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Key Milestones in the Evolution of Skills Policy in Ireland

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Introduction

Since the beginning of industrialisation, the availability of sufficiently skilled workers has been a key concern in all political economies. State involvement in skills policy began to emerge in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century in the context of international competitiveness. Developments in the United Kingdom (UK) had a significant influence on developments in Ireland until the 1970s and 1980s. At this time the locus of influence began to shift toward Europe, following Ireland's membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. The increasing influence of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) can also be identified from the 1960s.

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This chapter will identify the key milestones in the evolution of skills policy in Ireland with particular emphasis on further education and training and intermediate skill formation. Its primary focus will be on the period from 1973, when Ireland joined the EEC, until 2020, and the publication of the second National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020a). The chapter will begin by identifying the key events and influences in the period from the mid-nineteenth century until 1973, which laid the foundations for the trajectory of policy evolution, and set in train the key themes to emerge. Following the discussion of the 1973 to 2020 period, the chapter will conclude with a discussion on the current state of skills policy in Ireland. The potential impact of key developments in recent times will also be discussed, such as the Irish government's stated aim of creating an integrated tertiary education sector (Department of Education and Skills, 2018), and the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in 2020, with particular focus on the place of FET.

Before discussing the developments in Ireland, the first section of the chapter will outline the key features of skill formation systems, and how such systems vary between countries. This will place the subsequent discussion on developments in Ireland in a broader international context.

Skills Formation Systems

The skill formation system (SFS) in every industrialised county is the interface between the education system and the labour market. The SFS consists of the vocational education and training (VET) system and higher education. The VET (or FET in Ireland) system provides the intermediate-level skills for the economy, while the high-level skills are provided by higher education. However, a SFS does not exist in isolation. It is part of the overall education and training system within a country, which includes pre-school, primary and post-primary education. Progression from one level of the system to the next is a common feature in all countries. The inter-connected nature of the education and training system means that what happens at one level often affects another.

The transition from school-to-work, 'through the SFS', is a key pathway through the system. The structure of the post-primary system, the starting point of this pathway, affects how the pathway progresses. Whether a post-primary system is stratified, such as that in Germany, or standardised, as in Ireland, is important to the context within which the SFS, and in particular, the school-to-work pathway, evolves in each country.

Indeed, the duality of the relationship between the structure of the SFS and the structure of labour market entry has been highlighted by a number of commentators. Gangl (2001) highlighted the importance of the linkages between the SFS and employment systems while Allmendinger (1989, p. 232) states that:

> Education *systems* define occupational opportunities for individuals at entry into the labour market … these systems have long-term implications for how people are matched to jobs.

Finegold and Soskice (1988, p. 21) are critical of policy makers in the UK for failing the see the importance of the "two-way nature of the relationship between education and training and the economy". In other words, while the SFS in a given country responds to the skills needs of the economy, the structure of labour market entry is largely dependent on the 'output' of the SFS. The symbiotic nature of this relationship, and, in particular, employer involvement in the SFS, have been identified by a number of writers as a variable in the comparability of SFS. This is discussed in more detail below.

Comparing Skills Formation Systems

As a small open economy within the European Union, Ireland's economy and, by extension, its SFS, must be placed within an international context. Indeed, the first National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2014, p. 3) states that the vision for the new FET Sector is "a world-class integrated system of further education and training in Ireland". In this section, the discussion will focus on the comparability of SFS between countries and

identify the key features of SFS across advanced political economies. Firstly, the discussion will focus on the key determinants in the evolution of SFS from pre-industrial times, including the emergence of different models of economic activity. Given that SFS respond to the needs of the economy, different modes of economic activity result in differences in SFS. In such cases what are the implications for the comparability of SFS? This will be followed by a brief consideration of the differences between small and large economies and their implications for comparability of SFS. This section will conclude with an overview of the key features of SFS in advanced political economies.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, skill formation across the world has been the preserve of the apprenticeship tradition dating back to ancient times (Ryan, 2000b). Indeed, while the VET systems in many countries prior to industrialisation were very similar (Wollschläger, 2004), the growth of industrialisation produced different institutional configurations. Deissinger (2004, p. 39) states that "education and vocational training should not and cannot be separated from the history of a country, its social development, and its institutions". Iversen and Soskice (2009) highlight how the mode of economic activity in pre-industrial times was largely continued into the post-industrial economy. They describe how the transition to industrialisation was mediated by the local context in each country. Features, such as the degree to which economic activity was locally rooted, the strength of a craft guild tradition, whether agriculture was dominated by large land owners employing landless peasants or small land-owning farmers, all contributed to how economic activity took place. They identified two broad categories of economic activity—coordinated market economies (CME's), and non-coordinated or liberal market economies (LMEs). The CME group was further sub-divided into social democratic, located mainly in Scandinavia, and the Christian democratic, centred primarily in Germany.

It is worth noting that, in the nineteenth century, the bulk of the workforce in most countries lived in rural areas. Indeed, Esping-Andersen (1990) observed that, until the post-World War II period, political dominance was based primarily on rural class politics. Hall and Soskice (2001) identified a continuum from LMEs to CMEs along which advanced

industrial economies could be placed called the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC). As a Member State of the European Union, placing the Irish SFS in a European context is an important element of the discussion. However, the distribution of the political economies of the 27 Member States along the VoC continuum (Menz, 2005) reveals the difficulties in comparing SFS from different types of economies. This also has implications at EU level regarding the development of an EU-wide approach to skill formation. Comparing the Copenhagen and Bologna processes, Powell et al. (2012) describe the emergent European skill formation model as a bricolage of the elements of various existing models and international influences. Within the complexity of the VoC continuum, comparing SFS based on type of economic activity, namely CME or LME, has some validity. Using the VoC model, Hall and Soskice identified the six Anglophone countries as LMEs—United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand. Therefore, it would seem most appropriate to compare the SFS in countries with similar approaches to economic activity.

Small and Large States

However, type of economic activity is not the only variable relevant to the comparability of SFS. In addition to levels of education and training within a labour market (which will be discussed later in this chapter), demographic characteristics are also relevant to this discussion. As Bielenberg and Ryan (2013) state: "A crucial factor influencing the development of any economy is the size and capability of the labour force" (165).

Table 9.1 shows the population of the six LME countries. Not only are Ireland and New Zealand the smallest countries, in population size, it is noteworthy that the four largest countries are also members of the G7 group of nations, which consists of the seven largest economies in the world.

Therefore, is a comparison of the SFS in LME's appropriate without considering the relative size of the economies? Smaller states, because of their increased dependence on imports to meet domestic demand, are

Table 9.1 Population of six LME countries

Country	Population (000's)
United States of America	329,484
United Kingdom	67,215
Canada	38,005
Australia	25,687
New Zealand	5084
Ireland	4994

Source: www.data.worldbank.org—data for 2020

correspondingly more vulnerable to international circumstances such as financial crises. Consequently, Buckley (2016) states that "small states can be regarded as *structurally different* to other larger states" (emphasis in the original). He goes on to observe that this can lead to a corresponding increase in the priority of skill formation: "The appeal that human capital development can have for a smaller state becomes evident when it is unable to generate significant investment in physical capital due to market size constraints" (Ibid).

Differentiating between smaller and larger states has implications for comparing the skill formation systems within the LME group. Equally, a comparison between smaller LME states leaves one option, namely, to compare Ireland and New Zealand. This would involve comparing an EU Member State with a non-EU country, which raises further questions in terms of validity.

Given the heterogeneity of SFS internationally, the comparability of such systems is, as the previous discussion has highlighted, complex. The next section will provide an overview of the key elements in SFS and will draw attention to the blend of these elements as being the main determinant in the differentiation of SFS.

Key Elements of Skill Formation Systems

Becker (1964), in taking a human capital theory approach, categorised skills broadly as being either general or specific. General skills are those that are largely transferable between firms and industries, while specific skills are seen as transferrable only within firms or industries. Specific skills have been further refined into industry specific skills, which are

transferrable between firms within the same industry, and firm-specific skills which are restricted to the requirements of a specific employer. Busemeyer (2009) describes the differences between the countries in this regard as "the variation in the 'portability' of skills" (377).

While all three categories of skills—general skills, industry-specific skills, and firm-specific skills—can be found in every economy, each country will have a dominant skill type that relates to the particular skill-bias of its form of economic activity. For example, Ireland, as an LME, would be regarded as having a general skills bias in the labour market, while in Germany, a CME, the labour market would be seen to have a bias towards industry-specific skills. The bias in any country may change over time in response to changes in the industrial profile of the economy.

Unlike education systems, SFS and VET are more heterogeneous. A key feature across all VET systems is the involvement of the primary actors in the governance, provision and regulation of VET, namely, the state, education and training providers, employers, and trade unions. It is the blend of the degree of involvement of these stakeholders that translates into the variation between the SFS systems in different countries. Busemeyer (2009) is of the view that a key variable in the skill formation system is the degree of employer involvement. Vossiek (2018, p. 17) echoes this view when he states that "it is a central question for policy-makers how to get employers involved in skill formation". Cappelli (2012, p. 53), in reference to employers in hi-tech industries, states:

> They should be involved in co-op programs and support students pursuing the needed courses, and they should train and develop current employees for skills that are emerging… To expect schools and students to guess what skills your company will need in the future is plain and simply bad business, especially in such a rapidly transforming and innovative industry. In effect, doing so amounts to outsourcing the supply of talent without bothering to let the outsource vendors know.

Busemeyer (2009) further argues that, within the various typologies of skill formation systems, insufficient attention is paid to the importance of an authoritative certification of skills. If such a system has the confidence of the employers, then certified skills will have 'value' in the labour

market. The issue of certification, and in particular, the absence of it for VET is a recurring theme in the evolution of skills policy in Ireland. For a more in-depth discussion on the typologies of skill formation systems see Greinert (2004), Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012), and Busemeyer and Schlicht-Schmälzle (2014).

