Education and Educational Disadvantage

Core Policy Objective: Education and Educational Disadvantage

To provide relevant education for all people throughout their lives, so that they can participate fully and meaningfully in developing themselves, their community and the wider society.

Education can be an agent for social transformation. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that education can be a powerful force in counteracting inequality and poverty while recognising that, in many ways, the present education system has quite the opposite effect. The primary focus of education is to prepare students for life enabling them to participate in and to contribute to society. Education allows people to live a full life. Living a full life requires both knowledge and skills appropriate to age, environment, and social and economic roles, as well as the ability to function in a world of increasing complexity and to adapt to continuously changing circumstances without sacrificing personal integrity (Department of Education and Skills, 1995). Education makes a fundamentally important contribution to the quality and well-being of our society. It is a right for each individual and a means to enhancing well-being and quality of life for the whole of society (ibid). Investment in education at all levels can deliver a more equal society and prepare citizens to participate in a democracy. Education is one of the key policy areas that must be addressed urgently as part of the Policy Framework for a Just Ireland we set out in Chapter 2 under the pillar Social Services. Education must also be available as a right as envisaged in Governance pillar of our policy framework, set out in the same chapter.

Education in Ireland – the numbers

There are just over one million full-time students in the formal Irish education system. Of these, 536,317 are at primary level, 367,178 at second level and 168,982 at third level. The numbers at primary level have been increasing since 2001 and
this will have knock on implications for provision at second and third level. (CSO 2012:100). This demographic growth and the knock-on pressure on the education system and the need to develop long-term policies to cater for increased demand have been acknowledged by the Minister for Education and Skills. By 2017 there will be an extra 105,000 extra students in education in Ireland; 64,000 at primary level, 25,000 at second level and 16,000 at third-level. By 2026 the secondary school aged population is projected to increase by between 31 and 34 per cent (CSO, 2013) with the fastest increase expected between 20120 and 20206. This projected increase will require long-term planning in terms of both capital and current expenditure between now and 2026. It will require a significant increase in expenditure during the period. Such planning will require policy coherence across the framework areas of social infrastructure and investment as set out in chapter 2.

Table 9.1: Ireland: Real current public expenditure on education, 2003-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>First Level* €</th>
<th>Second Level* €</th>
<th>Third Level* €</th>
<th>Real Current Public Expenditure** €m</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>5,390</td>
<td>7,825</td>
<td>10,539</td>
<td>6,687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>5,794</td>
<td>7,914</td>
<td>10,332</td>
<td>6,893</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>5,898</td>
<td>8,262</td>
<td>10,689</td>
<td>7,133</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>6,103</td>
<td>8,625</td>
<td>11,206</td>
<td>7,498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>6,246</td>
<td>9,085</td>
<td>11,078</td>
<td>7,822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>6,361</td>
<td>9,207</td>
<td>10,866</td>
<td>8,061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>6,605</td>
<td>9,307</td>
<td>10,314</td>
<td>8,343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>6,493</td>
<td>9,010</td>
<td>9,898</td>
<td>8,293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>6,455</td>
<td>8,911</td>
<td>9,161</td>
<td>8,326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>6,272</td>
<td>8,735</td>
<td>8,417</td>
<td>8,005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*€ per student at 2012 prices **€m at 2012 prices
Source: Department of Education and Skills, CSO (2014)

