



# Ireland

This country note provides an overview of key characteristics of the education system in Ireland based on Education at a Glance 2024. In line with the thematic focus of Education at a Glance 2024, it highlights issues of equity in education. Data in this note are provided for the latest available year as indicated in Education at a Glance 2024.

## The output of educational institutions and the impact of learning

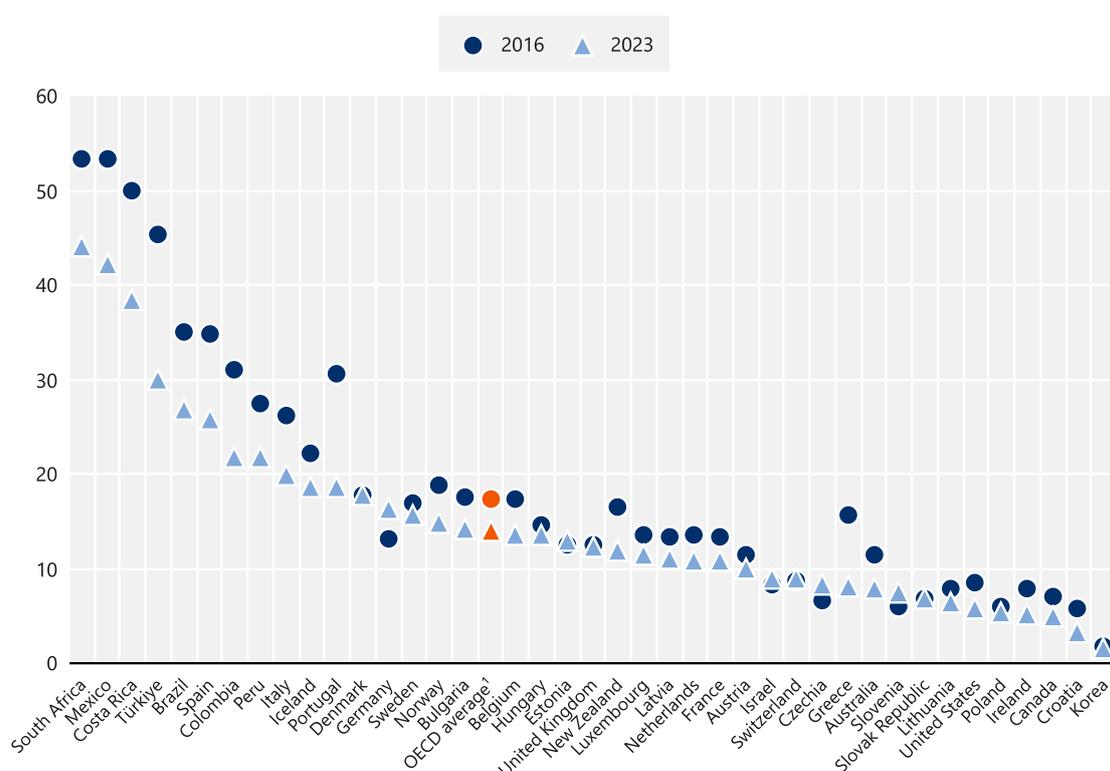
- Adults without upper secondary qualification are at considerable risk of poor social and labour-market outcomes throughout their lives. Reducing the share of young adults without an upper secondary qualification has been a priority in many countries and their share has decreased between 2016 and 2023 in 28 out of 35 OECD member countries. This is also the case in Ireland. Their share of 25-34 year-olds without upper secondary educational attainment decreased by 3 percentage points between 2016 and 2023. At 5%, it is 9 percentage points below the OECD average in 2023 (Figure 1).
- The difficult labour-market situation faced by workers without an upper secondary qualification is reflected in employment rates among 25-34 year-olds. In Ireland, 44% of 25-34 year-olds without an upper secondary qualification are employed, compared to 76% of those with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification. The corresponding OECD averages are 61% and 79%, respectively. Moreover, workers without an upper secondary qualification are at risk of earning very low wages in most OECD countries. In Ireland, 43% of 25-64 year-olds with below upper secondary educational attainment earn at or below half the median income compared to 26% of workers with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary educational attainment and 15% of workers with a tertiary qualification. Across the OECD, the respective shares are 28%, 17% and 10%.
- By almost all available measures, girls and women have better educational outcomes than boys and men, and in many cases the gap is widening. This is reflected in gender gaps in educational attainment. In all OECD member countries, women aged 25-34 are as likely or more likely than their male peers to have a tertiary qualification (54% compared to 41% on average across OECD countries). With a tertiary educational attainment rate of 67% for women and 60% for men, the gap is much narrower than the OECD average in Ireland.
- Although girls and women clearly outperform boys and men in education, the picture is reversed when they enter the labour market; the key measures of labour-market outcomes are generally worse for women than for men. Women aged 25-34 are less likely to be employed than men, with the gap typically widest for those with below upper secondary educational attainment and narrowest for those with tertiary attainment. In Ireland, only 29% of young women with educational attainment below upper secondary educational level are employed, while the corresponding share for young men is 55% (the corresponding OECD averages are 47% and 72%). In contrast, 88% of

