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Title	Life-long learning and new skills in Ireland : a gender perspective
Authors(s)	Barry, Ursula
Publication date	2010-06
Publication information	Barry, Ursula. "Life-Long Learning and New Skills in Ireland : A Gender Perspective" (June, 2010).
Series	UCD School of Social Justice Working Papers, 10(2):1-27
Publisher	University College Dublin. School of Social Justice
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2144

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Life-Long Learning and New Skills in Ireland: A Gender Perspective

*UCD School of Social Justice Working Papers Series
Number 10(2):1-27*

Ursula Barry

June 2010

Barry, Ursula: ursula.barry@ucd.ie

Women's Studies, School of Social Justice, University College Dublin

How to quote this paper: **Barry, U. 2010. "Life-Long Learning and New Skills in Ireland : A gender Perspective". *UCD School of Social Justice Working Papers Series*. 10(2):1-27. Dublin: University College Dublin.**

1. Introduction

Over the past decade Ireland has undergone dramatic changes. Historically Ireland has been a country of net emigration and high unemployment. The boom that became known as the ‘celtic tiger’ brought with it a decade of high growth, increasing employment and net immigration. It was short-term growth driven primarily by a property and construction boom followed by a recession which saw a collapse of the banking sector and an acute crisis in public sector finances. The deep recession that has hit Ireland over the last two years has seen a return to an economy marked by high levels of unemployment and renewed emigration. At the same time persistent inequality and significant poverty have continued to mark Irish society even through the ‘boom’ years. This is the context in which policies towards lifelong learning are implemented.

Historically Ireland has only relatively recently expanded our second-level and higher education and this expansion occurred mainly through increased numbers of places within the higher education sector. Educational attainment levels among the older population, those on low income and those in marginalised groups continues to be extremely low even by international standards. Increasing numbers of full-time courses in universities and other higher education institutes are primarily directed at those who have just completed second level education. The consequences of our relatively late investment in secondary and higher education are still evident in the educational profile of our older adult population, which remains poor by international standards. This weakness is compounded by our similarly poor performance in lifelong learning. Ireland has traditionally had a strong community-based adult education sector and, in recent decades, a particularly strong women’s community-based education and development sector. This is a sector that is under-resourced and which receives receiving low levels of public funding. It relies heavily work and local commitment and unfortunately cutbacks in public expenditure since 2008 has hit this sector badly.

The most recent Irish Census for 2006 revealed that over 15% of the adult population had only completed primary level education and 38% of the population aged over fifteen years has not completed second level education. Ireland emerged as the country with the second lowest level of literacy among 22 countries surveyed by OECD in 2000 in which one in four adults, were found to have a level of literacy ‘below that required for fully effective participation in society’ (OECD Adult Literacy Survey 2000). The recent announcement of the cancelation of the 2009 School Leavers Survey for ‘financial reasons’ means the withdrawal of a crucial source of information on educational provision, access and disadvantage on the basis of gender and social class.

Under current Irish employment policy (National Reform Programme) there is a stated commitment under Guideline 23 to ‘improving educational systems and skill levels’. The National Skills Strategy (NSS) projects up-skilling 500,000 existing lower skilled people by at least one level on National Framework for Qualifications by 2020. The NSS also sets down targets of increasing the participation rate in upper second level education to 90% and of increasing the progression rate to third level to 70%. With the depth of the economic crisis and the pressure on the public financial system there is no evidence that these forecasts will remain as anything other than aspirations. Ireland had reached the Lisbon target for women’s employment rate by 2007, although the impact of recession and rising unemployment has already seen the rate of employment slipping back from this position to 59%.

2. Lifelong learning: national progress and debate

2.1 Early school-leavers

2.1.1 National situation

Early school leaving has been a persistent trend affecting a significant proportion of young Irish people over recent decades. The most recent report to quantify and analyse early school leaving based on a longitudinal database (Post-Primary Longitudinal Study PPLS) was published in early 2010 ‘No Way Back ? The Dynamics of Early School Leaving’ by Delma Byrne and Emer Smyth (Liffey Press in association with the Economic and Social Research Institute 2010). This report highlighted a relatively stable school completion rate over the past fifteen years averaging between 80 and 83% with some, as yet unconfirmed, data that suggests an improvement to around 86% in 2007. A significant majority of those leaving with no educational qualifications or with Junior Certificate level (second level/first exam) qualifications are young men, primarily from low income, welfare dependent households or from specific minorities, for example Travellers or people with disabilities. What the data does also reveal is that a small but significant number of early school leavers do not enter second level education at all. Some commentators have speculated that the low level of school completion may have been affected by labour market conditions, which saw a high rate of growth in employment opportunities from the mid 1990s through to 2007. However, the economic situation has now changed dramatically to one of recession, reduced public expenditure and high levels of unemployment, affecting young people in particular. One of the negative consequences of the recession has been a cancellation of the planned Early School Leavers Survey for 2009 – stated as due to expenditure cutbacks - which means there is an absence of critical up-to-date data.

The following table shows the qualification levels by gender of those leaving the second level system in 2007.

Table 1 Second Level Qualification Level by Gender 2007

Qualifications	Female	Male
No Qualification	2%	3%
Junior Certificate	8%	15%
Leaving Certificate	90%	82%

Source : Byrne and Smyth 2010

Data analysis indicates that the critical factors in determining early school leaving are primarily social class and gender. Girls are consistently the majority of those completing second level education and parental social class is a key factor in explaining patterns of early school leaving. While there has been a marked improvement in school completion rates among those from working class backgrounds, there remains strong evidence that parental social class and parental involvement in education are crucial determinants.

“While participation rates in education have increased significantly in Ireland over the last number of decades, up to the 1990s education policy in Ireland focused on

increasing the overall level of participation in education with little attempts to promote equity in access to the system.” (Newman 2005).

Research also indicates that schools with a cross-class social mix have higher completion rates and also that school policy can play a crucial role. Where the relationships between students and teachers are good and where the disciplinary system is seen as fair, completion rates are higher. Students with low levels of reading and mathematical skills have lower completion rates, whereas those in schools with mixed ability have higher rates. Poor records of attendance at school are frequently preceded by early school leaving. (McCoy and Smyth 2004, Oakes 2005). Another group of young women and men are those that never make the transition from first to second level education. Estimates indicate that these account for a small but significant group of young people – figures for 2001 are 724 and for 2007 are 1,165 (NESF 2007). Early school leaving patterns are also different across different kinds of schools. Secondary schools tend to have the highest completion rates, followed by vocational schools and then community and comprehensive schools.

“ It is important, however, to note that differences in retention rates between school sectors are likely to reflect the composition of the student body rather than the impact of the school sector per se. Previous research has indicated that vocational schools have a disproportionate number of working class students and those with lower academic ability...groups that are more likely to drop out of the school system. ” (Byrne and Smyth 2010)

Unemployment rates are particularly high among young women and men with no educational qualifications, running at a level of between 40 and 50%. Lack of educational qualifications and early school leaving result in significant disadvantages on the labour market. Under the Irish National Anti-Poverty Strategy education is viewed as central to addressing poverty. Increasing levels of educational attainment are seen as critical to improving access to more and better job opportunities (Office of Social Inclusion 2009). Research indicates that rates of pay, access to training, education and diverse employment opportunities are all negatively affected by low qualifications.