Having outlined some of the key issues in the development and comparability of SFS in general, the remainder of the chapter will focus on developments in Ireland, with particular emphasis on the provision of intermediate skills within the Irish labour market. Through this chapter the themes of state involvement in skills policy, the degree of employer involvement, and the issue of certification for VET/FET in Ireland, will be evident throughout. The theme of system divergence and convergence will also recur throughout the discussion. In particular, it will be evident that the evolution of skills policy, as it applies to FET in Ireland, has been strongly influenced by international drivers, while its development has been subject to national barriers (O'Sullivan, 2018).

Before proceeding to the primary focus of this chapter, the 1973 to 2020 period, there follows an overview of the key events and influences in the skill formation policy arena prior to 1973. This period laid the foundations and the policy trajectory for the emergence of the modern FET sector in Ireland from modest beginnings in the mid-1970s.

From the Great Famine to the Formation of the Irish Free State in 1922

The history of policies relating to education, training and skills formation in Ireland is very different from the experience in the majority of industrialised countries. While many countries, particularly in Europe, were experiencing the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, Ireland lagged behind in terms of industrial development. Ireland's economy became increasingly dependent on agriculture. While the Industrial Revolution began in Britain in the latter half of the eighteenth century, there was little evidence of it in Ireland. Ó Gráda (1994, p. 208), in referring to the situation at the time of the Great Famine in Ireland in the 1840s, states

> …the Great Famine is a grim reminder of how narrowly the benefits of the first Industrial Revolution had been spread by the 1840s. Nearly a half-century of political and economic union had made little or no impression on the huge gap between Irish and British incomes.

In demographic terms, the Great Famine initiated a "population decline unmatched in any other European country in the nineteenth century" (Ó Gráda, 1994, p. 213). According to the census data, the population of Ireland fell from 6,528,799 in 1841 to 3,389,111 in 1911, the last census before the formation of the Irish Free State. This represents a decline of almost 52% in 70 years. In addition, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Ireland had also experienced considerable political and social upheaval having seen "considerable turmoil and trauma…which resulted in widespread death and emigration" (Ferriter, 2004, p. 28). From the perspective of skill formation, the consequence of this economic situation leads Garvin (2009) to suggest that it led to the effective deindustrialisation of Ireland, with a corresponding deskilling of the population.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, government interest in skills policy in the UK was ignited by British industry being outperformed by German industry as evidenced at the International Exhibition in 1867. While the approach to skill formation prior to this point was primarily voluntarist in nature, this international competition was the catalyst for the UK to become more interventionist in its approach. The first attempt to legislate for technical instruction in the UK was the 1889 Technical Instruction Act, which applied to England, Wales, and Ireland (which was still under British governance). This was based on the local authority funding technical education through local taxation. The absence of a national local authority structure in Ireland meant that the implementation of this legislation in Ireland was unsuccessful. However, the 1889 Act was the first recognition of the State's role in giving direct support to technical education (Coolahan, 1981).

During the 1890s the demand for a system of technical instruction designed for the Irish context remained. As Byrne (1999, p. 27) argues, "the urgent requirement was to displace adopted British policy with an adapted Irish one". In 1895, an unofficial committee of Irishmen, both

parliamentarians and other interested parties (Byrne, 1999), known as the Recess Committee, under the chairmanship of Mr Horace Plunkett, made a systematic study of the approaches taken in other countries to industrial development (Department of Education, 1927). The Committee's report was published in 1896 and its recommendations resulted in, what Coolahan (1981, p. 87) described as the "great breakthrough for technical education", the Agriculture and Technical Instruction (Ireland) Act of 1899. The funding of technical education through local taxation was facilitated by the passing, in the previous year, of the Local Government (Ireland) Act in 1898, establishing a national system of local authorities in Ireland. Byrne observes that, with the passing of the 1899 Act, "the bonds which kept Irish technical institutions subservient to a lofty and remote South Kensington [in London] were finally severed" (1999, p. 28).

From Independence to EEC Membership

The establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 involved the partitioning of the island of Ireland, which resulted in the six counties of Northern Ireland remaining within the UK. This created a significant economic dilemma with the loss to the newly formed Free State of the only region of substantial industrial development on the island of Ireland at that time. Ireland was a predominantly agricultural economy and was, compared to Britain, industrially underdeveloped. As a result, the demand for skills was different to the UK. Ó'Buachalla (1988, p. 33) observes that this was primarily due to the "absence of the catalytic effect of heavy industry and the dominance of agriculture in the economy". However, the profile of the Irish economy changed significantly over the next fifty years. Figure 9.1 illustrated how in 1926 almost 52% of employment was in agriculture compared to 14.5% in industry and 33.7% in services. As the chart below highlights, over the period until 1971, the broad profile in employment in Ireland changes significantly, with 25.8% in agriculture, 29.9% in industry, and 33.3% in services, in 1971.

The economic context of the period between 1931–1957 was also significant since the country spent the major portion of the period in the

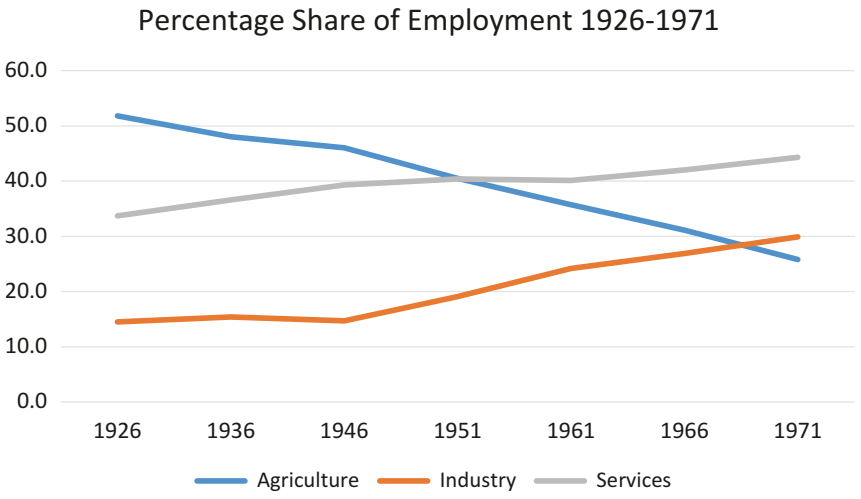

Fig. 9.1 Percentage share of total employment by sector 1926–1971. (Source: Derived from census data in Bielenberg and Ryan (2013, Table 9.1, p. 191))

grip of three economic crises. When the fledgling state was trying to establish itself, progress in terms of economic development was significantly retarded by these crises (Ferriter, 2004; Garvin, 2004; Ó Gráda, 2011; Bielenberg & Ryan, 2013; Haughton, 2014). The three economic crises of this period were identified by Ó Gráda (2011, p. 23) as the Economic War (1934–1938), the 'Emergency' (1939–1945), and, what Ó Gráda refers to as the "lost decade" the 1950s. He uses the net emigration rate as an indicator of the three economic crises experienced in Ireland during this period (see Fig. 9.2). Emigration has traditionally been a kind of 'safety valve' in Ireland during times of crisis particularly against unemployment. After the Second World War, while post-war Europe was experiencing a decade of growth, Ireland was underachieving with the worst growth record in Europe for the 1950–1958 period. The Irish government's protectionist economic policies over the course of this period had been shown to be increasingly ineffective. In the early 1950's representatives of the Irish government began exploring the option of foreign investment and a more outward looking approach to economic policy.

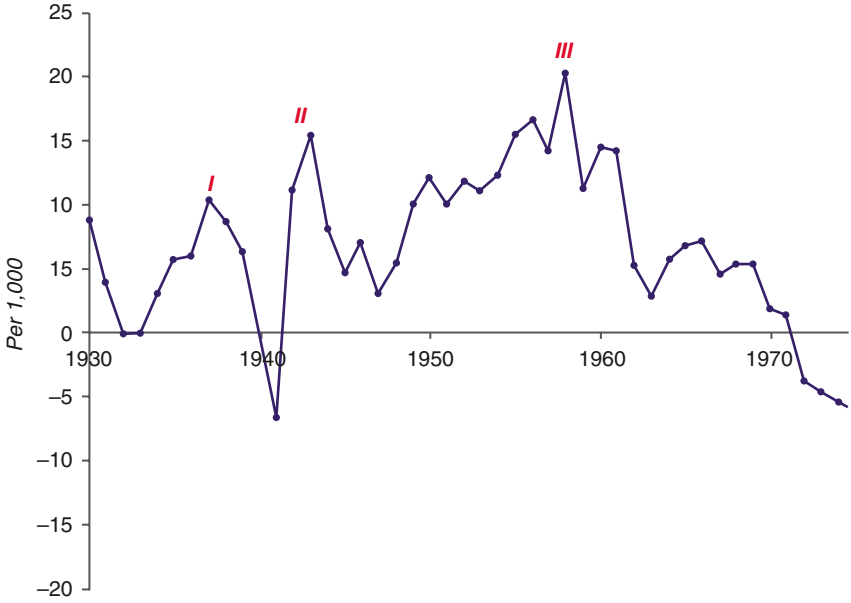

Fig. 9.2 Net emigration rate—1930–1973. (Source: Ó Gráda (2011, p. 5))

Over the fifty-year period after independence, the evolution of skills policy in Ireland can be divided into three periods:

1. 1922–1931—from Convergence to Divergence
2. 1931–1957—Economic Stagnation and Catholic Church Opposition
3. 1957–1973—End of Protectionism and the Beginnings of Convergence

1. 1922–1931—From Convergence to Divergence

In the 1920's all modern industrial countries tended to make the technical school responsible for industrial training (Department of Education, 1927). A significant event that helped progress policy thinking during this period was the building of the Ardnacrusha hydroelectric scheme on the River Shannon. This was seen as an important development in the

direction of industrialisation (Ferriter, 2004). Shortly after the formation of the Irish Free State, in 1924, control of technical education, in addition to primary and secondary education, was brought under the auspices of the Department of Education. The fragmented position prior to independence had been ameliorated.

