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Fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the workplace in Ireland

Across countries, there is a growing need for people to upskill and reskill regularly over their life course so they can adapt to developments in the labour market and society. Lifelong learning results in a wide range of benefits, including higher wages for individuals, higher productivity for firms and higher levels of social trust. This chapter explains the importance of fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the workplace in Ireland and provides an overview of current practices and performance. It then explores three opportunities to improve participation in lifelong learning: 1) strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for individuals; 2) strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for employers; and 3) making lifelong learning more flexible and accessible.

The importance of fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the workplace

Fostering greater participation in lifelong learning, or learning over the life course, is very important in Ireland's current context and will only increase in importance in the coming years. Around the world, the digital transformation, demographic changes, climate change and sudden shocks, such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis and the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, are rapidly transforming the skills individuals need to effectively participate in work and society. In Ireland, where population ageing, skills shortages, and the future demand for high-level qualifications in the labour market outpace the OECD average (see also Chapter 1), upskilling and reskilling are particularly important.

As policy interventions relating to youth are generally outside the scope of this report or addressed in Chapter 2 on skills imbalances, the interventions in this chapter will primarily focus on learning by adults who are no longer engaged in initial education (the terms "lifelong learning" and "adult learning" will be used interchangeably). Upskilling and reskilling for adult learners can be pursued through formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities (Box 3.1).

Box 3.1. Definitions of formal education, non-formal education and informal learning

Formal education/learning: Formal education/learning is provided in schools, colleges, universities or other educational institutions and leads to a certification recognised by the national educational classification.

Non-formal education/learning: Non-formal education/learning is an education or training activity that does not necessarily lead to a formal qualification, such as on-the-job training, open or distance education, courses or private lessons, and seminars or workshops.

Informal learning: Informal learning relates to typically unstructured, often unintentional, learning activities that do not lead to certification. In the workplace, this is more or less an automatic by-product of the regular production process of a firm.

Source: OECD (2011^[1]), *PIAAC Conceptual Framework of the Background Questionnaire Main Survey*, [www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/PIAAC\(2011_11\)MS_BQ_ConceptualFramework_1%20Dec%202011.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/PIAAC(2011_11)MS_BQ_ConceptualFramework_1%20Dec%202011.pdf).

Encouraging a culture of lifelong learning is crucial to ensuring that individuals actively engage in adult learning after leaving the compulsory education system. In turn, participation in different forms of adult learning positively impacts individuals, firms and society.

For individuals, participation in formal adult education and training can lead to better employment prospects, higher wages and upward social and/or occupational mobility (Midtsundstad, 2019^[2]). For firms, training leads to higher productivity growth and is often a complement to innovation in the workplace (Acemoglu, 1998^[3]; Reenen, Reed and Dearden, 2006^[4]; Konings and Vanormelingen, 2015^[5]; Dearden, Reed and Van Reenen, 2006^[6]). Participation in adult learning can also generate strong social benefits: higher-skilled adults typically report better health, feel more included in political processes and trust others more than low-skilled adults. Adult learning opportunities can help individuals achieve these higher levels of skills (OECD, 2016^[7]).

Increasing engagement in lifelong learning has been identified as one of the primary objectives of Ireland's National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025 (Box 3.2) (Department of Education and Skills, 2016^[8]). Promoting learning over the life course is also a component of a range of other strategies in Ireland in areas including digitalisation, unemployment, COVID-19 recovery, apprenticeships, further education and training (FET), higher education (HE), literacy and climate change.

Box 3.2. This chapter and Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025

Four of the six main objectives of Ireland's NSS 2025 relate to the provision of and/or demand for lifelong learning opportunities. All the opportunities in this chapter are primarily designed to address the fourth objective in the strategy ("people in Ireland will engage more in lifelong learning, especially those in employment"). Yet some of the opportunities address other objectives as well.

In addition to driving more engagement with lifelong learning, the analysis and recommendations in this chapter related to strengthening incentives for individuals and making lifelong learning opportunities more accessible should help promote the NSS 2025 objective to put "a specific focus on active inclusion to support participation in education and training". Furthermore, the analysis and recommendations on strengthening incentives for employers and supporting employers to be more active participants in guiding employees to lifelong learning help to progress the objective that "employers will participate actively in the development of skills and make effective use of skills in their organisations". Lastly, the analysis and recommendations on making the lifelong learning offer more flexible could contribute to the objective that education and training providers develop opportunities "that are relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy," ensuring that opportunities are not only relevant to learners' lives in terms of the skills offered but also in terms of the way they are designed and delivered.

More specific key actions in the NSS 2025 relevant to this chapter include enhancing the skills development capabilities of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), building greater capacity for recognition of prior learning (RPL) and designing specific support for disadvantaged and under-represented groups to participate in lifelong learning.

Source: Department of Education and Skills (2016^[8]), *Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 – Ireland's Future*, www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/.

This chapter focuses on opportunities to foster greater participation in lifelong learning among adults of working age (18-65 years) from Ireland, both in and outside the workplace, by exploring policy interventions that target the supply and demand of lifelong learning opportunities. The analysis touches on a number of issues that are expanded upon in other chapters in the report, which are referenced accordingly. Guidance for both youth and adults on learning opportunities and careers is primarily covered in Chapter 2 on securing a balance in skills. Lifelong learning opportunities related specifically to increasing firms' management capabilities and improving high-performance work practices are addressed in depth in Chapter 4 on driving innovation and strengthening firm performance. Finally, governance arrangements related to lifelong learning (e.g. engaging employers in designing lifelong learning programmes) are discussed extensively in Chapter 5.

Participation in lifelong learning can be boosted in Ireland in both the short and long term by making lifelong learning opportunities more flexible and easier to navigate and by reducing barriers to participation, such as scheduling, family responsibilities and cost. Supporting employers in mapping out their employees' skill sets and improving employers' awareness of the lifelong learning opportunities and benefits available to them and their employees can promote greater employer participation in creating a culture of lifelong learning in Ireland. Similarly, strengthening financial incentives can make Ireland's lifelong learning system more robust and strengthen its economy.

This chapter begins with an overview of the lifelong learning system and its performance in Ireland. It then articulates three opportunities for fostering greater participation in lifelong learning:

1. strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for individuals
2. strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for employers
3. making lifelong learning more flexible and accessible.

Overview and performance of the lifelong learning system

For Ireland, strengthening its lifelong learning system is already a key objective. It has been described in various recent strategies, including the NSS 2025 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016^[8]). Ireland has also launched many initiatives to strengthen lifelong learning. The result is an extensive range of policies, incentives and programmes targeting both individuals and employers. Outlining the characteristics of these policies and analysing their performance to date provides a snapshot of Ireland’s current lifelong learning ecosystem and can help identify areas where the system can be improved.

Overview of the current lifelong learning system

Relevant strategies and policies for lifelong learning

Adult learning forms a key part of a number of Irish strategies, and not only in the NSS 2025 (Table 3.1). These include strategies relating to further and higher education, strategies responding to global trends such as digitalisation and climate change, and strategies aimed at recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Together these strategies show that promoting lifelong learning is a high policy priority in Ireland when planning for the future. Furthermore, Ireland’s strategies are quite bold in relation to EU-wide strategies. For example, Ireland’s 2030 target rate for adult participation in education and training (64.2%) surpasses the European Union (EU) target of 60% (European Commission, 2022^[9]).

Table 3.1. Ireland’s strategies and policy plans related to lifelong learning

Strategy or policy	Description	Specific objectives related to lifelong learning
Adult Literacy for Life (2021)	A ten-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decrease the share of adults in Ireland with unmet literacy needs, i.e. Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Level 1 or below, from 18% to 7% Decrease the share of adults in Ireland with unmet numeracy needs, i.e. PIAAC Level 1 or below, from 25% to 12% Decrease the share of adults in Ireland without basic digital skills from 47% to 20% (as measured by the Digital Economy and Society Index [DESI])
Climate Action Plan 2021	Plan to achieve a 51% reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and to reach net-zero emissions by 2050	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide reskilling and lifelong learning to individuals, so they are equipped with the necessary skills to participate in Ireland’s future climate-neutral economy Deliver the Programme for Government commitment to develop a Green Further Education and Skills Development Plan Promote timely and tailored activation and training responses for workers whose jobs are at risk by the decarbonisation process
Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024	A strategy for the future of further education and training (FET), building on the first FET Strategy from 2014-2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the number of upskilling and reskilling opportunities Provide pathways for a diverse group of learners to engage in lifelong learning Develop new strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and the education and training boards (ETBs)
Harnessing Digital – The Digital Ireland Framework	A strategy intended to improve the digital skills provision across the skills spectrum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the share of adults in Ireland with at least basic digital skills to 80% by 2030 (as measured by DESI), which is intrinsically linked to improving lifelong learning participation Focus particularly on low-skilled workers whose jobs are exposed to the risk of automation
Higher Education Strategy to 2030	A strategy to improve the higher education system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take further action in the areas of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks and quality assurance of lifelong learning Expand the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) for delivering lifelong learning objectives Review and reform the first-year curricula of Irish higher education institutions so they serve as “a foundation of learning activities entailing more inquiry-based formats and engendering employability and lifelong learning outcomes” Further develop postgraduate diplomas and master’s courses to provide workers with further professional development or new skills

Strategy or policy	Description	Specific objectives related to lifelong learning
National Access Plan 2022-2028	Plan in collaboration between the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) towards the goal of creating an inclusive, diverse higher education sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make pathways to higher education available to all who seek to upskill • Increase more flexible ways of learning • Support students to study on a flexible basis, including part-time and blended learning • Improve the use of recognition of prior learning
National Economic Recovery Plan (2021)	Supports Ireland's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help people get back to work, including by reskilling/upskilling
National Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021)	Plan to underpin EU funding to Ireland as part of its national recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the digital transformation of Irish education at all levels, including lifelong learning, through the Addressing the Digital Divide and Enhancing Digital Skills project • Support flexible course provision in higher education, including lifelong learning, through the Technological Universities Transformation Fund project
National Skills Strategy 2016-2025	Ireland's ten-year national skills strategy, building on the previous strategy, Towards Tomorrow's Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage employers to participate in skills development through active collaboration with education and training providers • Enhance the capability of small and medium-sized enterprises through skills development • Strengthen the promotion and communication of career opportunities through improved employer participation • Promote and communicate the benefits of lifelong learning to the full population of Ireland • Create more and easier opportunities for those in employment to engage in education and training • Strengthen recognition of workplace learning and develop the capacity for recognition of prior learning • Significantly strengthen career guidance with the aid of employer engagement • Support disadvantaged and under-represented groups to participate in education and training
National Training Fund Implementation Plan (2019)	Plan aiming to support the training of those in employment and those who wish to take up employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide greater investment to support enterprise-focused higher education programmes, which include lifelong learning • Provide expenditure on training for those seeking employment, training for persons in employment, training on literacy and numeracy, and training for those in the community and voluntary sector
Pathways to Work 2021-2025	Strategy to assist people in getting back to work as the economy and labour market recovers from COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure seamless referral to relevant upskilling opportunities • Increase the number of training programme places by funding 50 000 additional places in further and higher education by the end of 2021 • Support 50 000 long-term unemployed people to enrol in FET by 2025 • Tailor bespoke job promotion and local recruitment events for young job seekers, as well as older workers, where reskilling and upskilling options will be outlined and referrals made to the ETBs
White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030	Policy document with implications for Ireland's Enterprise Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase investment in high-level digital skills as well as transversal skills • Adopt more widespread lifelong learning to equip the labour market with appropriate skills • Invest in skills and training in research development and innovation • Attract and retain skilled workers with affordable housing and updated infrastructure and through tax policy • Improve management skills in firms

Note: The table aims to provide an overview, not an exhaustive list. Strategies are listed in alphabetical order.

Roles and responsibilities in the lifelong learning system

Promoting lifelong learning is a complex and cross-cutting priority area that involves a wide range of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders (see also Chapter 5 for an overview of related governance arrangements). On the policy side, principal actors in Ireland's lifelong learning system include the Department of Education (DEP EDU), the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) and the Department of Social Protection (DSP).

The DEP EDU is responsible for lifelong learning through initial education in Ireland, while DFHERIS is involved in lifelong learning policy related to higher and FET for adults. DFHERIS's responsibilities include overseeing a number of bodies that play an active role in lifelong learning, such as SOLAS, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and Regional Skills Fora (RSF). SOLAS, as the FET Authority of Ireland, manages and funds a range of FET programmes and, through the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU), provides analysis on skills needs. HEA oversees lifelong learning opportunities provided through the higher education system. The QQI is responsible for ensuring the quality of lifelong learning opportunities, approving accreditation, and developing RPL policies. RSF are often employers' primary contacts for information and guidance about lifelong learning opportunities and feed data on lifelong learning into the policy sphere (data on lifelong learning are explored in more depth in Chapter 5 on governance).

The relevant responsibilities of DETE include overseeing Enterprise Ireland (EI) and the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), which are responsible for enterprise development and, in that capacity, also play a role in signposting enterprises towards lifelong learning provision, guidance and support to address key business needs. DETE also houses the secretariat that supports Ireland's Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, which advises the government on current and future skills needs. Meanwhile, the DSP is responsible for Intreo, the public employment service, and for social protection and active labour market policies, which include job seeker training and guidance programmes.

To ensure high-quality and relevant lifelong learning opportunities, these entities work with additional stakeholders such as employers, representative enterprise and trade organisations and lifelong learning providers.

Main providers in the lifelong learning system

In Ireland, a variety of providers offer formal and non-formal adult learning opportunities. Formal education and training providers include higher education institutions (HEIs), education and training boards (ETBs), eCollege, sector-specific agencies or organisations and private providers delivering accredited courses. There are over 20 HEIs in Ireland, including 7 universities as well as technological universities, institutes of technology and colleges of education. There are 16 ETBs in Ireland, which were established by the Education and Training Boards Act of 2013 to deliver FET throughout Ireland (Citizens Information, 2022^[10]). Non-formal education and training providers include ETBs, Skillnet Ireland Business Networks and private providers. In addition, non-formal learning opportunities may be provided directly by employers. A more detailed explanation of adult learning providers in Ireland is outlined in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Adult learning providers in Ireland

Provider or programme	Responsible/funding body	Target group	Description
eCollege	SOLAS	General public	A completely online institution that delivers online training courses on demand in business, project management, information technology, graphic design, web design, digital marketing, software development, and basic computer literacy. Courses are delivered through the eCollege website directly, and all courses lead to industry certification.
Education and training boards (ETBs)	SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)	FET learners (NFQ 1-6)	ETBs are active in the different regions of Ireland, providing further education and training (FET) to learners over age 16, including apprenticeships, traineeships, Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, community and adult education, and core literacy and numeracy services. The ETBs establish and operate second-level schools, FET colleges, training centres, PLC centres, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) centres, Youthreach centres, and various other adult and FET centres throughout Ireland. FET enrolments for those aged 25 or over were about 97 700 in 2020 (64% of total FET enrolments).
Higher education institutions (HEIs)	Higher Education Authority (HEA)	Individuals (NFQ 6-10)	The higher education sector in Ireland comprises seven traditional universities, three technological universities, seven institutes of technology, and several smaller institutions providing programmes across a wide range of disciplines. HEA reports that 84 500 students aged 24+ enrolled in HEIs in 2021/22 (about 34% of total enrolments), about half of whom were part-time students.
Ibec Academy	Ibec	Enterprises	The Ibec Academy provides members with a wide range of professional services and management training on all aspects of human resource management, occupational health and safety, employee relations and employment law.
Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)	Enterprise Ireland (EI)	Enterprises	LEOs act as local first-stop-shops for providing support with starting, growing and developing a business. They offer mentoring and training programmes for developing business and management skills.
Private providers	n/a	Individuals and enterprises	Private providers in Ireland offer a range of lifelong learning education and training programmes.
Sector-specific agencies or organisations	n/a	Enterprises	Agencies or organisations supporting specific industries in Ireland offer adult education and training opportunities. Examples include Teagasc in the agriculture industry and BIM in the seafood industry.
Skillnet Business Networks	SkillNet Ireland, funded by the National Training Fund through the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	Enterprises	The Skillnet Business Networks, located throughout Ireland, engage directly with companies to identify their needs and develop customised training across Ireland and across sectors. They provide a number of specific programmes, including MentorsWork, Skills Connect, and Climate Ready.

Note: The table aims to provide an overview, not an exhaustive list. Providers are listed in alphabetical order. NFQ stands for National Framework of Qualifications.

Source: SOLAS (2021^[11]), *This is FET: Facts and figures 2020*, www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/cdfb3456d9/15665-fet_facts_report_2020.pdf; HEA (n.d.^[12]), *Key Facts and Figures*, <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/>.

Ireland's performance in lifelong learning

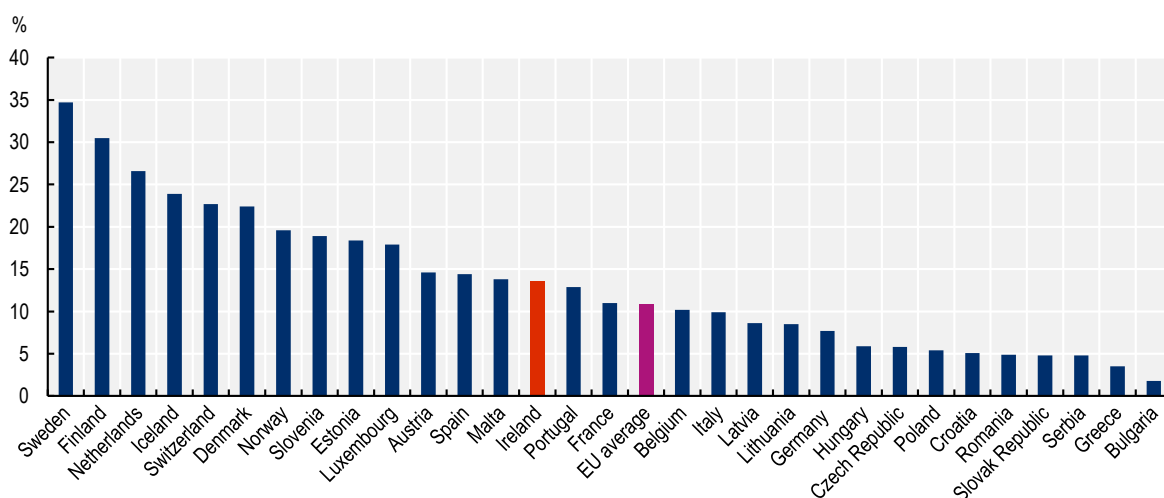
By international comparison, Ireland's lifelong learning system appears robust. First, lifelong learning opportunities in Ireland are generally perceived as high quality. Ireland ranks among the top countries with regard to the share of individuals (32%, second only to Malta) who rated the adult learning system in general as being "very good", and the share reporting that the most recent training in which they participated was "very good" (52%, second only to Malta) (CEDEFOP, 2020^[13]). Nonetheless, participation in lifelong learning in Ireland is not as high as expected, given these favourable perceptions.

