

The Irish educational system: a note on classification

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This chapter presents background information on all levels of the Irish educational system. It explores the way in which ISCED educational levels can be mapped onto national qualifications and highlights some of the potential difficulties in applying the ISCED framework to the Irish context.

1 Pre-primary and primary education (ISCED 0 and ISCED 1)

1.1 The nature of the system

Little systematic information is available on the participation of children in pre-school education, although the level of child-care and other pre-school provision is deemed to be low in Ireland compared with the rest of Europe. ISCED 0 includes children taking part in Early Start programmes (provided in some primary schools for 3–4 year-olds living in disadvantaged areas) as well as children under six in private primary schools.

School attendance is compulsory from the age of six. In practice, however, many children enter full-time education at the age of four or five; 46% of four-year-olds and almost all five-year-olds are currently enrolled in reception classes within primary schools (Department of Education and Science, 2005). The vast majority of primary schools are run by religious orders and/or diocesan authorities. There has been some increase in recent years in the number of multi-denominational schools and Irish-language schools (*gaelscoileanna*), usually set up at the instigation of (groups of) parents. Primary schools are generally State-aided but a minority (just over 1%) of pupils attend private (fee-paying) primary schools which do not receive State funding. Less than two per cent (1.5%) of children in primary schools attend 'special schools' targeted at those with physical and/or learning disabilities. While the majority of pupils attend co-educational schools, the single-sex sector is relatively large by European standards, with 28% of primary pupils attending single-sex schools. The primary curriculum is formulated at a national level by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Unlike many European countries, there is no system of national testing during, or at the end of, primary schooling. However, standardised testing for particular class groups within primary schools is shortly to be introduced; this testing is intended to monitor student progress but will not form the basis for formal qualifications.

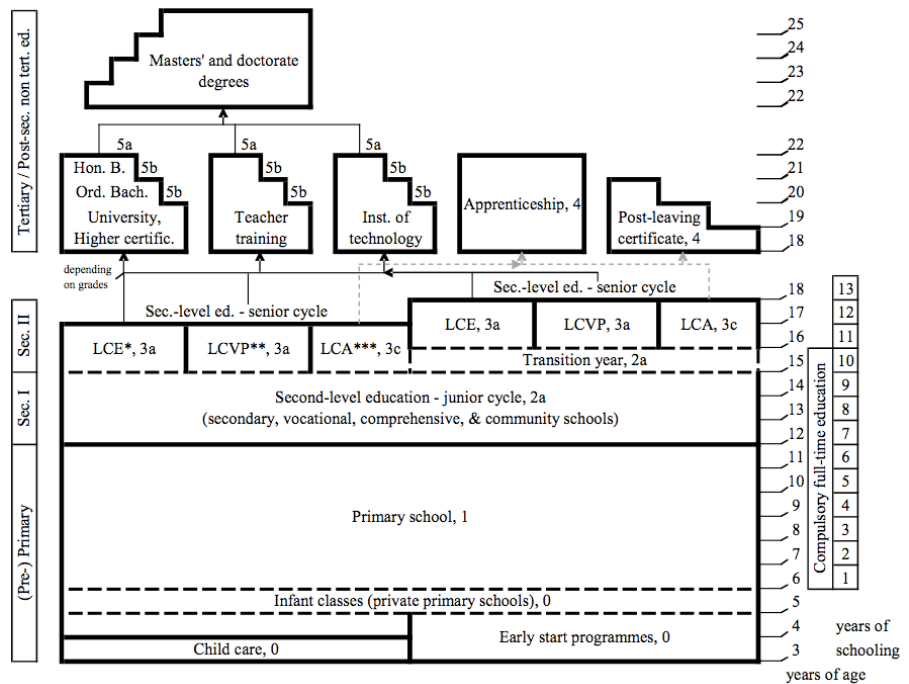
1.2 Issues in relation to ISCED at this level

Measures of participation in ISCED level 0 in Ireland are likely to underestimate the total numbers involved. However, this probably reflects a more general difficulty in separating out 'care' and 'education' functions in early years provision. Furthermore, there is some contradiction in the treatment of 4–5 year-olds; if these children attend private (non-State aided) primary schools, they are classified as ISCED 0 while a similar age-group attending State-aided primary schools are classified as ISCED 1.

Children attending 'special schools' (for those with disabilities) are classified as ISCED 1, even though some of these students may be taking courses which would otherwise be classified as secondary level (either ISCED 2 or 3).

There are no particular difficulties in using the ISCED-97 for measuring educational attainment at this level. However, contrary to the situation in many European countries, the completion of primary school does not involve the receipt of formal qualifications.