young women with a tertiary qualification are employed, while the corresponding share for young men is 92% (the corresponding OECD averages are 84% and 90%).

- Parents' education has a strong impact on the educational attainment of their children. In Ireland, 83% of 25-64 year-olds who have at least one parent with tertiary attainment also attained a tertiary qualification. In contrast, only 38% of 25-64 year-olds with parents without an upper secondary qualification have obtained a tertiary qualification themselves. This compares to the averages of 72% and 19%, respectively.

**Figure 1. Trends in the share of 25-34 year-olds with below upper secondary educational attainment (2016 and 2023)**

In per cent



1. The OECD average is derived from the unweighted mean of all countries with available and comparable data for both years. Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of 25-34 year-olds with below upper secondary attainment in 2023.

Source: OECD (2024), Table A1.2. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

### Access to education, participation and progression

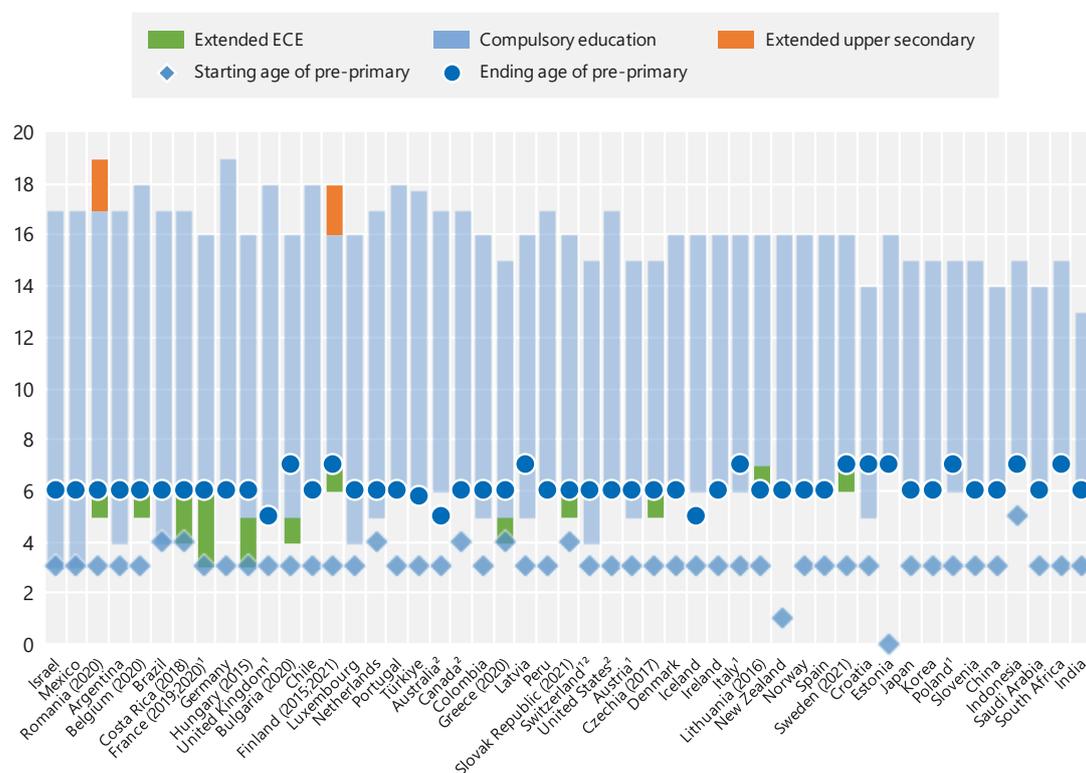
- Childcare and parental leave policies vary considerably between countries. Of particular importance for low-income families is the so-called childcare gap, the period between the end of paid parental leave and the start of free early childhood education and care or compulsory education. In eight OECD countries, there is no childcare gap as free early childhood education or