The Minister for Education at the time argued that the anticipated industrial development from this project would only succeed "if a national scheme of technical training was in place" (Logan, 2000, p. 239). Consequently, the government was of the view that there was a need to overhaul technical and industrial training. The Report of the Commission on Technical Education (Department of Education, 1927), established to review the requirements of industry, recommended the development of a new system which would target three categories of provision—continuation education, technical education and higher technical education (Clarke, 2016). The report resulted in two pieces of legislation, the Vocational Education Act of 1930, and the Apprenticeship Act of 1931.

The 1930 Act established the system of Vocational Education Committees (VEC) in each of the local authority areas in the country. This new system was based on the existing system established under the 1899 Act. Byrne (1999, p. 34) describes the 1930 Act as creating "an institutional framework that facilitated the comprehensive development of vocational and technical education at both second and third level over the half-century that followed". O'Reilly (1989, p. 153) says that "vocational education can be seen as the main element of the manpower policy of the new state". Indeed, O'Reilly (1998, p. 186) argues that the VEC system was established as "a major human resource development agency of the state". He further argues that "the VECs were the exclusive locus of explicit educational initiatives by the Irish state in respect of economic development until the 1960s" (Ibid, p. 108). However, as Clarke (2016, p. 297) observes, "vocational and technical education was undervalued both in terms of its contribution to education and to the economy".

The second piece of legislation resulting from the 1927 Report was the 1931 Apprenticeship Act. This Act assigned policy responsibility for apprenticeships to the Department of Industry and Commerce. In the area of apprentice education Part VI of the 1930 Act provided for cooperation between the Vocational Education Committees (VEC) and

Apprenticeship Committees, and gave the VECs the authority to provide courses for apprenticeships. The convergence of policy responsibility for technical education achieved in 1924 with the establishment of the Department of Education ended with the passing of the 1931 Act. The two pieces of legislation (the 1930 Vocational Education Act and the 1931 Apprenticeship Act) also resulted in the further segmenting of different aspects of technical education. Responsibility for agricultural education remained with the Department of Agriculture. This proved to be the beginning of the development of sectoral training, to be later joined by similar initiatives in tourism, fisheries and forestry. Technical education, as envisaged prior to 1922, was now the responsibility of three government Departments. With the 1930 and 1931 Acts, responsibility for vocational/technical education was formerly separated from vocational/technical training and assigned to two different government departments. These two separate strands of development continued in parallel under two separate government departments—the Department of Education, and the Department of Industry and Commerce—until the government decision in 2010 to bring both areas under a renamed Department of Education and Skills.

2. 1931–1957—Economic Stagnation and Catholic Church Opposition

In 1930, the new VEC system inherited 77 technical schools from its predecessor and began the process of increasing this number. By the end of the 1930s, this number had reached 200 (Logan, 1999). With the significant decline in agriculture, the number of jobs available to family members on the family farm similarly declined (Ibid). This led to a corresponding increase in enrolments on continuation courses in vocational schools. "Families who once believed that their children's future was on the land now sought opportunities for them in occupations that would require higher levels of education" (Ibid, p. 286). Indeed, as Logan (1999, p. 281) observes:

> …the relatively low demand for advanced technical education, at a time when there was a growing demand for second-level schooling, ensured that between 1930 and 1965 the continuation of second-level education of adolescents became the principal activity of most vocational schools.

For the newly established VEC system, as well as the new apprenticeship system, circumstances would prove difficult. However, it was the opposition of the Catholic Church to the vocational education system, and the state's complicity, that would be a defining feature of this period. While the purpose of the VEC system as outlined in the 1927 report was in response to the anticipated skills needs in the economy, the Catholic Church viewed this as state intervention in education that had been, in effect, delegated to the Church by the state. Their lack of control of this sector of the education system was a significant issue for the Church. Clarke (2012, p. 483) states that in Ireland "denominational control of vocational education became a priority for the Roman Catholic Church". Clarke (2012, p. 485) goes on to point out that, in addition to influencing the Department of Education, the Catholic Church set about spreading its influence at VEC level.

> Membership of the local VECs was secured for the Catholic clergy by the early 1940s. By this time the Roman Catholic Church had achieved much success in representational terms with clergy holding positions on every VEC committee in the country with the exception of Dublin.

Logan (2000, p. 241) concurs with Clarke and observes:

> From 1930 to the mid-1960s, the majority of non-councillor [VEC] committee places were allocated to clergymen, and three out of every four committees formed would elect a priest as its chair.

Certification and qualifications for vocational and technical education, and in particular, their absence was a recurring theme during this period. Following the establishment of the VEC system in 1930, the first state examinations in technical education provided by the Department of Education were held in 1936. These Trade Examinations were taken at

Junior and Senior levels, while the Technological Examinations were held at Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced levels. Students in vocational schools were prevented from sitting the state exams, the Intermediate and Leaving Certificates. In effect, the state colluded with a private institution to prevent students in the public system from gaining access to state certification. Logan (2000) identifies criticism of the absence of certification of continuation education programmes, particularly in relation to there being no mechanism to reassure employers and parents of a national uniformity of standards. This criticism viewed the vocational school as "localist, prone to idiosyncratic variation and unsystematic in contrast to the secondary school" (Ibid, p. 243). National certification for continuation education was not available until after the Second World War in 1947 when the Day Vocational Certificate, more commonly known as the Group Certificate, was established. Significantly, the Group Certificate was not accepted for entry into university. Consequently, the continuation education programme was an educational *cul-de-sac* as it had little or no transfer value to further education or training. In effect, the State and the Catholic Church colluded to prevent students attending vocational schools from sitting the examinations which gave access to university. From a social mobility perspective, this resulted in vocational education being regarded as second rate.

However, despite the opposition of the Catholic Church, the VEC system was successful over this period. By 1957, there were 260 vocational schools providing full-time continuation education programmes to more than 22,000 students (O'Connor, 1986). However, as Girvin (2002, p. 69) observes, the opposition of the Catholic Church prevented the vocational education system from "achieving its full potential". Barry (2007, p. 1) adds that, "by the end of the 1950s it was clear that economic policy needed to be completely overhauled. The First Programme for Economic Expansion, introduced in 1958, heralded the demise of protectionism".

By contrast to vocational education, the Catholic Church took practically no interest in developments pertaining to apprenticeships although the education dimension of apprenticeships, which was delivered by the VECs, was inevitably impacted upon to some degree by the developments described above. While the 1931 Act established a

regulated apprenticeship system in Ireland, it turned out to be largely ineffective (Garavan et al., 1995). The education element of apprenticeships was a relatively small element (6%) of technical education by the end of this period, a small increase of just 5% on mid-1930s levels (J.G. Ryan, 2000a). This was particularly due to the fact that the apprenticeship committees were enabled but not obliged to make rules requiring employers to train apprentice employees in a specific manner (Coolahan, 1981). The VECs, which under the 1930 Act had a responsibility to provide the education dimension of apprenticeships, experienced great difficulties in planning for this provision. As J.G. Ryan (2000a) put it:

> …in relation to the overall demands of the apprenticeship system, the educational sector was, to a large extent, working in the dark. It was not in a position to organise apprenticeships in the workplace, it did not know the numbers of apprentices to be provided for the particular trades, their location, nor their specific requirements as regards education and training. (p. 289)

The ineffectiveness of the 1931 Apprenticeship Act was the target of criticism in the Report of the Commission on Youth Unemployment (Department of Industry and Commerce, 1951, p. 21). This report called for the establishment of a National Apprenticeship Committee which would co-ordinate the different apprenticeship committees. The absence of certification was also noted when the report drew attention to the omission of any provision in the 1931 Act for a "test of competency on the completion of apprenticeship". The standards-based approach to apprenticeship would not be implemented until some forty years later in the 1990s. Work began on new apprenticeship legislation by the Department but it did not become law until 1959.

3. 1957–1973—End of Protectionism and the Beginnings of Convergence

The period between the 1950s and Ireland's joining the EEC in 1973 has been described as the birth of modern Ireland (Girvin, 2002). It also

signalled a change in the political guard with the baton of Taoiseach [Prime Minister] being passed from Eamonn de Valera, who was seen as representing the inward looking, traditionalist view, to his successor, Sean Lemass, representing the outward looking, progressive view of the country's future. The significance of the period is also characterised by the appointment of a number of younger, ambitious politicians to key government ministries such as Jack Lynch to Industry and Commerce, and Patrick Hillery to Education. Their ambition, policy entrepreneurship, and political skills combined to set the country on a new and ultimately prosperous path. Some initial work was done during the 1950s by government officials in terms of seeking overseas investment. The Industrial Development Authority had been established in 1949, which O'Reilly (1998) suggests was the starting point of this transition from protectionism to free-trade.