Figure 1. The Irish system of education



2 Lower secondary education (ISCED 2)

2.1 The nature of the secondary school system

Young people enter second-level education at 12 or 13 years of age. Participation in full-time education is compulsory until the age of 16, or three years of lower secondary education, whichever is later. Participation in post-compulsory secondary education is high with an estimated 85% of 17-year-olds and 65% of 18-year-olds enrolled in full-time education (Department of Education and Science, 2005).

There are three types of secondary-level institutions: voluntary secondary schools, vocational schools and community/comprehensive schools. Voluntary secondary schools are privately owned and controlled, mainly by religious orders, although they are subject to public regulation and inspection. The vast majority (95 per cent) of voluntary secondary schools are Catholic with a small number of Protestant, Jewish and Quaker schools. Vocational schools are publicly owned and are administered by local education authorities, which are called Vocational Education Committees. Voluntary secondary schools have traditionally been more academic in focus, in contrast to a greater practical and technical orientation in vocational schools. Community and comprehensive schools were established in an attempt to bridge the gap between the secondary and vocational sectors, by providing a broad curriculum catering for pupils of different backgrounds and ability levels. Comprehensive schools are denominational in character with religious orders also represented on the board of management in community schools.

Fifty-six per cent of secondary-level pupils are enrolled in voluntary secondary schools, with 30% in vocational schools and 14% in community/comprehensive schools. Although the main differences between the three types of school relate to funding and management arrangements, the types of school differ in their student composition with a greater concentration of working-class and lower ability students in vocational schools (Hannan et al., 1996). This pattern reflects, at least in part, quite active selection of schools on the part of students and their families; students are not required to attend their local school and almost half do not attend their nearest or most accessible school. In spite of these differences, the Irish system can be regarded as relatively undifferentiated in comparative context; while schools may vary to some extent in the subjects they provide, all school types draw from a national curriculum (Hannan, Raffe and Smyth, 1996).

All secondary schools receive some form of public funding. However, around 8% of schools are private and charge fees to their students. While secondary-level education is (mostly) 'free' at the point of use, there are hidden costs associated with educational participation, including schoolbooks, lunches, school uniforms, extra-curricular activities and transport. In addition, most voluntary secondary schools request a 'voluntary' contribution from parents towards the running costs of the

schools and the majority of students are required to pay fees for participating in public examinations.

Compared to other countries, Ireland has a relatively high proportion of secondary students in single-sex education. In total, 64% of second-level schools are coeducational with 62% of all students attending these schools. Coeducational education has become more prevalent over time, partly as a result of the amalgamation of smaller single-sex schools in rural areas into larger coeducational schools.

2.2 The nature of lower secondary education

Students follow a three year lower secondary programme, leading up to the national *Junior Certificate* examination. The curriculum and examination are nationally standardised (Hannan, Raffe and Smyth, 1996), although schools and students have a degree of choice in the subjects chosen. Pupils typically take ten or eleven subjects for the *Junior Certificate* examination. All students study English and Mathematics while the vast majority study the Irish language (only students who completed their primary education outside Ireland or who are given an exemption because of learning difficulties do not take the subject). Irish, English and Mathematics can be taken at higher, ordinary or foundation levels while other subjects can be taken at higher or ordinary levels. Students are awarded a grade in each subject they take but no particular grade is required for access to upper secondary education. Grades achieved in the *Junior Certificate* examination do, however, influence access to particular subjects and subject levels within upper secondary education. They are also predictive of employment chances among those who enter the labour market directly. Those with a Junior Certificate qualification are allocated to ISCED 2A.

After taking the *Junior Certificate* exam, pupils may participate in a '*Transition Year*' or may proceed directly into a two-year upper secondary (*Leaving Certificate*) programme. The *Transition Year* programme is designed to promote a range of competencies and skills not usually emphasised within traditional academic education, placing an emphasis on developing personal and social skills, self-directed learning and providing young people with experience of adult and working life. Access to the programme varies according to the school attended; not all schools provide the programme, in some schools the entire year cohort participates while in other schools participation is voluntary for the individual student. Over a third of the student cohort takes this programme before proceeding into a *Leaving Certificate* programme. Students who leave after *Transition Year* but before taking the Leaving Certificate are allocated to 2A when measuring educational attainment, while for policy purposes and enrolment statistics the *Transition Year* is considered as part of upper secondary education and thus classified as ISCED 3C by the OECD.

2.3 Issues in relation to ISCED classification at this level

There appear to be no particular difficulties in the implementation of the ISCED 2 category in the Irish context. However, it should be recognised that important distinctions are evident among this group of leavers, depending on the grades received. Those who achieve lower grades are more likely to drop out of school before the completion of upper secondary education, and if they remain in school, they are less likely to be able to access higher level subjects. Distinctions in terms of grades have significant consequences for young people's subsequent pathways but are not captured by the ISCED classification.