Participation in learning by adults could be further expanded

The participation of the adult population (25-64 year-olds) in education and training (in the last four weeks) in Ireland (13.6%) was above the EU average (10.8%) in 2021, but lags behind top EU performers, such as Sweden (34.7%) and Finland (30.5%) (Figure 3.1) (Eurostat, 2022^[14]). While participation dropped in 2020, as it did across the European Union (given COVID-19 lockdowns), Ireland appears to have recovered in 2021 faster than the EU average. However, this recovery is not uniform – while levels of non-formal education and training, which experienced a 30% drop in participants during the pandemic, have not yet returned to their pre-COVID level, participation in formal education and training increased beyond pre-COVID levels.

Figure 3.1. Participation in adult learning in Ireland and selected European countries, 2021

Percentage of adults aged 25-64 who participated in formal and/or non-formal education and training in the past four weeks



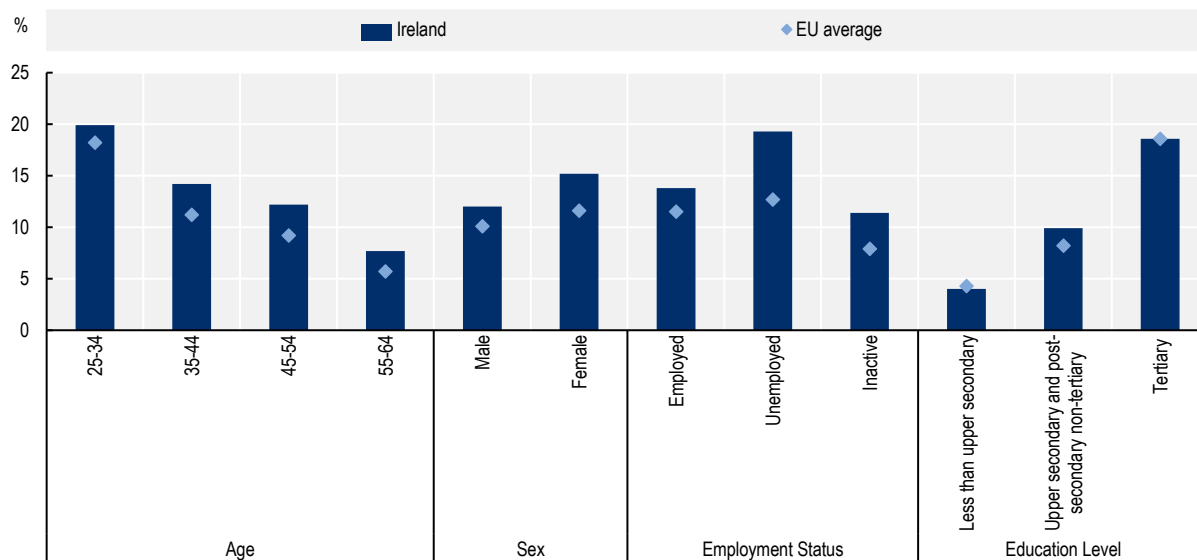
Source: Eurostat (2022^[14]), *Labour Force Survey: Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by sex, age and labour status*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_ifs_03/default/table?lang=en.

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Furthermore, there are differences in participation rates in non-formal and formal adult education and training across demographic characteristics. As can be seen in Figure 3.2, participation rates in lifelong learning are lower as age increases, with the participation rate for adults aged 55-64 less than half of the participation rate of 25-34 year-olds (8% and 20%, respectively) (Eurostat, 2022^[14]). In addition, the adults with the lowest skill levels are often not participating in learning activities in Ireland. For example, while 19% of adults with a tertiary degree participate in education and training, only 4% of adults with less than upper secondary education do. Also, men participate less frequently than women, and those who are economically inactive less than those who are economically active (though participation is relatively high among the unemployed) (Eurostat, 2022^[14]). These trends are comparable with those in other EU countries. However, for most sub-groups, the participation rate is slightly higher in Ireland than in the European Union on average, particularly for unemployed adults.

Figure 3.2. Participation rate in formal and non-formal education and training across different demographic characteristics, Ireland and EU average, 2021

Share of adults aged 25-64 who participated in formal and/or non-formal education and training over the last four weeks



Source: Eurostat (2022_[14]), *Labour Force Survey: Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by sex, age and labour status*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_ifs_03/default/table?lang=en.

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With regard to informal learning (e.g. learning on the job; interacting with a family member, friend or colleague; or visiting libraries), over 60% of adults in Ireland report engaging in informal learning in the last 12 months (Eurostat, 2022_[15]). This figure is similar to but slightly surpasses the EU average. However, just as with formal and/or non-formal education and training, while informal learning in Ireland is slightly above the EU average, it falls below the EU average for those with less than upper secondary education.

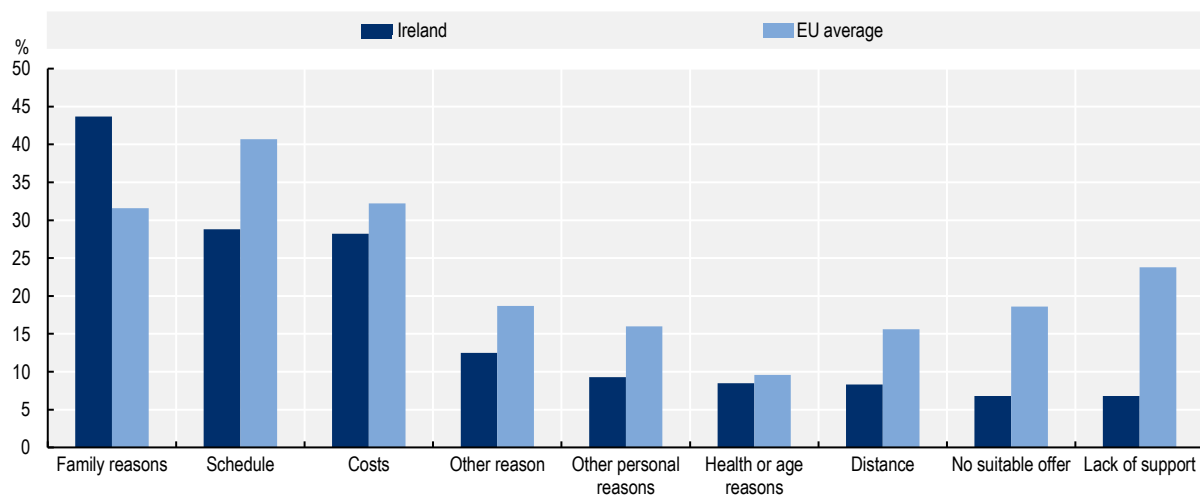
A comparatively large share of adults in Ireland is motivated to learn

By international comparison, the motivation to participate in lifelong learning in Ireland is quite high. The percentage of individuals in Ireland who did not and did not want to participate in education and training in 2016 (32.4%) was among the lowest in the European Union (Eurostat, 2022_[16]).

While, for most countries, the lack of a willingness to participate in adult learning is the leading reason for not participating, this is not the case in Ireland. At 49%, Ireland tops the list of only five countries where individuals report difficulty fitting in training with other commitments as a greater barrier to participating in adult learning than not needing such training (CEDEFOP, 2020_[13]). The three main reasons adults in Ireland who do want to participate in lifelong learning cite for not participating are family reasons, schedule and costs (Figure 3.3) (Eurostat, 2022_[16]). Compared with other EU countries, family reasons are, in particular, frequently mentioned as an obstacle in Ireland (44% versus 32% across the European Union of adults wanting to but not participating).

Figure 3.3. Obstacles to participation in adult education and training, Ireland and EU average, 2016

Percentage of adults aged 25-64 who did not participate but wanted to participate in adult education and training



Source: Eurostat (2016^[17]), *Adult Education Survey 2016: Population wanting to participate in education and training, by reason for not participating and sex*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_aes_176/default/table?lang=en.

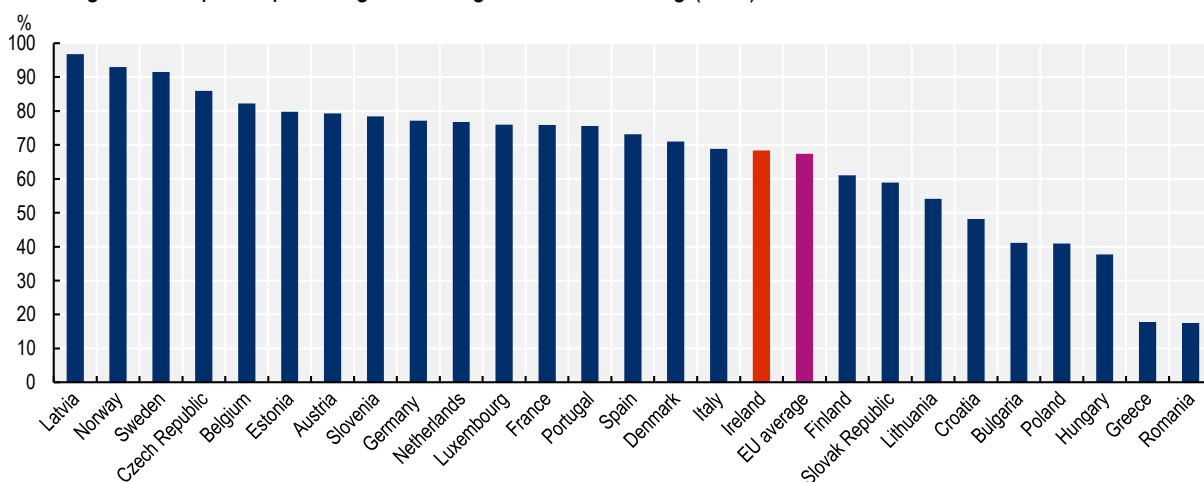
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Not all employers are actively supporting a culture of lifelong learning among employees

Employers in Ireland also seem to agree that lifelong learning is worthwhile. A higher share of employers in Ireland (53%) than in the European Union on average (35%) rate the value of training as “high” (Eurofound, 2019^[18]). Employers in Ireland provide their workers with training opportunities at a similar level to the EU average, but far behind the rates of the best-performing countries. According to the EU Continuing Vocational Training Survey, about 68% of enterprises in Ireland provide continuing vocational training, compared to an EU average of 67% (Figure 3.4). A slightly older Irish National Employer Survey shows even higher rates with 86% of employers reporting they provide some support to staff to engage in continuing professional development, lifelong learning, upskilling or reskilling. Of the companies supporting lifelong learning opportunities, 73% say they provide in-company training, 46% report that they fully fund the cost of learning, 38% report partially funding the cost of learning, and 35% report providing paid study leave.

Figure 3.4. Training provision in enterprises in Ireland and selected European countries, 2020

Percentage of enterprises providing continuing vocational training (CVT)



Source: Eurostat (2020_[19]), *Continuing Vocational Training Survey 2020: Enterprises providing training by type of training and size class - % of all enterprises*,

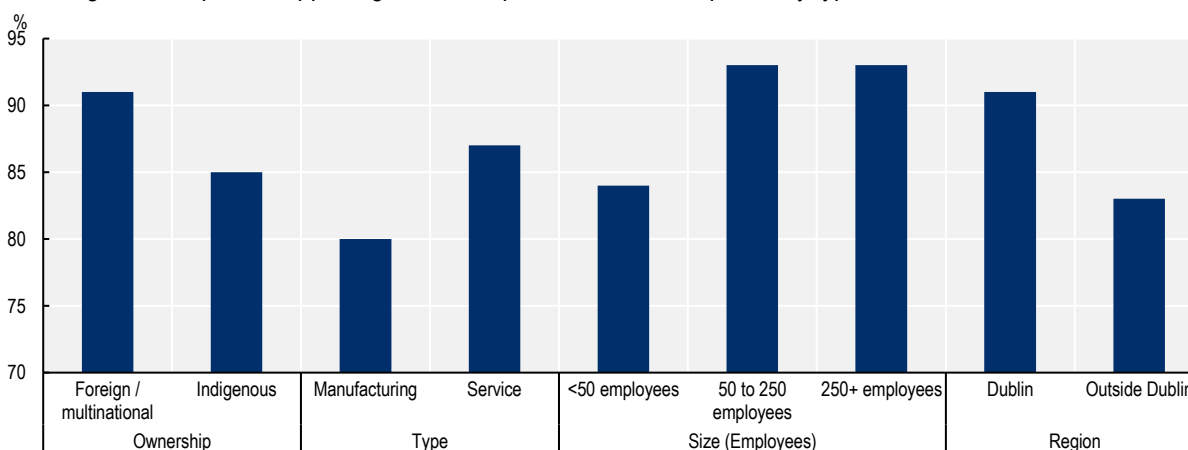
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_CVT_01S/default/table?lang=en&category=educ.educ_part.trng_cvt.trng_cvt_00.

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While a relatively high share of employers in Ireland provides continuing training to employees, provision is not uniform. As can be seen in Figure 3.5, employer support is lower in indigenous companies (85%) compared to multinationals (91%), in manufacturing (80%) compared to service (87%) industries, in small enterprises (84%) compared to larger ones (93%), and outside of Dublin (83%) compared to in Dublin (91%). Time limitations are cited by enterprises that provide training as the primary barrier they face to providing more training (66%) and is cited by enterprises not providing training as a central reason for doing so (29%), following only that existing employees or recruits already having the requisite skills (Eurostat, 2020_[19]).

Figure 3.5. Share of companies supporting continuing professional development in Ireland, 2018

Percentage of enterprises supporting continued professional development by type



Source: Fitzpatrick Associates (2019_[20]), *Irish National Employer Survey 2018*, www.solas.ie/fi/70398/x/ba617d5d3d/irish-national-employer-survey-final-report-3.pdf.

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Opportunities to foster greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the workplace

Ireland's performance in lifelong learning results from several factors, including individual, institutional, system-level and societal characteristics. However, three critical opportunities for improvement have been identified based on a review of the literature, desk research, discussions with the Cross-Departmental Project Team and a broad range of stakeholders consulted during this Skills Strategy project (hereafter "project participants") – e.g. government departments and agencies, employer organisations, educational establishments and other interested parties – during workshops, group discussions and several related meetings. The following opportunities are considered to be the most relevant for Ireland's specific context:

1. strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for individuals
2. strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for employers
3. making lifelong learning more flexible and accessible.

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

The most direct way to foster greater participation in lifelong learning in Ireland is to encourage more individuals to participate in lifelong learning opportunities. Individuals have much to gain from engaging with learning throughout life, including personal development and the acquisition of skills that can improve their employability, wages and career development in the labour market (OECD, 2021^[21]). Yet, despite these benefits, even countries with the highest levels of interest and motivation among individuals to participate in adult education and training have a large portion of the population who remain uninterested and whose interest in lifelong learning could still be engaged. For example, out of the OECD countries, Switzerland has the lowest share of individuals who did not and did not want to participate in education and training, and even in this case, one-fifth of the population remains unmotivated. Though Ireland ranks fairly well by international comparison on individuals' motivation to participate in lifelong learning, one-third of the population remains unmotivated (Eurostat, 2016^[17]).

While all individuals can benefit from lifelong learning, the individuals who tend to participate most in adult learning in OECD countries are those who face low barriers to participation, can expect high individual returns to participation, and whose participation results in relatively low social returns (OECD, 2021^[21]). In practice, individuals in OECD countries who participate in lifelong learning at high rates tend to be young, employed, have high levels of education, and come from high socio-economic backgrounds (OECD, 2021^[21]). Trends in lifelong learning participation in Ireland follow similar patterns to those seen in other OECD countries. A key challenge for policy makers looking to maximise the societal returns of skills policy (as opposed to individual returns) is to determine what measures would most successfully encourage lifelong learning uptake among groups of individuals whose participation in such learning would lead to the greatest societal returns (OECD, 2021^[21]). This includes reducing the barriers these groups face and increasing their motivation to participate.

There are both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that lead individuals to participate in lifelong learning. Intrinsic motives may include, among others, being interested in the subject matter of a course, believing a course will contribute to one's personal development, and wanting to feel a sense of fulfilment and progress. Extrinsic motives may include, among others, believing that the economic benefits of participating in training will outweigh the costs, being offered training by an employer or required by the employer to participate, and being advised that acquiring a given skill will make one eligible to apply for a new job (Rothes, Lemos and Gonçalves, 2014^[22]). A useful tool at the disposal of policy makers for raising intrinsic motives is raising awareness about the benefits of lifelong learning. However, generally, policy makers are more involved in addressing extrinsic motives. A central reason that individuals invest in lifelong learning is that they expect to see returns to this learning in the future. Policy makers use a number of tools

to tip this calculation in favour of participating in lifelong learning by making it worthwhile for individuals to invest in lifelong learning. These include subsidies, savings or asset-building mechanisms, tax measures, subsidised loans, time accounts and training leave entitlements (OECD, 2017^[23]).

Project participants highlighted the importance of promoting the benefits of lifelong learning on a society-wide level, as well as particularly encouraging the participation of disadvantaged groups who are under-represented in lifelong learning. These goals are reflected in a number of national strategies, including, among others, the NSS 2025, the Pathways to Work and Adult Literacy for Life strategies.

