



Country Profile: Ireland

REGIONAL
Comparative Analysis of Regional Policies
for Adult Learning

Maynooth University

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**Lifelong
Learning
Programme**

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REGIONAL Country Profile: Germany

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Executive Summary

The REGIONAL project presents a comparative analysis of Adult Learning (AL) policy formulation, implementation and financing in 21 regions in six countries across Europe during the period 2014-2015. This report is one of the project deliverables and, using information collected through primary and secondary research, presents a summary of the interview responses in relation to adult learning policy development for the Republic of Ireland. Maynooth University, a project consortium partner, was tasked with reviewing adult learning policy development in three regions within Ireland and with undertaking a series of interviews to investigate how the policy making progress for adult learning is devised.

For the purposes of this research project a review of adult learning policy development was undertaken in each of the regions selected. The research was informed by reviewing secondary publicly available information including census data and area annual reports. In each case the data was complemented by further information from front line educators involved in the delivery of adult learning programmes in the region.

The regions selected for the purposes of this project were:

- An urban region: City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETБ)
- A midland rural region: Longford Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB)
- A border region: Cavan Monaghan Education and Training Board (CWETB)

The research revealed that educational policy making is the prerogative of the Department of Education and Science located in the capital city of Ireland, Dublin. Administrative regions, called Education and Training Board (ETB) areas, prepare service level plans which are assessed by a national education and training body, SOLAS. When education and training service plans are accepted this triggers the provision of funding along with monitoring, evaluation and reporting requirements to the specified area for the activities specified in the service plans. The new structure, SOLAS and ETBs, put in place in 2014 and the standard operational procedures applied to each area are still in the pilot-formative stage. It should be noted that when a strategic planning process is at a formative stage it is more challenging to undertake a comparative analysis particularly with other countries where the procedure for adult learning policy development is in place over an extended period. However, the newness of structure and processes offers an opportunity to fine-tune the policy making model in Ireland to make it more effective in serving the needs of learners, in contributing to the social, cultural, and economic development of the country, and in reemphasising that education is the foundation for a healthy modern democratic society.

Country Report: An Introduction

Ireland is a small, modern, trade-dependent open economy. Ireland was among the initial group of 12 EU nations that joined the European Union (then called the European Community (EC)) in 1973 and the euro group of countries in January 2002. The following tables present key statistics in relation to Ireland and the regions selected.

Statistical Comparison of Regions

Table 1: Demographic and employment statistics (2013)

Member State Name	Country Republic of Ireland	Region 1: City of Dublin	Region 2: Longford/Westmeath	Region 3: Cavan/Monaghan
Population	4,588,252	525,383	125,164	133,666
Employment Rate	59.6%	82.6%	77.1%	79.1%
Unemployment Rate	14.6%	17.40%	22.9%	20.9%
Region Type	Country	Urban	Midlands	Border

Table 2: County Incomes and Regional GDP

Member State Name	Country Republic of Ireland	Region 1: City of Dublin	Region 2: Longford Westmeath	Region 3: Cavan/Monaghan
Disposable Income Per Person, 2011 in €*	€19,055	€21,329	€17,428	€16,984
Region Type	Country	Urban	Midlands	Border

*Source: CSO statistical release, 23 April 2014

From the above tables the reader will note that the Dublin urban region has the highest population, the highest rate of employment, and the highest gross national product (GNP) per person. The Longford/Westmeath region has the highest levels of unemployment but the Cavan/Monaghan region has the lowest gross national product per person.