3 Upper secondary education (ISCED 3)

Until the 1990s, young people who stayed on to upper secondary education took a single, academically-oriented *Leaving Certificate* programme. There are now three types of *Leaving Certificate* programme: the *Leaving Certificate Applied* (LCA), the *Leaving Certificate Vocational* (LCVP) and the *Leaving Certificate Established* (LCE). These are all two-year programmes.

The LCA programme is intended to cater for less academically-oriented students and those potentially at risk of school drop-out. The curriculum and approach focus on preparing students for the transition from school to adult and working life, using more active and practical teaching and assessment methods. Five per cent of students who complete upper secondary education take this programme. Students who take LCA cannot enter tertiary (ISCED 5) education directly but must first complete a further education (ISCED 4) course. The LCA programme is allocated to ISCED 3C because of the lack of direct access to higher education.

The *Leaving Certificate Vocational* Programme (LCVP) was introduced to foster in students a spirit of enterprise and initiative and to develop their interpersonal, vocational and technological skills. There is a good deal of overlap with the *Leaving Certificate Established* but students take additional subjects centring on enterprise education and preparation for work. However, the programme cannot be regarded as 'vocational' in any real sense of the term. Twenty-three per cent of the student cohort take this programme. Students may access tertiary education after taking LCVP. This programme is thus allocated to 3A.

The majority (72%) of students continue to take the *established Leaving Certificate* (LCE), which is also allocated to ISCED 3A. While schools have some discretion in the subjects they provide, subject syllabi are determined at a national level by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Students typically take seven examination subjects. Irish and Mathematics can be taken at higher, ordinary or foundation levels while other subjects can be taken at higher or ordinary levels. Examinations are nationally standardised in terms of procedures and approach to as-

assessment. While some elements of project work and practical assessment have been introduced in recent years, assessment primarily relates to performance in a written examination. Grades received determine access to higher education and are highly predictive of access to, and quality of, post-school employment. In general, the upper secondary system in Ireland is oriented towards the provision of a general education rather than preparing students for particular occupational niches.

3.1 Issues in relation to ISCED classification at this level

LCVP and LCE leavers are allocated to ISCED 3A, which is in keeping with the fact that these qualifications facilitate access to tertiary education. However, at a practical level, it may be difficult to differentiate between ISCED 3A and 3C, especially where proxy interviews within the household are used. Many respondents are likely to report '*Leaving Certificate*' rather than specify LCA, LCVP or LCE. As with lower secondary education, important distinctions are evident among upper secondary leavers, depending on the grades received; such distinctions are not captured by the ISCED classification.

4 Further education/apprenticeship (ISCED 4)

4.1 The nature of the system

This is a very heterogeneous category, including apprenticeships as well as a range of classroom-based vocational training courses (*Post-Leaving Certificate* (PLC) courses).

The apprenticeship system in Ireland is seen in structural terms as post-school rather than an integral part of the initial educational system. It involves alternating periods of on-the-job experience with off-the-job (classroom-based) learning in twenty-five designated craft fields; although standards-based rather than time-based, apprenticeships generally take four years to complete. *Post-Leaving Certificate* (PLC) courses range from one to three years in duration and are available in a range of subject areas (the most popular being business and healthcare). They are mainly classroom-based but usually incorporate periods of work experience. While there are a small number of designated further education/PLC colleges, courses are mostly provided in existing secondary schools. PLC courses have become an increasing route towards 'second-chance' education for adults as well as a pathway to qualifications for non-university bound young people.

4.2 Issues in relation to ISCED classification at this level

PLC courses are diverse in terms of duration, content and position within the Irish national qualifications framework. However, they are all allocated to ISCED level 4C, concealing potentially important differences within the sector. A further issue relates to the designation of apprenticeships. Formally, Junior Certificate qualifications are required for entry to apprenticeships. However, in practice the majority of apprentices now have a Leaving Certificate qualification. The ISCED classification does not reflect these differences in entry pathways to apprenticeship.

5 Tertiary education (ISCED 5A, 5B and 6)

5.1 The nature of the system

Entry to tertiary education is determined by a 'points' system whereby students are awarded 'points' on the basis of their *Leaving Certificate* grades with allocation of places based on their subsequent ranking. Demand in certain subject areas currently exceeds the supply of higher education places. The tertiary sector consists of: universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education (teacher training), and a small number of private colleges. Institutes of Technology were originally established as Regional Technical Colleges to provide technical and practical skills for local economies through certificate and diploma courses. However, from 1974 onwards they have provided degree-level courses, too. Participation in tertiary education has expanded rapidly in recent years, with 55% of the cohort now proceeding to higher education. Since 1996, students are no longer required to pay course fees for undergraduate courses at recognised higher education institutions. However, students (except those from low income families) pay a registration fee.