While Ireland already has a number of measures in place to encourage participation in lifelong learning among individuals, there remain opportunities for improvement that are both universal and specific. Thus, it will be important for Ireland to simultaneously improve the perception and prominence of lifelong learning in Ireland's society to strengthen all individuals' motivation to participate in lifelong learning and provide tailored and targeted support to disadvantaged groups to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning.

Recommendation 1: Incentivise adults to participate in lifelong learning to improve the prominence of lifelong learning in Ireland's society

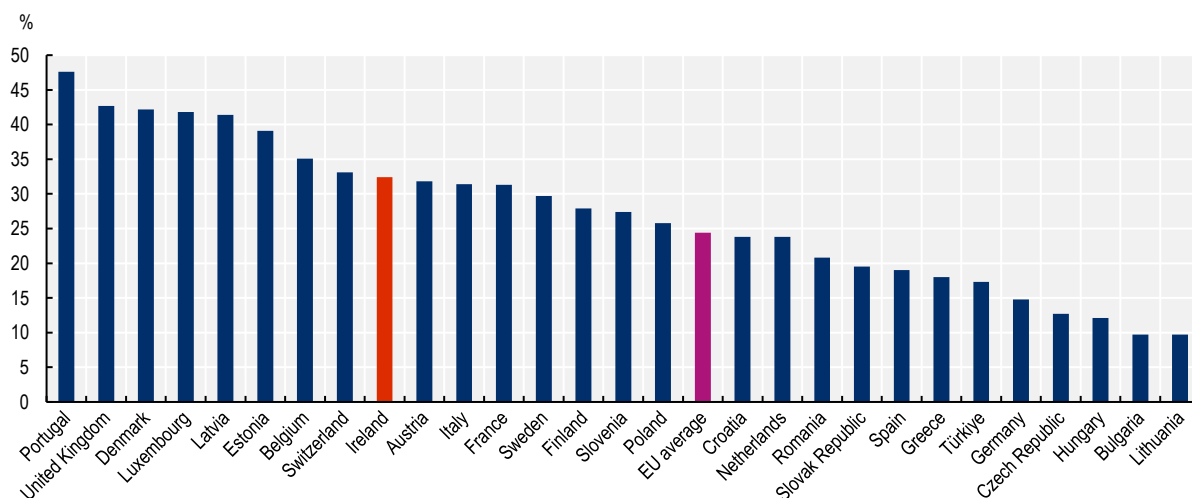
In Ireland, adult participation in lifelong learning is above the EU average but falls well below top performers such as Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. To become a world leader in lifelong learning, it will be important for Ireland to raise the profile of lifelong learning. This may include measures to make lifelong learning a greater part of the public discourse as well as exhibiting that lifelong learning is a national priority through the political promotion of and commitment to improving Ireland's performance on lifelong learning indicators.

While motivation to participate in lifelong learning is relatively high in Ireland by international comparison, as discussed above, the share of individuals in Ireland who face obstacles to participating in lifelong learning experiences is also relatively high, particularly when compared to top lifelong learning performers (Eurostat, 2016^[17]). As can be seen in Figure 3.6, the share of individuals in Ireland facing obstacles to participating in lifelong learning – that is, those who either did not participate in education and training but wanted to participate or those who did participate but wanted to participate more – is higher than the EU average and than other top performers.

Thus, there appears to be a significant amount of untapped potential for participation in lifelong learning in Ireland. As mentioned above, other OECD countries use a range of incentives to encourage individuals to participate in lifelong learning, including subsidies, tax incentives, loans, savings and asset-building mechanisms, study/training leave and time accounts (OECD, 2017^[23]). Schemes that are attached to individuals (as opposed to specific employers or employment status) fall into the category of individual learning schemes (ILSs) and have gained much attention in recent years due, in large part, to EU initiatives to promote the adoption of individual learning accounts (ILAs) in member countries (OECD, 2019^[24]; European Commission, 2021^[25]; CEDEFOP, 2021^[26]). While the term “individual learning accounts” is often used more broadly to refer to all different types of individual learning schemes, pure ILAs are quite rare and most ILSs, in practice, take the form of vouchers or other subsidies (Box 3.3).

Figure 3.6. Individuals facing obstacles to participating in education and training in Ireland and selected European countries, 2016

Percentage of adults aged 25-64 who either did not participate but wanted to participate in adult education and training or who did participate but wanted to participate more



Source: Eurostat (2016^[17]), *Adult Education Survey 2016: Population by will to participate in education and training*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_AES_175/default/table?lang=en&category=educ.educ_part.trng.trng_aes_12m3.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/nm37wo>

Box 3.3. Individual learning schemes

A common characteristic across individual learning schemes is that the benefit is linked to individuals instead of employers and is not dependent on the individual's employment status.

While most individual learning schemes implemented across OECD countries are called "individual learning accounts" (ILAs), in practice, these ILAs encompass a number of different types of individual learning schemes, with the most frequently implemented scheme being voucher schemes.

Individual learning accounts

Individual learning accounts are "virtual" accounts in which training rights are accumulated over time. The accounts are virtual because their resources are only activated if and when an individual undertakes education or training.

Individual Savings Accounts for Training (ISAT)

Individual Savings Accounts for Training are physical savings accounts in which individuals accumulate funds over time that can be used towards education and training at a later point. Employers and public authorities may, in some cases, also deposit funds in these accounts. Funds that are not used for training are owned by the individual and, in some cases, may be used for other purposes.

Training vouchers

With training vouchers, individuals receive direct subsidies for participating in education and training, which often require co-funding by the education or training participant. Training vouchers usually do not allow for rights or resource accumulation over time.

Time accounts

Time accounts allow individuals to accumulate time, rather than money, to be used towards education and training at a later point. The accumulated time can be linked to overtime hours.

Source: OECD (2019^[24]), *Individual Learning Accounts: Panacea or Pandora's Box?*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/203b21a8-en>; OECD (2017^[23]), *Financial Incentives for Steering Education and Training*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264272415-en>.

Ireland already has in place a number of financial incentives targeting individuals to participate in lifelong learning, none of which are traditional ILs. Ireland's current schemes, outlined in Table 3.3, generally tend to encourage participation in lifelong learning by making specific courses free or reducing their cost and enabling specific groups of individuals to apply to participate in these subsidised/free courses (e.g. eCollege, Human Capital Initiative [HCI], Springboard+, Back to Education Initiative [BTEI], Skills to Advance, Skills to Compete). None of these existing schemes are classic ILAs, ISATs, training vouchers, or time accounts, and none provide an entitlement directly to individuals that is theirs to use as they please, within certain parameters.

ILAs, or ILs more broadly, have gained more prominence following the 2022 European Council recommendation on individual learning accounts to boost the training of working-age adults (European Council, 2022^[27]). Member states will be evaluated on their progress in implementing this recommendation five years after it was adopted. Ireland welcomed the European Council recommendation and is committed to advancing the framework conditions set out in the recommendation (DFHERIS, 2022^[28]).

ILs have a number of characteristics that make them very attractive options for policy makers. However, they can also be expensive and ineffective when designed poorly or without a country's specific context in mind. Some of the advantages of ILs are that they can inspire "ownership" of lifelong learning among individuals by increasing individuals' choice and responsibility in their education and training decisions (OECD, 2019^[24]). The schemes are seen by many as a promising way to extend access to lifelong learning to all, including low-income and other disadvantaged groups, to improve the skill levels and employability of individuals, and to promote healthy competition among education and training providers given that individuals have a substantial choice in the providers they choose (OECD, 2019^[24]). ILs are also a promising way to extend access to lifelong learning to workers in non-standard forms of work (e.g. temporary work, self-employment, "gig economy" workers) who have only tenuous or non-continuous relationships with an employer (OECD, 2019^[24]). Non-standard forms of work are on the rise across countries, as well as in Ireland, where the share of self-employment is similar to the OECD average (Seitani and Westmore, 2020^[29]). Therefore, it is advisable for Ireland to review and consider amending regulations that place limitations on individuals who want to work in the gig economy (Seitani and Westmore, 2020^[29]). Furthermore, ILs are seen by policy makers as reflecting individuals' "right" to lifelong learning and in tackling the challenges of individuals' lack of motivation, lack of time and lack of funding for participating in lifelong learning (CEDEFOP, 2021^[26]). Given that time obstacles are particularly strong barriers to participation in lifelong learning in Ireland, Ireland may want to implement an IL that directly addresses this obstacle.

Table 3.3. Main financial incentives in Ireland for individuals to participate in lifelong learning

Scheme	Type	Target group	Description
Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)	Subsidy	Young people and adults who did not gain the Leaving Certificate and are social welfare benefit recipients	These are flexible, part-time learning opportunities offered free of charge and aimed to help participants return to learning while balancing family, work and other responsibilities.
eCollege	Subsidy (for target groups)	NFQ Levels 5 and below	eCollege provides online, on-demand courses available free of charge to the unemployed, that have been temporarily made available free of charge to the entire population in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Human Capital Initiative (HCI)	Subsidy	Higher education students (NFQ Levels 8-9)	HCI offers free and subsidised courses at NFQ Levels 8-9.
Learner Fund	Subsidy	Workers in early childcare	Staff in early childcare can receive a grant to participate in education and training activities towards Level 6 (NFQ) awards in childcare to meet new minimum qualification requirements as of 2016. Grants cover 75% of costs.
Skills Connect	Subsidy	Unemployed individuals	Skills Connect is a labour market activation programme that provides free education and training courses for unemployed individuals that are offered through Skillnet Business Networks.
Skills to Advance	Subsidy	Employed individuals, particularly those with below Level 5 NFQ	Subsidised upskilling and reskilling opportunities are provided for employees in vulnerable sectors through education and training boards (ETBs) or eCollege.
Skills to Compete	Subsidy	Employees displaced by COVID-19	Free reskilling courses are offered to individuals displaced or at risk of displacement from their employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The courses are offered through ETBs.
Springboard+	Subsidy	Higher education graduates (NFQ Levels 6-9)	The programme provides free (for unemployed) and subsidised (for employed) upskilling and reskilling higher education opportunities in areas of identified skills need.
Student Grant Scheme	Subsidy	Disadvantaged students in higher education and further education and training	A means-tested grant is provided to full-time students in further and higher education courses to cover fees and living costs. Funding streams available to part-time students include the Student Assistance Fund, Higher Education Access Route and Disability Access programmes.
Tax relief for tuition fees in respect of tertiary education	Tax incentive	Students in third-level education	Students can claim tax relief for their education and training fees for approved courses. Eligible courses include certain undergraduate and postgraduate courses and certain training courses in foreign languages and information technology.
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	Subsidy	Unemployed individuals, particularly early school leavers	Provides full-time basic education and training and advanced vocational training for up to two years at NFQ Levels 3-6.

Note: Schemes are listed in alphabetical order. NFQ stands for National Framework of Qualifications.

Source: CEDEFOP (2022^[30]), *Financing adult learning* (database), www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db; DFHERIS (2021^[31]), *Learn new skills or retrain*, www.gov.ie/en/publication/89b3c-learn-new-skills-or-retrain/.

On the other hand, there are many trade-offs and potential pitfalls when implementing ILSs. For example, these types of schemes can create deadweight loss when not targeted sufficiently (e.g. the scheme would be used by people who also would have participated without the incentive). Furthermore, they can be relatively ineffective without substantial matching funding from the government. They can also have limited participation if the scheme is too complex. Finally, they can be less effective if not combined with other measures to promote lifelong learning (OECD, 2019^[24]). In addition, ILSs are often costly and can be administratively burdensome to set up and should thus be regarded with caution.

In the specific context of Ireland, the advantages and disadvantages of implementing ILSs would need to be considered before implementing such a measure. As discussed above, individuals in Ireland who wish to participate in lifelong learning face primarily family, schedule, and cost barriers to participation in adult education and training (Figure 3.3). Many project participants emphasised that an entitlement tied to the individual and/or one ensuring a “right” to lifelong learning could help individuals overcome these barriers

and justify participation in lifelong learning. Furthermore, project participants noted that instituting an ILS could send a symbolic message to the public that lifelong learning is a national priority for Ireland, which can impact the public's perception of lifelong learning. On the other hand, having a requirement to accommodate employees' guaranteed right to training can be very challenging for employers, particularly in a tight labour market such as Ireland's. Furthermore, Ireland already has a number of incentives for individuals in place, and introducing an ILS could further complicate a crowded policy space. Many project participants, including those representing employers, expressed caution about implementing such a measure.

Because instituting an ILS is such a big and costly step, and its outcomes depend greatly on it being implemented in a tailored way that fits a country's specific context, it would be important to, as a first step, conduct in-depth research into possible outcomes of ILSs, as well as other measures of establishing individual rights for training, specifically in the Irish context.

Another way to promote individuals' optimal participation in lifelong learning is to expand existing programmes and incentives that are particularly successful in engaging individuals in learning, especially in attracting new learners and introducing them to a positive lifelong learning experience. Two programmes that seem to reach broad audiences and are fairly distinct from one another are Springboard+ and eCollege. Springboard+ provides free (for the unemployed) or subsidised (for the employed) courses in HE in areas of labour market importance. While Springboard+ aims to incentivise more individuals to participate in HE, eCollege provides online courses for the FET sector. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, both programmes were expanded (Springboard+ by supplementing additional learning spots and eCollege by making the courses free of charge for all) to meet additional upskilling needs exacerbated by the crisis (Box 3.4). As project participants reflected, this increased supply has been met with increased demand, indicating that expanding these successful programmes could help more adults engage with lifelong learning.

As discussed, although motivation to participate in lifelong learning is relatively high in Ireland, nearly one-third of the adult population in Ireland still does not and does not want to participate in education and training (Eurostat, 2016^[17]). Ireland's NSS 2025 has very little mention of engaging with public awareness campaigns to promote lifelong learning. It is mentioned only as one of several measures under Action 4.1, "Promote lifelong learning" (Department of Education and Skills, 2016^[8]). Nonetheless, while education and training providers run their own public awareness campaigns, there has not yet been a broad-scale national campaign to promote lifelong learning across Ireland, such as in other countries including Switzerland (Box 3.5). Perhaps the most effective awareness-raising campaign in Ireland related to lifelong learning has been the National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Awareness Campaign funded by SOLAS as part of the FET Strategy 2014-19. An independent evaluation of the latest phase of this campaign (Phase 5) found that 78% of individuals who themselves have literacy and numeracy difficulties reported being aware of free literacy classes in local ETBs, an 18% increase from before the implementation of this phase of the campaign (SOLAS, 2021^[32]).

Box 3.4. Relevant national example: Expanding programmes that successfully engage individuals

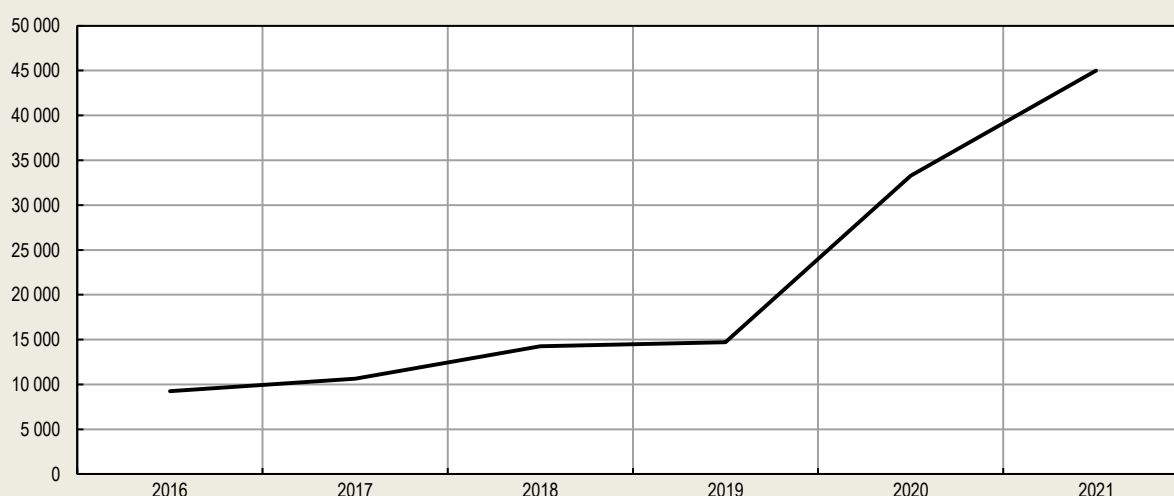
Ireland: Extending eCollege during the COVID-19 pandemic

eCollege is an online learning platform and service funded by SOLAS. It offers FET courses in areas with high labour market demand, including project management and digital and business skills. Furthermore, the courses offered by eCollege can be accessed on a continuous intake basis, as opposed to having one start date, and have flexible completion timelines. All courses on eCollege lead to industry certification.


The eCollege programme was launched in Ireland in 2005 to provide more flexible online training, specifically in the agri-food industry, but later evolved into an online training service offered free of charge to unemployed individuals in Ireland, with paid access available to employed individuals. While courses were open to employed individuals willing to pay, the use of eCollege among those not receiving the service for free was quite limited, standing at under 10% of participants in 2016-19. In 2019, free access to eCollege was expanded to include vulnerable individuals in employment. This expansion did not lead to any substantial increase in the number of learners in 2019.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, eCollege was made available free of charge to all individuals in Ireland over age 18. As can be seen in Figure 3.7, the number of eCollege learners increased substantially in 2020 and 2021 following this policy change. While there has not been research on who these individuals are and whether or not they are first-time lifelong learners, this trend is promising in showing: 1) that there is more demand for a service like eCollege than was previously being tapped into; and 2) this could provide a more flexible and accessible training option that could introduce more individuals in Ireland to lifelong learning.