Identification of interviewees

For the purposes of this research the researchers sought a range of informants. Interviewees included

- Two policy and research officers with national further education organisations
- Two academics in the field of educational policy
- A combination of four adult education officers involved in adult learning delivery in both selected and not selected areas
- One higher executive officer active in administrative delivery of adult learning
- One higher executive officer at national government departmental level with responsibility for adult learning policy
- Two officers active in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) delivering adult learning

1. Formal and non-formal learning	2
2. Formal and informal adult learning	3
3. Formal, informal and non-formal learning	4
4. Formal education	2
5. Not classified	1

A total of twelve (12) interviews were conducted in the period June to October 2014. The

1. Economic, Social and Cultural goals	2
2. Social & cultural followed by economic goals	1
3. Social and cultural goals	1
4. Social goals	1
5. Economic goals	2
6. Social and Economic goals	2
7. Not classified	1

experience of the interviewees ranged across formal, non-formal, and informal learning (Table 1). Ireland has a rich mixture of non-formal, informal and formal learning in the adult learning/further education sector. Interviewees also ranged across a combination of

education for economic, social and cultural goals within adult learning policies (Table 2). The interviewees suggested that, in their experience, the primary goal of adult learning policies in Ireland was economic progression with elements of social and cultural education of lesser importance.

Policy Formulation

One interviewee noted that recent adult learning/further education policy documents in Ireland emphasise the role of adult learning within the wider societal issues such as social protection, welfare, justice and health. However, they note that adult learning has not yet managed to forge an identity for itself and is still being influenced by a dominant training for enterprise and employment model. Another interviewee noted that in Ireland there was a specific funded policy for training but there was none for adult learning and particularly for community-based adult learning. Since 2014 SOLAS (the national education and training body) centrally prepares the national strategy in adult/further/training and education published in the FET (Further Education and Training) Strategy 2014. One interviewee noted that arising from the 2014 SOLAS FET strategy ETBs (Education and Training Boards) can now make local policy to respond to the needs as identified through local service plans. This interviewee suggests that up to recently there was a large discrepancy between national policy in adult learning/further education and local implementation but ETBs now have the tools, resources and freedom to implement national policy locally. Other interviewees do not agree with this and suggest that ETBs are being required to implement a dominant economic strategy within their education and training programmes.

In relation to the question “How is Adult learning policy developed/formulated in your region” two of four (4) interviewees responded. Two interviewees suggested that adult learning policy was formulated primarily at national level and two responded that while the policy was formulated at nation level it was possible to adapt it for local application. Local responses are possible if the Education and Training Board (ETB) undertake a local need assessment, and on the basis of the outcomes, define local programmes that correspond with national policy emanating from the national authority. One interviewee noted that key people in further education such as AEOs (Adult Education Officers) and CEFs (Community Education Facilitators) can have policy influence particularly when they work through collective organisations. In Ireland there is a history of adult education policy being formulated by people, particularly women in women’s groups, who having been alienated and isolated by social policy began to articulate their own needs in the early 1980s. Entry into the European Union facilitated the voice of a wide range of stakeholders than were previously accommodated in Ireland. However, more recently, the opportunity to influence policy has become more centralised according to some interviewees. These interviewees suggest that nationally and centrally driven policy alone “misses” much of the diversity in the adult/further education sector.

Policy Implementation

Arising from the interviews interviewees active in further education agreed that there is ongoing consultation in the formation of policy. One interviewee referred to the elaborate

1. There are consultations	10
2. No consultations	1

consultation structure put in place by SOLAS to create the further education strategy. This included a national technical group and advisory group to

advice on the consultation process. SOLAS invited a range of stakeholders to their open consultation process. However, there are mixed views on the effectiveness of this process. While some interviewees favoured this process others suggested the process was used to confirm a market driven strategy that was already in place. One interviewee suggested the consultation process as “entirely tokenistic”. Others suggested that it was possible to influence “at the edge”.

Interviewees agreed that consultation is a constant formal and non-formal dialogue through events such as national and local conferences, seminars and focus groups to engage stakeholders. They noted that the approach to consultation varies from ETB area to ETB area and is directed by a senior ETB executive(s) who may, or may not, have experience of a particular consultation model. On further discussion a consensus emerged that consultation in policy-making in Ireland would benefit from a more open consultation methodology.