Furthermore, there was also significant attitudinal change in Ireland in the late 1950s and 1960s which was influenced by Ireland's increasing involvement with international organisations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the OECD (Coolahan, 1981). It should also be noted that, while Ó Gráda (2011) refers to the recession of the 1950s in Ireland as the 'lost decade', this decade was "commonly referred to as the 'golden age' of European economic growth" (Bielenberg & Ryan, 2013, p. 185). In the context of international developments, including the increasing international popularity of human capital theory, economists began to emphasise education as an economic investment (Ibid). Logan (1999, p. 290) argues that availability of the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate exams in vocational schools "paved the way for a high degree of convergence in the second-level curriculum". While the rationale for this policy is clear from an equality perspective, the failure to develop the technical senior cycle within the existing vocational schools signalled the beginning of the end of vocational education in post-primary schools. The introduction of vocational subjects to the Leaving Certificate curriculum was in keeping with the Minister's policy of a comprehensive curriculum. However, "the consequence of this policy was the effective curricular colonisation of the second-level curriculum by the academic intermediate and leaving certificate syllabus, as vocational

subjects were displaced overtime by the stronger academic disciplines" (O'Sullivan, 2018, p. 116).

The most significant development, in terms of educational policy, in Ireland was the publication of the report of the OECD funded survey of Irish education *Investment in Education* (OECD, 1966). This report, described by Coolahan (1981, p. 165) as one of the "foundation documents of modern Irish education", was the first time that the link between education and economic development was officially acknowledged in Irish government policy. O'Connor (2014, p. 199) states that the "very conceptualisation of expenditure on education as an investment was revolutionary in the 1960s". T.K. Whitaker, architect of the First Programme for Economic Expansion (1958), said *Investment in Education* did for education what *Economic Development* did for the economy (Chambers, 2014).

Although it was not a specific recommendation of the *Investment in Education* report, the establishment of free post-primary education in 1967 was a turning point in Irish society. Post-primary enrolment expanded rapidly in subsequent years, with the Church-run secondary schools getting the lion's share of the increase. The social mobility opportunities, and the careerist interpretation of general education (O'Sullivan, 2005), provided by the Church-run schools were seen as a far more powerful motivator than the supposedly rational human capital theory view being proposed by government.

While human capital theory was gaining increasing acceptance within the education policy arena internationally, the emergence of active manpower policies was also a feature of this period. A number of reports within government departments in the early 1960s, as well as recommendations from the OECD (OECD, 1964), and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (ILO, 1964), combined with a visit to the British Ministry of Labour to study the implementation of their Industrial Training Act of 1964, contributed to the country's first White Paper on Manpower Policy (Department of Industry and Commerce, 1965). In line with international developments, the White Paper embraced an active approach to manpower (Weishaupt, 2011) with the main elements of the policy consisting of:

- Manpower forecasting;
- Training for workers as well as the retraining of those who lost their jobs or who are in need of upskilling;
- A redundancy payments scheme;
- An unemployment financial assistance scheme;
- Development of the Employment Service (Department of Industry and Commerce, 1965, p. 4).

Overall responsibility for manpower policy was assigned to the Minister for Labour, a cabinet position established in 1966.

This period also saw a new Apprenticeship Act in 1959. This Act established a National Apprenticeship Board, An Chéard Chomhairle (Council of Trades). This body had the authority to set minimum age and educational entry levels for apprentices. It also had the authority to require employers to send their apprentices on training courses. Unlike the 1931 Act, which was seen as an imposition by employers and trade unions, this new legislation was the result of the recommendations of a joint committee of employers and trade unions, and was thus strongly supported by both groups. In 1961, the Board set new entry requirements for apprentices resulting in both the Day Vocational (Group) Certificate and the Intermediate Certificate being acceptable. This initiative was regarded as ground breaking (Walsh, 2009). For vocational school students, the *cul de sac* nature of the Group Cert had been removed with the establishment of this progression pathway. However, despite these reforms the apprenticeships continued to be time-served with no evaluation of competency upon completion (McCarthy, 1977).

In addition to the establishment of the Department of Labour, the White Paper on Manpower Policy also led to the Industrial Training Act of 1967 and the establishment of a new Industrial Training Agency, An Chomhairle Oiliúna (AnCO). This new agency assumed responsibility for all industrial training including apprenticeships. It also witnessed the transfer of the manpower function of the VECs to the new agency and from the Department of Education to the Department of Labour. In keeping with the government's increasing interventionist approach in education policy, the 1967 Act signalled a similar change in the area of industrial training.

This period also saw developments in the sectoral training arena with the establishment of the Farm Apprenticeship Board under the Department of Agriculture in 1963 to operate the farm apprenticeship scheme. In addition, a training and development agency for the tourism sector, the Council for Education, Recruitment and Training (CERT), was developed under the Department of Industry and Commerce in 1963.

In a decade of significant developments, the 1960s also saw developments in higher technical education. The OECD review of technicians training in Ireland (OECD, 1964) highlighted the deficiencies in the current provision. In 1963, the Minister for Education, Patrick Hillery announced the establishment of Regional Technical Colleges (RTC) to provide advanced technical education. O'Connor (1986, p. 200) described this initiative as "one of the outstanding successes of the period". A Steering Committee was established to make recommendations relating to the proposed RTCs (Steering Committee for Technical Education, 1969). One of its recommendations related to the establishment of the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) similar to the British Council for National Academic Awards. It was subsequently established in 1972.

The skill formation policy of the nascent Irish state in its first fifty years after independence faced numerous challenges. In some ways, the period since independence could be characterised as the struggle between those wishing to preserve the past and those seeking to prepare for the future. While external forces, such as the economic relationship with the United Kingdom, and the three economic recessions until the late 1950s, would suggest a more progressive policy response, the internal forces, particularly the Catholic Churches opposition to the vocational school system and the state's complicity, resulted in a skill formation system that was significantly under-resourced and under-developed when it came to responding to the challenges of the new outward looking approach and dynamism of the 1960s and increased inward investment. Ireland's increasing involvement in the international community, through such bodies as the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in particular, provided increasing influence in various national policy arenas in Ireland. As the birth of

modern Ireland (Girvin, 2002) emerged in the 1960s, the membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 was to have a significant impact on Ireland, both economically and socially. The next section will discuss the developments from 1973 until 2020.

1973 to 2014—The Emergence of the Modern FET Sector

The Economic and Social Context

Since the end of the Second World War, Ireland has not only changed from an agrarian to industrial economy, but also from a predominantly rural country to become more urbanised (Punch & Finneran, 2000). The shift from protectionism to free trade, which commenced in the late 1950s, began a process of economic development which led to membership of the EEC in 1973. Ireland joined the European Economic Community (EEC) along with Britain and Denmark to bring the number of EEC Member States to nine. Bielenberg and Ryan (2013, p. 26) describe Ireland's entry into the EEC as "one of the most decisive breaks in Irish economic history". O'Hagan et al. (2000, p. 85) describe Ireland's membership of the EEC as the "single most dominant influence" on the economic development of the country since the end of the Second World War.

In 1973, Ireland's economy was still below European norms, with a GDP per capita 58% of the European average. However, EEC membership, married with the government's outward-looking approach to economic development, led to a significant increase in foreign direct investment (FDI). FDI contributed significantly to changes in the profile of economic activity and the labour market. Barry (2007, p. 262) describes Ireland as the "most FDI-intensive economy in Europe" and identifies four phases of FDI in Ireland. The first phase was from the late 1950s to Ireland's membership of the EEC in 1973 discussed above. The second phase began in 1973 and featured a "shift into higher-technology sectors" (Ibid, p. 263). This phase continued until the late 1980s with the

pending Single European Market in 1992. The third phase is that of the 1990s and the "global high-tech boom" (Ibid, p. 264). The fourth phase, beginning in the 2000s, he identifies as being "characterised by the substantial offshoring of R&D [Research and Development] functions by multinational corporations" (Ibid, p. 264). These last two phases can be seen as coinciding with the emergence of the knowledge economy. Barry observes that, over this period, the post-secondary education and training system has been "driven by the country's FDI focussed strategy" (Ibid, p. 283).

Figure 9.3 illustrates the continuing change in the labour market over this period. Employment in agriculture fell from 26% in 1971 to less than 6% in 2014. The percentage employed in industry fell from 31% in 1971 to 18% in 2014. Conversely, employment in the services sector rose from 43% to 76% over the same period.

This period also coincided with the removal of the marriage ban from women in the public service and participation by women in the labour force increased (Treacy & O'Connell, 2000). Women represented 26% of those employment in 1971 and 47% by 2011.

EEC membership coincided with the "oil crises" in 1973 and 1979 and the resultant economic recessions. This period witnessed significant industrial unrest, high unemployment and high inflation in Ireland. The persistent levels of unemployment during this period were regarded by

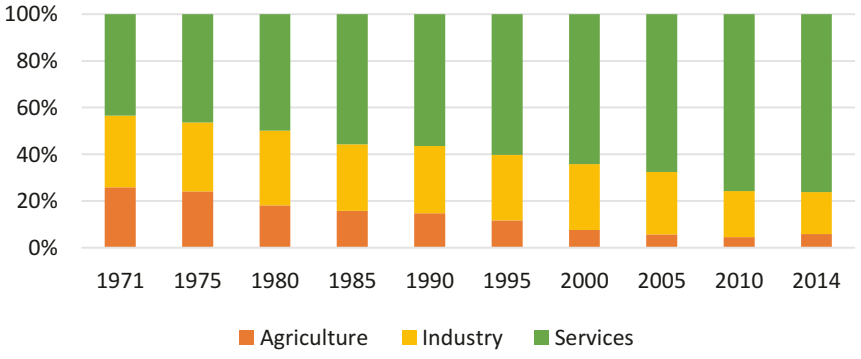

Fig. 9.3 Percentage employment by broad industry sector 1971–2014. (Source: O'Sullivan (2018, p. 157))

the Irish government as the "most urgent Irish economic problem" (Government of Ireland, 1976, p. 8), with the unemployment level reaching 17.1% by 1986, its highest level in since independence (Ó Gráda, 2011). The government approach to dealing with unemployment during this period was to aim for full employment. It also maintained a reliance on public sector employment to address persistent unemployment (Government of Ireland, 1976). The traditional Irish 'safety valve' for high unemployment, namely emigration, increased significantly (see Fig. 9.4).