“ In particular, early leavers in Ireland are found to experience educational disadvantages in relation to access to further education/training, employment chances, employment quality and broader social outcomes. Research has highlighted the ‘one way’ nature of the Irish educational system. Access to further and higher education is generally restricted to Leaving Certificate completers, especially those with higher grades (Byrne et al 2009) and participation in life-long learning is more prevalent among those who already have higher levels of education (O Connell 1999). Even apprenticeship training, a traditional route for male Junior Certificate leavers now attracts a significant proportion of young men with Leaving Certificate qualifications.” (Byrne and Smyth 2010)

In an EU context 16% of young men and 9% of young women are classified as early school leavers in Ireland. EU Comparative data is based on the proportion of those aged 18 to 24 years that were not in education or training in the previous month. Targets for school completion rates and early school leaving levels have been set under the National Action Plans on Poverty and Social Inclusion. An earlier target of a school completion rate of 90% by 2000 and 98% by 2007 was revised downwards in 2002 and replaced by targets of 85% by 2003 and 90% by 2006. These targets have not been met (Office of Social Inclusion 2009). Under the Lisbon strategy a target of a maximum of 10% early school leaving and a second

level completion rate of 85% has since been adopted as policy of the current Irish government. While a review of the Lisbon Strategy in Ireland indicates that the 85% completion rate has been attained the early school leaving rate remains above the target maximum.

The private market sector also plays a role in the education and training sector in Ireland. While there is no comprehensive data covering private provision, there is an understanding that its role is significant.

“Education and training in Ireland also includes a small, but significant, private sector, comprised of private, independent colleges and professional institutes. Courses offered in private colleges are accredited by a variety of awarding bodies including the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). Professional institutes provide training for occupations such as bankers, accountants, insurance brokers, lawyers, managers, etc. In the main, professional institutes act as their own awarding bodies.” (Condon and McNaboe 2009).

Another element in the educational and training system that also has a significance for young Irish people is the significant number of Irish students in third level educational systems outside Ireland, primarily the U.K. In 2008 6,120 Irish students accepted higher education places in the U.K (1% increase over 2007) and 5,300 Irish students qualified from technology, health, veterinary and agricultural and other UK courses (Condon and McNaboe 2009).

2.1.2 Policies

In an important development in the policy framework towards education in 2000, the legal school leaving age was raised to 16 years of age and the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) was set up under the Education Welfare Act 2000. The NEWB has a specific responsibility in relation to children and family welfare and particularly to school attendance. In a small number of cases a court order is sought and a School Attendance Notice (SAN) is issued linked to the allocation of a Education Welfare Officer (EWO) who initiates a formal monitoring process for each specific child.

Despite a number of important policy initiatives to address early school leaving, the target rates set by successive governments, which in turn coincide with EU targets, have not been reached.

One set of policies has focused on the educational curriculum at second level. A Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and a Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) were introduced aimed at introducing more continuous assessment, basic skills, social and personal development into the curriculum. Around 4% of pupils took the JCSP and 7% the LCA and a recent evaluation of the LCA showed positive results (Banks et al 2010). These changes coincided with a levelling off of early school leaving rates which it can be argued has been a significant positive achievement, particularly against a background of strong employment growth which has meant that job opportunities for young people were more readily available up until 2008.

A second set of policies has involved increased resources to schools in disadvantaged areas under the School Completion Programme (SCP) and involves both first and second level schools. Eligible schools may apply for funds to develop both in-school and after-school support systems under the programme for Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

(DEIS). It is estimated that around 20% of students were attending schools that benefitted from SCP in 2007 (Hibernian Consulting 2008).

The most successful policy that has focused on early school leavers is the Youthreach and Travellers programme which offers training and educational opportunities to young men and women outside the traditional educational environment. Its stated aim is to ‘prevent the drift into long-term unemployment by strengthening the preventative approach’ and is part of a wider ‘Back to Education Initiative’. Evidence from locally-based programmes show the positive impact that Youthreach and other access initiatives have achieved among young people who would otherwise have left the educational system (Hibernian Consulting 2008; Dept of Education and Science 2009; Department of Enterprise and Employment 2009).

However, the recession of the last two years has had a strongly negative impact on the economy as a whole and also on public finances causing cut-backs in certain important programmes aimed at educational disadvantage resulting in reduced resources towards educational programmes particularly those supporting educational disadvantage, for example classroom assistants, language supports and school book programmes.

2.1.3 Gender issues

The Central Statistics Office “Women and Men in Ireland 2009” estimated that boys are nearly twice as likely to leave school earlier than girls. The estimated rate for 2008 was 8.7% for girls and 14.2% for boys. While girls continue to have higher school completion rates than boys, the gender gap has narrowed over time. In the 1980s the gender gap was around fifteen percentage points and, while still substantial, this gap had narrowed to around 7-8 percentage points by 2007 in the latest research (McCoy et al 2010). Even where girls and boys attend the same school, gender differences in completion rates are evident. Patterns across social class, however, are similar between girls and boys.

“ The gender gap is evident across all social classes. However, the gender gap is greatest for the farmer group; in other words, farm daughters resemble those from professional backgrounds in their school completion patterns but farm sons have much lower rates of retention. The gender gap in early school leaving appears to be least evident in the higher professional group. ” (Byrne and Smyth 2010).

Expectations on the labour market are likely to play a crucial role here. Girls from farm families have much fewer opportunities to work on, or inherit, farms and consequently are likely to place more emphasis on educational qualifications. On the contrary, both girls and boys from higher professional backgrounds tend to both have strong expectations of higher-paid and high quality jobs on the labour market – and these are linked directly to educational qualifications. Early school leaving is highest among working class boys – among those from non-employed, semi/unskilled manual and skilled manual households – and those from specific minorities such as travellers. It is estimated that 25% of young travellers and 20% of ‘newcomer’ immigrants leave school early compared to 10% of young people generally (and this only includes those that make the transition to second-level) (Byrne and Smyth 2010).

Data from the latest School Leavers Survey 2007 gives an indication of the reasons for leaving school early among girls and boys. The largest proportion (around two-thirds) of both boys and girls cited ‘school factors’ as their reason for leaving early. Gender differences were evident in the greater percentage of girls citing ‘family reasons’ (25%) compared to boys

(9%) and the higher proportion of boys citing ‘economic or work reasons’ (70%) compared to girls (44%).

Table 2 Reasons for Leaving School Prior to Completing Senior Cycle by Gender (2007)

Factors	Male	Female
School	61%	64%
Economic / Work	70%	44%
Health	5%	6%
Family	9%	25%

School Leavers Survey 2007

Unemployment rates are significantly higher among early school leavers without qualifications, a gap that has been growing over the recent decade. Figures for 2007 revealed a 40% unemployment rate among young male early school leavers compared to a rate of 7% among those with Leaving Certificate qualifications. Among young women early school leavers the difference in the unemployment rates are even greater – 50% of young women with no qualifications were unemployed compared to 12% of those with Leaving Certificate qualifications (Byrne et al 2009). There is also evidence that young women who leave school early are more likely to become lone mothers (Smyth and McCoy).