58 ibid

Socio-Economic Review 2015
Ireland’s expenditure on education equalled 6.2 per cent of GDP in 2011, an increase of almost two percentage points since 2008. This is due mainly to the decrease of GDP in Ireland over this period (CSO 2014). However, education accounts for only 9.7 per cent of total public expenditure in Ireland compared with an OECD average of 13 per cent. Finland spends 6 per cent of GDP on education, but has better outcomes in terms of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. Education accounts for 12 per cent of total public expenditure in Finland (OECD, 2014). Over much of the last decade, as national income has increased, the share allocated to education has slowly increased; a development we strongly welcome. Table 9.1 (CSO 2014) details a real expenditure increase per student of 16.4 per cent at first level and 11.6 per cent at second level over the period 2003-2012. During the same period real expenditure per student at third level declined by one fifth (20.1 per cent). Real expenditure per student in 2012 at primary level was three quarters that at third level. Between 2003 and 2012 the numbers of students in Ireland grew by 17 per cent at first level and by 6.5 per cent at second level. Over the same period, the number of full-time third level students increased by 24.1 per cent (CSO 2014). The number of part-time third-level students increased by just 0.3 per cent in the same period. It should also be noted, however, that Ireland’s young population as a proportion of total population is large by EU standards and, consequently, a higher than average spend on education would be expected.

**Investment and planning for future education needs**

Education is now regarded as a central plank in the economic, social and cultural development of Irish society (Department of Education and Skills, 2004). Education and training are also crucial to achieving the objective of an inclusive society where all citizens have the opportunity to participate fully and meaningfully in social and economic life. The development of the education and skills of people is as important a source of wealth as the accumulation of more traditional forms of capital.

The fundamental aim of education is to serve individual, social and economic well-being and to enhance quality of life. Policy formulation in education should value and promote all dimensions of human development and seek to prepare people for full participation in cultural, social and economic life. This requires investment in education at all levels, from early childhood right up to lifelong learning.

*Social Justice Ireland* welcomes the fact that the Department of Education has begun to use the population projections by the CSO based on the census results to plan for future education needs, timing and spatial distribution. Using these figures, the Department of Education now projects the following possible increases in enrolment across the system:
• an additional 44,000 places will be needed at primary level between now and 2017\textsuperscript{59} with enrolments to peak at 573,777 by 2018\textsuperscript{60};

• an additional 25,000 places will be needed at second level between now and 2017 with significant increases projected in the years 2021-2026, to peak at an enrolment of 404,915 in 2025\textsuperscript{61};

• at third level, the number of full-time students is expected to continue to rise every year between 2015 and 2028; reaching 211,709 by 2028\textsuperscript{62}.

The Department of Education has published a capital works programme amounting to €2.2 billion between now and 2016 to address this issue and increase the number of places available through a School Building Programme. Social Justice Ireland believes it is critically important that Government, and in particular the Department of Education and Skills, pays attention to the population projection by the CSO for the years to come in order to adequately plan and provide for the increased places needed within the education system in the coming decades. Budget 2012 introduced an increase in the number of pupils required to gain and retain a classroom teaching post in small primary schools. The reasoning given for this change was that small schools benefitted disproportionately from the staffing schedule and that it acted as a disincentive to consider amalgamation. A Value for Money Review of small primary schools was submitted to the Minister for Education and Skills in April 2013 but has yet to be published. The Minister has announced that the recommendations of the report have not been accepted and that Government will implement two new policies to better support small rural schools\textsuperscript{63}. These policies include changes to the staffing schedule for small rural schools and a voluntary protocol for one teacher schools. To date 79 schools have lost a classroom post and 42 schools have not gained a classroom post as a result of this decision. A further 75 posts were removed from rural schools in 2014 with the last phase of budget measures relating to small primary schools being implemented in the 2014/2015 academic year. This policy, which has had a significant impact on rural schools and education in rural areas seems to be based on a philosophy that rural schools should be forced to amalgamate. Such a philosophy ignores the economic and social impact of the closure of a school on rural communities.

\textsuperscript{61} ibid
Education is widely recognised as crucial to the achievement of our national objectives of economic competitiveness, social inclusion and active citizenship. However, the overall levels of public funding for education in Ireland are out of step with these aspirations. This under-funding is most severe in early childhood education and in the areas of lifelong learning and second chance education – the very areas that are most vital in terms of the promotion of greater equity and fairness. The projected increased demand outlined above in all areas of our education system must be matched by a policy of investment at all levels that is focussed on protecting and promoting quality services for those in the education system.