The predominantly Keynesian approach to the state finances in Ireland was replaced during the mid-1980s when neo-liberalism, in the form of a monetarism approach to economic policy associated with the Thatcher government in the UK, begins to emerge. Added to the economic difficulties, and in keeping with the Keynesian approach, the deficit spending approach of the six successive governments during this period resulted in an enormous national debt by the 1980s. The fiscal crisis of the mid-1980s created the context for discussions between the government, the trade unions and the employers which led to the first social partnership agreement (Government of Ireland, 1987), based on the European approach.

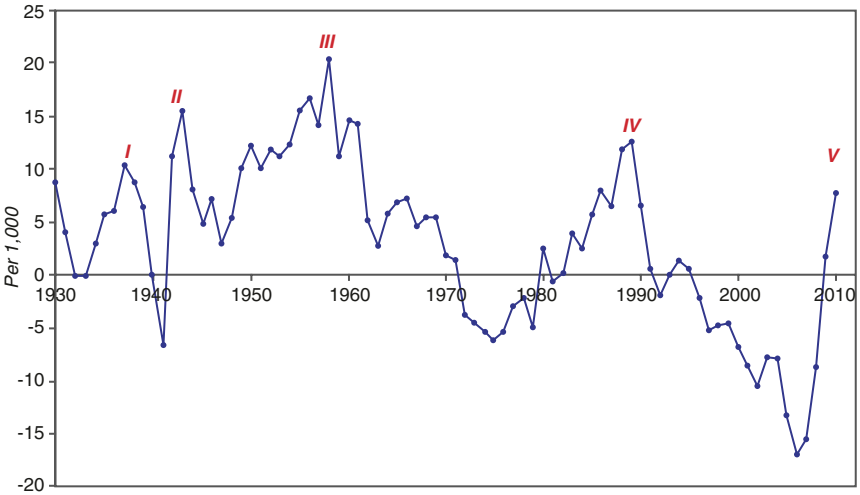

Fig. 9.4 Net emigration rate—1930–2010. (Source: Ó Gráda (2011, p. 5))

The experience for the trade unions in Ireland, in particular, in the 1980s has to be placed within the context of the experience of the trade union movement in the near neighbour, Britain, which conditioned their thinking at the time (Hardiman, 2002, p. 35).

> The trade unions … were also acutely aware of their own vulnerability at this time, given the battering which the unions in Britain had been taking since the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979.

The timing of the first social partnership agreement *Programme for National Recovery* (Government of Ireland, 1987) proved fortunate as the international economy began to experience an upturn and inflation began to fall. The social partnership process was extended over time into an increasing number of public policy areas.

The government strategy of aiming for full employment, which characterised the 1970s and 1980s, begins to change during the social partnership period to one of employability. In other words, responsibility for employment shifts from the government to the individual. Unemployment began to fall, and Ireland's economy began to move in the direction of innovative industries of the knowledge economy, the so-called Celtic Tiger of the mid-1990s and early 2000s.

Having experienced the boom of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland felt the impact of the global financial crisis that resulted in what commentators have called the 'Great Recession' (Barrett & McGuinness, 2012). As a result, in late 2010, the Irish government had to seek financial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission, and the European Central Bank (ECB)—a triumvirate of organisations that became known as 'The Troika'. The outcome was a three-year financial support programme lasting from 2011 until 2013—the 'Troika Years'. While these years witnessed many difficulties across many areas of the Irish economy and society, these three years also saw a significant increase in the pace and volume of change within the public service, and within further education and training in particular. Three developments were of particular significance. In 2012, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established following the amalgamation of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher

Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). In 2013, the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETB) were established, following the amalgamation of the VECs and the training establishments of the former National Training Authority, FÁS. By October 2013, the final months of the Troika Years, the first ever national further education and training authority in Ireland, SOLAS, was established. Thus, the Irish FET Institutional Triangle was established—SOLAS, as the policy coordinator and funder, the ETBs as the providers, and QQI as the quality standards and certification body. This was followed in May 2014 with the launch of the first ever national strategy for further education and training (SOLAS, 2014). These developments are discussed in more detail below.

European Influence in Skills Formation Policy in Ireland

The evolution of skill formation policy and the associated development of education and training in Ireland since joining the EEC can be mapped to significant events at a European level. So as to place the developments in Ireland in the proper context, this section will give an overview the key European developments. The involvement of the EU in education and training can be seen as consisting of three main phases separated by the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties (Ertl, 2006; Pépin, 2007; Walkenhorst, 2008): 1957–1992: Pre-Maastricht, 1992–2000: From Maastricht to Lisbon and 2000—present: Lisbon Strategy.

The 1957 Treaty of Rome, establishing the EEC, gave the EEC competence in vocational training but not education. Before the 1970s, a great deal of the proposals put forward under Article 128, including the adoption of general principles for the implementation of a common vocational training policy (European Council, 1963), were contested by Member States "as a reaction against the attempts to harmonise the area" (Cort, 2009, p. 92). The emerging relationship between education and training at the European level found its first expression in the Janne

Report of 1973 (European Commission, 1973) which highlighted the traditional separation of general and vocational education as a barrier to progress. The issue of unemployment, and in particular youth unemployment, was a catalyst for an increase in the profile of education and training on the European Agenda (European Council, 1976a, 1976b, 1983; European Commission, 1977, 1980). The focus was on the vocational preparation of young people transitioning from education to working life (Ertl, 2003). Cort (2009) argues that, while education was not included in the competences of the EU until the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, it was the fact that Article 128 of the Treaty of Rome gave the EEC competence in vocational training that acted as a "lever for the gradual expansion of the policy field of both general and higher education and the establishment of the European discourse on Lifelong Learning" (Ibid, p. 87).

The second phase of the development of EU involvement in education and training began with the Maastricht Treaty by the then 12 Member States in 1992, and the establishment of the Single Market. For the first time the EU was formally given competence in education and training in Article 126 referring to education and Article 127 referring to training thus addressing any ambiguities of the competence of the EU in this regard. Pépin (2007, p. 125) describes the Maastricht Treaty as a "major turning point for education cooperation at Community level". Cort (2009) observes that the discourse in European policy documents shifted towards European competitiveness on a global stage. Education and training were no longer viewed as being part of just the school-to-work transition but also the increasing need to maintain and update skills in response to changing economic needs. Both initial and continuing education and training were required. Education and training were increasingly seen as an integrated single entity under the banner of lifelong learning which served the overall objective of economic competitiveness. The emphasis was placed on the recognition and accreditation of competences acquired outside formal education systems. Notably, the focus had shifted from input or process, as in formal education, to learning outcomes. The catalyst for the EU, and its Member States, regarding lifelong learning as a common policy area, was the 1993 White Paper *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment* (European Commission, 1993). The EU White Paper on Education and Training (European Commission,

1995a) saw the re-emergence of the concepts of informal and non-formal learning, recognition of which would manifest itself in the validation of the knowledge, skills and competences through the assessment of the learning outcomes demonstrated within the national certification system.

Jones (2005) argues that this 1993 White Paper sowed the seeds of reform that are still evident in the Lisbon strategy. The Luxembourg Summit in 1997 (European Council, 1997) was the next important step in the reform process which launched the so-called 'Luxembourg process'. This was established to coordinate the development of an employment strategy for the EU (Jones, 2005). The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 formally linked employment strategy with skill formation for the first time. In the second half of the 1990s the impact of globalisation and European competitiveness were increasingly to the forefront of policy discussion. The use of the terms 'knowledge society' and 'knowledge economy' begins to increase. Lifelong learning is identified as a key element of the European Employment Strategy (European Council, 1997).

The 1990s also saw, as a part of the influence of global competitive pressures, an increase in the internationalisation of higher education provision (Pépin, 2007). The OECD (2005) commented that such pressures have resulted in increasing attention being paid at national levels to issues of quality assurance and system monitoring. The absence of quality assurance standards was seen to reduce confidence, both nationally and internationally, in the higher education system within a particular country. Within the EU the response to such concerns (Pépin, 2007) found expression in the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999—a joint declaration by the Education Ministers of 31 European countries to establish the European higher education area (www.eur-lex.europa.eu). While further discussion of the Bologna process is outside the scope of this chapter it does constitute an important element of skill formation in the EU. The Copenhagen process in VET, which emerged from the Lisbon Strategy, was based on the underpinning concept of the Bologna process.

In 2000 the European Council of the 15 Member States adopted what is known as the Lisbon Strategy (European Council, 2000)—a 10-year strategy aimed at strengthening the EU in terms of employment, economic competitiveness and social cohesion. From an education and training policy perspective, some commentators have described the Lisbon Strategy as a 'turning point' (Ertl, 2006; Pépin, 2011) by placing education and training at the centre of the new strategy. However, Walkenhorst (2008, p. 567) observes that the "there is a paradigmatic shift in policy aims, away from pro-integrationist towards pro-market orientation" Powell et al. (2012) argue that the focus of EU policy in skill formation has shifted from the citizen to the worker of the future. Education and training have been commodified as a mechanism to improve the economic competition of the EU. Nevertheless, the Lisbon strategy gave education and training a place on the agenda for the first time in the history of the EU.

In their November 2002 meeting, the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training and the European Commission adopted a resolution, known as the Copenhagen Declaration, on enhanced cooperation in vocational education and training (European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, 2002). The Declaration identified four priority areas: the European dimension of VET; transparency, information and guidance; recognition of qualifications and competences; and quality assurance. The Copenhagen process had significantly raised the profile of VET at both a European and national level (European Commission, 2011). By 2010, the following had been achieved:

- the Europass single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences was adopted (European Parliament and Council, 2004)
- Work had progressed on the European credit transfer system for VET (ECVET) as well as on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF)
- the EQF had been established and a recommendation had been adopted (European Parliament and Council, 2008: para 2) that Member States "relate their national qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework by 2010".