compulsory education starts immediately following the end of paid parental leave. In contrast, Ireland has an above average childcare gap of 5 years between the end of paid parental leave and the start of free compulsory education.

- Participation in early childhood education and care is particularly important for children from disadvantaged families. However, in Ireland, as in most other OECD countries, children aged 0-2 from families in the bottom income tertile are less likely to participate in childcare than children from the top income tertile (7% compared to 54%). The difference of 48 percentage points in participation between children from families in the top and bottom tertile is larger than the OECD average of 19 percentage points.
- Early childhood education can help to reduce the developmental gaps that put some children at a disadvantage when they enrol in primary school. In most OECD countries, the large majority of children are enrolled in early childhood education one year before the start of primary education. In Ireland, 93% of children in this age group are enrolled, compared with an OECD average of 96%.
- Although most children and youths participate in education in the years before and after compulsory education, not all do so. In order to increase enrolment in the early years or among youths, twelve OECD member and accession countries have increased the duration of compulsory education over the past decade. Ireland does not belong to this group. Compulsory education in Ireland lasts from the age of 6 to 16 for a total of 10 years, which is below the OECD average of 11 years (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Duration of compulsory education (2022)**

In years



**Note:** The year in parentheses indicates when policy changes were made to the duration of compulsory education. In addition, extended ECEC/extended upper secondary refers to the extension in the duration of the relevant level since 2013.

1. There are other compulsory activities to complete by the end of compulsory education (see Table B2.1).

2. Starting age, ending age, and duration of compulsory education may vary at sub-national level.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the duration of compulsory education.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table B2.1. For more information see Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

- Grade repetition is common in many countries to give students more time to master the content of a grade, although its effectiveness is debated. In Ireland, 0.4% of primary, 0.1% of lower secondary and 0% of general upper secondary students repeat a grade in their current level of education, while the OECD average is 1.5% at primary, 2.2% at lower secondary and 3.2% at general upper secondary level.
- Women are significantly over-represented in tertiary education and the gap is widening in most countries. In Ireland, 55% of new entrants to tertiary education are women, compared with an OECD average of 56%. As women are also more likely than men to complete tertiary education, the gap is even greater among graduates (see Education at a Glance 2022). However, there are large differences between fields of study in all OECD countries. In Ireland, 17% of women entering tertiary education were studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields, while only 5% of men were entering education-related fields.



- In most OECD countries, a large majority of 15-19 year olds are still enrolled in education, even though compulsory education usually ends before the age of 19. However, in most countries there are large differences in enrolment rates between sub-national regions. In Ireland, 94% of 15-19 year olds are enrolled at national level, whereas in the region with the lowest enrolment rate, Eastern and Midland, only 80% of this age group are enrolled.