Figure 3.7. Number of eCollege learners, 2016-21



Source: SOLAS (2022^[33]), *Annual Report and Accounts 2021*, www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/9a0af12b29/solas-annual-report-2021-english.pdf; SOLAS (2021^[34]), *Annual Report and Accounts 2020*, www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/78309d67cb/15514-solas-annual-report-2020-web.pdf; SOLAS (2020^[35]), *Annual Report and Accounts 2019*, www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/c755bd73ba/solas-annual-report-english.pdf; SOLAS (2019^[36]), *Annual Report and Accounts 2018*, www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/d21ad1190d/annual-report-english.pdf; SOLAS (2018^[37]), *Annual Report and Accounts 2017*, www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/dcb57e6b9e/14438-solas-annual-report-2017-english-web.pdf; SOLAS (2017^[38]), *Annual Report 2016*, www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/1590e1d822/solas-annual-report-2016.pdf.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/wbg8za>

Box 3.5. Relevant international examples: Encouraging widespread participation in lifelong learning

Canada: The Lifelong Learning Plan (LLP)

The Lifelong Learning Plan in Canada allows individuals to withdraw up to CAD 10 000 (Canadian dollars) a year (with a maximum total cap at CAD 20 000) from their Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSPs) to be used towards training or education for themselves or a spouse/common-law partner. The LLP funds can only be used for full-time education or training programmes. Unlike other RRSP withdrawals, the funds withdrawn under the LLP scheme are exempt from taxes. Individuals who withdraw funds under LLP must repay these funds within ten years, or the funds do indeed become subject to tax. In this sense, the LLP acts as a no-interest loan to individuals to be used for the specific purpose of education and training. While both the RRSP beneficiary and the beneficiary's spouse/common-law partner can benefit from LLP (even at the same time as one another), the LLP benefit cannot be applied towards the education and training of either's children. LLP is part of a larger scheme to encourage retirement savings in Canada but provides more flexibility around individuals' needs by allowing them to withdraw funds early for specific purposes.

Switzerland: National #LifelongLearning campaign

In 2019, the national #LifelongLearning campaign was launched in Switzerland on the third annual Swiss Digital Day. The campaign, which aims to raise awareness about lifelong learning among employers and employees, was jointly launched by the digitalswitzerland initiative, a cross-industry initiative to promote digital skills in Switzerland, and the Union Patronal Suisse, the Swiss Employers' Association. The campaign's goals are to increase public awareness about the importance and benefits of lifelong learning and to increase participation in lifelong learning, particularly in digital skills. As part of the campaign, over 125 employers pledged to support their employees to participate in adult education and training. Simultaneously, over 100 videos of employees sharing their stories and positive experiences with lifelong learning were disseminated.

The campaign has a website (www.lifelonglearning.ch/) which houses information on the importance of lifelong learning alongside lifelong learning stories in both video and text format, the employer pledge to support lifelong learning and numbers showing how many employers have made the pledge, and information on lifelong learning offers with a link to Switzerland's neutral web platform (www.formationcontinue.swiss/) that provides information on courses from different providers.

The formationcontinue.swiss website has a homepage with a user-friendly advanced search box that allows perspective participants to search across lifelong learning providers by various characteristics at once, including start date, price, topic, keyword, region/platform of learning (e.g. online), certified providers, courses that accept continuing education vouchers, etc. in order to find courses matching one's needs. The search results are then displayed in a chart that shows many options "at a glance" with key information such as start date, price, and other characteristics listed. Each option result can then be clicked on to find further information.

Thus, the #LifelongLearning campaign website (www.lifelonglearning.ch/) provides information on both the "why" and "how" of lifelong learning in one place and was launched on an already recognised national day to give the campaign prominence and strengthen its impact.

Source: Government of Canada (2022^[39]), *Lifelong Learning Plan (LLP)*, www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/forms-publications/publications/rc4112/lifelong-learning-plan.html; Sun Life (2022^[40]), *Lifelong Learning Plan (LLP)* www.sunlife.ca/en/investments/rrsp/llp/; digitalswitzerland (2023^[41]), #LifelongLearning, <https://lifelonglearning.ch/>.

Recommendation 1: Incentivise adults to participate in lifelong learning to improve the prominence of lifelong learning in Ireland's society

Project participants indicated broad support for raising the profile of lifelong learning in Ireland and fostering a culture that values learning throughout life. However, despite various programmes available to individuals to support their participation in lifelong learning, Ireland does not yet have widespread national messaging or a comprehensive national policy around lifelong learning to reflect the importance of lifelong learning for individuals and society at large.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to improve the perception and prominence of lifelong learning in Ireland's society to strengthen all individuals' motivation to participate in lifelong learning:

- 1.1. **Assess the feasibility of individual learning schemes and paid training leave in Ireland's context.** To determine whether or not Ireland should adopt an ILS and, if so, the type and characteristics most suited to its needs, DFHERIS should conduct in-depth research into the feasibility of such schemes in Ireland's context. Furthermore, DFHERIS should assess the option of establishing a statutory right to lifelong learning in Ireland and linking this right to the existing and proposed supports for engaging in lifelong learning.
- 1.2. **Evaluate and expand programmes or financial incentives that effectively engage a wide range of individuals in lifelong learning by extending their scope, target audience and/or allocated resources (e.g. Springboard+, eCollege).** To help more individuals engage with lifelong learning and have positive experiences that encourage them to participate more in the future, programmes popular with adults in Ireland in recent years should be properly evaluated and expanded in the areas where they have had the greatest impact. As part of such an expansion, models that work well for one segment of individuals could be adapted to meet the needs of other segments (e.g. courses delivered in a format similar to eCollege could be expanded beyond National Framework of Qualifications [NFQ] Level 5). These successful programmes could point learners towards future opportunities for lifelong learning. Consideration would need to be given to the implementation of this measure so as not to eliminate individual and/or employer contributions for training, which foster buy-in to education and training outcomes.
- 1.3. **Implement a public awareness campaign to raise awareness about the importance and benefits of lifelong learning for all.** To raise the prominence of lifelong learning in the national discourse, DFHERIS should launch a national awareness campaign about the benefits of lifelong learning, particularly highlighting different types of learner pathways, varying entry points into lifelong learning and many types of learning (formal, non-formal, informal) in order to send a message to the public that lifelong learning can be for all types of learners.

Recommendation 2: Provide tailored and targeted support to disadvantaged groups to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning

Within Ireland, participation in lifelong learning varies widely between different groups of individuals. This phenomenon is, of course, not unique to Ireland. As seen in Figure 3.2, in both Ireland and other EU countries, participation in adult education and training is lower among older individuals, men, individuals who are inactive in the labour market, and those with lower education levels. Nonetheless, engaging these groups in Ireland and other countries, particularly the low-skilled, is becoming more critical since low-skilled individuals are more likely to work in jobs affected by climate change and digitalisation. These individuals would therefore benefit from reskilling and upskilling but are at the same time less likely to participate in adult education and training (OECD, 2019^[42]). Furthermore, in Ireland, the participation of vulnerable groups in lifelong learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly affected (SOLAS, 2022^[43]).

Ireland could benefit from a better understanding of different types of learner profiles within the country in order to provide more tailored and targeted support to disengaged groups. There are already some indications of who these groups are and how their participation in lifelong learning has changed in recent years. For example, recent data show that the pandemic led to a more substantial drop in learners among women; that participation is lower as NFQ level declines; and that individuals who work from home are more likely to participate in lifelong learning (SOLAS, 2022^[43]).

However, even with this information, project participants noted that a significant barrier to developing more tailored lifelong learning policies is not understanding in enough detail which individuals in Ireland are or are not participating in lifelong learning currently and the reasons driving those trends. One step towards better understanding and targeting disengaged groups in terms of incentives, awareness and guidance would be to conduct research into the specific adult learning profiles of individuals in Ireland, similar to those developed in the *OECD Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance for Flanders, Belgium* project (OECD, 2022^[44]) described in Box 3.6.

In Ireland, particular population groups that could benefit from targeted lifelong learning policies include individuals with low education and skill levels, parents and carers, and the inactive or long-term unemployed. With regard to education and skill levels, 70% of lifelong learning participants in Ireland have NFQ Levels 6-10, or the equivalent of third-level qualifications. There has been a greater decline in participation in lifelong learning among those with lower NFQ levels since the pandemic than those with higher NFQ levels (SOLAS, 2022^[43]). Individuals participating in lifelong learning in Ireland are mostly (over 50%) either working in professional or associate professional occupations (as opposed to elementary, operative, and sales occupations). They are most likely to work in the health and education sectors (SOLAS, 2022^[43]). A strong indication that parents and carers need further support to participate in lifelong learning is that family reasons are the biggest barrier to participation across education levels. This trend stands out compared to other EU countries (Figure 3.3). Equally, as shown in Figure 3.2, the share of inactive individuals in Ireland who participate in adult education and training surpasses the EU average but is still low relative to employed individuals and has declined in Ireland compared to before the pandemic.

Individuals with low education and skill levels in Ireland tend to face greater barriers to participation in lifelong learning than their more educated peers. Despite the financial incentives already in place in Ireland, including those meant specifically to target individuals with lower education or skill levels, cost remains a barrier for many individuals in Ireland to participate in lifelong learning. About 28% of individuals in Ireland who want to participate in adult education and training but do not are unable to participate due to costs (Eurostat, 2016^[17]). Ireland's existing incentives for individuals include a number of schemes that particularly target lower-educated or lower-skilled individuals (e.g. Student Grant Scheme, Skills to Compete, eCollege, BTEI; see Table 3.3). Furthermore, most of these schemes are subsidised or offered free of charge (eCollege, BTEI).

Box 3.6. Relevant international examples: Profiling tools for adult learners

Flanders (Belgium): Adult learner profiles

In 2022, through an Implementation Guidance project, the OECD worked with Flemish stakeholders to develop a segmentation of the adult learning population in Flanders that identifies nine distinct adult learner profiles that can be used to help Flanders better target and tailor its lifelong learning policies in the future.

The study uses Latent Class Analysis, which makes it possible to identify sub-groups of adults with a shared set of motivations to learn and obstacles to participation in lifelong learning. Furthermore, for each of the nine profiles, the study identifies the characteristics of the individuals in this profile (e.g. age, education level, type of job). Creating profiles in this style helps to call attention to groups of adults who have been overlooked or under-engaged by previous skills policies. Learner profiles can also aid policy makers in refining existing policies or designing new policies tailored to different types of learners.

United Kingdom: Profiling tools for awareness-raising strategies

In the United Kingdom, the Department for Education commissioned Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to research adults' relationships with lifelong learning. L&W developed an attitudinal typology dividing adult learners into six categories based on the purpose of learning for potential participants. These categories are: lifelong learners; defiant learners; outcome-focused learners; tentative learners; exhausted learners; and stuck-in status-quo learners. The study found that lifelong, defiant and outcome-focused learners likely had an easier time overcoming barriers to training because they had a clear purpose for learning. The research also found that tentative, exhausted and stuck-in-the-status-quo learners lacked a strong purpose for learning, making it harder to encourage their participation in learning, and would therefore require more targeted, tailored and intensive government support.

Source: OECD (2022^[44]), *OECD Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance for Flanders, Belgium: The Faces of Learners in Flanders*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/7887a565-en>; Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2018^[45]), *Decisions of Adult Learners*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/742108/DfE_Decisions_of_adult_learners.pdf.

However, despite these generous incentives, low-skilled individuals in Ireland still seem to contribute quite a bit to their ongoing learning. For example, while the largest source of funding for community education groups in ETBs, which target low-skilled individuals, is from the ETBs themselves through funding from SOLAS (29%), the second largest source of funding is individual learner fees, standing at 10.5% (AONTAS, 2020^[46]). Project participants noted that vulnerable individuals might pay more than they are required to for adult education and training because they are not aware of the financial support available to them. Confusion around costs, grants and entitlements can be a major barrier for prospective learners from vulnerable groups to finding suitable and affordable courses (see Chapter 2 for recommendations on information on learning opportunities). Potential learners also noted that better information about the costs of courses, the grants available, and payment plans could help learners spread the cost of courses over a longer period (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017^[47]).

Furthermore, in Ireland, and particularly for disadvantaged groups, indirect costs, such as time, childcare, and transportation, serve as additional barriers to participation in lifelong learning. According to a recent CEDEFOP (2020^[13]) study, Ireland is only one of a handful of countries where individuals report time issues as a greater barrier to participating in adult learning than not believing they need such training. Furthermore, individuals in Ireland report that family reasons keep them from participating in lifelong learning (43.7%) at a substantially higher rate than the EU average of 31.6% (Eurostat, 2016^[17]). With

regard to incentives in Ireland specifically addressing time constraints, almost none of the financial incentives outlined in Table 3.3, except the BTEI (which is only available to social welfare benefit recipients), directly address individuals' primary barriers to participating in lifelong learning – family reasons and scheduling or time barriers. As discussed in Recommendation 1, paid training leave could help address the time barriers faced by vulnerable groups of individuals in Ireland, as could policies that address the indirect costs of learning (Box 3.7).

Box 3.7. Relevant international example: Covering indirect costs of training

British Columbia (Canada): Adult Upgrading Grant (AUG)

The Adult Upgrading Grant in British Columbia covers the indirect costs of participating in education and training programmes. In addition to providing tuition-free Adult Basic Education and English-Language Learning programmes at public post-secondary institutions, low-income learners are eligible for additional monetary benefits. The AUG covers indirect learning costs, including registration fees, books and supplies, transportation and unsubsidised childcare. The AUG Emergency Access Grant is an additional one-time sum that participants can receive to invest in hardware, software or home Internet access to facilitate learning.

Source: OECD (2019^[48]), *Getting Skills Right: Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311756-en>.

Childcare also serves as a major barrier to participating in lifelong learning for parents and carers in Ireland. A recent survey showed that even women who were highly motivated to participate in training in Ireland found childcare to be a prohibitive barrier to participation, and female respondents reported that having a child reduced their ability to participate in full-time formal education and training (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017^[47]). Thus, good-quality, accessible and affordable childcare is necessary to allow young women, in particular, to participate in lifelong learning. Ireland's Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) programme subsidises childcare for children of disadvantaged parents and parents participating in education, training or low-paid employment. Parents can either choose between this scheme or the broader National Childcare Scheme (NCS), which has largely replaced previous interventions like CCSP (Citizens Information, 2022^[49]). However, these schemes do not necessarily address the needs of parents participating in education and training. For example, the NCS has been criticised for being complicated and difficult for parents to navigate, which can be particularly challenging for parents with low literacy and digital literacy skills (OECD, 2021^[50]).

Furthermore, childcare challenges for adult learners include: the rigidity and limited eligibility for a childcare allowance; the fact that costs are only partially covered by the allowance; and the absence of on-site childcare at adult learning facilities, particularly in community education where, project participants noted, on-site childcare was more common in the past (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017^[47]; AONTAS, 2020^[46]). Many participants in FET and community education reported needing additional support for childcare as well as other basic support, such as transportation and meals (AONTAS, 2022^[51]; 2020^[46]). Furthermore, learners lack awareness about the financial support available to them. In fact, lone parents were the learners least likely to be aware of available childcare support (AONTAS, 2022^[51]).

Improving access to education and training for the inactive and long-term unemployed is a priority in Ireland's strategic documents, and particularly in Pathways to Work 2021-2025 (Department of Social Protection, 2021^[52]). The Pathways to Work strategy sets out a goal to support 50 000 long-term unemployed people to commence FET by 2025. According to state experts, as of the end of 2022, a little over 23 000 long-term unemployed had begun training programmes. This shows that Ireland is generally on the right track but has more improvements to make, particularly given current skills and labour shortages.

Ireland has a number of relatively successful initiatives that could be further strengthened to improve the participation of the inactive and long-term unemployed in lifelong learning. Two programmes of note are the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and the Specific Skills Training (SST) programme, both delivered through the ETBs.

VTOS provides training courses to long-term unemployed individuals (over six months) over age 21 to help them gain skills to re-enter the labour force and/or to spur them to participate in FET (CEDEFOP, 2022^[30]). In addition to unemployment benefits, VTOS participants receive a training allowance; courses are provided free of charge (including course materials); and additional support is provided for meals, transportation and childcare, depending on a learner's specific situation (CEDEFOP, 2022^[30]). The outcomes of VTOS have been quite positive, with close to one-quarter of those completing the programme continuing on to employment and over half of those completing the programme progressing to FET (Indecon International Research Economists, 2018^[53]).

The SST programme provides vocational training at NFQ Levels 4-6 for the unemployed and job seekers, over half of whom are long-term unemployed, at a lower cost than most other FET programmes (Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020^[54]). Unlike apprenticeships and traineeships, SST focuses on formal learning opportunities (not work-based learning) in areas that are specifically relevant for employment. The SST programme has had quite positive outcomes, with an evaluation showing an increase of 3.5-5.6% in the probability of employment one year after completing the SST programme (Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020^[54]). However, the evaluation showed that the impact of the SST programme on employment was lower for the long-term unemployed (Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020^[54]). Other shortcomings were found in the SST programme as well. For example, ETB staff noticed a need to include greater numeracy and literacy resources for learners in SST programmes, having identified a lack of these skills as a barrier to better programme outcomes (Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020^[54]).

Furthermore, financial support, the geographical location of courses and the learning difficulties of potential participants are still seen as major barriers to participation in SST programmes by participants and SST Training Centre and ETB management (Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020^[54]). At the same time, participation in SST has been declining while increasing for apprenticeships and traineeships, which involve a substantial amount of work-based training (Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020^[54]). This may indicate a need to incorporate greater work-based learning into the SST programme. To improve participation in lifelong learning among this group of learners, it appears that greater holistic support specific to learners' needs could contribute to better learning outcomes.