This outline of the key European developments in the skill formation arena will provide a backdrop to the discussion in the next section on the key developments in the skills formation arena in Ireland since 1973.

Skill Formation Policy in Ireland since 1973

1970s–1980s

Within the context of education and training in Ireland, the early 1970s brought about significant structural change. Following the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967, enrolments increased markedly. This had a consequential demand for post-secondary education and training. The increase in the number of post-primary schools was accompanied by an increase in the network of RTCs around the country. In the area of skill formation, it was EEC membership that made a significant contribution. In particular, EEC membership permitted access to funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) which assists Member States with responses to unemployment including vocational training.

The high levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, was an increasing issue among EEC Member States. In 1978 a new programme, funded through the European Social Fund (ESF), known as the Pre-Employment Course (PEC) was introduced in vocational and Community and Comprehensive schools only. These courses were primarily aimed at young people who were at risk of leaving school after the junior cycle with little or no qualifications, and low educational attainment. In echoes of the absence of certification for vocational school students in the 1930s and 1940s, the VPT courses were introduced without any national certification. Certification was sought primarily from the UK. AnCo, and later FÁS, also used UK based certification for their programmes. It was not until 1993, when the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA), established in 1991 on an ad hoc basis, began offering national certification, some 13 years after the introduction of the PEC courses. As O'Sullivan (2005, p. 227) observes:

> It was lower-stream pupils, typically outside of the secondary school sector, who were first perceived to be in need of intervention in their transition from school to working life. Substantially, they appear to have been the 1970s manifestation of the 1960s' primary school terminal leavers, repositioned within the educational system by policy changes….

Crucially, O'Sullivan goes on to observe:

> It was around these 'distant others' that employability was initially constructed as a paradigm. The problematising of these newly-identified 'distant others' in terms of their integration into the non-school world of labour market and adult relationships, as distinct from their potential for class and school disruptiveness, was a significant step in the construction of the employability paradigm. (277)

He identifies the discourse relating to the European Social Fund, which provided significant funding for these curriculum development experiments, as being influential in the identification of specific groups of school leavers as being vulnerable. He observes:

> The European Community involvement was never that of a neutral provider of financial support. It was rather a dynamic force in the shaping of Irish understandings of the link between young people, schooling and the world of work. (278)

The PEC had proven popular with the vocational and C&C schools with over 45% of eligible schools offering such programmes. Given this level of support for PECs, as well as the "relative haste with which the new programme was drawn up" (McNamara, 1991, p. 349), the PEC evolved into the Vocational Preparation and Training (VPT) programme in 1984, with little modification (Department of Education, 1984) and was extended to secondary schools. Funding for a second year became available in 1985. The first year was referred to as VPT1 and the second as VPT2. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, in combination with the continuing increase in students remaining in school to complete the Leaving Certificate, VPT courses were no longer only post-junior cycle, but also post-senior cycle, and have been popularly known ever since as

the Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. In 1991, the OECD identified the PLC course as the principal transition course in Irish education (OECD, 1991). The White Paper on Education (Department of Education, 1995, p. 73) describes the PLC courses as the "principal" VET courses in the education sector. On the training side of FET provided by FÁS, data in annual reports showed corresponding increases in the provision of training programmes. However, due to different approaches to data collection between the DES, AnCo and FÁS no direct comparisons are possible. For a more in depth discussion, see O'Sullivan (2018).

In the area of apprenticeships the 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the emergence of an increasingly negative public perception. Despite the introduction of off-the-job training for the first year of the apprenticeship in 1975 (AnCO, 1975), it was seen as out of date and inflexible (Field & Ó Dubhchair, 2001). A report on manpower policy in Ireland (NESC, 1985) questioned whether the apprenticeship system in Ireland had a future. This report also described the responses to labour market difficulties as "tending to be of an *ad hoc* piecemeal nature … [consisting] of individual and largely unrelated programmes grafted onto a system which has not undergone any basic change" (NESC, 1985, p. 35). This report also proposed a rationalisation of all post-compulsory vocational education and training programmes including the first year of apprenticeship.

Developments in the United Kingdom in the mid-1980s saw proposals emerging for a qualifications-based approach to apprenticeship that would be based on competency upon completion rather than on time-served (Field & Ó Dubhchair, 2001). In Ireland, a White Paper on Manpower Policy (Department of Labour, 1986) called for a broader approach to the concept of training (Garavan et al., 1995). It proposed that the three bodies currently operating in the manpower arena—AnCo, the National Manpower Service, the Youth Employment Agency—should be amalgamated into one. The Labour Service Act, 1987 that followed, established an Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) in 1988 from the amalgamation of these three bodies. FÁS initiated a review of the apprenticeship system based on recommendations in the White Paper and published a discussion paper (FÁS, 1989). While the proposal to move

towards a standard-based system of apprenticeship was on the agenda, it was unclear as to how this could be achieved given the position taken by the key interest groups, namely, the employers and the trade unions. As Vossiek (2015, p. 120) observes:

> … this entailed the question of how to break the traditional impasses between craft unions and employers reluctant to release their apprentices under the old system.

Boyle (2005) highlights difficulties in relation to the implementation of the new standards-based apprenticeship. He identifies two crucial actors, namely the employers and the Department of Education, as the sources of the main difficulties. His criticism of employers is based on employers' track record of underinvestment in training and a preference for poaching skilled workers. The second target of his criticism is the RTCs led by the Department of Education. He describes the system as being "perceived as inert and unresponsive to the changing needs of both employers and apprentices" (2005, p. 47). However, these two actors were crucial for the implementation of the new apprenticeship model and had an effective veto over developments. Ultimately, as Boyle states, "social partnership provided the answer" (Ibid, p. 50). Vossiek (2015) and Ryan (2000b) concur with this view and see the inclusion of the reform of the apprenticeship system within the social partnership framework as crucial to the new system being introduced in 1993/1994. A broad outline for the new standards-based system was agreed by the social partners as part of the second social partnership agreement, *Programme for Economic and Social Progress* (Government of Ireland, 1991). This new system was in effect a hybrid of the time-served and standards-based system in that it consisted of seven phases, each with a specific time duration.

In higher education, the story from 1973 to 2020 is one of continuous expansion with third level enrolments increasing considerably. A second interesting feature of higher education has been the growth of the technological sector, namely the RTCs, which would later become the Institutes of Technology. More recently, the Technological University sector has emerged, with the established of Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) in January 2019. TU Dublin resulted from the

amalgamation of the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Institute of Technology (Blanchardstown), and the Institute of Technology (Tallaght). As the focus of this study is primarily on further education and training and intermediate skill formation, an in-depth discussion of higher education policy in Ireland is outside the parameters of this chapter. For a more thorough discussion in this area, see Loxley et al., (2014), Clancy (2015) and Walsh (2018).

The 1990s—Towards a National Qualifications System

By the mid-1980s, the issue of the mutual recognition and comparability of vocational training qualifications between EEC Member States, in order to facilitate the free movement of workers, was gaining prominence (European Council, 1985). This was part of the establishment of the single market in Europe defined as comprising "an area without internal frontiers in which the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital is ensured in accordance with the provisions of this Treaty" (Article 8a of the Single European Act 1987, p. 7). The adoption by the European Council of two separate directives on the mutual recognition of qualifications proved to be one of the catalysts for the developments at a national level in Ireland. While the 1970s and 1980s were characterised by an absence of a national qualifications system, the 1990s witnessed increasingly intense discussions on the design of such a system. Criticism of the absence of a national certification system was also coming from employers (Culliton, 1992, p. 54) who stated that "the British approach has not served us well in this area". While referring specifically to the certification of FÁS training programmes predominantly by City and Guilds of London, Roche and Tansey (1992, p.vi) state:

> The use of British certification/qualification standards is inappropriate. These are no longer an index of best European practice. German standards should provide the model against which Irish training is measured.

In the context of the social partnership process, employers, and particularly their representative bodies, became more engaged in the public policy field, especially that which pertained to skill formation. While some consideration had been given to extending the remit of the existing NCEA, it was subsequently decided, given the level of development required, to proceed with a separate body (Trant, 2002). The National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established by the Minister for Education on an *ad hoc* basis in 1991. Shortly after the publication of the Culliton Report, the Department of Education published a Green Paper on Education (Department of Education, 1992). In the certification arena, the Green Paper proposed the establishment of a new national body with responsibility for certification in the vocational and technical education space. The proposed Council for Educational and Vocational Awards (CEVA) would incorporate the two existing bodies, NCEA and NCVA. In many ways, this proposal, while not implemented in this form, has similarities with the state agency now in place in this area, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

While the NCVA set about its work and commenced certifying programmes in 1993, it made initial proposals for a national framework of vocational qualifications (NCVA, 1992). This framework consisted of five levels, the first three of which were to be awarded by the NCVA while the upper two were to be awarded by NCEA. This framework was developed in line with the European Framework proposed by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the practice in other Member States (NCVA, 1992). In 1995, when the White Paper on Education (Department of Education, 1995) was published, the national debate in relation to certification and qualifications had progressed apace. This period also coincided with significant developments in Europe since the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, as discussed above. The White Paper contained a proposal for the establishment of a national certification authority, TEASTAS (certificate). TEASTAS was established on an *ad hoc* basis and operated from 1995 until 1998. It was the first attempt to establish some form of overall coordination for all the certifying bodies. Attempting to coordinate the activities of existing bodies proved very difficult and, indeed, some of the proposals made by TEASTAS were regarded as controversial (Trant, 2002). The level of

opposition from the stakeholder bodies was such that the then Minister for Education, Micheál Martin, suspended TEASTAS' operations and decided to pursue the legislative route (Trant, 2002). The Qualifications Act was passed in 1999 and was a seminal event in Irish education (O'Sullivan, 2018). Mulvey (2019, p. 115) concurs describing the Act as "the most important policy shift and milestone during this phase". For the first time, Ireland had a national qualifications system. Under the Act, the organisational structure mirrored that of TEASTAS, namely, a coordinating body, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), and two certifying bodies, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