When the interview progressed to the interviewee experience of preparing policy by publishing green paper and white papers interviewees referred to making submissions to green papers and attending focus groups on adult learning/further education policy in Ireland. They noted that in their experience it was difficult to see an outcome from the time and resource investment in the policy-making process. They noted that it is easy for groups without power to become disheartened when seeking to influence policy.

A further question asked about the range of stakeholders involved in policy consultation. Interviewees suggested that adult learning providers in the form of Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other interested parties, consulted with a range of stakeholders ranging across higher education, vocational education, civil society, trade unions, business, and particular interest groups. However, a number of interviewees suggested that stakeholders often need education about how the policy-making process works. One interviewee noted that the adult learning landscape in Ireland has changed dramatically over the past few years and that people are not familiar with the new structures and procedures.

In addition to practitioners and learners in lifelong learning interviewees identified other key stakeholders that should be involved in the consultation process. These included non-governmental organisations (NGOs), funders, further education providers, senior civil servants

in the Department of Education and Skills, the quality qualifications authority (QQI), policy think-tanks, and other organisations within the lifelong learning field. Interviewees noted that the lifelong learning process is complex and messy, and that consultation with a wide range of stakeholders is essential.

One interviewee noted their wish to see education and training boards (ETBs) used as consultative forums to reach out to the wider community especially during the annual service planning process. Part of the service planning process requires interaction with stakeholders on the ground. This interviewee also noted that, in many cases, there was significant consultation between state agencies in the preparation of local education strategies. They noted that ETBs have representation from a wide range of stakeholders on their boards. They also noted that consultation should not happen just for the sake of it and that a further education and training strategy implementation advisory group around is invaluable. Interviewees noted that in Ireland, because of the significant recent change in further education, there is an opportunity to shape learner engagement in policy formation. However, one interviewee noted that in some cases people are frustrated with consultation because they feel they are not being heard. Further, some of the agency consultations are not linked up and it appears many agencies are duplicating the same process of information collection.

In the interview discussion about documents that support and inform adult learning/further education consultation the following reports were referred to:

• PIIAC Report	http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/_Technical%20Report_17OCT13.pdf
• PISA Report	http://ec.europa.eu/ireland/press_office/news_of_the_day/ireland-makes-progress-in-pisa-assessment_en.htm
• OECD reports	https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Programme-for-the-International-Assessment-of-Adult-Competencies-PIAAC-2012-Survey-Results-for-Ireland.pdf
• CEDEFOP reports	https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2013/2013_CR_IE.pdf
• EU reports	http://www.nesse.fr/nesse/activities/reports/mind-the-gap-1
• Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019	http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf
• An Action Plan for Solas The New Further Education & Training Authority	http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/An-Action-Plan-for-SOLAS.pdf

One interviewee noted that local consultations have rarely been published but in the new FET strategy regional further education and training plans will be published. In discussion OECD &

CEDEFOP were noted to have a major impact on education policy in Ireland due to the profile, level of research, and quality of production of their policy documents. One interviewee noted that every government pays attention to specific European policies when funding is attached. They noted that policy follows the money and there is a different policy perspective when programmes are funded from the national exchequer compared to funding from external agencies such as the EU.

In discussion about the sharing of practices with other regional and local government authorities interviewees noted that Ireland is not as good as it could be at sharing practice and that most sharing of practice is done informally through internal networks. Interviewees also noted that evaluation has always been a challenge in Ireland. There are uneven levels of evaluation and often the evaluation is only used by individual adult educators to inform their own practice. However, now that there is a new national agency and that a national database is being developed there will be greater opportunity for harvesting the outcomes of evaluations completed at local level. Having noted this interviewees also expressed concern that evaluations and data collecting would focus primarily on the economic impacts of further education and that social/cultural further education would be further marginalised. Interviewees noted that success criteria are already predominantly focused on progression into employment or higher education and do not adequately assess other impacts of citizen value.