Recommendation 2: Provide tailored and targeted support to disengaged individuals to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning

Project participants stressed the specific and heightened barriers to participating in lifelong learning faced by vulnerable population groups. While Ireland has relatively good adult participation rates in education and training by international comparison, specifically engaging these vulnerable groups could be a key to becoming a top performer in lifelong learning. Effectively engaging vulnerable groups involves better understanding why they are not participating and designing policies specific enough to meet their needs while limiting unnecessary and inefficient costs.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to provide tailored and targeted support to disengaged individuals to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning:

- 2.1. Develop detailed profiles of different types of lifelong learners and potential lifelong learners.** To best target disengaged lifelong learners, it is first important to have a more granular picture of the different types of adult learners or potential learners in Ireland and to understand their particular contexts and barriers to participation. DFHERIS, in partnership with SOLAS and DETE, should undertake or commission research to identify the different profiles of lifelong learners in Ireland's adult population, using the findings of such research as input for designing and implementing tailored lifelong learning policies.
- 2.2. Improve holistic support for parents and carers to participate in lifelong learning through information, additional financial support and on-site services.** The DSP, in collaboration with SOLAS, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and DFHERIS, should design and implement additional holistic support for parents and carers (e.g. on-site childcare, information about existing government support for childcare and support in the application process, stipends for living costs during studies, etc.) to make lifelong learning more accessible to parents and carers.
- 2.3. Increase support for vulnerable groups to participate in lifelong learning by providing targeted guidance and financial supplements to address the indirect costs of learning.** The costs of participating in lifelong learning are higher in reality than the costs of tuition to participate in a course, particularly for low-income individuals and other vulnerable groups, such as the long-term unemployed. The DSP, in collaboration with SOLAS and DFHERIS, should build on existing DSP benefits to strengthen targeted support for vulnerable groups (e.g. transportation and meal vouchers, stipends for living costs during studies, information about RPL, etc.) to offset the indirect costs of lifelong learning and make it more broadly accessible.

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

Participating in lifelong learning is beneficial not only for individuals in Ireland, no matter their employment status, but also for employers. For employers, providing education and training opportunities for their employees can improve firm performance, lead to greater productivity and profitability, help fill skill gaps, improve competitiveness and boost employee retention (OECD, 2022^[55]; 2021^[56]). Nonetheless, employers in Ireland as well as in other countries, face a number of challenges in providing education and training opportunities to their employees, including financial and time constraints, fears of poaching and lack of clarity about the training opportunities available to them or support for participating in such

opportunities (OECD, 2021^[56]). In addition, employers' decisions around lifelong learning for their employees are impacted by a number of factors, including whether or not they have a dedicated training manager/specialist, whether or not they use training needs assessments, whether they want to provide training in-house or outsource training, and if or how to provide time to participate in training during work hours (OECD, 2021^[56]).

Policy makers have a role to play in encouraging employers to be more active partners in promoting lifelong learning among their employees and potential employees. Policy interventions can help overcome employers' attitudinal, informational, time or financial barriers as well as their co-ordination problems (OECD, 2021^[56]). Some of the tools policy makers can employ to address these barriers are information and guidance, capacity building, financial incentives, the direct provision of training and regulatory instruments (OECD, 2021^[56]).

Project participants emphasised the importance of involving employers more actively in supporting, providing and promoting lifelong learning. The importance placed on the employer's role is reflected in Ireland's various strategies that discuss lifelong learning. Not only is the role of the employer very present in the NSS 2025, but it also features in other strategic documents, such as the National Training Fund Implementation Plan and the White Paper on Enterprise (Table 3.1). While stakeholders representing government bodies, education and training providers, and employers' organisations all stressed the importance of getting employers more involved in Ireland's skills ecosystem, including by supporting their employees to engage in ongoing education and training, the employers themselves who participated in consultations expressed that they are time poor, which affects their ability to play an active role in driving upskilling and reskilling. While skills shortages further drive the need for employers to develop and retain a skilled workforce to survive in today's economic climate, these shortages also make it harder for employers to dedicate time to investing in their employees' continued development. Thus, employers participating in the consultations expressed frustration with the overload and complexity of information on skills and a lack of guidance to navigate the system.

By international comparison, Ireland is already a leader in engaging employers in skills-related strategy and policy (see also Chapter 5). Nonetheless, employers could be better and more effectively engaged in Ireland by establishing clear and robust lifelong learning guidance (lifelong guidance for individuals is covered extensively in Chapter 2) and a support system for employers to efficiently match their employees with training that meets their needs. Greater support and guidance could incentivise employers to be more active partners in lifelong learning and access the many training opportunities and financial mechanisms already designed in Ireland for their benefit.

Recommendation 3: Establish a clear and robust lifelong learning guidance and support system for employers to efficiently match them with training that meets their needs

Even if employers in Ireland want to provide education or training to their employees, they often do not know where to turn to find objective information and guidance about courses and training providers who may fit their needs and about the public support or benefits available to them. Throughout consultations, employers, employers' representatives, and policy makers repeatedly discussed this challenge as an often insurmountable obstacle for employers in engaging with lifelong learning. While Ireland already has some structures in place to provide guidance to employers, there is currently not one solution in place that has all of the characteristics project participants say are needed for this employer guidance to be effective. Furthermore, employers lack access to tools and resources that can help them assess their employees' skill sets and the skills needed to develop their workforce to maintain a competitive edge in their industries. In all of these areas, the challenges faced by SMEs¹ are greater than for larger companies, as SMEs rarely have the capacity to have staff dedicated to internal skills development and often face greater time and cost constraints than larger employers.

One of the project participants' most consistent messages was that employers in Ireland, many of whom face time constraints, need help navigating the very complex landscape of education and training offers and determining which offering is most suitable to their needs. There are a few different structures or bodies in place whose mandates address these needs, yet all have limitations to the degree to which they can accomplish this. In addition to each of the education and training providers themselves reaching out to employers to pitch their own offerings (e.g. ETBs, HEIs, among others), the main entities in Ireland that currently serve the role of guiding employers to appropriate education and training across providers include RSF managers, Skillnet Ireland and LEOs (more discussion on the specific roles of each of these bodies in Ireland's skills ecosystem can be found in Chapter 5 on governance).

The key criteria for an entity providing lifelong learning guidance to employers that emerged from stakeholder consultations during the OECD assessment were: 1) an independent body that is impartial and does not have an incentive to promote one provider or type of provider over another; 2) a body with the regional/local/sectoral reach to connect with employers "on the ground"; 3) a body with the capacity to scale up engagement with employers to reach the largest possible number and range of employers; 4) a body that can provide support for employers to conduct assessments of their skill needs; 5) a body with credibility and/or branding recognition among employers; and 6) a body that can provide an online portal for employers to find education and training opportunities for their businesses. As seen in Table 3.4, although the skills policy landscape is busy and many entities engage with employers (see Chapter 5), no one entity among the three mentioned above meets all these criteria.

One criterion of particular note is the ability to provide an online portal for employers to improve their ability to navigate the education and training offer(s) that meet their needs. While online navigation of the education and training offer for *individuals* is discussed in Chapter 2, employers have different needs when engaging with lifelong learning. They would therefore benefit from a portal tailored specifically for them. An online portal for employers must be considered in tandem with consideration of the entity or entities providing lifelong guidance to employers, as the two complement one another and are necessary to improve employer engagement in lifelong learning.

While there are a number of online portals available in Ireland for navigating education and training options, most are geared towards potential learners or other target groups, with only a few having tailored information for employers (see Table 2.1 in Chapter 2 for information on portals targeted at individuals in Ireland). The existing portals for individuals with curated information for employers are Generation Apprenticeship, Mycareerpath.ie, SmartChoices and The Right Course. SmartChoices and The Right Course redirect employers to other platforms without providing additional tailored information for employers. The information provided for employers on the Generation Apprenticeship portal is, unsurprisingly, related to apprenticeships and not to broader skills resources for employers. Mycareerpath.ie, supported by HCI funding, provides information and guidance services for employers to help them identify their employees' upskilling and training needs and develop learning pathways with customised courses, yet focuses primarily on HE rather than FET opportunities. None of these portals has a landing page that asks employers questions about their needs and then directs them to relevant education and training options according to their answers.

Portals that specifically target employers include the LEOs website (Table 3.4) and the Supporting SMEs Portal (<https://supportingsmes.gov.ie/>), a new platform developed by DETE that provides information on various support available for SMEs, including but not limited to, those related to upgrading management skills. The Supporting SMEs Portal was set up under the SME and Entrepreneurship Growth Plan to reduce administrative burdens for SMEs to access government support available to them and as a tool that EI and the LEOs (indigenous agencies of DETE) can refer SMEs to for relevant information. However, the portal lacks detailed information on specific education and training offerings.

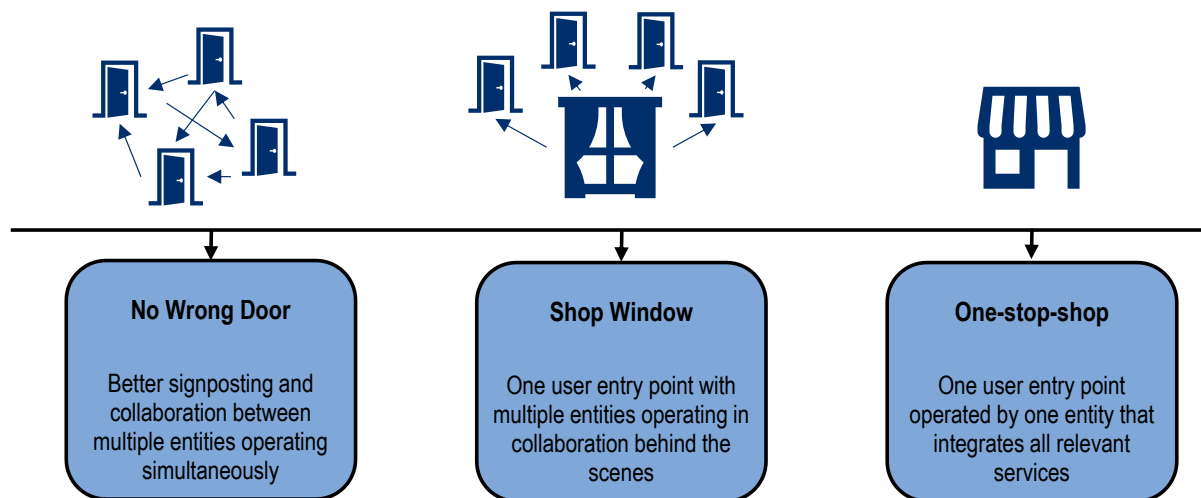
Table 3.4. Sources of education and training guidance for employers in Ireland

Entities providing education and training guidance for employers evaluated alongside key criteria for employer guidance that emerged during consultations

	Impartiality	Direct connection with employers	Capacity to scale	Skills assessment support	Credibility/branding recognition	Online portal for employers	Description
Regional Skills Fora (RSF) managers	X	X		X	X		The nine RSF managers (one per region) are the main point of contact for many employers on lifelong learning and skills policy matters. In addition to managing the Regional Skills Forum (which convenes employers, education and training providers and other regional actors) in each of their regions, RSF managers provide employers with skills auditing tools and help them navigate the education and training offer, as well as the available government supports for which they are eligible. Many project participants greatly praised the work of the RSF managers. In particular, project participants discussed the importance of the RSF manager's impartiality in allowing them to provide employers with unbiased advice to help them meet their skills needs. However, project participants, including the RSF managers themselves, noted that they do not currently have the capacity to scale their services and meet the needs of a larger share of the employers in their regions. They would need significantly more resources to do so. In 2022, RSF engaged with about 1 400 enterprises, including one-on-one engagements (e.g. relationship-building, signposting regarding courses, etc.), skills needs assessments, forum or sub-group meetings, regional promotional events, and RSF-led pilot programmes.
Skillnet Ireland		X	X	X	X		Skillnet Ireland is an international best practice example of involving employers in designing employee education and training. Skillnet Ireland's more than 70 Business Networks work with external providers (universities, training providers, etc.) to deliver upskilling and workforce development courses to employers and employees through their network, including facilitating the design of courses where there are gaps in the existing provision. Though Skillnet Ireland Business Networks are primarily education and training providers, the role of Business Network Managers is also to advise enterprises in their network on courses best suited to their needs. While there are Skillnets in all of Ireland's regions, they are formed at the will of enterprises rather than top-down, such that they are not necessarily evenly spread across localities and sectors. Furthermore, as Skillnet Business Networks are also education and training providers themselves, Skillnet Ireland may not be able to be fully impartial when advising employers. Skillnet programmes have a broad reach, engaging 19 000 businesses and 85 000 individuals in 2022.
Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)		X	X	X		X	LEOs and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE)'s other agencies, such as Enterprise Ireland, are tasked with promoting enterprise development and are not specifically focused on education and training. Nonetheless, LEOs serve as sign posters of education and training opportunities related to enterprise development. While only focusing on the specific target population of micro-enterprises (though in the future this will be expanded to enterprises with 11-49 employees as well), LEOs are self-proclaimed first-stop-shops, providing mentorship and guidance to help micro-enterprises navigate government benefits available to them and a range of education and training services that can help them grow their businesses. In-depth support to create a company skills report is provided to the micro-enterprises that qualify for the Enterprise Ireland Spotlight on Skills programme, which supports enterprises through a comprehensive, multi-step workforce development process. However, Spotlight on Skills is intended for scaling companies with a strategic plan already in place and reaches only a very small number of enterprises. LEOs also provide education and training, so they may not be able to be a fully impartial advisory body to employers. The infrastructure and staff of 31 LEOs are already in place across localities in Ireland, which indicates a capacity to scale. However, the current reach of LEOs remains relatively low, at about 7 158 micro-enterprises in 2021. This may be due, at least in part, to the more limited target audience of LEOs compared with other employer guidance providers.

With regard to an online portal, employers stressed during consultations that they often find it too difficult to navigate the education and training offer(s), which can impede their uptake of education and training for their staff. This navigability problem could be addressed in several ways that might be described on a continuum from better referral between the existing entities to a one-stop-shop lifelong guidance solution for enterprises (Figure 3.8). On one end of the continuum, Ireland could adopt a “No Wrong Door” policy in which there is no one online portal for employers to access, but rather there is better signposting and collaboration between existing resources available for employers and/or better-tailored information for employers on portals that primarily target individuals. In the middle of the continuum might be a “Shop Window” style portal in which there is one user-facing online portal that employers can engage with in order to navigate the education and training offer(s), but behind the scenes, there are multiple entities feeding information into this portal. On the other end of the continuum would be a one-stop-shop online portal, which would be a fully integrated online information hub with one clear “owner” responsible for monitoring that its content is consistent and updated.

Figure 3.8. Lifelong guidance solutions: A continuum



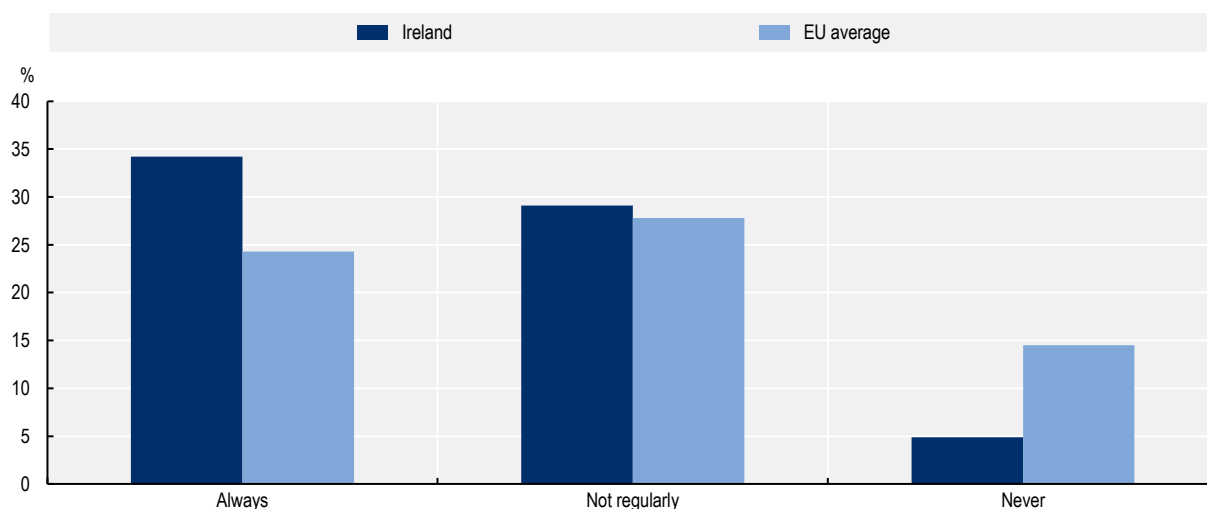
Similar to the different models of online portals, a system for providing broader, more holistic lifelong learning guidance for employers could be considered on a similar spectrum to that outlined in Figure 3.8. On one end, the three existing providers of guidance for employers on lifelong learning and reskilling/upskilling – RSF managers, Skillnet Ireland and LEOs – could all continue to operate similarly to how they do today as multiple “entry points” for employers to navigate lifelong learning opportunities. However, if so, signposting and co-ordination between the entities would need to be greatly improved, given that employers find the current status quo confusing. Another option in the middle of the continuum would be to establish or identify one clear “entry point” for employers, but these entities are all operating behind the scenes to provide guidance to employers, playing on each of their relative strengths. The third option would be to create a one-stop-shop entity or agency to provide lifelong learning guidance for employers, whether from among the existing guidance entities or by establishing a new entity. In this case, the one-stop-shop agency should be built or adapted to address all six key lifelong learning criteria that project participants identified. For optimal outcomes, a portal to support employers in promoting lifelong learning should be integrated with other forms of skills-related guidance and linked to a portal to support individuals seeking lifelong learning opportunities (Box 3.8 and Chapter 2).

Another challenge for employers in Ireland that emerged from consultations and desk research is that employers find it difficult to assess the current skill set of their employees and their skills and training needs, an important precursor and motivator for supporting their participation in lifelong learning. In Ireland,

a higher share of enterprises that assess their future skills needs provide continuing vocational training to employees than the share of enterprises that do not assess their future skills needs (Figure 3.9). While this trend is the same in Ireland as in the European Union, on average, the situation in Ireland is even starker than in the European Union. That is, enterprises in Ireland that always assess their future skills needs are more likely to provide continuing vocational training to employees than enterprises that always assess their future skills needs in the European Union, on average. At the same time, enterprises in Ireland that never assess their skills needs are less likely to provide continuing vocational training to employees than enterprises in the European Union that never assess their skill needs, on average. This makes a good argument for the importance of encouraging more employers in Ireland to assess their future skill needs to motivate them to actively engage in their employees' lifelong learning.