The late 1990's, leading into the new millennium, was a very busy period in Ireland in terms of economic change and EU influence in many areas of Irish life and society. There were many State and European influences that triggered this wave of policy development. Through social partnership agreements, moderate, sustainable pay increases were agreed. This move was clearly a signal to potential Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) that Ireland has a stable workforce, and increasing its attractiveness as an FDI proposition. The term 'competitiveness' grew in usage throughout this period. The areas that witnessed the most significant developments were those of employment generation, responses to the problem of social exclusion, agriculture and education. Coupled with the 1996 European Year of Lifelong Learning (which also intersected the development of the 1995 White Paper on Education), this plan increased a focus on policy planning in the work and skills related policy development and economic and education and training interventions. The 1997 White Paper on Human Resource Development (Department of Enterprise and Employment, 1997) coincided with increasing concerns over skill shortages in the hi-tech industries, many being multi-national corporations. In response, the White Paper proposed the establishment of an Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) in 1997. This group began work on bolstering the labour market intelligence of the state. However, as O'Sullivan (2018) observed, had an almost exclusively higher education focus.

During the latter period of the 90's up until 2007 Ireland experienced a significant period of economic growth, often referred to as the *Celtic Tiger*. By 2003, Ireland was at the top of the OECD's list for economic growth, "with GDP growth upwards of 10% in 1999" (Curley, 1999, p. 214). "This is compared with 2.1 percent in the United Kingdom, 3.6 percent in the United States, growth rates around 2 percent in other European countries such as Spain and Germany, and 3 percent for Finland and Spain" (Battel, 2003, p. 94).

2000–2008 The National Qualifications System

On foot of the 1999 Act, activity in the 2000s concerned the implementation of the new national qualifications system. While the NQAI and HETAC, were, in effect, renamed versions of their legacy bodies—TEASTAS and NCEA respectively—FETAC had a mammoth task. It was the first time in the history of the state that a single agency would certify all FET programmes. This proved to be a highly significant convergence event within FET. It brought a new identity to a hitherto fragmented sector. It formalised the certification processes, ultimately amalgamating the legacy processes into a single national process. While the establishment of FETAC provided a horizontal convergence process within FET, it was the launch of the National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) in 2003, which introduced a vertical convergence process between FET and higher education. For the first time, all qualifications, both FET and higher education were presented in the same format, namely, based on learning outcomes. This facilitated new access, transfer and progression opportunities for learners. Since its launch, the NFQ was recognised as, "the most fundamental and central development in education for the FET sector during this era and set in motion a policy trajectory that underpinned all aspects of the FET policy discourse" (Mulvey, 2019, p. 116).

A further significant development at this time was the White Paper on Adult Learning—*Learning for Life* (Department of Education and Science, 2000). The Paper committed the government to a national adult-literacy programme, the Back to Education Initiative, the

expansion of Youthreach, Post-Leaving Certificate Courses and the VTOS, the development of an adult guidance service, the implementation of a National Qualification Framework and the establishment of a National Adult Learning Council and Local Adult Education Boards (Louise Holden—*Irish Times*, 2007). The publication of this White Paper coincided with the participation of the 'Community Pillar' in the social partnership process. This led to an increasing prominence of adult and community education issues in public policy, including skill formation.

In the next section the focus turns to third-level education. This presents an overview of the pattern of increasing participation within the broader context of skill formation.

Following the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education (2000), the Department of Education established a steering group to "…examine and make recommendations as necessary regarding the organisational, support, development, technical and administrative structures required in schools and colleges with large scale PLC provision" (DES 2000 in McGuinness et al., 2014).

Published in 2003 the McIver Report (Department of Education and Science, 2003) proposed a range of recommendations in relation to the FET (PLC) sector. While continuing to operate within a post-primary governance model, the recommendations recognised the distinctiveness of the sector and the need for a new approach to staffing and resourcing. However aspirational it was at the time, O'Sullivan (2018) points out that subsequently the report was not acted upon to any great degree.

2008–2020

The period of prosperity, change and economic 'boom' in Ireland came to a crashing halt in 2008. In 2008, Ireland officially declared that it was in a recession, and facing the worst austerity since the foundation of the state. The "Troika Years" witnessed many difficulties across many areas of the Irish economy and society, these three years also saw a significant increase in both the pace and volume of change within the public service,

and within further education and training in particular. Significant structural changes occurred during this period including the ending of the social partnership process.

In 2010 the national training agency FÁS was disbanded and the Department of Education and Science renamed the Department of Education and Skills (S.I. 184/2010). Responsibility for FÁS training was transferred to Department of Education and Skills (S.I. 187/2010), and responsibility for employment services were transferred to the Department of Social Protection (from which the INTREO service emerged). However, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Innovation retained its responsibility for labour market policy. These moves saw policy responsibility for all levels of education and training move fully to the Department of Education and Skills. This ended the divergence set in motion by the 1931 Apprenticeship Act discussed above.

The Department of Social Protection was given responsibility for unemployment issues and the newly prioritised labour market activation. A review of activation policies in Ireland (Grubb et al., 2009) recommended the introduction of a mutual obligation strategy in which the benefit recipient would be deemed to have an obligation to engage with the activation activities and that penalties could apply in the absence of such engagement. Also referred to as workfare, a policy of the Thatcher government in the UK in the 1980s, had been resisted by the Community Pillar in the social partnership process (Larragy, 2006) and was not implemented at the time. However, following a government decision of 2010 to realign departmental functions, the workfare-type approach was subsequently implemented (Section 7, Social Welfare Act, 2010). Prior to 2010, responsibility for activation measures including training was a matter for the Department of Enterprise and Employment and FÁS, with school-to-work transition being that of the Department of Education of the FE Schools and Colleges, mostly within the VECs. With the

transfer of responsibility for training to the Department of Education and Skills, activation also became an objective of the PLC courses, a role for which they were neither designed nor resourced.

During the period from 2010 to 2014 the priority in terms of balancing training and education was to focus on putting in place a solid foundation for the development of a new sector which would be part of a reimagined Irish education system. Furthermore, "having assumed policy responsibility for training, a single Skills Division was created for the first time in the renamed Department of Education and Skills" (FETCI, 2021, p. 9). The creation of Skills Division in the Department of Education and Skills laid the foundation for rolling out a public policy infrastructure on which the FET institutional triangle of SOLAS, QQI and the ETBs would be based.

While the amalgamation process to create QQI had begun prior to the 2008 'financial crash', it was not completed until 2012. The ETBs and SOLAS were established in 2013. In July of that year the then Minister for Education and Skills (Ruairí Quinn) announced that 16 new Education and Training Boards would be established to replace the 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs). He stated.

> Today marks a new era for education and training in Ireland. The new ETBs will strengthen locally managed education and enhance the scale of local education and training. This represents a major component of the public service transformation agenda. At a time when the need for training and reskilling has never been more important, it is crucial to provide appropriate programmes and courses that offer students and learners the best opportunities to progress. We must do all of this while providing value for money to the taxpayer. (Public Affairs Ireland, 2013)

The establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in 2012 further advanced the convergence process of the certification and qualifications system in Ireland (O'Sullivan, 2018). QQI would act as the single national agency for qualifications and quality assurance.

In 2014, the government published its first ever National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2014) thereby setting the strategic direction and structure for

FET, building on the FET Triangle of SOLAS, QQI and the ETBs. The FET strategy provided five strategic goals for FET:

- Skills for the Economy
- Active Inclusion
- Quality Provision
- Integrated Planning and Funding
- Standing of FET

However, of particular significance to the 'Standing of FET' strategic goal was how the strategy reconnected with the economic imperative in national public policy. In his analysis of the purpose of FET, as stated in government policy documents, O'Sullivan (2018) finds that from the mid-1980s, FET was primarily associated with social inclusion and labour market activation, while the economic imperative became the almost exclusive preserve of higher education. The 2014 FET Strategy recalibrated the economic imperative to include FET.

However, "what matters most to macro policy outcomes is local capacity" (Clarke, 2014, p. 200). Prior to the establishment of SOLAS, QQI and the ETBs, the Minister for Education of the day described the FET sector as having been treated as the "black sheep of the education system" (Quinn, 2012), the "backwater" (Quinn, 2013), and the "Cinderella of the broader education system" (Quinn, 2014). Given the legacy of neglect of the vocational sector in general (Walsh, 2011), and the FET sector in particular, this has resulted in a situation where 'FET in Ireland has suffered from a persistent capacity deficit' (O'Sullivan, 2018, p. 332). Consequently, in order to move from such a level of under resourcing to become a world-class FET system (SOLAS, 2014), the government must commit the necessary investments both financial and structural.