School leavers in paid employment are concentrated in industry, distribution and personal services sectors of employment. Gender differences among school leavers in paid employment are strongly evident : women are concentrated in the distribution and personal services sector in service and clerical occupations while men are concentrated in the industry sector in skilled and semi-skilled manual occupations (Byrne, McCoy and Wilson 2007).

2.2 Educational Level of the Labour Force

2.2.1 National Situation

Recent data from 2009 presents a comprehensive picture of the levels of education attainment linked to labour force participation rates and to unemployment rates. It is very clear from these data that labour force participation rates rise across the board as educational attainment levels increase. While this is true for both women and men, much higher participation rates of women are closely linked to higher educational levels. Unemployment rates among men are higher than among women with a particularly marked difference between young women and young men whose unemployment rate is recorded as 22.5% (for those with primary or below qualifications) and 22.7% (for those with lower secondary qualifications) compared to 9.5% and 12.1% for those same categories of young women. Lowest levels of unemployment for both men and women are recorded among those with Third Level degree qualifications as well as the highest participation rates. It is also worth noting that the gender gap in participation rates is at its narrowest where educational levels are highest – among women with third level degree qualifications.

Table 3 Persons aged 15 to 64, classified by the highest level of education attained, ILO Economic Status and Sex October – December 2009

	Highest educational level attained	Unemployment	Labour Force Participation	
		rate	Rate	
		%	%	
Males aged 15 to 64				
	Primary or below	22.5	52.0	
	Lower secondary	22.7	64.9	
	Higher secondary	17.8	80.2	
	Post leaving cert	20.4	89.4	
	Third level non-honours degree	10.4	91.0	
	Third level honours degree or above	6.5	90.9	
	Other	16.6	81.9	
	Total males aged 15 to 64	16.1	77.8	
Females aged 15 to 64				
	Primary or below	9.5	26.3	
	Lower secondary	12.1	36.3	
	Higher secondary	8.4	62.2	
	Post leaving cert	12.2	70.1	
	Third level non-honours degree	7.2	79.4	
	Third level honours degree or above	5.7	85.1	
	Other	8.1	63.9	
	Total females aged 15 to 64	8.3	62.1	

Central Statistics Office (2009) Quarterly National Household Survey Decem. 2009 Table 23.

Data from the latest School Leavers Survey 2007 provides a picture of the extent to which both girls and boys have participated in any form of post Second Level training or education, including PLC courses and state training courses under FAS, the National Training Authority. It is clear from this data that both boys and girls those who have completed their Leaving Certificates are much more likely (over 80%) to participate in further education or training while those with no qualifications are less likely (around 50%). It is likely that minimum entry requirements (linked to the Leaving Certificate) for both Third Level courses as well as apprenticeships, is a key factor here. Gender differences are not marked but it is notable that women with Junior Certificate qualifications are more likely (68%) than men (61%) to participate in further education and/or training.

Table 4 Percentage Participating in Post Second Level Education or Training (2007)

	Male	Female	Total
No Qualification	53%	51%	52%
Junior Cert.	61%	68%	64%
Leaving Cert.	83%	88%	85%

School Leavers' Survey Report 2007 (2008)

This table confirms the importance of completion of second level education, showing that more than 88% of girls and 83% of boys (of those who sat the Leaving Certificate in 2005) had gone onto some form of post-school education and training in 2007. 25% of those young people went onto further education and training - two thirds of these to higher education (Condon and McNaboe 2009).

2.2.2 Policies

Ireland had reached the Lisbon target for women's employment rate by 2007, although the impact of recession and rising unemployment has already seen the rate of employment slipping back from this position to 59%. The government had announced a €1 billion investment programme over five years in the National Development Plan 2007-2013 focused on education, training programmes and active labour market schemes (implemented through FAS – the national training agency). While there is a stated commitment to meet improved targets of educational access and opportunity, deteriorating economic conditions are acting against to undermine stated objectives. Pressure to make substantial cuts in public expenditure and increasing levels of unemployment across the private sector have already seen reductions in resources towards certain initiatives (see above) and are not the conditions in which new positive education and employment initiatives are likely to be implemented.

2.2.3 Gender Issues

Research into women's participation on the labour market indicates that education attainment has been a critical factor in shaping rising employment and participation rates among women in Ireland to a level of the EU average. Russell et al highlight the dramatic rise in female participation rates between 1998 and 2007 from 57% to 67% (drawing 300,000 women onto the labour market). They also point to strong variations in participation rates linked to age and number and ages of children – women with children under 5 years, lone parents and young women revealed the lowest participation rates – indicating 'persistent barriers' to employment. Changes in educational attainment levels they identify as an important factor affecting all groups.

“The low rate of increase for mothers of young children and the stagnation of rates among lone parents in a period of rapid economic growth suggest persistent barriers to employment among these groups. Despite the fact that the rates of increase were highest among women with low education, changes in the educational composition of the population meant that women in the labour force were much better qualified in 2007 than 1998. For instance, the proportion of the female workforce with third level education rose from 29 to 43 per cent over the period....

...Our analyses show that changes in the educational qualifications of the adult female population and demographic changes in the age profile account for about 40 per cent of the rise in female participation between 1994 and 2007, while the rest of the change is due to behavioural changes or changes in other characteristics.” (Russell et al 2009)

This period of increased participation and employment rates among women has coincided with a particularly strong period of growth in employment opportunities and rising real wages which drew many women onto the labour market (as well as the rising cost of other household expenditure in relation to housing for example). Research has consistently shown that higher educational qualifications among women are directly linked to higher employment and

participation rates (Callan and Farrell, 1991; Barrett *et al.*, 2000; Barry 2009). However, women continue to earn substantially less than men – the adjusted gender pay gap for 2008 was 17% (CSO 2010). There are also gender differences in participation rates in Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, with women having higher rates of participation in PLC courses and more women progressing through to Higher Education.

Educational attainment levels of women have changed very significantly over time as the following Table 5 below illustrates. 29% of women had third level qualifications in 1998 compared to 43% in 2007. Women with only primary level qualifications had decreased from 10% to 7% and those with Junior Cert (2nd level) qualifications had decreased from 19% to 11% of the female workforce over the same period 1998-2007.

Table 5 : Educational Composition of the Female Labour Force 1998-2007

	Primary	Junior Cert.	Leaving Cert.	Third Level
1998	10%	19%	42%	29%
2000	10%	16%	44%	30%
2005	7%	13%	41%	39%
2007	7%	11%	39%	43%

Source |: Russell et al 2009

A very specific gender profile is evident from data on apprenticeships, which with its traditional link to construction industry trades is almost entirely male dominated. By far the majority of those taking up apprenticeships on leaving second level schooling are young men, accounting for 13% of all male school leavers. Analysing the socio-economic backgrounds of those taking up apprenticeships, they are mainly from those defined as skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual linking to employment in construction. Because there has been a collapse in construction and construction-related employment since 2007, these education and training opportunities have shown a marked downfall. Less than 1% of annual apprenticeship registrations are female and of the cumulative total of registrations currently for 2010 this pattern is repeated with only 94 women and 19,600 male apprentices.