Figure 3.9. Share of enterprises providing training to employees in Ireland by frequency of skills assessment, 2020

Percentage of enterprises providing continuing vocational training by frequency of assessing future skill needs



Source: Eurostat (2020_[19]), *Continuing Vocational Training Survey 2020: Enterprises which assess their future skill needs by type of training provided and size class - % of all enterprises*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_cvt_33s/default/table?lang=en.

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

Yet, employers in Ireland and beyond find it difficult to understand their skills needs for a variety of reasons. For example, many enterprises do not create workforce strategies or training plans because they lack capacity, including human resources capacity; this kind of planning is not part of the culture of the enterprise (particularly in family businesses); or they are expanding the size of their businesses (OECD, 2021_[56]). Furthermore, the most common barrier to assessing skills needs in Ireland raised during consultations was a lack of time and capacity, particularly among SMEs.

There are currently a number of measures in Ireland to aid employers in mapping out their future skills needs, but these measures are limited in scope and would need to be greatly expanded to have the desired impact (for more on assessing skills needs for the Irish economy as a whole, see Chapter 5, Recommendation 5). The programme that received the most attention and praise for helping employers identify their skills needs from project participants was the Spotlight on Skills programme. Spotlight on Skills is part of the Skills for Growth initiative led by DFHERIS and is carried out by EI in partnership with DFHERIS, the Irish Management Institute, and RSF managers. The programme takes enterprises along a comprehensive process in which they define company aspirations, state company goals, determine key

success factors, clarify strategic priorities, identify strategic capabilities, diagnose the skills gaps to build organisational capabilities and create a skills plan to address skills gaps (Enterprise Ireland, 2022^[57]). While enterprises who participated in Spotlight on Skills, as well as a wide range of government stakeholders, had very positive perceptions of the outcomes of the Spotlight on Skills programme, the current scale of the programme is quite limited, reaching only 124 companies in 2020-21. This raises the question of how the benefits of a programme like this can be scaled to reach more employers (and what the budget implications of scaling the programme would be), even if the full in-depth process continues only for a smaller, more targeted group of enterprises. Furthermore, the Spotlight on Skills programme is only available to enterprises with a strategic growth plan, making this in-depth assistance unavailable to many SMEs who need it most (Enterprise Ireland, 2022^[57]). In addition to Spotlight on Skills, RSF managers provide additional skills assessment support to enterprises in their regions on an ad hoc basis. However, they reported using varying methods and not having formal, unified tools to share with employers to conduct such assessments.

Given that SMEs in Ireland face particularly acute challenges when it comes to understanding their own skills needs, choosing appropriate education and training, and releasing staff for training, it is worth considering designing additional support measures for this target group of enterprises. As is shown in Figure 3.5, enterprises in Ireland with fewer than 50 employees provide continuous training at lower rates than bigger firms. Furthermore, it is critical to engage SMEs as they make up 99.8% of enterprises in Ireland, and employees in SMEs make up 67.5% of the engaged persons in the labour market (Central Statistics Office, 2021^[58]). However, given that SMEs are such a broad category, it may be beneficial to explore and test methods for specifically engaging SMEs with a pilot programme that employs test methods for SMEs in select sectors of national priority.

Box 3.8. Relevant international examples: Lifelong learning guidance for employers

Germany: Information Portal for Employers

The Information Portal for Employers (Informationsportal Arbeitgeber) in Germany was established through an iterative approach, including consecutive project phases and involving relevant political actors and stakeholders. The process was initiated in 2011 by the Federal Cabinet that commissioned the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The project's first phase involved identifying an information portal as a possible solution, creating a baseline scenario, and identifying areas for improvement through a feasibility study. The project's second phase involved creating a prototype of the information portal, which was designed based on a similar platform from the Irish Health and Safety Authority (<http://besmart.ie/>). In the third phase, the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs created a more comprehensive description of the required functionalities of the portal, including organisational and technical requirements. Finally, the full one-stop-shop portal was developed following the blueprint outlined by the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs.

Multiple organisations maintain Germany's Information Portal for Employers. Importantly, the portal's content can be updated by content experts without any programming or technical skills through a programme created to automatically convert the content into the format required for the website. Another important element contributing to the portal's success is its user-oriented design and language to make the content as broadly accessible as possible.

France: Competence Operators (Opérateurs de compétences, OPCOs)

OPCOs are French competence operators that help SMEs holistically identify and meet their training needs. The 11 OPCOs in France, established in 2019, are jointly governed by employers and employees. They help enterprises carry out skills assessment and anticipation exercises; provide information and access to vocational training for enterprises; and support enterprises in analysing and defining their professional training needs, particularly in response to ongoing economic and technical changes in specific sectors.

Source: OECD (2022^[55]), *Good practices in Europe for supporting employers to promote skills development*, www.oecd.org/skills/Good-practices-in-Europe-for-supporting-employers-to-promote-skills-development.pdf; OECD (2021^[59]), *Incentives for SMEs to Invest in Skills: Lessons from European Good Practices*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1eb16dc7-en>; OECD (2020^[60]), *One-Stop Shops for Citizens and Business*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b0b0924e-en>; ITSG (n.d.^[61]), *Informationstechnische Servicestelle der Gesetzlichen Krankenversicherung GmbH*, www.itsg.de/; Employers' responses to OECD Skills Studies survey 2019.

Recommendation 3: Establish a clear and robust lifelong learning guidance and support system for employers to efficiently match them with training that meets their needs

Employers in Ireland, as well as other project participants, acknowledge that further aid is required to match employers of all sizes, particularly SMEs, with the education and training most suited to their needs and the needs of their employees. While there are many high-quality education and training opportunities in Ireland and many government supports available to enterprises, enterprises may not be able to fully take advantage of them without additional support to help them navigate all that is available.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to establish a clear and robust lifelong learning guidance and support system for employers to efficiently match them with training that meets their needs:

- 3.1. **Formalise a system of lifelong learning guidance for employers by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the feasibility, of different models of service integration.** DFHERIS, DETE, existing advisory bodies, employers and employers' associations and education and training providers should work together to evaluate different models of service integration for providing guidance to employers on lifelong learning and workforce development in Ireland's context. Once a model for providing guidance to employers has been chosen, a multi-phase action plan should be developed to move from the current provision of employer guidance to a more formalised and co-ordinated system and to raise awareness among employers about this new system.
- 3.2. **Design an online portal tailored to employer needs and integrate this portal into a potential broader lifelong learning guidance system for employers.** In co-ordination with the design of a new lifelong learning guidance system for employers, DFHERIS, DETE, EI, IDA Ireland, LEOs, employers' associations and the administrators of other existing portals should work together to build on existing guidance websites for employers and develop a user-friendly online portal to complement other guidance services for employers. The portal should contain an interactive and user-friendly landing page in which employers can communicate their skills needs and be directed to relevant information and guidance as well as information about financial support available to them for upskilling their employees. This portal should be linked to the online portal for individuals to find lifelong learning opportunities (Chapter 2).

- 3.3. Strengthen support to employers to map out their employees' skill set and future skills needs (e.g. methodological guides, manuals, tools, etc.).** To help the broadest range of employers map out their employees' current skill set and their future skills needs, the lifelong learning advisory system for employers should build on existing best practices in skills assessment tools to develop tools and support for enterprises in Ireland, specifically indigenous and small-scale companies that do not currently have access to skills assessment resources.
- 3.4. Develop a work plan to provide targeted additional guidance to small and medium-sized enterprises, beginning with a pilot programme in sectors of national priority.** SMEs in Ireland face particular challenges in providing or supporting lifelong learning and therefore require particular support. Given that there are so many different types and kinds of SMEs in Ireland that may face different barriers to participation, DFHERIS and DETE should collaborate on identifying specific sectors of high national priority for reskilling and upskilling. In addition, they should consider establishing a pilot programme to help small enterprises in these sectors engage in education and training by addressing the barriers they face.

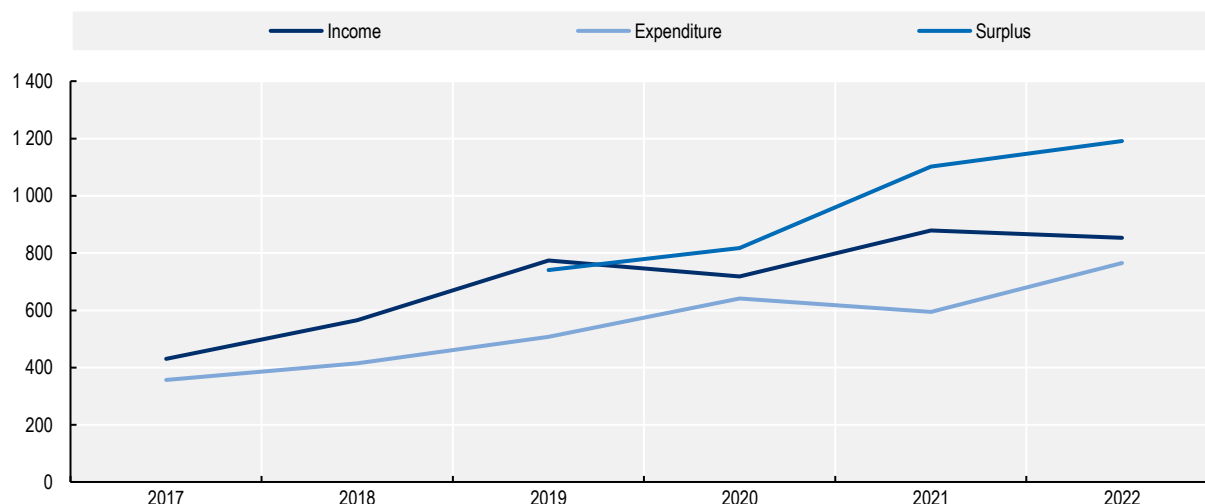
Recommendation 4: Reform the National Training Fund to better foster lifelong learning in workplaces

A recurring theme in consultations and the literature is that the current use of NTF funds to encourage the adoption of lifelong learning in workplaces does not sufficiently encourage or enable employers in Ireland to support education and training for their employees. Currently, financial incentives to encourage employers to provide or support lifelong learning for their employees are largely funded by Ireland's National Training Fund (NTF), established by the National Training Fund Act (2000), or by SOLAS matching funding to NTF-funded programmes. However, many project participants noted that the NTF as it is currently structured has a number of shortcomings, including surplus funds that cannot be unlocked for use; a lack of structural incentives for employers to provide education or training; a lack of discretionary funds; and not enough targeted funding for SMEs.

Concerns about NTF funds in Ireland not being used to their greatest potential are related to the large and increasing NTF surplus that is not being used to fund initiatives to promote education and training. Over 95% of funds in Ireland's NTF are raised through the National Training Fund levy on employees' earnings for about 75% of insured employees in Ireland, with some small supplements from the European Social Fund and other sources. The NTF levy was raised from 0.7% in 2017 to 0.8% in 2018, to 0.9% in 2019, and to 1.0% in 2020 (DFHERIS, 2022^[62]). As seen in Figure 3.10, the income of the NTF over the past few years has increased substantially due to the rise in the levy as well as the strong performance of the Irish economy in recent years which led to greater income from the levy unrelated to the levy rate. It is important to note that expenditure from the NTF has also increased since 2017, but not in keeping with the NTF income. Thus, the gap between income and expenditure has grown, creating an increasingly large surplus. While during the preceding decade (2007-17), the NTF surplus remained relatively stable at between EUR 100 million and EUR 300 million, the surplus has increased greatly in the years since, jumping to EUR 740 million at the end of 2019 and then to over EUR 1.1 billion by the end of 2021 (DFHERIS, 2022^[62]; Ibec, 2022^[63]).


Figure 3.10. Ireland's National Training Fund finances, 2017-22

In EUR millions



Note: 2022 data are forecasts.

Source: DFHERIS (2022^[62]), *National Training Fund: 2020 and 2021 Report*; www.gov.ie/en/publication/f9390-national-training-fund-annual-expenditure-report-2020-and-2021; DFHERIS (2020^[64]), *National Training Fund Expenditure Report 2019*, <https://assets.gov.ie/24754/c42908b6a02a4d9298418f9cdf129d4.pdf>; Ibec (2022^[63]), *Future of the National Training Fund*, www.ibec.ie/-/media/documents/media-press-release/future-of-the-national-training-fund---ibec.pdf.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/3d8qhp>

The NTF surplus has accrued in large part because of expenditure rules. As experts from Ireland's Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery & Reform (DPENDPDR) explained during consultations, the Government of Ireland has set a Medium-Term Expenditure Strategy that aims to invest in the economy and society while reducing the deficit. The strategy has set a Government Expenditure Ceiling (GEC) and links overall core expenditure growth to the trend rate of the economy, setting the expenditure ceiling at a growth rate of approximately 5% over the 2023-26 period. Any expenditure increase, including in the key priorities of housing, health and climate action, or any increased expenditure from the NTF, must be managed within the parameters set by the strategy. The GEC must be the aggregate of individual ministerial expenditure ceilings, and therefore expenditure from the NTF is included within the ministerial ceiling of DFHERIS, where the NTF is housed. This means that an increase in expenditure from the NTF, all other things being equal, would require an increase in the DFHERIS and overall GECs. Therefore, despite active measures to increase revenue from the NTF levy (i.e. raising the levy from 0.7% to 1.0% between 2017 and 2020), money paid out of the NTF cannot subsequently be increased without a decision from the Government of Ireland on the expenditure ceiling.

With regard to the relationship between employers and the functioning and allocation of the NTF, reforms were made in recent years, but employer awareness and involvement continue to be low. An external review of the NTF conducted by Indecon (Indecon International Research Economists, 2018^[53]) led to the formation of a National Training Fund Advisory Group (NTFAG) in 2019 to spur greater employer involvement in decisions surrounding the NTF. The NTFAG, consisting of employer representatives, departmental officials and agency representatives, meets quarterly to discuss the priorities of the NTF (DFHERIS, 2022^[62]). However, a recent paper on the NTF published by Ibec, Ireland's largest employers' group, finds that the NTFAG does not adequately involve employers in the decision making about the NTF's annual expenditures (Ibec, 2022^[63]). There is also a limit on the degree to which the NTFAG can

impact NTF spending. While the NTFAG could potentially have a greater voice in how NTF funds are allocated, overall NTF expenditure levels are determined by the expenditure rules put in place by the Government, DPENDPDR, and Ireland's larger fiscal policies. Nonetheless, enterprises could be more engaged with the NTF than they are in the current landscape. Many enterprises, particularly SMEs, are not aware of the NTF's existence or that they pay into the levy that funds it (UNESCO, 2022^[65]). The National Training Fund Implementation Plan that followed the 2018 Indecon review expressed a commitment to improving the branding of the NTF and promoting the Fund's activities and offerings (Indecon International Research Economists, 2018^[53]). However, multiple employers who participated in workshops during the OECD consultations did not know about the existence of the NTF.

The way Ireland's NTF is currently structured does not specifically incentivise employers to use the funds in the NTF, even though they are required to contribute to financing the fund through the training levy. This is because the NTF in Ireland is a revenue-generating levy scheme, which acts as an earmarked tax (Table 3.5). That is, the levy is compulsory for employers in Ireland, but the scheme does not include an additional incentive for employer investment in education and training. This may also be connected to low awareness about the NTF among employers, specifically SMEs. Other types of levy schemes, such as levy-grant schemes or train-or-pay schemes, allow employers to either get their contributions returned or reduced if they invest in training themselves (Box 3.9).

Table 3.5. Types of levy schemes

Levy scheme	Description
Revenue-generating schemes	These are the simplest form of levy. In essence, they collect funds by operating more like a tax. Generally, they are aimed more at raising funds for publicly provided training. Because the use of the funds is not usually clearly hypothecated with the business community contributing to the fund, visibility of value for money and relevance is limited. As such, their strength as incentives to change employers' training behaviour is constrained.
Levy exemption schemes or train-or-pay schemes	These usually impose a fee or tax on employers to fund training within a business community, which is reduced if the employer undertakes their own training activities. The reduction is usually proportionate to the scale of their own training investment. An alternative form of the scheme is the cost-reimbursement scheme, in which firms pay a compulsory levy but can claim expenses for any training costs they incur annually.
Levy-grant schemes	These collect funds from business communities which are then reallocated to the contributing community. Due to this, the incentive for employers to invest in training is strong. This means not only can employers see ways to get their contributions back if they apply to the fund for resources, but they also can get grants larger than the levy they paid, where the allocations are proportionate to need. As such, the schemes can also help address labour market needs by making grants conditional on training in specific skills. One example of this model is the training funds in Italy.
Hybrid schemes	While there are three broad types of levy schemes – based on the principle of collecting funding contributions from many within a community and then pooling those to finance initiatives and services for that community – many countries often have hybrid schemes drawing on features of many schemes.

Source: Based on OECD (2017^[23]), *Financial Incentives for Steering Education and Training*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264272415-en>.

The idea to take a step toward changing the incentive structure of Ireland's levy scheme was proposed in the 2018 Indecon review of the NTF and the subsequent Review of the National Training Fund Implementation Plan. The Implementation Plan discusses launching a pilot programme targeting SMEs engaging in upskilling for the first time (Indecon International Research Economists, 2018^[53]). Nonetheless, there appears to still be relatively high disengagement of employers in the functioning of the NTF. It would be worthwhile to revisit this and more drastic changes to the NTF structure to incentivise greater engagement in education and training among employers.

Box 3.9. Relevant international examples: Cost-reimbursement training levy

Hungary: Training sub-fund of the National Employment Fund – Vocational Training Contribution

In Hungary, employers are legally required to make a “training contribution” of 1.5% of payroll to a training fund. However, they are not required to make this contribution for the employment of specific groups, such as career starters, beneficiaries of childcare support or the formerly unemployed.

Enterprises in Hungary can fulfil their obligation to contribute to the training fund in three ways:

1. by paying into the development and training sub-fund of the National Employment Fund
2. by providing practical training for students in vocational training schools or tertiary education
3. by providing training for their own employees.