This period also witnessed a major review of apprenticeships in Ireland. In the midst of the Great Recession, the OECD *Review of Vocational Education and Training in Ireland* (Kis, 2010) recommended a further review of the apprenticeship system in Ireland. This was echoed in the Sweeney Report (Sweeney, 2013). In May 2013, the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, announced the review of apprenticeship training in Ireland. The background issues paper (Department of

Education and Skills, 2013a) published with this announcement states that the objective of the review was:

> To determine whether the current model of apprenticeship should be retained, adapted or replaced by an alternative model of vocational education and training for apprentices—taking into account the needs of learners, the needs of employers, the needs of the economy and the need for cost effectiveness into the future. (2013a, p. 7)

The final report of the Review Group was published in December 2013 (Department of Education and Skills, 2013b). Its recommendations included some significant breaks from the existing system. The review proposed the extension of the apprenticeship model into both FET and higher education leading to a qualification "at any level from Level 5 upwards" (Ibid, p. 94). It also recommended that, to be regarded as an apprenticeship, the duration of the programme should be "no less than two years" (Ibid, pp. 94–95). The apprenticeship system would be administered by the new further education and training authority, SOLAS, and a new Apprenticeship Council would be established with a range of functions including advising on "the introduction of apprenticeships in additional occupations" (Ibid, p. 99). In this regard, the Review states that during the consultation process of the review:

> The submissions received referred to the potential for apprenticeships in ICT, retail, hospitality, business administration, medical devices, sports and leisure programmes, childcare and social care, financial services, accounting, hairdressing, and beauty care sectors. (Department of Education and Skills, 2013b, p. 110)

However, the report goes on to highlight the importance of the commitment required from employers:

> Such programmes will not be successful unless there is a strong commitment from employers to identifying occupational needs, recruitment and payment of apprentices, and joint collaboration with education and training providers in programme delivery. (Ibid)

2016 also witnessed the launch of a new national skills strategy (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). A key focus of the strategy is to increase employer involvement in the skills forecasting and development processes. Central to this objective was the proposal to establish a network of nine Regional Skills Fora throughout the country, reporting to the National Skills Council.

> The Regional Skills Fora…provide an ideal forum for forecasts and other datasets to be used to inform discussions between employers and education and training providers on skills needs in each region. Where education and training is the appropriate response, plans can be developed for how best this can be delivered by providers across a region, while also considering the needs of learners and the cost to the State. (Ibid, p. 37)

In keeping with the government's policy of promoting the roll out of more apprenticeships through engagement with employer consortia, the Regional Skills Fora and the National Skills Council infrastructure is a significant initiative. It is also a further step towards achieving the government policy of increasing "… the alignment of higher education and further education and training to achieve a more integrated tertiary education system" (DES, 2018, p. 14).

The mid-point of the 2014 FET strategy saw the introduction of two strategic processes, by SOLAS and QQI, that accelerated the vertical system convergence between FET and higher education. In 2017, SOLAS agreed its Corporate Plan for 2017–2019 with the Department of Education and Skills. This plan specified a number of national targets to be met by the FET sector over the three-year period of the Plan (SOLAS, 2017):

Target 1—Skills for the Economy: 10% more learners securing employment after undertaking a relevant FET course;
Target 2—Progression: 10% more learners progressing to other FET courses or higher education from relevant courses;
Target 3—Transversal Skills: 10% increase in the rate of certification on courses primarily focused on social-mobility skills development that is transversal in nature;

Target 4—Lifelong Learning: 10% increase of adult learners taking part in lifelong learning delivered through FET;
Target 5—Certification and Qualifications: From 2018, for three years, an average of 10,000 more learners each year are to achieve qualifications related to business sectors where employment growth and skills needs have been identified;
Target 6—Apprenticeships and Traineeships: 30,500 new apprentice and trainee registrations from 2017–2019.

Commencing in 2018, SOLAS held a series of strategic engagements with each ETB. Each ETB had to formally agree how the above targets could be addressed within their area. The resultant Strategic Performance Agreement signed between SOLAS and each ETB stipulates the contribution of the ETB to the achievement of the overall national targets by the end of the three-year period.

The relationship between the ETBs and QQI also evolved during the 2015–2016 period. The governance of the Quality Assurance System (QAS) within each ETB underwent a process of migration from the legacy situation under FETAC, which, in many cases, consisted of central QA policies with local procedures in each centre, to a consolidated ETB-wide QAS. The final phase of this initial process began 2017. QQI met with ETBs in a series of Initial Quality Dialogue Meetings (IQDM). These IQDMs were focused on a dialogue regarding the work achieved to date and the plan for improvements. This places a greater emphasis on the corporate responsibility at ETB level for the governance of Quality Assurance.

It is interesting to note that the Strategic Performance Agreement Model implemented by SOLAS was based on a similar strategic agreement model used between the Higher Education Authority and the third-level institutions. Similarly, the Quality Assurance Review Model rolled out by QQI in relation to the ETBs is based on the model used for Institutes of Technology (QQI, 2018). With the creation of a single division in the Department of Education and Skills for Higher and Further Education and Training Policy in 2017, the trajectory of convergence between FET and Higher Education is gathering pace.

The most recent convergence event occurred in the summer of 2020 with the establishment, for the first time, of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and the launch of the second FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020a). While 2010 to 2014 was characterised by developments at the national level, the 2014–2019 period on the regional level, namely ETBs, the second FET strategy was primarily focused on the local with the centrality of the 'FET College of the Future' concept. The strategy focuses on the development of a single unified governance model for all FET provision in all of its diversity by simplifying its structure. The strategy is based on three pillars—skills, pathways and inclusion. It states that key to the success will be the "evolution of FET facilities and provision into a distinct integrated college of FET that can serve as a beacon of community-based learning excellence" (SOLAS, 2020a, p. 38).

Skills Policy in Ireland

As referenced earlier, the post-secondary education and training system in Ireland has been "driven by the country's FDI focussed strategy" (Barry, 2007, p. 283). Indeed, Sweeney (2013, p. 12) describes Ireland as a "third level society". While undoubtedly FDI has been, and continues to be, a vital component of Ireland's economic policy, employment in FDI companies only accounts for roughly 10% of the Irish labour force. Consequently, this raises the question of possible over-influence of FDI on skills policy. The Irish labour market has been monitored and analysed by a number of different agencies in recent years, especially the ESRI, the NESC, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (established in 1997 during the Celtic Tiger following skills shortages in FDI IT Companies), and the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) (formerly in FÁS) in SOLAS. With the establishment of the National Skills Council and the Regional Skills Fora, the labour market intelligence infrastructure of the state has developed considerably in recent years. However, policy responsibility for these agencies is spread across a number of government departments. However, as the various convergence processes

have shown, after many years of policy fragmentation, joined-up thinking in skills policy is becoming apparent.

However, in 2019, the Future Jobs Ireland Strategy emerged from the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation that was heavily biased towards higher education. O'Sullivan (2018) identified a pattern of a higher education bias in the skills policy statements and commentary, particularly from the Department of Enterprise and Employment.

So what of this emphasis on higher education? In the age of evidence-based policy, does the evidence support such an emphasis? Labour markets world-wide are described and categorised using various criteria, such as employed/unemployed, age cohorts, industry sector, and gender. However, when it comes to the skill profile of labour markets, the most commonly used criteria is higher educational attainment, which is taken as a proxy for skill level. So, is this helpful for skills policy? The OECD in its Employment Outlook 2017 examined the change in high, middle and low skills level jobs over a 20-year period from 1995 to 2015. It found that, for Ireland, while the level of low skill jobs remained roughly the same, high skill jobs increased by 15% over this period, and middle skilled jobs decreased by the roughly the same amount. As this is based on "employment rates of people according to their education levels" (www.oecd.org), is this a description of the change in the education profile of the Irish population, rather than an actual change in the skills required if the labour market change was examined by occupational category? Using labour market data from the CSO based on Standard Occupational Classification, the profile of the Irish Labour Market has changed very little from 2007 to 2019. The breakdown is as follows: high skill 28–30%, intermediate skill 59–61%, and low skill 10–12%. How can this be so different? The principle reason is that by using highest educational attainment as a proxy for the skills profile of the labour market, the level of over-education is hidden.

Recent reports from the SLMRU have taken an increasingly sophisticated approach to analysing the skills profile in the Irish labour market, including the interplay between education and occupation (SOLAS, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2021). While these reports have contributed to improving the labour market intelligence available, the level of over-education in the Irish labour market remains one of the highest in Europe.

This issue was also addressed in the national skills strategy (DES, 2016, p. 37) which states that

> forecasting models tend to categorise skills as 'low', 'medium' and 'high'. High skilled jobs are typically thought of as those requiring a third level qualification. However, many vocational skills acquired through Further Education and Training (FET) are also high skilled, e.g. tool making or aircraft mechanics.

It will take time for policy changes to have an impact on the skills profile of the labour market.

Conclusion

This discussion set out to identify the key milestones in the evolution of skills policy in Ireland, with an emphasis on intermediate skills and FET. The developments of the nineteenth century laid the tentative foundations for the modern FET sector, and were built upon in the early years after independence with the establishment of the VEC system. Developments were significantly hampered by the opposition of the Catholic Church, enabled by state collusion. Over the course of the discussion, it is clear that the drivers and facilitators of the developments in the FET sector in Ireland were international. In particular, the European Union and the OECD, as well as the Troika in more recent times. The barriers to development were clearly located within the state. Catholic Church opposition in the early years of the VEC system thwarted its development, and prevented it from "achieving its full potential" (Girvin, 2002, p. 69). The neglect by the Department of Education until recent times was a further barrier and was in many ways a product of the low standing of FET within Irish society. O'Sullivan (2018, p. 308) states that "this legacy of neglect has resulted in a persistent capacity deficit in the FET system in Ireland". Unlike many European countries, for example, and with the exception of the Further Education and Training Research Centre in Dublin City University, there is little evidence of FET research infrastructure within the Irish university system.

The development of the modern FET sector in Ireland commenced in 2010. Its first ten years have seen significant developments. The FET institutional triangle is in place, system convergence has continued apace, and the second FET strategy has set an ambitious target for the sector. However, as mentioned earlier, the success of national policy is significantly dependent on local capacity to implement. The onus is on the government to commit the medium and long-term resources to match this ambition.

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