The interviewees referred to further education courses focused on employment. They noted that many of the adult learning participants may have left school early or have had a negative experience in formal education. Interviewees accepted the value of FET for employment where participants were ready and able to access the world of work. The interviewees noted that FET courses may be a means of exiting the poverty trap of the welfare system or for parents to role model engagement in education. Two interviewees referred to examples of programmes that combine economic and social aspects of development. An example is a community employment (CE) scheme with a progression rate (70%) to employment or further education due to its particular learner centered approach.

Interviewees noted the importance of the social inclusion in adult learning programmes. Interviewees noted that the goals of further education should firstly be the socialisation of learners. Adult learning should then encourage cultural awareness and thirdly lead the learner to economic progress. **All** interviewees agreed that the main goal of adult learning is enhanced citizenship and social participation. They agreed that economic progression emanates from education that is socially and culturally engaging. Interviewees referred to the value of a counselling and guidance services for adult learners. They also referred to the value of community education that brings people together in informal settings. Community education can be the first step into the further adult learning. During this discussion two interviewees again noted the dominant economic focus of the further education strategy and the direction of the national policy emphasising the provision of further education to the long term unemployed and meeting market needs of the employer.

Funding for Adult Learning

Funding was addressed during the interview. Interviewees noted that they were not directly involved in budgeting. While the researchers of this project targeted leaders in adult/further education policy development these people did not have a responsibility for funding. It suggests that there is a separation of policy and strategy development from funding decisions. Interviewees noted that funding for further education is part of the overall education budget and that that is decided at national level. They noted that the budgets of European, cross-border, philanthropic and charitable projects contribute to funding further education especially for disadvantaged groups. They noted that targeted funding is vital where there are learners who have particular disadvantages. Interviewees also noted that there is no budget for policy development at local level and that is the work of the Department of Education and Science.

Challenges for Adult Learning Policy

A significant part of the interview was a discussion about the principle challenges in adult learning/further education policy formation? Interviewees were very engaged with this question. One interviewee noted that there is a gap in understanding and perception separating executive management in public service and adult learning/further education activists. Interviewees also suggested that front-line staff involved in the delivery of adult learning programmes have limited understanding of programme management and policy development other than what is happening in their classroom. Further, interviewees suggested that a relatively small number of adult learning/further education staff and activists understand the process of policy formation.

One interviewee noted that as people become more educated they seek a greater level of accountability and empowerment within the policy-making process. They welcomed this as an important development. Some interviewees mentioned the hidden hand of the economy on education. Another interviewee commented that quantitative indicators applied in evaluation do not measure the soft outcomes of adult or community education. They suggested that this is a particular challenge in community education. This interviewee referred to 'More Than Just A Course' Report from AONTAS (2010) noting its value as a ten year longitudinal study and the learning achievements evidenced in this report. As an example one interviewee commented on a programme run fifteen years ago. Ten course participants from the course are now managing community resource centres, working as youth workers and working as community leaders. Such an outcome is a significant return on investment that can only be seen in the 'longer term'. The interviewee noted that some of the people on this community education course went on to do degrees while others are continuing to impact on the lives of many people in their community. Arising the interview suggested that adult learning policy needs to reflect longer term impacts of further education.

A further interviewee noted the flexibility of adult learning to respond to the needs of learners could be lost in the drive to achieve common standards, particularly QQI (Quality Qualifications

Ireland) accreditation. This interviewee suggested that policy needs to recognise that some people who come into adult learning are not ready, or able, to engage in accredited learning at the early stages. Interviewees noted that, in theory, the further education legislation requires a strategy for each ETB area comprising a five year plan and a yearly plan. This interviewee noted that ideally the strategy should encourage responsiveness and flexibility to adult learning needs. However, two interviewees suggested that the current further education and training strategy is urban-centric with a tendency towards a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to adult learning. Adult learning policy should put people first, listen to the providers on the ground, encourage joined up thinking, and plan for the long term. They talked about situations where only level 3 and 4 (National Framework of Qualifications) adult learning programmes were offered when in reality there was a much more diverse need.