Enterprises can deduct the costs of contributions to the training fund (Option 1) if they provide the alternative options (Options 2 or 3).

Enterprises that provide training to their employees are exempt from contributing to the training fund up to the amount paid for internal training. If enterprises pay more for internal training than their required contribution to the training fund, they are eligible for reimbursement from the training fund. The costs enterprises can deduct for providing in-house training are greater for micro and small enterprises, for medium and large enterprises that provide practical training to at least 45 students a month, and enterprises that provide training to disadvantaged individuals, including individuals with disabilities. Costs that are eligible for deduction include those that support in-house training, such as wage and travel costs for instructors, materials needed for the training, and the costs of exams to validate the training.

Korea: The Training Consortium Pilot Programme

In 2001, Korea began a pilot programme to encourage SMEs to use training fund resources more in order to upskill and reskill employees. SMEs in the same sector were organised into training consortiums (TCs), each of which had a dedicated staff of two training managers to assess the training needs of the SMEs; make them aware of the education and training options available to them and their staff; and advise them on the training opportunities best suited to their needs. These dedicated staff were financed through public funds. Furthermore, each TC had an operating committee made up of SME members, representatives from the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry, local Ministry of Labour officials and training experts.

The results of the pilot were very positive, showing that the initiative led more SMEs to make use of available funding for upskilling and reskilling. The pilot programme increased the number of SMEs participating in education and training from 11% to 50% within a year of the pilot launch in areas where the pilot programme operated. In a 2002 survey, 81% of employers reported improved job performance and productivity; 72% reported that waste and defective products had declined; 88% reported increased use of factory machinery; and 67% reported savings in maintenance and repair expenses.

Source: CEDEFOP (2022^[66]), *Training sub-fund of the National Employment Fund - Vocational Training Contribution*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db/search/training-sub-fund-national-employment-fund-vocational-training-contribution; UNESCO (2022^[65]), *Training Sub-Fund of the National Employment Fund (Nemzeti Foglalkoztatási Alap – NFA)*, https://unevoc.unesco.org/countryprofiles/docs/UNESCO_Funding-of-Training_Hungary.pdf; OECD (2019^[67]), *Adult Learning in Italy: What Role for Training Funds?*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311978-en>; ILO (2017^[68]), *Case Study: Training Levy in South Korea*, www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-jakarta/documents/presentation/wcms_565074.pdf.

Project participants reflected that employers across Ireland would benefit from greater flexibility in NTF funding and, particularly, in the establishment of discretionary funds as part of NTF expenditure. The project participants argued that it is important for Ireland's NTF to be flexible and responsive to quickly changing labour market needs, as discussed in the Indecon report, and to the ever-changing and specific needs of particular employers. The suggested reform would involve creating limited discretionary budgets financed by the NTF, to be distributed to employers *only* when training is not provided by an existing education or training programme. These discretionary funds could be distributed on a case-by-case basis by local, regional or sectoral entities, such as those providing employers with lifelong learning guidance and information (see Recommendation 3). Furthermore, guidelines could be distributed to local entities to encourage using discretionary funds in appropriate cases where there is no available solution to employers' reskilling and upskilling needs. During consultations, both employers and RSF managers cited past experiences in which no appropriate subsidised education or training opportunity met the employer's needs, and a discretionary fund such as the one described here would have been useful.

While the 2018 Indecon report emphasises the importance of ensuring that the NTF provides more funding targeted specifically at SMEs, it appears that little has been done in practice towards this end. Given the increased challenges in providing or supporting education and training faced by SMEs as described above, changes should be made to the structure of the NTF to ensure that the needs of SMEs are met, including supporting them in mapping out their future skill needs, as discussed in Recommendation 3.

Recommendation 4: Reform the National Training Fund to better foster lifelong learning in workplaces

Ireland's NTF is paid into by employers in Ireland and provides funding to be used both in and outside the workplace for education and training purposes. However, the fund is currently not being used as effectively as it could be for a number of reasons. First, there are surplus funds in the NTF not being used towards education and training, as fiscal rules limit the use of such funds. Second, many employers are not aware of the NTF and do not take advantage of the education and training it funds. Third, employers sometimes need trainings that are not offered by NTF-funded programmes and end up paying out of pocket. Finally, the needs of SMEs are insufficiently met under the current NTF funding.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to reform NTF funding to better foster lifelong learning in workplaces:

- 4.1. Unlock surplus National Training Fund funds to facilitate greater investment in lifelong learning in Ireland.** To ensure that NTF funds are being used for their designated purpose of upskilling and reskilling individuals in Ireland and that spending from the NTF is in line with money collected from employers through the NTF levy, the current expenditure rules should be adapted to unlock more NTF funds to be invested in lifelong learning. This could be done, for example, by the government raising the expenditure ceiling for the NTF specifically; by changing legislation so that increased spending from the NTF is not linked to the ministerial (DFHERIS) expenditure ceiling; or by amending the rules such that an increase in the NTF levy automatically results in an equivalent increase in the NTF expenditure ceiling without a specific decision from the government on the ministerial or overall expenditure ceiling.
- 4.2. Improve structural incentives for employers to take advantage of education and training funded by the National Training Fund.** To improve employers' use of the NTF, which they pay into through the NTF levy, DFHERIS, along with employers' associations, should raise awareness among enterprises about the connection between the levy they pay and the subsidised training opportunities available to them and their employees. In addition, DFHERIS and NTFAG, working with employers' associations, should draft and test potential amendments

to the National Training Fund Act to more directly link the funds enterprises pay into the NTF with monetary rewards they can gain from incorporating education and training into their workplaces.

- 4.3. Establish a discretionary fund as part of the National Training Fund to be distributed at the regional/local/sectoral level.** DFHERIS, on the advice of the NTFAG, should use NTF funds to establish annually allocated regional, local or sectoral discretionary funds to be distributed to employers on an ad hoc basis to reimburse costs related to trainings not covered by existing NTF-funded programmes, including for mapping their skill needs and creating a training plan (Recommendation 3).
- 4.4. Increase National Training Fund support specifically allocated for upskilling and reskilling for small and medium-sized enterprises.** To ensure that supporting education and training in SMEs is prioritised, a share of NTF funds should be designated for supplementary support to SMEs (e.g. covering indirect costs of training, providing on-the-job training and/or compensating the time employees are in education and training).

Opportunity 3: Making lifelong learning more flexible and accessible

Improving the flexibility and accessibility of lifelong learning provision is crucial to improving access to these types of learning opportunities. International evidence suggests that flexibility in format (e.g. part-time, online) and design (micro-credentials, modular courses) helps overcome time-related barriers, especially for medium- to high-skilled workers (OECD, 2019^[69]). These kinds of measures can help individuals in Ireland fit education and training around personal and work commitments and make them accessible to a broader range of people.

Flexibility is particularly important in Ireland, where motivation to participate in lifelong learning is already relatively high, yet barriers to participation remain strong. The main barriers to participation faced by individuals who want to participate in adult education and training are family reasons and schedule (Figure 3.3), both of which could be eased by promoting greater flexibility in the education and training offer (for more on incentivising education institutions to offer flexible learning pathways, see also Chapter 2, Recommendation 6). Furthermore, employers in Ireland also struggle with time constraints and difficulty in releasing employees to participate in education and training. As project participants stressed, Ireland already has a variety of high-quality education and training offers. It could benefit from focusing on how to adapt those existing offers and other incentives to enable and encourage a greater share of individuals to take advantage of those opportunities.

Using the RPL to shorten and simplify learning pathways is another way to make adult education and training more accessible to a wider range of individuals and to encourage greater participation in adult learning. RPL helps adults upskill and reskill by personalising learning pathways to fit their specific learning needs and reduces the time individuals need to spend in training programmes by allowing them to focus on addressing skills gaps rather than engaging in training for skills they have already acquired (OECD, 2021^[21]).

Recommendation 5: Promote greater flexibility in the lifelong learning offer to help individuals and employers incorporate ongoing learning into daily life

There is much evidence that greater flexibility in the lifelong learning offer could help more individuals and employers engage in education and training. First, the main obstacles cited by both individuals and employers include time constraints. A range of project participants consistently raised the need for more flexible options. Furthermore, flexibility has been a major theme in Ireland's strategies that relate to lifelong learning.

There are a number of initiatives in Ireland that are underway to make learning more micro- or bite-sized. The Modular Skills Provision programme was enacted as part of the 2020 July stimulus programme to offer shorter, flexible upskilling and reskilling courses while not taking employees away from work for too long. The MicroCreds programme, funded under the HCI project and co-ordinated by the Irish Universities Association (IUA), also provides flexible and bite-sized upskilling and reskilling opportunities in partnership with seven Irish universities.

However, there is still much to be done in terms of expanding micro- or bite-sized courses to all types of institutions and disciplines; making these micro-credentials stackable; designing quality assurance measures for these courses; and ensuring their recognition, including by raising awareness about micro-credentials among employers and individuals. Project participants often mentioned the potential of micro-credentials to make lifelong learning relevant and accessible to more people and to increase uptake in lifelong learning activities.

In addition to ensuring that funding models do not *disincentivise* the creation of flexible learning options, education and training providers of lifelong learning could be positively rewarded for being top performers in providing education and training in flexible formats and times. Across OECD countries, common tools for rewarding top-performing education and training institutions are publicly recognised performance awards and performance-based funding (OECD, 2017^[23]). While both of these mechanisms are usually used as a way to reward education and training institutions providing courses that align with labour market needs (whether based on the types of courses that are offered or graduate outcomes), the tools could also be applied to reward education and training institutions providing courses of a desired flexible mode and/or format.

Project participants emphasised that flexibility lies in the length of an education or training course and its timing. For example, many courses are offered only with start times according to a traditional academic annual calendar. This may not suit individuals or employers in industries where certain times of year are busier than others, making it difficult to release staff for training. Furthermore, as project participants noted, if learners are motivated to participate in lifelong learning but have to wait a long time to enrol in a course of interest, they may lose motivation before the course is available. To this end, more “just-in-time learning”, or having access to learning when one needs it, seems more appropriate for the context in Ireland and should be promoted.

Project participants emphasised the importance of ensuring the stackability of micro-credentials to strengthen both the flexibility and effectiveness of micro-credentials to facilitate upskilling and reskilling in Ireland. Indeed, studies from the United States and Canada indicate that stacking micro-credentials improves participants’ later labour market outcomes (OECD, 2021^[70]). A study of Community College graduates in Virginia found that individuals receiving multiple short-duration credentials in the same field of study between 2000 and 2019 were 4 percentage points more likely to be employed than those who received only one credential; they also earned USD 570 (US dollars) more in quarterly wages (Meyer, Bird and Castleman, 2020^[71]). A Canadian study looked at individuals with a bachelor’s degree who also have short-duration credentials and found that the share of individuals working in low-value-added service industries decreased from 22% before participating in the short-duration credentials to 10% after participating (Ntwari, 2020^[72]).

Ireland has started to introduce stackable micro-credentials through programmes such as MicroCreds in HEIs; the Skillnet Ireland and University of Limerick partnership on micro-credentials related to climate action; and Ireland’s joining the cross-country Stacking Credits and the Future of the Qualification (STACQ) project (IUA, 2020^[73]; University of Limerick, 2022^[74]; QQI, 2021^[75]). However, project participants noted that there is still much room for Ireland to learn from other countries and progress to become an international leader in the realm of stackable micro-credentials (Box 3.10).

Box 3.10. Relevant international example: Stackable micro-credentials

Sweden: “Free-standing” courses

Universities in Sweden offer “free-standing” courses that range from 7.5 to 30 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). These courses are given across study areas and are designed to appeal to different types of learners, from those taking a one-off course to those requiring more time to study. The courses are flexible in other ways besides being standalone. For example, in the University of Gothenburg, these courses can be offered at different times of day, including the evening; can be distanced courses or in person; can be transferred across certain HEIs; and some are offered continuously throughout the academic year rather than starting at one specific time. The courses can be stacked in accordance with other complementary courses where they meet certain conditions to build towards a degree.

Source: OECD (2021^[70]), “Micro-credential innovations in higher education: Who, What and Why?”, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f14ef041-en>.

At the same time, online learning has become more prevalent in Ireland in the past few years in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and should be leveraged to increase the flexibility of lifelong learning offer in years to come (Box 3.11). Before the pandemic, in 2019, the percentage of individuals in Ireland reporting doing an online course or using online learning material stood at a mere 24%, falling behind many EU countries, including Iceland (73%), Sweden (38%), Finland (35%) and the United Kingdom (35%). In 2021, the share of individuals in Ireland participating in these online learning activities nearly doubled to 46%, surpassing all countries but Iceland (Eurostat, 2021^[76]).

Box 3.11. Relevant national example: Developing online instruction resources for teachers

Ireland: The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (NFETL)

The NFETL is a national body in Ireland responsible for leading and advising on the enhancement of teaching and learning in HEIs in Ireland. One of the focuses of NFETL is to prepare teachers for adapting to teaching in the digital world. Towards this end, NFETL provides a number of resources and tools for digital teaching and learning on their website (www.teachingandlearning.ie/), including a national survey on digital engagement in teaching and learning; a guide on developing institutional policies for digital and open teaching and learning; and a number of teaching resources that are openly licensed and can be easily searched and shared among teachers.

Source: National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (n.d.^[77]), *Home page*, www.teachingandlearning.ie/.

Online or blended learning has many benefits, including accessibility from any location with a broadband connection; saving time commuting to and from education and training opportunities; and more time flexibility in completing modules. In addition, strategies such as the Universal Design of Learning, which provides instructors with techniques and digital tools to facilitate equal learning opportunities for students of different ability levels in an online setting, could both promote flexible learning and improve participation in education and training among vulnerable groups (see Recommendation 2) (Europass, 2023^[78]). However, the benefits of the shift to more online lifelong learning opportunities are not equally accessible to all because these courses are only available to those with the digital skills to access them.

People in Ireland generally have relatively high digital skills by international comparison. According to the Digital Economy and Society Index 2022, 70% of people have at least basic digital skills, 40% have above basic digital skills, and 77% have at least basic digital content creation skills (all higher than the EU average) (European Commission, 2022^[79]). Ireland has committed to increasing the share of adults with at least basic digital skills to 80% by 2030, such that these findings suggest that Ireland is doing very well

in making progress towards meeting this target (European Commission, 2022^[79]). Nonetheless, those in Ireland with lower digital skills include groups who already participate less in lifelong learning, such as individuals with lower levels of educational attainment and older individuals (SOLAS, 2021^[80]). Furthermore, many individuals in industries particularly affected by the pandemic, such as hospitality and retail, have low digital skills (SOLAS, 2021^[80]).

As online learning expands, there are a number of infrastructure issues that both providers and learners will need to address to make online learning smooth and beneficial. Providers need to find suitable online learning platforms and train teachers in online teaching. As project participants mentioned, broadband issues throughout the country can also make it difficult for learners to access online courses and materials from specific areas.

Building on measures already in Ireland's Harnessing Digital strategy to improve the digital literacy of the population in Ireland in general, policy makers in Ireland can initiate measures that would set the stage for an expansion of online lifelong learning in the coming years. Countries can harness the potential of online learning for adults by creating a broader range of online courses across institutions and disciplines; training online teachers; establishing quality assurance mechanisms for online courses; and strengthening digital infrastructure (OECD, 2020^[81]).

Recommendation 5: Promote greater flexibility in the lifelong learning offer to help individuals and employers incorporate ongoing learning into daily life

In Ireland, one of the central barriers to participation in lifelong learning for both individuals and employers is time. Project participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of developing more flexible education and training opportunities that fit more naturally into the lives of individuals and the flow of the workplace. This means education and training opportunities that are short or bite-sized; delivered in an online or blended fashion; can be accessed on demand or at multiple times of the day, week or year; and build on one another to lead toward larger credentials.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to promote greater flexibility in the lifelong learning offer to help individuals and employers incorporate ongoing learning into daily life:

- 5.1. **Encourage lifelong learning providers to offer more flexible learning opportunities (e.g. online, modular, “bite-size” microcredentials).** Greater provision of flexible learning opportunities can be promoted by rewarding institutions that prioritise flexible courses (e.g. through public awards or performance-based funding). In addition, flexible courses can be encouraged by removing barriers to their design and implementation. To that end, it is important to ensure that new FET and HE funding models do not penalise or disincentivise shorter-length courses (see Chapter 2). Furthermore, providers that organise company- or sector-specific trainings, such as Skillnet Ireland Business Networks, should be supported through guidelines and information to provide just-in-time learning that begins at a time of year that makes sense for specific industries (e.g. retail, hospitality, etc.).
- 5.2. **Strengthen the recognition, accreditation and stackability of lifelong learning opportunities in line with the National Framework of Qualifications (e.g. through stackable micro-credentials, digital badges, etc.).** Shorter and more flexible courses can be better integrated into the lifelong learning offer if there are clear measures for accrediting these courses in the NFQ and stacking them to build unique learner pathways. The QQI should work together with SOLAS and HEA to create frameworks and streamline processes for determining the accreditation of short and bite-size courses.

5.3. Strengthen support for online learning instructors and providers to improve the quality of online courses and enable further expansion of remote lifelong learning. Given that so much lifelong learning has moved on line since the COVID-19 pandemic, DFHERIS should work together with SOLAS and HEA to strengthen the online teaching skills of instructors of lifelong learning through subsidised training courses for instructors and the provision of online tools and teaching materials to help instructors adapt to remote teaching.

Recommendation 6: Improve the recognition of non-formal and informal learning for individuals and enterprises to make lifelong learning more accessible to all

Non-formal and informal learning are an important part of the adult learning system because they tend to be more flexible in format and delivery than formal learning and more accessible to a broader group of individuals than formal learning. Non-formal courses tend to be shorter than formal courses, using more of an approach of modular rather than full courses, and are often focused on acquiring specific competencies. These courses can take place via on-the-job training, remote learning, courses and private lessons, seminars and workshops, as well as in vocational and HEIs (OECD, 2019^[48]).