Table 6 FAS Apprenticeship registrations by year and gender 2005 - 2009

Year	Male	Female	Total figure
2009	99.2%	0.8%	1,535
2008	99.5%	0.5%	3,765
2007	99.3%	0.7%	6,764
2006	99.5%	0.5%	8,306
2005	99.5%	0.5%	8,304

Source : FAS – data provided by FAS 2010.

Russell et al highlight in their research the link between the level of education among women and men and their pattern of labour force participation, focusing on the rise in participation rates among older women and those with the lowest educational level – in both instances these rises have occurred from a very low base. Among men the patterns are much higher and very different although the data does reveal a lower (although not increasing) rate of participation among men with lower educational qualifications.

“In 2007 activity rates ranged from 35 per cent for those with primary level education or below, up to 82 per cent among those with third level educational qualifications. Our trend figures show that the greatest rise in participation rates was among the least educated group. The rate of participation rose by almost 6 percentage points which represents an increase of 20 per cent on the 1998 level. There is a strong correlation between level of education and age, because it is the older age groups that have fewest qualifications. The steep rise among the lowest educational group is, therefore, consistent with the strong increases in participation amongst older women since 1998. Levels of participation among women with Leaving Certificate or college level education have shown only a small increase since 1998.... there are two competing trends at work, the number of women in the working age population with low qualifications is shrinking, but a higher proportion of that group are active in the labour market”. (Russell et al 2009).

Table 7 : Participation Rates by Level of Education

	1998 Women	2007 Women	Change	1998 Men	2007 Men
Primary	28.9	34.6	5.7	70.4	67.9
Inter/Group	48.4	51.4	3.0	90.3	87.6
Leaving Cert.	63.0	65.3	2.3	86.4	88.0
Post leaving and Third Level	80.2	82.0	1.8	91.7	92.9
All	56.7	66.9	10.2	85.2	86.8

Source : Helen Russell et al Respondents aged 20-64 years.

Note : ILO definitions of employment status. 1998 Special tabulation from CSO; 2007 authors' analysis of *QNHS* 2007 micro-data. The third level/post-leaving Cert categories changed over time. In 1998 it included: third level university, third level IT/ Post-Grad/other; and Technical College. In 2007 the categories are Post-leaving Cert (PLC), third level non-degree and third level degree and above. By grouping all post-leaving certificate level qualifications together the categories are broadly comparable over time.

A clear profile of trends in education and activity levels among women is evident in the following table, also taken from Russell et al. It shows the definite trends towards higher participation among women between 1998 and 2007 together with a steady increase in the proportion of women within the labour force with medium to higher level qualifications. As labour market participation levels increased over the period from 57% to 67% those with no formal or primary level education fell from 35% to 29%.

Table 8 Education levels among women active in the labour market and population (000s)

	1998			2007		
	Active (000)	Pop (000)	%	Active (000)	Pop (000)	%
No formal/Primary Education	59.0	205.1	28.8	55.6	160.5	34.6
Lower Secondary	113.4	234.2	48.4	96.0	186.7	51.4
Upper Secondary	246.0	390.6	63.0	241.4	369.7	65.3
Post Leaving	176.7	220.2	80.2	473.3	577.3	82.0
All	595.1	1050.1	56.7	866.3	1294.2	66.9

Note: Women aged 20-64 years. ILO Employment Status.

Sources: 2007, own calculations using *QNHS* microdata, 1998 figures, special tabulation from CSO.

Publicly funded or state-sponsored training is primarily provided by FÁS (National Training Authority) training schemes, programmes (together with a number of other State agencies Failte Ireland, Bord Iascaigh Mhara, Teagasc, Youthreach - not including apprenticeships). Figures for 2006-07 show that 5% of school leavers participate in these training courses (6% male school leavers and 4% female school leavers). These courses encompass a range of different levels – some specific skills training, others linked to second level qualification and many also linked to general labour market activation programmes. Research indicates that the socio-economic background of households and the kind of school attended were important factors in explaining the pattern of participation in training. Participation rates are higher among those from households with lower educational attainment levels and from those participating in vocational schools at second level (Hibernian Consulting 2008).

2.3 Participation in lifelong learning

2.3.1 National Situation

Ireland's participation rate in lifelong learning is poor. Only 14% of 25-64 year-olds in Ireland were engaged in non-formal education and training in 2002, compared with 16.5 percent in the EU25 and 34.5 percent in the UK. Ireland has a high level of adult literacy (Expert Group for Future Skills Needs 2007).

The Irish legislative and policy framework for lifelong learning began to be formalised during the late 1990s with the passing of the Universities Act 1997 which included a specific statement on lifelong learning. Section 9 (j) of the Act which states that one of the objectives is to 'facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education'. The Education Welfare Act (Ireland) came into law in 2000 set the compulsory school attendance age in Ireland at 16 years, or completion of lower second-level education, whichever is the later. The current government has established for the first time a Minister of State for Lifelong learning who has a responsibility for the development of the National Skills Strategy which has set down a target to increase the percentage of those with higher education qualifications in the labour force from 39% in 2009 to 48% by 2020 (it had increased from a level of 33% in

2005). Those with second level qualifications have been targeted to increase to 45% (from 40%) by 2020.

2.3.2. Policies

In 2000, the Government also issued a White Paper ‘Learning for Life’ and this was followed by the Qualification (Education and Training) Act, National Training Fund Act and the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework in 2003. The White Paper represented a significant development in adult education/lifelong learning and its policy perspective was confirmed when the National Development Plan NDP (2000-2006) was published which set as a priority the “continued investment in education and training and, in particular, through developing a strategic vision for lifelong learning” (National Development Plan 2000- 2006, para. 5.21).

Investment in education under the NDP was to concentrate on:

- Prevention of early school leaving;
- Increasing the retention rate at second level;
- Expanding adult and second chance education and training opportunities;
- Widening access to third level education;
- Improving the funding situation for Research, Technological Development and Innovation (RTDI) – in 2000 it was the lowest in Europe.
- Establishment and continuous development of a coherent National Qualifications Framework which underpins a strategy of lifelong learning;
- Supporting the requirements of the labour market.

These objectives were confirmed in the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013. Social partnership agreements entered into by the Government over this time period – i.e. the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF) (2000-2002) and Sustaining Progress (2003-2005) (more particularly the former) explicitly referred to Lifelong Learning. The PPF acknowledged lifelong learning as the key to a future of sustained economic growth and social development at a time of ongoing change and called for the development of a strategic framework for lifelong learning including the establishment of a Taskforce on Lifelong Learning. The report from the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning (2002) a Strategic Framework of Lifelong Learning by mapping existing provisions, identifying gaps in those provisions and proposing solutions to fill those gaps. Sustaining Progress specifically referred to ‘... maintaining the promoting and investing in Lifelong Learning within available resources’ (Taskforce on Lifelong Learning Report p 42). Following these reports a National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education was established in 2003 and has published a plan aimed at those groups underrepresented in education and also been involved in evaluating access programmes into higher education.