**Early Childhood Education**

It is widely acknowledged that early childhood (pre-primary) education helps to build a strong foundation for lifelong learning and ensure equity in education. It also improves children’s cognitive abilities, reduces poverty and can mitigate social inequalities (OECD 2012: 338). It is seen as the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability (European Commission, 2011). It is important that adequate resources are invested in this area because early childhood education plays a crucial role in providing young people with the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential.

The most striking feature of investment in education in Ireland relative to other OECD countries is our under-investment in early childhood education relative to international norms. Ireland spends 0.1 per cent of GDP on pre-primary education compared with the OECD average of 0.5 per cent (OECD 2012: 339). The introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) has been a positive move in addressing this under investment. The ECCE Scheme entitles every child between the ages of 3 years and 3 months and 4 years and 6 months to three hours of pre-school care for thirty-eight weeks in one year free of charge. The ECCE scheme is availed of by over 68,000 children and is administered by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs at a cost of approximately €175 million. In 2011, 95 per cent of 4 year olds in Ireland were enrolled in early childhood education as a result of this initiative. However only 47 per cent of 3 years olds were enrolled in early childhood education compared with an OECD average of 67 per cent. Clearly Ireland still has quite a way to go to catch up with the OECD average. The establishment of the Early Years Education Advisory Group by the Minister for Education and Skills is a welcome development. The Minister has made improving the quality of early years education in Ireland a policy priority in 2015. The commitment to ensuring equal educational opportunities to all children from the start of their lives is welcome. A coherent Early Childhood Education and Care

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strategy requires adequate resources and policy coordination between the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. A commitment to ensuring equal opportunities to all children at the start of their lives should be at the core of all Government policy and not just confined to a number of key departments.

Early childhood is also the stage where education can most effectively influence the development of children and help reverse disadvantage (European Commission, 2011). It has the potential to both reduce the incidence of early school leaving and to increase the equity of educational outcomes. Early childhood education is also associated with better performance later on in school. A recent OECD study found that 15-year-old pupils who attended pre-primary education perform better on PISA testing (Programme for International Student Assessment) than those who did not, even allowing for differences in their socio-economic backgrounds (OECD, 2012:338). This is mirrored in the PISA 2012 results for Ireland which show that Irish students who attended pre-school scored significantly better than those who did not (Department of Education and Skills, 2013).

Chart 9.1 below illustrates that the highest return from investment in education is between the ages of 0 to 5. This is the point in the developmental curve where differences in early health, cognitive and non-cognitive skills, which are particular sources of inequality, can be addressed most effectively. The evidence shows that early childhood education has the greatest potential to provide more equal educational opportunity to those students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The importance of investment in education is widely acknowledged and the rewards for both individuals and the state are clear. The Oireachtas Spotlight on Early Childhood Education and Care details that the return on investment can be as much as €7 for every €1 invested in a child. Longitudinal studies internationally also show returns of between three and ten times the original investment in children65. It is critically important that Ireland invest in this area and provide universal early childhood education services for children. This will provide an economic and social return for many years to come.

The European Commission believes that Europe’s future will be based on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and that improving the quality and effectiveness of education systems is essential to this (European Commission, 2011). Achieving such growth, and honouring the educational commitments outlined in the Programme for Government and National Recovery in the process, will require significant strategic investment in early childhood education and lifelong learning through a policy making process that has long-term planning at its core. Our success in educating future generations of pre-school children will be a major determinant of our future sustainability.

Primary and Second Level Education

Ireland has a pupil teacher ratio (PTR) of 15.7 at primary level and 14.4 at second level (CSO, 2014), the eleventh highest in the EU. The average class size in Ireland at primary level is 24.4, the second highest in the EU. Government should address this issue and take action to reduce class sizes at primary level. In 2011 Ireland took part in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). These test primary school pupils in the equivalent of fourth class in reading, mathematics and science in over 60 countries. Ireland preformed relatively well, ranking 10th out of 45 participating countries in reading, 17th out of 50 participating countries in mathematics and 22nd out of 50 participating countries in science. A detailed analysis has been published by the Educational Research Centre (Eivers and Clerkin eds., 2013).