One interviewee suggested that adult learning policy should not be developed in isolation from compulsory education policy. One interviewee noted the political dimension of policy-making is a complex matrix of cross cutting issues. They also noted that there are gaps in hard and soft data and an over dependence on quantitative information as was noted previously. Another interviewee noted that result measurable outcomes dominate adult learning policy development.

During the interview there was discussion about the main policy formulation drivers in the experience of the interviewees. In general interviewees agreed that the primary driver in policy formulation in Ireland is labour market activation. This overshadows everything else with a focus on the short-term outcomes and progression to employment or further/ higher education. Interviewees also affirmed that policy-making is a long-term process. One interviewee noted that the experience of organisations such as AONTAS suggest that impacting on policy can take years. However interviewees also noted that there are opportunities in the changing landscape of adult learning. Interviewees noted that the local ETBs are in a position to interpret policy to meet the needs of learners in their respective areas.

Key findings

From the foregoing narrative text we can conclude the following:

- The structure of adult learning are presently going through the most significant change since the founding of the state
- Arising there are new structures and new management positions in place in all the administrative regions in the republic of Ireland. People are settling in to the new roles in their respective areas.
- Levels of funding continue to decline arising from the austerity following the financial collapse.
- Some interviewees are dissatisfied with the trends arising from the new structures. There is a strong sense that the economic agenda has overtaken the learning agenda.
- Funding and resources are the primary barriers to adult learning in each administrative area.
- There is limited evidence of inclusive consultative engagement as an input into policy making and programme development.
- In the republic of Ireland adult learning policy is made at national level by the department and delivered to a national education training body in conjunction with funding.
- Local organisation, education and training board, in each administrative area is tasked with preparing a development plan and submitting to the national education and training body, solas, to secure funding.
- There is no common system for designing policy across the administrative areas or nationally. The national education and training body, solas, recently introduced a consultation system to prepare their first national implementation strategy. While welcome interviewees identified a number of shortcomings in this process.
- European policy and funding has had a very significant impact on the level and method of delivery of adult learning in the republic of Ireland. Interviewees suggest that a number of significant lessons have been learned but these are not uniformly applied across all areas.
- As funding from Europe reduces so does the impact of Europe on the adult learning programmes and their means of delivery.
- The interviewees identified a number of generic tools that would be valuable to assist the process of policy formation. These tools range from activities to concientisation and education

What tools do you use to formulate your adult learning policy?]

1. Production of a regular magazine
2. Use of social media.
3. Active participation in events
1. On going CPD Education
2. Participation in EU programmes

3. Attending open discussion forums
4. Participation with NGOs and academics discussing policy
5. Quantitative and qualitative data.

Interviewees also noted that:

- The skill of policy formation in an Irish context is largely illdefined. The most useful tool is consistently engaging with those who make policy and being available to have conversations, write position papers, and input at various levels while policymakers are struggling to respond to demands for policy change.
- It is the people on the ground we need to be talking to, listening to the voices of those who will be engaging in learning.
- Meet the employers through the chamber of commerce etc.

Conclusions

Arising from the country profile: Republic of Ireland the key trends emerging are:

- The structures for adult learning are presently going through the most significant change since the founding of the state
- Arising there are new structures and new management positions in place in all the administrative regions in the republic of Ireland. People are settling in to the new roles in their respective areas.
- Levels of funding continue to decline arising from the austerity following the financial collapse.
- Funding and resources are the primary barriers to adult learning in each administrative area.
- In the republic of Ireland adult learning policy is made at national level by the department and delivered to a national education training body in conjunction with funding.
- There is no common system for designing policy across the administrative areas or nationally.
- As funding from Europe reduces so does the impact of Europe on the adult learning programmes and their means of delivery.

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