A later Report on Adult Literacy – Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science (2006) made 28 recommendations across a range of key areas in adult literacy, including planning, structures and organisation, staffing, literacy initiatives and supporting access to literacy services. The Report called for further developments particularly in relation to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services, workplace literacy programmes, family literacy programmes and the development of a literacy strategy specifically for the Travelling community. Evaluations on the implementation of these reports and recommendations have not yet been carried out.

Under current Irish employment policy (National Reform Programme 2009) there is a stated commitment under Guideline 23 to ‘improving educational systems and skill levels’. The National Skills Strategy (NSS) projects upskilling 500,000 lower skilled people by at least one level on the National Framework for Qualifications by 2020. The NSS also sets down targets of increasing the participation rate in upper second level education to 90% and increasing the progression rate to third level to 70%.

However, Irish policy has been strongly criticised for its lack of important policy provisions. In a statement issued by the Statutory Committee on Educational Disadvantage (2005) it concluded :

“Ireland lags behind other industrialised countries in having no legislative basis for paid educational leave to enable people to gain qualifications later in life, having been educationally disadvantaged in their earlier years’ (Statutory Committee on Educational Disadvantage 2005).

A number of specific initiatives were introduced over the last few years that will have a small but significant impact on access to educational opportunities, particularly for those who have become unemployed during the recent recession.

Changes to Back to Education Allowance Scheme : The Back to Education Allowance Scheme (BTEA) allows eligible jobseekers to return to education while continuing to draw welfare payments. Improvements have been made as follows : jobseekers who have been out of formal education for at least 2 years may access a second BTEA once they have been in receipt of Jobseeker’s Allowance/Benefit for at least three months (down from six months).

Earlier access is also being provided to the BTEA third level scheme from a period on Jobseekers Allowance/Benefit of 9 months (down from 12 months) on the recommendation of either a FAS Employment Services Officer or a Facilitator from DSFA. Both the Departments of Social and Family Affairs (D/SFA) and Enterprise, Trade and Employment (D/ETE) are also stated to be working together to devise a new graduate placement scheme. It is intended that graduates will be allowed to maintain their social welfare entitlements whilst gaining work experience. Details have not yet been announced.

The Department of Education and Science (D/ES) has a programme to support the education of teen parents and contributes towards the childcare costs of participants aimed at early school leavers and the unemployed. Participants in such programmes are mostly young women although the target population (both early school leavers and the unemployed) are more likely to be male (NWS 2008). Childcare allowances are paid on a range of FAS training and labour market programmes and have been particularly important on Community Employment Schemes on which women lone parents and women spouses of unemployed men make up a large proportion of participants. Total childcare allowances (a contribution towards the cost of childcare incurred by participants in FÁS training) amounted to €4.9 million in 2008.

2.3.3. Gender Issues

Gender differences are very evident when data on educational attainment is correlated with data on socio-economic background. Young people from professional, employer/manager and farming backgrounds have significantly higher levels of educational attainment than those from skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual backgrounds. Those from unemployed

households have particularly low levels of educational attainment. Women consistently show higher levels of educational attainment than men across all categories as the following table indicates. Women with Leaving Certificate qualifications range from 64% to 96% across different socio-economic backgrounds compared to men with a range 53% to 92% across the different categories.

Table 11 : Initial Level of Education Attained by Socio-Economic Background (2007) – Parental Occupation

	Male			Female			Total
	No Quals.	Junior Cert.	Leaving Cert.	No Quals	Junior Cert.	Leaving Cert.	
Farmer/Agricultural	2.6%	15.1%	82.3%	1.3%	3.1%	95.6%	8.6%
Higher/Lower Professional	1.5%	6.1%	92.4%	0.7%	4.6%	94.7%	20.5%
Employer/ manager	0.3%	8.5%	91.3%	0.3%	6.9%	92.8%	10.9%
Intermediate/other non-manual	2.7%	20.7%	76.6%	1.9%	10.5%	87.6%	34.6%
Skilled/semi/ unskilled manual	3.2%	17.9%	78.9%	1.6%	9.2%	89.3%	16.2%
Unemployed	11.9%	35.2%	52.8%	12.5%	10.8%	76.7%	3.6%
Other/Unknown	5.6 %	17.2%	77.1%	2.2%	14.2%	83.6%	5.6%

School Leavers Survey 2007

Similar factors influence gender differences in participation rates in post leaving certificate courses. Young women make up the majority of participants.

“Gender disparities are particularly evident as female school-leavers continue to dominate entry to this sector. Patterns of participation by parental socio-economic group show relatively high levels of entry into this form of post-school education among young people from other non-manual backgrounds and skilled manual backgrounds, with young people from professional and farming backgrounds less likely to pursue this educational path “. Russell et al 2009

State financial supports to participants in higher education is very limited in Ireland, is strictly means tested, and has in fact been falling in recent years. Women are slightly more likely to be in receipt of grants, linked primarily to the household background (parental income) they are from. For example, a higher proportion of women come from farming backgrounds which in turn leads to a higher proportion of households qualifying under means test regulations which are more income-based than asset-based. The overall percentage of those receiving state grants fell from 46.9 of higher education entrants in 1997-98 to 34.4% in 2006-07 (36% of female entrants and 34% of male entrants).

Table 12 Percentage of Full-Time Higher Education Entrants receiving a Grant

	1997/98	2002/04	2006/07
All	46.9	37.3	34.4
Males	43.7	35.5	32.3
Females	49.6	38.8	36.2

Source : Department of Education and Science 2009

Current educational attainment levels among young women are higher than among young men and, in a period of economic crisis this may be one factor (as well as sectoral and other factors) contributing to the lower unemployment rates among young women. Further evidence of the importance of educational attainment and training emerges from the data for lone parents and women returners and is likely to have become increasingly significant since the recession that has hit Ireland since 2008. For example, low wage expectations among lone parents linked is linked to their low level of educational attainment and is a likely disincentive to employment and the ‘occupational downgrading’ of women returners is likely to have a similar outcome. In this context, education and training are vital (Russell et al 2009; Barry 2009).

Women are far more likely to have a third level qualification in Ireland than men. 51% of women aged 25-34 years have a third level qualification compared to 39% of men. Gender differences are evident in the examination performances of young women and men with women attaining higher results in both Junior and Leaving Certificates (Byrne, McCoy and Watson 2007).

Doctoral enrolments have also shown a significant increase over the five year period from 2003 to 2007. Data drawn from HEA reports are summarised in the following paragraphs. Enrolments at PhD level have risen by more than a half since 2003, going from 3,815 to almost 6,000 in 2007. Enrolments for postgraduate certificates and diplomas also grew strongly and have increased by 47% since 2003, reaching 7,742 in 2007. Enrolments for master degrees increased steadily and totalled 15,471 in 2007, a third more than in 2003.

More than one half of all students enrolled on postgraduate programmes in 2007 were female (56%), an increase on the 53% share observed in 2006, but on a par with the 2005 share (also 56%). Females dominate in particular at postgraduate cert/diploma level, making up approximately two thirds of enrolments; there are also slightly more females than males at masters level (53% are female). On the other hand, enrolments are almost gender balanced at PhD level where 49% are female.