Some of the most interesting findings are in the differences in results for children in Northern Ireland and the Republic. Northern Irish primary school pupils performed better in reading and numeracy than any other English speaking country, coming 5th out of 45 participating countries in reading and 6th out of 50 participating countries in mathematics. A revised primary school curriculum and targeted literacy and numeracy programmes were introduced in Northern Ireland.
in 2007. The new curriculum is based on the skills that children should attain rather than on content to be covered, with a focus on preparation for learning and child-led learning. The revised curriculum has been a considerable success and provides an excellent example of how to redesign a school curriculum, putting quality programmes and services at the heart of the system. This is particularly relevant at a time when the Minister for Education and Skills has set tackling educational disadvantage in schools as one of three priorities for 2015. Recent research from the Educational Research Centre (ERC) (2015) examined English Reading and Mathematics at 2nd and 6th class in primary schools. Students’ performance has improved significantly, for this first at primary level since the early 1980s. These very welcome improvements were evident in both DEIS and non DEIS schools. These results show that the targets set out in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2021 for children and primary level have already been achieved. This strong performance gives the Minister for Education scope to set an ambitious new target following the interim review of the strategy in 2015. There is ample evidence to support more ambitious targets following the interim review. The ERC study also shows that there is still significant scope for improvement. The large proportion of very low achievers in reading in DEIS band 1 schools is worrying (44 per cent of pupils in 2nd class in DEIS band 1 schools performed at or below the lowest proficiency level on overall reading) and there is room for improvement on mathematics and problem solving across all schools.

At second level, Irish students performed relatively well in the 2012 PISA tests in reading, literacy, mathematics and science. The performance of Ireland’s fifteen-year-olds shows a significant improvement on the 2009 performance. However, when compared with 2003 PISA results, the overall performance showed very little progress. Students from fee paying schools significantly out-performed those from non-fee paying schools, and students who never attended pre-school performed less well than those who attended pre-school (Perkins et al, 2013). The PISA findings suggest that while reading levels among the school-going population are better than the population generally, this difference is much smaller than might be expected. The fact that the proportion of male students unable to read at the most basic level (Level 2 PISA) is almost unchanged since 2000 (Perkins et al., 2013:143) must be a cause of considerable concern for policymakers. It is clear that fundamental reforms are needed to Ireland’s education system\(^{66}\) to address this problem.

*Social Justice Ireland* welcomes the reforms to the Junior Cycle and the implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategy ‘*Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*’. The strategy sets out national targets and a range of

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\(^{66}\) A discussion paper by Aine Hyland for the HEA Summer School 2011 suggested that the emphasis on rote learning at second level might have affected our results as the PISA test is based on the application of prior knowledge.
significant measures to improve literacy and numeracy in early childhood education and in primary and post-primary schools. These measures include improving the performance of children and young people in PISA literacy and numeracy tests at all levels. The impact of these measures and of Project maths should be seen in the next round of PISA 2015. The strategy also proposes fundamental changes to teacher education and the curriculum in schools and radical improvements in the assessment and reporting of student progress at student, school and national level. Progress on this issue is overdue and budgetary and economic constraints must not be allowed to impede the implementation of the strategy.

The ‘reform agenda’ currently pursued by the Minister for Education and Skills is being implemented at second level with the phased replacement of the Junior Certificate examination with the new Junior Cycle Student Award incorporating a school-based approach to assessment. This award was developed in response to weaknesses in the current model highlighted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and to address the issue of second level students not achieving their potential and the wake-up call in Irish education of students failing PISA tests. Social Justice Ireland welcomes the new student centred approach to the Junior Cycle and the new emphasis on helping students who are not performing well in Irish schools. It is important that such reforms be followed through to the Leaving Certificate to ensure policy coherence and a truly student centred approach in the second level education system. It is equally important that policymakers, whilst implementing a reform agenda, remember that the primary focus of education is to prepare students for life, not just for work.