However, non-formal learning in Ireland was disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While formal adult learning declined only slightly in 2020, there was a 30% drop in the number of non-formal learning participants that same year. While the number of individuals participating in formal adult learning in Ireland in 2021 already surpassed pre-pandemic numbers, non-formal adult learning has not yet recovered to pre-COVID levels (SOLAS, 2022^[43]). The same could also be said for informal learning, as most informal learning happens between colleagues in the workplace. While it is difficult to collect data on the exact effect, fewer colleagues gathering in workplaces due to the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in fewer opportunities for this informal learning to take place.

Promoting more non-formal and informal learning in Ireland can get more individuals and employers involved with lifelong learning. However, non-formal and informal learning is more attractive for both individuals and employers if it is adequately recognised. Recognising non-formal and informal learning is not simple, and many countries find it challenging to do so. Strengthening processes for RPL is one of the main ways countries acknowledge and reward skills that individuals have gained through non-formal and informal learning and strengthen further lifelong learning by doing so.

RPL, or the recognition of prior learning, is an important mechanism for helping individuals engage with lifelong learning. RPL is the process by which knowledge and skills acquired through experience, non-formal and/or informal learning, as well as those acquired through formal learning, are recognised formally (e.g. with a certificate or qualification). RPL can improve lifelong learning outcomes for individuals by improving their employability by recognising acquired skills, making them eligible to enrol in a learning opportunity for which a skill they acquired informally is a prerequisite, or making a learning process shorter if they can use RPL to get an exemption from courses or credits providing a skill they already have (OECD, 2021^[82]). RPL can also help create flexible and customised learning pathways for individuals in Ireland.

RPL appears in various laws and strategic documents in Ireland related to skills. The basis for Ireland's RPL system is laid out in the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, which specifically cites the importance of being able to accumulate and transfer formally recognised competencies (OECD, 2021^[82]). Ireland's NSS 2025 identifies RPL as an important priority to bring about the strategic objective of increasing engagement across Ireland in lifelong learning. The specific goals laid out in the strategy that relate to RPL are: 1) to provide for the recognition of awards that are consistent with Ireland's NFQ system and ensure quality assurance of courses that result in recognised awards; and 2) to develop a common understanding of RPL and explore good practices in RPL (Department of Education and Skills, 2016^[8]). Ireland's FET and HE strategies also call for the need to implement an RPL framework within and between these sectors (QQI, 2023^[83]).

The process to obtain RPL in Ireland is fairly straightforward. The processes include the RPCL (Recognition of Prior Certified Learning) and the RPEL (Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning). These processes involve completing an RPL application; being assigned a mentor or facilitator from the Quality Assurance Unit of the ETB to guide individuals through the process; presenting a portfolio of evidence of prior learning to RPL Assessors appointed by the ETB, who assess the portfolio and inform learners of the outcome; and an appeals process for learners who are dissatisfied with the outcome (OECD, 2021^[82]; ETBI, 2019^[84]). However, beyond this general process, institutions providing RPL have a great deal of autonomy and generally follow separate internal guidelines, leading to variations in RPL across institutions in several areas (Table 3.6).

Table 3.6. Ireland's performance with regard to good practice principles in the validation of prior learning

	Principles on validation	Status of Ireland	Notes
1	Validation arrangements in place	Yes	Recognition of prior learning (RPL) leading to both full and partial qualifications and providing access to other education and training programmes are in place (except in the general education sector).
2	Guidance and counselling are readily available	Varies	While guidance and counselling are available, the widespread view is that more is needed.
3	Information and guidance on benefits, opportunities and procedures are available and accessible	Varies	In Ireland, this information and guidance are provided by the institutions conducting the validation who provide information on their own services. Ireland lacks an information and guidance system across institutions.
4	Validation arrangements are linked to a national qualification framework (NQF) and in line with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	Yes	Ireland's RPL system is linked to Ireland's NQF and the EQF.
5	Qualifications or parts of qualifications obtained through validation comply with agreed standards that are the same or equivalent to those for qualifications obtained through formal education programmes	Yes	The RPL process in Ireland uses the same standards as those used for qualifications obtained through formal education programmes.
6	Provision is made for the development of the professional competencies of validation practitioners	Varies	Because the development of validation practitioners is left to the institutions carrying out the validation, the degree to which staff are provided with professional development opportunities varies across institutions.
7	Transparent quality assurance (QA) measures support reliable, valid and credible assessment methods and tools for validation	Yes	QA measures for RPL are overseen by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), similar to QA for formal education programmes.
8	Synergies between validation and credit systems exist	Yes	Ireland's RPL system is synergised with the NFQ and EQF.
9	Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation	No	While disadvantaged groups certainly are able to benefit from RPL in Ireland, they are not particularly likely to do so in the current environment.
10	Skills audits are available for individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment	Varies	The use of skills audits for individuals, as well as individual education and training plans, varies across relevant institutions in Ireland.
11	EU/national transparency tools are promoted to facilitate the documentation of learning outcomes	Yes	EU transparency tools like Europass and Youthpass are used and promoted in Ireland.

Note: The European Union developed these 11 good practice principles to validate prior learning following an EU Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2012.

Source: OECD assessment based on CEDEFOP (2019^[85]), *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018: Final synthesis report*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-on-validation; Murphy (2019^[86]), *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Ireland*, http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Ireland.pdf.

Many steps have already been taken to strengthen Ireland's RPL system by promoting and standardising the RPL process across institutions. For example, the National RPL Project was established as part of the HEA's HCI Pillar 3 (Innovation and Agility) for 2020-25 (Box 3.12). Ireland also has an RPL Practitioner Network that focuses on networking, sharing knowledge and experience, raising awareness about RPL and contributing to policy related to RPL (RPL Practitioner Network Ireland, 2022^[87]).

Box 3.12. Relevant national example: An initiative on recognition of prior learning in higher education

Ireland: The National RPL in Higher Education Project

The National RPL in Higher Education project is a four-year collaboration between 14 publicly funded HEIs in Ireland to build a consistent and coherent approach to RPL across the institutions. The project is funded by the HCI Pillar 3 (Innovation and Agility) and co-sponsored by the Technological Higher Education Association and the IUA. The project is advanced by 18 project leads who work on the project across HE universities and receives strategic guidance from a Project Steering Group made up of sectoral leaders, enterprise and learner representatives and RPL experts. The three central goals of the project are to: 1) streamline and promote RPL across the HE sector; 2) collaborate with employers to increase access and progression opportunities in areas of skills needs, and 3) strengthen the HE sector's capacity to conduct RPL by developing relevant tools, materials, resources and professional development opportunities for staff. The project's website (www.priorlearning.ie) includes access to resources, tools and information about the project.

Source: Recognition of Prior Learning (2022^[88]), Home page, www.priorlearning.ie/.

However, a number of challenges remain in Ireland's RPL system. First, there is no commonly agreed definition of RPL in Ireland, which makes it difficult to create coherent national standards around it. Second, RPL is still not widespread and is not offered by all education and training providers. Furthermore, guidance websites for learners, such as Qualifax, warn learners that many education and training providers do not apply RPL or may have a wide variety of ways they deal with RPL (Qualifax, 2022^[89]).

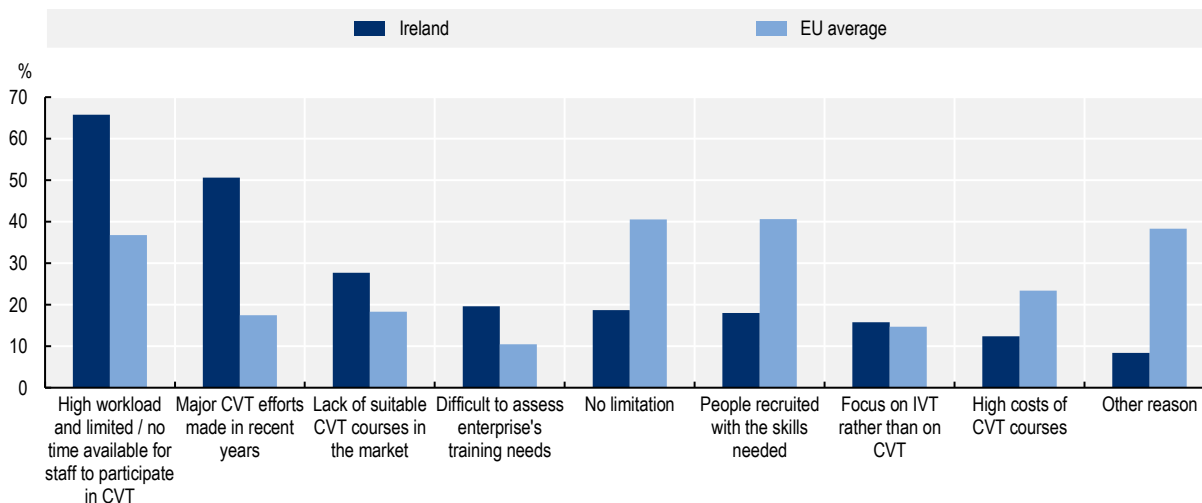
When asked about the greatest challenges to implementing RPL in ETBs, the most commonly identified challenges were lack of time and money resources. ETB staff's top suggestions for overcoming these challenges were led by the recommendation to create more consistent procedures and processes (Goggin, O'Leary and Sheridan, 2017^[90]). The second most common suggestion was to provide more resources.

Furthermore, there is generally a lack of awareness about RPL – what it is, its importance to lifelong learning, and how to engage in the process – among lifelong learning providers, employers and individual learners. The limited knowledge about RPL may, at least in part, be related to a lack of data collection and reporting in this area (Goggin, O'Leary and Sheridan, 2017^[90]). An established tool for documenting and presenting recognition of prior learning, including the use of digital technologies for this purpose (Box 3.13), might help raise the profile of RPL and promote its broader uptake in Ireland.

Just as recognising prior learning could encourage and facilitate more interested individuals in participating in FET opportunities by easing the process, the same can be said of employers. Project participants stressed that the most common and challenging barrier for SMEs in participating in or supporting lifelong learning was releasing staff for training. Indeed, among enterprises in Ireland that provided training, high workload and no time for staff to participate in training was the primary reason enterprises did not provide more training, much surpassing the EU average (Figure 3.11) (Eurostat, 2020^[19]). This has likely intensified further due to recent labour shortages.

Figure 3.11. Factors limiting more provision of training among enterprises in Ireland, 2020

Share of enterprises that provided training, by reasons for not providing more training



Note: CVT: Continuing vocational training; IVT: Initial vocational training.

Source: Eurostat (2020_[19]), *Continuing Vocational Training Survey*, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/continuing-vocational-training-survey>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/fivg0c>

Yet, more informal on-the-job training is already happening in enterprises in Ireland. Among enterprises providing training in Ireland, 52% provide on-the-job training, compared to 43% in the European Union on average (Eurostat, 2020_[19]). Given their time constraints, employers in Ireland may be more likely to provide more informal on-the-job learning to upskill employees if there were a mechanism by which on-the-job training could be recognised and rewarded, for example, through public recognition or financial rewards (Box 3.13). Measures like these could be particularly helpful in addressing the challenges faced by SMEs in Ireland. Like strengthening RPL for individuals, bringing more training into the workplace rather than encouraging employees to leave the workplace to seek training could ease access to employee education and training for employers in Ireland.

Box 3.13. Relevant international examples: Recognising prior learning

Italy: Bestr

The digital platform Bestr (www.bestr.it) in Italy was launched in 2015 as a way to collect and present open badges to certify the acquisition of competencies. The platform is used primarily by HEIs, and the most common certifications reflected in the badges are language skills, though they can also be used to certify soft skills. European-wide standards, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, help standardise open badges in Italy and across Europe.

France: The AFEST programme

The AFEST (Action de formation en situation de travail) programme in France recognises informal on-the-job learning and allows employers to access public funding, usually available only for formal education and training. The programme, which aims to promote continuing training, especially in small enterprises and among low-skilled workers, was introduced into the labour code in 2018 after a two-year pilot (Duclos, 2021_[91]). The AFEST programme only recognises informal learning that meets four conditions: the work activity that is utilised in the on-the-job training is modified as needed to match the

specific purpose of the training; the training provider is appointed before the training begins; the training includes reflection outside of the workplace to reinforce the lessons learned; and an assessment of training outcomes is carried out after the training. The assessment involves an evaluation by both the learner and the trainer. OPCOs (Opérateurs de compétences) or “skills operators”, which are organised by different sectors (Box 3.8), validate the informal learning through the AFEST programme and can cover part or all of the learning costs or connect employers with other financial support.

Evaluation results from the pilot programme in 2015-18 demonstrated overall positive results. Of the 50 companies that participated in the pilot, 100% of managers and learners reported that the skills acquired were useful for their current jobs (Le réseau Anact-Aract, 2018^[92]). However, in the same report, some employers questioned whether formalised on-the-job training would be effective for low-skilled workers, who are sometimes hesitant about participating in structured education.

Source: OECD/European Union (2019^[93]), *Supporting Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Higher Education in Italy*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/43e88f48-en>.

Recommendation 6: Improve the recognition of non-formal and informal learning for individuals and enterprises to make lifelong learning more accessible to all

Expanding incentives for non-formal and informal learning can make engaging with lifelong learning more appealing and accessible to both individuals and employers. In addition, improving the recognition of informal learning can be a mechanism to engage first-time lifelong learners or employers that have previously not been involved in providing education and training.

Ireland can undertake the following specific actions to improve the recognition of non-formal and informal learning for individuals and enterprises to make lifelong learning more accessible to all:

- 6.1. Strengthen the capacity of education and training providers to offer recognition of prior learning, including by establishing national guidelines outlining the procedures and processes of RPL.** Building on existing projects such as the HCI, QQI should collaborate with SOLAS and HEA to establish clear national guidelines for RPL in ETBs and HEIs. Furthermore, DFHERIS should work with SOLAS to provide additional funding and capacity to ETBs, particularly to help them better manage the RPL process within ETBs.
- 6.2. Improve awareness of and access to recognition of prior learning, including tools for individuals to accumulate and display their non-formal and informal learning.** As part of the one-stop-shop information portal discussed in Chapter 2, Recommendation 2, Ireland should create an online tool where individuals can accumulate and display their non-formal and informal learning achievements, which can then be shared with employers and/or integrated to work with online job boards. This online tool should be built to have compatibility with EU-wide tools for the recognition of learning and skills.
- 6.3. Implement a mechanism for recognising and rewarding informal, on-the-job learning provided by employers.** To encourage more employers to provide informal, on-the-job learning, DFHERIS and other relevant departments should work together to design a mechanism for rewarding employers who provide such training, for example, with public awards of excellence, certificates recognising internal trainers within enterprises, NTF contribution discounts or reimbursements. The mechanism could provide greater benefits to SMEs that provide informal, on-the-job learning.

Summary of policy recommendations

Table 3.7. Summary of policy recommendations for fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the workplace

Recommendations	Specific actions
Opportunity 1: Strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for individuals	
1. Incentivise adults to participate in lifelong learning to improve the prominence of lifelong learning in Ireland's society	1.1. Assess the feasibility of individual learning schemes and paid training leave in Ireland's context. 1.2. Evaluate and expand programmes or financial incentives that effectively engage a wide range of individuals in lifelong learning by extending their scope, target audience and/or allocated resources (e.g. Springboard+, eCollege). 1.3. Implement a public awareness campaign to raise awareness about the importance and benefits of lifelong learning for all.
2. Provide tailored and targeted support to disadvantaged groups to address the specific barriers they face to participating in lifelong learning	2.1. Develop detailed profiles of different types of lifelong learners and potential lifelong learners. 2.2. Improve holistic support for parents and carers to participate in lifelong learning through information, additional financial support and on-site services. 2.3. Increase support for vulnerable groups to participate in lifelong learning by providing targeted guidance and financial supplements to address the indirect costs of learning.
Opportunity 2: Strengthening incentives to participate in lifelong learning for employers	
3. Establish a clear and robust lifelong learning guidance and support system for employers to efficiently match them with training that meets their needs	3.1. Formalise a system of lifelong learning guidance for employers by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the feasibility, of different models of service integration. 3.2. Design an online portal tailored to employer needs and integrate this portal into a potential broader lifelong learning guidance system for employers. 3.3. Strengthen support to employers to map out their employees' skill set and future skills needs (e.g. methodological guides, manuals, tools, etc.). 3.4. Develop a work plan to provide targeted additional guidance to small and medium-sized enterprises, beginning with a pilot programme in sectors of national priority.
4. Reform the National Training Fund to better foster lifelong learning in workplaces	4.1. Unlock surplus National Training Fund funds to facilitate greater investment in lifelong learning in Ireland. 4.2. Improve structural incentives for employers to take advantage of education and training funded by the National Training Fund. 4.3. Establish a discretionary fund as part of the National Training Fund to be distributed at the regional/local/sectoral level. 4.4. Increase National Training Fund support specifically allocated for upskilling and reskilling for small and medium-sized enterprises.
Opportunity 3: Making lifelong learning more flexible and accessible	
5. Promote greater flexibility in the lifelong learning offer to help individuals and employers incorporate ongoing learning into daily life	5.1. Encourage lifelong learning providers to offer more flexible learning opportunities (e.g. online, modular, "bite-size" microcredentials). 5.2. Strengthen the recognition, accreditation and stackability of lifelong learning opportunities in line with the National Framework of Qualifications (e.g. through stackable micro-credentials, digital badges, etc.). 5.3. Strengthen support for online learning instructors and providers to improve the quality of online courses and enable further expansion of remote lifelong learning.
6. Improve the recognition of non-formal and informal learning for individuals and enterprises to make lifelong learning more accessible to all	6.1. Strengthen the capacity of education and training providers to offer recognition of prior learning, including by establishing national guidelines outlining the procedures and processes of RPL. 6.2. Improve awareness of and access to recognition of prior learning, including tools for individuals to accumulate and display their non-formal and informal learning. 6.3. Implement a mechanism for recognising and rewarding informal, on-the-job learning provided by employers.

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Note

1. It is important to note that the term SMEs, here and throughout the discussion of enterprises in Ireland, refers to all enterprises in Ireland that have under 250 employees, regardless of whether they are considered SMEs in other policy contexts in Ireland.



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