Over one third (36%) of postgraduate enrolments are for part-time students. The share of part-time students is highest for postgraduate cert/diploma courses (46%) and lowest for PhD programmes (13%). Post-graduate part-time students are primarily enrolled in social science, business and law programmes (27%) or health and welfare programmes (26%). Women accounted for 61% of all postgraduate awards in 2007: at postgraduate cert/diploma and master levels, females received 70% and 56% of awards respectively. At PhD level, however, males have a higher share with 54% of all PhDs.

Central to women’s learning opportunities and participation in lifelong learning is the issue of childcare (AONTAS, 2003). AONTAS have highlighted flexible needs-based childcare support for adult learners as key to participation though there is a growing difficulty with the cost of insurance, access to appropriate premises/facilities and availability of trained childcare personnel. The Women’s Education Network states that ‘Locally based education groups through providing safe and accessible childcare attracted many women who could not

otherwise participate in education', and AONTAS recommends that adequate, affordable and accessible childcare should be an integral part of funded programmes and not an add-on or an afterthought (AONTAS, 2003, p4). Owens (2000) observes that some men's groups serve as a 'gateway to education' through linking men to relevant programmes and supporting them through the process rather than offering education in its own right. To engage marginalized men, Owens (2000) emphasises the importance of counsellors to provide emotional support for participants and identifies programme participants as a key resource to motivate other more marginalised people to participate in adult education.

2.4 Summary and Conclusions

Significant changes have taken place in participation rates within the educational system in Ireland over recent years. Levels of participation among those coming from lower income households and among women have shown above average levels of increase. However, early school leaving continues to be a serious problem affecting primarily young Irish men and specific minorities such as members of Traveller Community. Targets to reduce early school leaving have not been realised and while this may have been in part due to job opportunities during the years of high growth in the Irish economy, this situation has now changed significantly. The recession of the last two years has had a strongly negative impact on the economy as a whole and also on public finances causing cut-backs in certain programmes aimed at educational disadvantage.

3. Lifelong learning and flexicurity

3.1 National Situation

Part-time employment and flexible working hours are the most common forms of flexible work arrangements on the Irish labour market. The growth of part-time work in Ireland follows a similar pattern as that of other European countries. In line with other EU countries, part-time work is more common among women than men, and much of the growth in part-time employment is linked to women's increased involvement in paid employment, mainly in the services sector. Within the public sector flexible work arrangements are widely available and take-up is high, particularly of flexitime and mainly by women. Within the private sector flexible working arrangements, other than specific forms of statutory leave entitlements, are informal and most policies operate at the discretion of individual employers. Gender patterns are evident in flexible working practices reflected in the priority attached to time among women workers linked to their carrying of the primary responsibility for care.

Statutory provision for leave entitlements, other than maternity leave, are limited in Ireland and at the lower end of the EU spectrum. Only maternity leave is paid and while there is a statutory entitlement to parental leave, it is unpaid. Paternity leave is not recognised under Irish employment law and hence there is no statutory entitlement. There are few specific incentives to women returning to work after a period of leave or to facilitate a return to paid employment generally. Leave for family and other purposes is largely discretionary. Certain key employers of women, for example the civil and public sectors, provide for a range of flexible work and leave arrangements. Individual private sector companies have also implemented their own work-life balance initiatives. Development is slow however, and there is evidence that a growth in long-hours culture and excessive commuting time has been in practice undermining the quality of life for a significant section of the Irish workforce. In the context of the deepening recession in the Irish economy it is unlikely that new initiatives will

be introduced over the coming years and so recent progress in relation to, for example leave entitlements, is likely to be halted (Barry and Vasquez del Aguila 2009).

Public policy currently provides little support in Ireland to women and men aiming to combine paid employment, education and training together with caring responsibilities. Leave entitlements are limited, there are no specific entitlements for educational leave and financial supports are inadequate. In Ireland there is no legislative right for parents to work part-time, as is the case in, for example, France, Germany, Holland, Finland, Belgium and France (Gornick and Meyers, 2003). Other provisions are at the discretion of the employer. Survey estimates are that the rate of take up of flexitime reported for employees in Ireland was around 23 per cent in total: 26 per cent among women and 20 per cent for men (Russell et al 2009, using 'The Changing Workplace' Employee Survey). This is close to the EU average (Evans, 2001). The rate of job sharing (6% of employees) and home working (8 per cent of employees) was much lower. In general, flexible working arrangements are more prevalent in the public sector than the private sector (Russell et al, 2009). This situation seriously disadvantages those on low incomes, and particularly women, in relation to employment, education and training. Reconciling work and family is low on the social and political agenda in Ireland and the response from the system is slow and weak. Government, employer's organisations, trade unions and others all express support for work-life balance initiatives but there is little evidence that the necessary resources are being put in place to achieve a greater level of access to education and training (Barry and Vasquez del Aguila 2009).

The expansion of the post second-level educational system has been relatively recent in Ireland and has focused predominantly on an increased number of full-time campus-based higher education places over recent decades. To a large extent this expansion has been aimed at immediate second-level or Leaving Certificate graduates.

“The consequences of our relatively late investment in secondary and higher education are still evident in the educational profile of our older adult population, which remains poor by international standards. This weakness is compounded by our similarly poor performance in lifelong learning.” (Higher Education Authority HEA 2009)

There is little provision within the system for flexible learning systems. For example, there is an extremely low level of provision for part-time students, a prerequisite for a flexible model of lifelong learning. Only 12% of undergraduate students were enrolled on part-time courses in 2007-08 (the majority of these are enrolled on Level 6 and 7 courses in institutes of technology).

“The current low level of part-time study opportunities limits the accessibility of higher education for working adults and adults with caring responsibilities. It also limits the study options available to traditional school leavers, who may prefer to, or need to, combine work and part-time study. The availability of part-time and flexible study opportunities is particularly poor at undergraduate level in the universities.” (HEA 2009)

Table 13 Part-Time Students in Higher Education, 2007-08

	Part-time*	%	Part-time
Level 6	2,200		34%
Level 7	2,600		28%
Level 8	2,100		8%
Levels 9/10	4,600		31%
TOTAL	11,500		20%

*All numbers have been rounded

Source: HEA 2009

Only 3% of the 72,600 undergraduate degree students in Irish universities are categorised as part-time and a further 16% of undergraduates are part-time in the Institutes of Technology – a comparatively low figure.