**Literacy and Adult Literacy**

The OECD PIAAC study 2013 provides the most up to date data on adult literacy in Ireland. On literacy, Ireland is placed 17th out of 24 countries with 18 per cent of Irish adults having a literacy level at or below level 1. People at this level of literacy can understand and follow only basic written instructions and read only very short texts (OECD, 2013). On numeracy, Ireland is placed 19th out of 24 countries with 26 per cent of Irish adults scoring at or below level 1. In the final category, problem solving in technology rich environments, 42 per cent of Irish adults scored at or below level 1. In other words, a very significant proportion of Ireland’s adult population does not possess the most basic literacy, numeracy and information-processing skills

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considered necessary to success in the world today. The report also found that there is no statistical difference between average literacy scores of adults in Ireland from IALS in 1994 and PIAAC in 2012. In other words, the adult literacy strategy implemented by successive governments in the intervening years was grossly inadequate in terms of dealing with Ireland’s adult literacy problem. People with literacy and numeracy difficulties are more likely to be long-term unemployed (O’Connell et al, 2009), to have lower earnings and career aspirations (Dorgan, 2009) and are less likely to take part in education and training (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007). A significant proportion of Ireland’s labour force is not equipped with the skills required for the modern labour market. Those with low literacy skills are almost twice as likely to be unemployed (OECD, 2013) and are more likely to report poor health outcomes and are less likely to participate in social and civic life.

The Programme for Government and National Recovery states that the government will address the widespread and persistent problem of restricted adult literacy through the integration of literacy in vocational training and through community education. The previous target for adult literacy policy set out in NAPInclusion was that ‘the proportion of the population aged 16-64 with restricted literacy will be reduced to between 10 per cent to 15 per cent by 2016 from the level of 25 per cent found in 1997’. It seems that the targets in the NAP Inclusion were destined for attainment without any policy action on adult literacy (because of the trend for younger people to have overall better literacy levels) (Dorgan, 2009). The European Commission recently noted the slow rate of progress in reform of further education and training (2014). This target was completely unacceptable and unambitious at the time and showed a lack of interest in seriously addressing the problem. The recent PIAAC results confirm this analysis. The lack of focus on this issue has been further underscored by successive budget cuts to funding for adult literacy programmes. Successive Government budgets cut funding for adult literacy since 201069 and only a relatively modest additional allocation was made in Budget 2015 (€6million).

No new target or strategy for adult literacy has yet been outlined, despite the Department of Education and Skills commencing a review of adult literacy provision in late 2012, and publishing the report of the review group in September 2013. The Department accepted the findings of the Report and as an initial step the Adult Literacy Operational Guidelines were revised to incorporate many of the recommendations. These guidelines were published in December 2013. A new Further Education Strategy (‘FET strategy’) 2014-2019 published by SOLAS in 2014 includes reference to the issue of literacy and numeracy and includes 12 actions described as a ‘literacy and numeracy strategy’. Key amongst these is a promotional

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69 Budget 2011 reduced capitation grants for adult and further education courses by 5%; there was a 2% reduction in Budget 2012, 2% in 2013 and 1% in 2014.
campaign to elicit higher levels of engagement (SOLAS, 2014, p.100). However, it is disappointing that the FET strategy fails to set specific literacy targets\(^{70}\) or to commit additional funding. The serious issue of adult literacy deserves a detailed high-level strategy, one that is more comprehensive than the commitments incorporated in the FET strategy and such a strategy should now be developed. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that public policy aimed at tackling literacy problems among adults has to date simply been inadequate and unacceptable and has left too many people with serious literacy problems unable to function effectively or to obtain meaningful jobs. *Social Justice Ireland* recommends that the new ambitious adult literacy targets be set in the context of the future social and economic development of Ireland, and that the necessary funding is provided to ensure that this target is met.