The nomenclature used for different types of courses was changed in 2005. Prior to this, undergraduate courses were offered at *certificate* (2 years), *diploma* (3 years) and *degree* (3 to 4 years) level. *Certificate* and *diploma* courses were allocated to ISCED 5B while *degree* courses were allocated to ISCED 5A. Since 2005, certificate courses have been termed '*higher certificates*' (5B), diploma courses have been termed '*ordinary bachelor degrees*' (5B) while *degree* courses have been termed '*honours bachelor degrees*' (5A).

As well as *bachelor degrees*, higher education institutions provide a range of *post-graduate diplomas*, *Masters' degrees* (both classified as 5A) and *doctorates* (ISCED 6). Professional qualifications awarded by professional bodies, such as accountancy qualifications and post-graduate legal qualifications, are also included at level 5A.

5.2 Issues in relation to ISCED classification at this level

Two issues are apparent in applying the ISCED classification at this level. Firstly, the change in terminology may lead to some inconsistencies in assessing trends over time; this could perhaps be avoided by using distinct response categories when collecting survey data and giving very detailed instructions to interviewers. Secondly, both undergraduate and postgraduate (non-doctorate) degrees are assigned to level 5A. However, their implications in employment chances and the quality of employment obtained are quite different and this distinction should be taken into account in recording educational level.

6 Educational distribution of the Irish population

The following table shows the distribution of the population aged 25 to 64 years of age across the educational levels, comparing a more detailed distribution from the Irish Quarterly National Household Survey with the distribution given by the Eurostat harmonised dataset. Almost a fifth of the adult population have only an ISCED level 1 education with a further fifth having lower secondary (ISCED 2) qualifications. A quarter of the population have upper secondary (ISCED 3) qualifications, a tenth have post-secondary (ISCED 4) qualifications while over a quarter have tertiary qualifications (ISCED 5). On average, women have attained higher levels of education than men.

There are some discrepancies between the distributions produced for national purposes and those for the harmonised datasets. These discrepancies are generally in the order of less than one per cent. However, EU-LFS overestimates upper secondary education by 3%, and underestimates tertiary education by 1.5%, compared to national estimates. The source of this discrepancy is not evident as the same survey data are used for both purposes but the discrepancy may relate to the treatment of the 'other' or 'educational level not known' groups. Alternatively, it may reflect rounding and/or weighting issues.

The level of disaggregation available from the national estimates does not substantially improve our understanding of the distribution pattern. At ISCED level 3, for example, we are unable to distinguish those who have taken the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (3C) from those who have taken other Leaving Certificate qualifications (3A). However, one advantage of the national data is that it allows us to distinguish between undergraduate and (different kinds of) post-graduate degrees, an issue that should be taken into account in the ISCED classification.

Table 1. Distribution of adults (aged 25–64) by level of education, 2004 (excluding other and educational level not known); in per cent

Level	National data, 2004			EU-LFS, 2004
	Male	Female	Total	Total
ISCED 0/1, of which:	19.7	16.9	18.3	17.5
No formal education	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.6
Primary only	19.0	16.4	17.7	16.9
ISCED 2A, of which:	20.4	17.1	18.7	18.1
Lower secondary	20.3	16.9	18.6	18.0
Transition Year (3C short)	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1
ISCED 3 (3A/3C)	22.2	26.3	24.3	27.3
				(3A/B/C)
ISCED 4C	10.1	10.8	10.5	10.3
ISCED 5, of which:	27.0	28.7	27.9	
ISCED 5B (Certificate/diploma)	9.3	11.7	10.5	10.2
Primary degree (5A)	11.6	11.2	11.4	16.3
Professional qualification (5A)	2.1	1.6	1.9	
Postgraduate cert/diploma (5A)	1.3	2.1	1.7	
Postgraduate degree (5A)	2.7	2.1	2.4	
ISCED 6 (doctorate)	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.4

Source: Quarterly National Household Survey, 2006, First Quarter; special tabulation from the Central Statistics Office; EU-LFS: Q2.

References

- Breen, R./Hannan, D. F./O'Leary, R. (1995). Returns to education: taking account of employers' perceptions and use of educational credentials, *European Sociological Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 59–73.
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Websites

General information on the Irish educational system is available from a number of websites, including: Department of Education and Science (www.education.ie), Higher Education Authority (www.heai.ie), FÁS – the State Training Agency (www.fas.ie) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (www.ncca.ie).