There are some examples of the use of technology to develop distance learning and e-learning initiatives in the Irish third level system but these are at a very small scale and tend to be linked to mainstream activities. As the OECD observed in 2005

“fully on-line provision at campus-based institutions will remain very much a minority in the short to medium term. Universities are more interested in improving their on-campus programmes using e-learning to offer increased flexibility and content”. (OECD 2005)

3.2 Policies

In its report in 2004 the OECD recommended that the percentage of part-time students should increase within the higher education sector and that full-time and part-time students should pay fees and be eligible for maintenance grants on a pro rata basis, which is not the case at present. Fees are charged to part-time students and grants are largely unavailable. It was also recommended that evening teaching should be enhanced and that a wider range of educational activities should be supported by public funds. However, the HEA 2009 Report indicates that these recommendations have not been addressed :

“Public funding currently available in respect of part-time study is relatively low and there is no public funding available in respect of ODL students. As many part-time courses and all open and distance learning courses are not recognised and are not eligible for funding purposes, colleges must operate flexible learning programmes on a largely self-funded basis. The current ‘free fees’ scheme also discriminates against part-time undergraduate education as it is available only to students undertaking recognised full-time on-campus programmes.” (HEA 2009)

As the HEA 2009 Report indicates that the treatment of part-time and full-time students in relation to grants and fees has not changed it does identify the development of the new qualifications system as a positive change in the system of recognition of qualifications at different levels. The lack of change in the policy towards part-time students means that for many women with caring responsibilities or those wishing to combine education with paid employment educational opportunities are not available. For students who are not Irish or EU citizens, the level of fees charged within the system is extremely high – and this applies to migrants who have lived and worked in Ireland for many years. Refugees and asylum seekers are mostly denied access to the educational system at third level.

Under HEA proposals a new public funding model for flexible education needs to be developed based on a system of 'parity for flexible learning' drawing on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and linked to the wider EU Bologna process. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) has already developed a comprehensive framework of qualifications and has issued guidelines on the recognition and accreditation of prior learning. Modularisation of courses, using credit-based systems which are compatible with the ECTS has been completed in most public and private higher education institutes and courses and modules are described in terms of learning outcomes and in terms of their level on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (HEA 2009). However, the issue of a more comprehensive and systematic approach to flexible learning remains to be addressed in Ireland and to date policy initiatives have been piecemeal :

"Ireland's underperformance in ODL and flexible learning up to now has been characterised by fragmentation and a lack of co-ordination, where there are numerous 'pockets of innovation' without the desirable institutional and systemic change." (HEA 2009)

3.3 Gender Issues

Public policy currently provides little support in Ireland to women and men aiming to reconcile education and family life. Leave entitlements are extremely limited and financial supports are inadequate. There is no statutory entitlement to educational leave. Within the public sector where career breaks are available for up to five years, women tend to use such leave for family and care reasons, men are more likely to avail of such leave for educational purposes. On the central question of childcare, successive reports have highlighted a persistent crisis in childcare provision and affordability which has a negative impact on access by women to flexible educational options. Pressure to make substantial cuts in public expenditure and increasing levels of unemployment across the private sector are not the conditions in which positive flexibility linked to educational provision likely to increase.

This situation seriously disadvantages those on low incomes, and particularly women, in relation to employment, education and training. Lifelong learning is on the stated social and political agenda in Ireland but the response from the system is slow and weak. Government, employer's organisations, trade unions and others all express support for lifelong learning but there is little evidence that the necessary resources are being put in place to achieve a greater level of availability and access of to flexible educational initiatives.

While rates of recorded unemployment are similar between Irish women and men, non-employment rates or 'inactivity' rates are significantly higher among women reflecting women's traditional roles as primary carers, a role which continues to shape women's attachment to the labour market. A recent study on Gender Inequalities in Time Use (McGinnity and Russell 2008) reveals significant inequalities between women and men in the distribution of unpaid work in the household, particularly where there are children. The only specific measure aimed at encouraging men to play a greater role in parental responsibilities is the parental leave principle of non-transferability between partners. In practice, the lack of payment discourages both women and men from taking up parental leave entitlements, and is thought to contribute particularly to the small percentage of men among claimants. In a study carried out in 2004, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions estimated that only 20% of eligible parents had taken up parental leave and 84% of those were women. Flexible provision of educational and training opportunities is particularly important for women given that they continue to carry primary responsibilities for care.

Community-based educational opportunities have played a significant role, primarily for women, and in many disadvantaged areas, at local level. These initiatives have provided ‘second-chance’ education at community level, in some cases in partnership with higher education institutes. Specific programmes have successfully provided access routes through to the third level sector. Unfortunately, many of these programmes are in crisis due to funding cut-backs in community and local development programmes and lack of adequate and structured support within the third level system.

3.4 Summary and conclusions

Lifelong learning is a stated priority of government policy in Ireland. However, there is a lack of a properly resourced system to make that stated priority a reality. Access to part-time educational opportunities is extremely limited particularly for those on low to middle incomes - substantial fees are imposed and grants are unavailable for part-time education at third level. This is a particular important issue for women who carry primary responsibility for care in Ireland. Public policy currently provides little support in to women and men aiming to reconcile education and family life. Leave entitlements are extremely limited and financial supports are inadequate. There is no statutory entitlement to educational leave. Within the public sector where career breaks are available for up to five years, women tend to use such leave for family and care reasons while men are more likely to avail of such leave for educational purposes. Current pressure to make substantial cuts in public expenditure and increasing levels of unemployment across the private sector are unlikely to create conditions under which positive flexibility linked to educational provision likely to increase.

4 ‘New skills for new jobs’?

4.1 National situation

Under current Irish employment policy (National Reform Programme 2009), as referred to above, Guideline 23 commits government to ‘improving educational systems and skill levels’. Linked to this commitment is the National Skills Strategy (NSS) which projects up-skilling 500,000 existing lower skilled people by at least one level on National Framework for Qualifications by 2020. The NSS also sets down targets of increasing the participation rate in upper second level education to 90% and of increasing the progression rate to third level to 70%. With the depth of the economic crisis and the pressure on the public financial system there is no evidence that these forecasts will remain as anything other than aspirations.

4.2 Policies

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) published a strategy document in 2007 identifying Ireland’s current skills profile and provides a strategic overview and specific objectives for Ireland’s future skills requirements entitled “Tomorrow’s Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy”. The key objective of the strategy is cited as being ‘to identify the skills required for Ireland to make the transition to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy by 2020. The strategy sets out a range of targets to be achieved within the timeframe set out including:

- An additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce to be up-skilled and to progress by at least one National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level over and above their current level of education and training;

- The Leaving Certificate retention rate for young people to rise to 90 percent;
- By 2020, the proportion of the population aged 20- 24 with NFQ level 4 or 5 qualification (Leaving Certificate or equivalent), to be increased to 93 percent.
- The progression from second- to third-level education should increase from 55 percent to 72 percent;
- Integration of immigrants into the education and training system, at all levels.
- Career guidance and mentoring for those at work.
- Assistance for individuals and companies in identifying their skills needs.
- More awareness programmes that highlight the benefits of education / training.
- The need for education / training provision to be flexible and responsive

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2009)

Regular reports by the EGFSN assess progress towards key objectives laid out in the strategy. Table 12 and 13 show the current progress made in the improvement of the educational attainment of the labour force against the target set in the National Skills Strategy for 2020. The shift in the education attainment is in the direction of the target i.e. the share of labour force with the lowest education attainment is shrinking and the share with the highest level increasing but the data indicates that the situation is still a long way from the target objectives.

Table 14 Education Attainment of the Labour Force and Skills Strategy Vision for 2020

	Q2 2005	Q4 2008	2020
Lower Secondary	28.7%	23.7%	7%
Upper secondary/FET	39.8%	39.2%	45%
Third level certificate/less than honours degree	11.4%	12.3%	16%
Third level degree or above	20.1%	24.8%	32%

Source: EGFSN Statement of Activity 2009 based on CSO data (published April 2010)

Progress towards the objective in relation the percentage with second level qualifications has remained unchanged, while there has been an increase in the percentage with third level qualifications. The percentage with lower second or below remains unacceptably high, as can be seen in Table 15.