**Lifelong learning**

Equality of status is one of the basic democratic principles that should underpin lifelong learning. Access in adult life to desirable employment and choices is closely linked to level of educational attainment. Equal political rights cannot exist if some people are socially excluded and educationally disadvantaged. The lifelong opportunities of those who are educationally disadvantaged are in sharp contrast to the opportunities for meaningful participation of those who have completed a second or third level education. Unlike the rising earnings premium and earnings rewards enjoyed by those who have completed higher education, the earnings disadvantage for those who have not completed upper secondary education increases with age. Therefore, lifelong education should be seen as a basic need. In this context, second chance education and continuing education are vitally important and require on-going support.

The OECD recommends that lifelong learning opportunities should be accessible to all through systems that combine high-quality initial education with opportunities and incentives for the entire population to continue to develop proficiency in reading and numeracy skills, whether outside work or in the workplace, after initial education and training are completed. It notes that the joint impact of investing in the skills of many individuals may exceed the sum of the individual parts.

There is a strong link between educational attainment and employment. Those aged 25 to 64 with only primary level qualification are three times more likely to be unemployed than those with a third level qualification (24 per cent versus 7 per cent) (CSO 2011:1). This gap has increased 10 percentage points since 2009, demonstrating the difficulties faced by Government in helping those with low levels

\(^{70}\) It instead commits to setting appropriate targets between 2015 and 2019
of educational attainment up-skill and improve their prospects of getting a job. The Programme for Government makes reference to lifelong learning as a high priority for jobseekers. However, labour market activation cannot be the sole factor defining the lifelong learning agenda and education and training curricula. Various reports identify generic skills and competences as a core element of the lifelong learning framework. The Forfás Report ‘Sharing our future: Ireland 2025’ (Forfas 2009) highlights the increasing range of generic skills that individuals require to operate within society and the economy. These include basic skills such as literacy, numeracy, use of technology, language skills, people related and conceptual skills. The report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs ‘Tomorrow’s Skills – Towards a National Skills Strategy’ (2007) indicates that there is substantial evidence to show that employers regard generic skills as equal to, if not more important than, technical or job specific skills.

Eight key competences for lifelong learning have been identified by the Council of Europe and the European Parliament (Council of Europe, 2006):

- Communication in the mother tongue (reading, writing, etc.);
- Communication in foreign languages;
- Mathematical and basic competences in science and technology;
- Digital competence;
- Learning to learn;
- Social and civic competences;
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
- Cultural awareness and expression.

These key competences are all interdependent, with an emphasis in each on critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem solving, risk assessment and decision making. They also provide the framework for community education and training programmes within the European Education and Training 2010 work programme and the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020) (European Commission 2011). These key competences should be included as part of the reform of apprenticeship programmes. Many of these key competences are already included in one of the recommendations of the report of the review group of apprenticeship training which recommends that apprenticeship programmes should provide for the appropriate integration of transversal skills, particularly literacy, numeracy, maths, science and ICT. These competences could also form the basis of a system to recognise the enhanced skills of the flow of returning migrants. These migrants have gained significant and diverse skills whilst
in employment abroad and a system to formally recognise this non-formal skill development will be needed. SOLAS, the Further Education and Training (FET) authority published the new FET strategy in 2014. The publication has brought some strategic planning to the delivery of further education and training that had been lacking previously. The implementation of the strategy will be challenging and more needs to be done at government level to ensure that the further adult and community education sector achieves parity of esteem with other sectors within the formal system. This is particularly important when one considers that is it expected to respond to the needs of large sections of the population who have either been failed by the formal system of for whom it is unsuitable as a way of learning.

A recent Forfas (2014) report urged Government to invest in developing FET and Apprenticeship systems in order to ensure the delivery of more high quality, flexible and responsive education and training programmes that explicitly meet the needs of the learner and the employer and are flexible to local needs.

