taking measures across the entire system, from schools to further education and training, higher education, and lifelong learning in general. This encompasses for example the Technology 2022 – Ireland’s Third ICT Action Plan, the Human Capital Initiative, the 2021–2025 Action Plan for Apprenticeship, and eCollege – the FET online learning platform which offers online courses in areas such as computer programming, web and graphic design. These strategies aim at further embedding the use of digital technologies in all teaching, learning and assessment activities, thus fostering the development of digital skills and building awareness and knowledge around the safe and ethical use of digital tools. This is to be achieved by (i) improving the provision of digital infrastructure, connectivity and digital equipment in schools, (ii) providing high quality digital content for use by teachers in the classroom, (iii) supporting institutions of education to further embed effective digital capacity planning and development, and (iv) enhancing key skills development of teachers to ensure a digitally competent and confident teaching workforce which in turn will support the development of digital literacy skills in student population.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission: Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022 – Ireland, p. 4.

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