Table 15 Educational Attainment of the Labour Force and National Skills Strategy target 2020

	Third level and above	Higher secondary/ PLC	Lower secondary or below
2020 TARGET	48%	45%	7%
2009	39%	40%	21%
2008	36%	40%	24%
2007	34%	40%	26%
2006	33%	40%	27%
2005	33%	40%	27%

Source: EGFSN Statement of Activity 2009 based on CSO data (published April 2010)

The EGFSN in its 2009 ‘Statement of Activity’ estimates that, without policy change, in 2020 there will be:

- A continuing shortage at third-level degree and above;
- A significant deficit (approximately 139,000) at third-level certificate/ordinary degree; and
- Surpluses at lower educational levels, with a large number of low-skilled individuals unemployed or inactive.

Their stated perspective is to maximise skills to foster competitiveness through upskilling the existing workforce, increasing participation on the labour market and continuing to attract highly skilled migrants. Specifically, the Expert Group proposes that, by 2020:

- 48% of the labour force should have qualifications at NFQ Levels 6 to 10;
- 45% should have qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5; and
- The remaining 7% will have qualifications at NFQ levels 1 to 3 but should aspire to achieve skills at higher levels.

4.4 Gender Issues

To a large extent the Irish future skills strategy’ is presented as ‘gender neutral’ but perhaps could be interpreted as ‘gender blind’. Little attention is paid to the specific differences in the labour market participation patterns of women and men, across ages and between social classes. Issues of flexibility in terms of education and training, significant for women with children or other care responsibilities, are rarely linked to the issue of skill.

4.5 Summary and conclusions

Employment policy in Ireland is based on a definite statement of objectives in relation to skill and education and specific targets are outlined for achievement at each level of education and skill. Regular updates are published on achievements in relation to these targets. While there has been some progress made toward achieving targets in relation to second and third level education, there remains a significant and persistent section of the population with low education and skill levels and for whom the targets have only marginally narrowed.

5 Summary and conclusions

Ireland’s participation rate in lifelong learning is poor. Only 14% of 25-64 year-olds in Ireland were engaged in non-formal education and training in 2002, compared with 16.5 percent in the EU25 and 34.5 percent in the UK. Ireland has a high level of adult literacy than in most OECD countries.

Under the Irish National Anti-Poverty Strategy education is viewed as central to addressing poverty. Lack of educational qualifications and early school leaving result in significant disadvantages on the labour market. Unemployment rates are particularly high among young women and men with no educational qualifications, running at a level of between 40 and 50%. Increasing levels of educational attainment are seen as critical to improving access to more and better job opportunities. Research indicates that rates of pay, access to training,

education and diverse employment opportunities are all negatively affected by low qualifications.

In practice, more than one in six of the adult population has only completed primary level education and 38% of the population aged over fifteen years has not completed second level education. Ireland emerged as the country with the second lowest level of literacy among 22 countries surveyed by OECD in 2000 in which one in four adults, were found to have a level of literacy 'below that required for fully effective participation in society'.

Significant changes have taken place in participation rates within the educational system in Ireland over recent years. Levels of participation among those coming from lower income households and among women have shown above average levels of increase. However, early school leaving continues to be a serious problem affecting primarily young Irish men and specific minorities such as members of Traveller Community. Targets to reduce early school leaving have not been realised and while this may have been in part due to job opportunities during the years of high growth in the Irish economy, this situation has now changed significantly. The recession of the last two years has had a strongly negative impact on the economy as a whole and also on public finances causing cut-backs in certain programmes aimed at educational disadvantage.

Boys are nearly twice as likely to leave school earlier than girls. The estimated rate for 2008 was 9% for girls and 14% for boys. While girls continue to have higher school completion rates than boys, the gender gap has narrowed over time. In the 1980s the gender gap was around fifteen percentage points and, while still substantial, this gap had narrowed to around 7-8 percentage points by 2007. Patterns across social class, however, are similar between girls and boys.

Under current Irish employment policy there is a stated commitment to 'improving educational systems and skill levels'. The National Skills Strategy (NSS) projects up-skilling a substantial proportion of those currently lower skilled by at least one level on National Framework for Qualifications by 2020. The NSS also sets down targets of increasing the participation rate in upper second level education to 90% and of increasing the progression rate to third level to 70%.

With the depth of the economic crisis and the pressure on the public financial system there is no evidence that these forecasts will remain as anything other than aspirations. The recession of the last two years has had a strongly negative impact on the economy as a whole and also on public finances causing cut-backs in certain important programmes aimed at educational disadvantage resulting in reduced resources towards educational programmes particularly those supporting educational disadvantage, for example classroom assistants, language supports and school book programmes. It has even resulted in the cancellation of the 2009 School Leavers Survey for 'financial reasons' which means the withdrawal of a crucial source of information on educational provision, access and disadvantage on the basis of gender and social class.

State financial support to participants in higher education is very limited in Ireland, is strictly means tested, and has in fact been falling in recent years. Women are slightly more likely to be in receipt of grants, linked primarily to the household background (parental income) they are from. There is little provision within the system for flexible learning systems. For example, there is an extremely low level of provision for part-time students, a prerequisite for a flexible model of lifelong learning. Only 12% of undergraduate students were enrolled on

part-time courses in 2007-08 (the majority of these are enrolled on Level 6 and 7 courses in institutes of technology). In its report in 2004 the OECD recommended that the percentage of part-time students should increase within the higher education sector and that full-time and part-time students should pay fees and be eligible for maintenance grants on a pro rata basis, which is not the case at present. Fees are charged to part-time students and grants are largely unavailable. It was also recommended that evening teaching should be enhanced and that a wider range of educational activities should be supported by public funds.

Community-based educational opportunities have played a significant role, primarily for women, and in many disadvantaged areas, at local level. These initiatives have provided 'second-chance' education at community level, in some cases in partnership with higher education institutes. Unfortunately, many of these programmes are in crisis due to funding cut-backs in community and local development programmes and lack of adequate and structured support within the third level system. Central to women's learning opportunities and participation in lifelong learning is flexible needs-based childcare support for adult learners as key to participation.

Lifelong learning is a stated priority of government policy in Ireland. However, there is a lack of a properly resourced system to make that stated priority a reality. Access to part-time educational opportunities is extremely limited particularly for those on low to middle incomes - substantial fees are imposed and grants are unavailable for part-time education at third level. Public policy currently provides little support in to women and men aiming to reconcile education and family life. Leave entitlements are extremely limited and financial supports are inadequate. There is no statutory entitlement to educational leave. Within the public sector where career breaks are available for up to five years, women tend to use such leave for family and care reasons while men are more likely to avail of such leave for educational purposes. Current pressure to make substantial cuts in public expenditure and increasing levels of unemployment across the private sector are unlikely to create conditions under which positive flexibility linked to educational provision is likely to increase creating stronger systems for lifelong learning.

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