The same report notes that skills development across all levels of the education and training system must remain priority and that managers be suitably upskilled to that they can recognise the value of education and training in terms of upskilling those who are in employment as well as those seeking employment.

The reform of apprenticeship training in Ireland will be important in terms of providing training and lifelong learning opportunities to those who are low skilled or those who are early school leavers. A reformed system has the opportunity to provide relevant skills and meaningful and clear progression paths to those involved. It can contribute to a strategy to help long-term unemployed people whose skills are now redundant to retrain for employment opportunities that have been identified in particular regions. It could also provide an opportunity to provide people with opportunities to upskill throughout their working life and contribute to a strategy to combat labour market polarisation. A reformed and flexible apprenticeship system could help ensure that low skilled workers at risk of losing their jobs in the future due to automation and the polarisation of the labour market have the skills required to remain in the labour market and take up other employment opportunities. The Apprenticeship Council, established in late 2014 is currently calling for proposals for the expansion of the new Irish Apprenticeship system into new sectors of the economy, across a range of qualification levels. The National Competitiveness Council (2015) has called on Government to ensure that an apprenticeship is seen as an attractive education option offering real career opportunities. It also proposes that apprenticeships be developed in key sectors such as modern manufacturing and engineering. In a welcome move the Minister has set the development of 21st century apprenticeships as one of three key policy priority areas for 2015.
Access to educational opportunity and meaningful participation in the system and access to successful outcomes, are central to the democratic delivery of education. Resources should be made available to support people who wish to engage in lifelong learning, in particular those people who completed second level education but who chose not to progress to third level education at that point. *Social Justice Ireland* welcomes the provision in the Technological Universities Act 2014 that a combined minimum of 30 per cent of all enrolments are to be in flexible learning programmes; professional or industry based programmes or mature learners. It is important that enrolment policies for higher education are revised and amended in conjunction with the reforms to further education and training.

**Early school leaving**

The proportion of persons aged 18-24 who left school with, at most, lower secondary education in Ireland was 9.7% in 2012 (CSO, 2014). The rate has been decreasing steadily since 2002 and positive progress has been made in this area. However it still remains a serious issue. Early school leaving not only presents problems for the young people involved but it also has economic and social consequences for society. Education is the most efficient means by which to safeguard against unemployment. The risk of unemployment increases considerably the lower the level of education. Early school leavers are:

- at higher risk of poverty and social exclusion;
- confronted with limited opportunities to develop culturally, personally and socially;
- likely to have poor health status; and
- face a cyclical effect associated with early school leaving, resulting in the children of early school leavers experiencing reduced success in education (European Commission, 2011).

The unemployment rate for early school leavers is 37 per cent, almost twice that for other persons in the same 18 to 24 age cohort. They also had an employment rate that was half that of their peers (21 per cent compared to 42 per cent) (CSO 2011:7). Government has invested heavily in trying to secure a school-based solution to this problem through, for example, the work of the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB). Seventy nine per cent of early school leavers are either unemployed or classified as economically inactive, a situation that is simply unacceptable and cannot be allowed to continue. Combined with Ireland’s very high NEET (young people aged 15-24 not in education, employment or training) rate of 18.4 per cent, early school leaving is a major issue for government that requires a long-term policy response. It may well be time to try alternative approaches aimed at ensuring that
people in this cohort attain the skills required to progress in the future and participate in society. With this in mind the review of apprenticeship training should include this cohort of young people as one of its target groups.

**Funding higher education**

The purpose of higher education and how it is to be funded has become a topic of much discussion in Ireland. The CSO population projections indicate that considerable investment is required to ensure that the higher education sector in Ireland can continue to cope with the projected increased demand. However public funding for higher education in Ireland has been decreasing since 2009 despite steadily increasing enrolments both full and part time.

A recent report by the Oireachtas Library and Research Service outlines the changing purpose and nature of higher education and how the higher education sector has developed over time in Ireland. This report also outlines some of the challenges Ireland faces in terms of future funding for the sector. The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* made 26 recommendations regarding the future of higher education in Ireland. One of the recommendations is to establish some form of student loan system to make the financing of higher education sustainable. There are arguments both for and against this recommendation.

There are strong arguments from an equity perspective that those who benefit from higher education and who can afford to contribute to the costs of their higher education should do so. This principle is well established internationally and is an important component of funding strategies for many of the better higher education systems across the world. People with higher education qualifications reap a substantial earnings premium in the labour market which increases with age (OECD, 2012:140). The earnings premium in Ireland for those with higher education has increased by 22 percentage points since 2010. Third-level graduates in employment in Ireland earn on average 64 per cent more that those with a leaving certificate only (OECD, 2011), and 81 per cent of people aged 25 to 64 with a third-level qualification are in employment compared with 35 per cent of those with a primary level qualification only. Ireland is one of the few countries where the relative earnings of 25-64 year olds with qualifications from tertiary type A (largely theory based) and advanced research programmes are more than 100 per cent higher than the earning of people with upper secondary or post-secondary education (OECD, 2013).

Ireland is the highest ranking country in the EU in terms of higher education attainment, with 48 per cent of all 25-34 year olds having a third-level qualification. At present third-level students do not pay fees but do incur a student contribution charge at the beginning of each academic year. Undergraduate students are supported
through the provision of maintenance grants under the Student Grant Scheme 2013. As a result of decisions taken in Budget 2012 postgraduate students are no longer eligible for maintenance grant support. Without the introduction of some form of income-contingent loan facility this decision is likely to have a significant impact on entry into postgraduate courses in Ireland over the coming years.

There has been much discussion regarding the future funding for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and how they might be configured in the future. In the ‘National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030’ the Higher Education Authority (HEA) discusses broadening the base of funding for HEIs and sets out in detail how a student contribution framework might be developed and managed. Various policy options for student contributions are discussed in a report to the Minister (Department of Education, 2009) and the fiscal impact of these options are outlined in detail. Further research concludes that an income contingent student loan rather than a graduate tax system would be the most equitable funding option for Ireland (Flannery & O’Donoghue, 2011).

There are also arguments against the introduction of fees for third level education, particularly in light of the absence of any complimentary strategy to ensure the long term future funding for the sector. These arguments relate to the possible costs of administering such a scheme, the risk of escalation in tuition fees and the prospect of there being no immediate saving to public expenditure as Government’s loan guarantee would be recorded as General Government Expenditure (Healy and Delaney, 2014). The policy challenge posed by these arguments is made more difficult by the lack of any alternative funding strategy for higher education. The IMF in its most recent country mission emphasises the need for higher education funding reforms to control growth in public spending while protecting low income students. Given the projected increases in student intake it is difficult to see how public spending on higher education can be curtailed and it would be extremely difficult to fund the sector on student loans alone. The sector will require long-term, sustainable Government funding to ensure that it can deliver what is expected of it in terms of human capital and engaging with society. These are the challenges that the Expert Group established to examine the funding policy for higher education must consider when presenting their recommendations at the end of 2015. The recently published discussion paper by the expert group notes that the existing funding system for higher education in Ireland is unsustainable given demographic projections and insufficient to maintain quality. The paper considers the value that higher education in Ireland contributes in terms of economic growth, social development and civic and cultural engagement. Clarity on the nature and

purpose of higher education, its contribution to society and how to enhance this contribution is key in order to guide future funding mechanisms argues the expert group.

**Key Priorities on Education and Educational Disadvantage**

- Invest in universal, quality early childhood education.
- Set an ambitious adult literacy target and ensure adequate funding is provided for adult literacy programmes.
- Increase resources available to lifelong learning and alternative pathways to education.
- Develop a long-term, sustainable funding strategy for all levels of education (primary, post-primary and higher education).