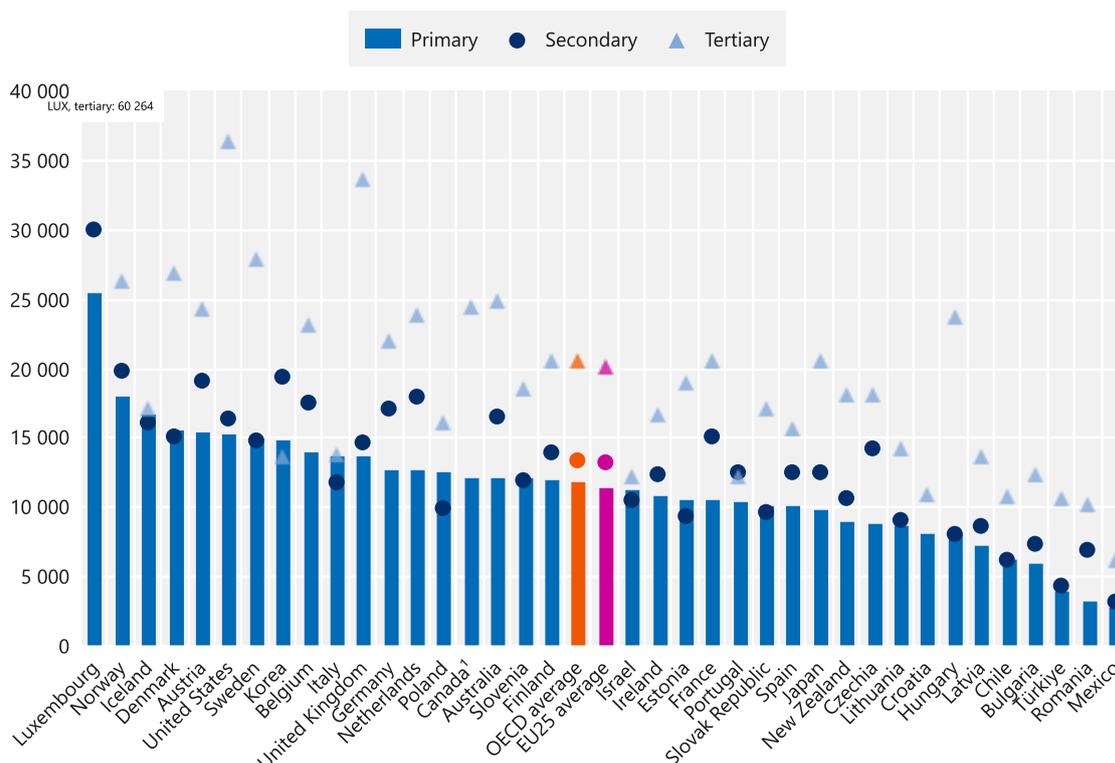
## Financial resources invested in education

- The average annual expenditure per student from primary to tertiary education (including R&D) in Ireland is USD 13 059 compared to an average of USD 14 209 in OECD countries. In most countries, expenditure increases by level of education. In Ireland, spending per student is USD 10 959 in primary education, USD 12 390 in secondary education and USD 16 700 in tertiary education (Figure 3).<sup>1</sup>
- Ireland spends 2.9% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on educational institutions at primary to tertiary levels (including R&D). This is less than the OECD average of 4.9% of GDP. On average across the OECD, the share of GDP dedicated to educational institutions (from primary to tertiary levels) has been broadly stable, with 4.9% in 2015 and 2021. However, trends vary considerably between countries. Ireland is among the countries where expenditure as a share of GDP decreased, going from 3.6% to 2.9%.
- Early childhood education has received much attention in recent years because of its importance, especially for children from disadvantaged families. In Ireland, public investment in early childhood education relative to GDP has increased by 37% between 2015 and 2021. Across the OECD, it has increased on average by 9% over this period.

<sup>1</sup> All expenditure figures in this note are expressed in USD calculated based on purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates.

**Figure 3. Total expenditure per full-time equivalent student in primary, secondary and tertiary education (2021)**

In equivalent USD converted using PPPs, expenditure on educational institutions



1. Primary education includes pre-primary and lower secondary programmes.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the total expenditure per full-time equivalent student in primary education.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table C1.1. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

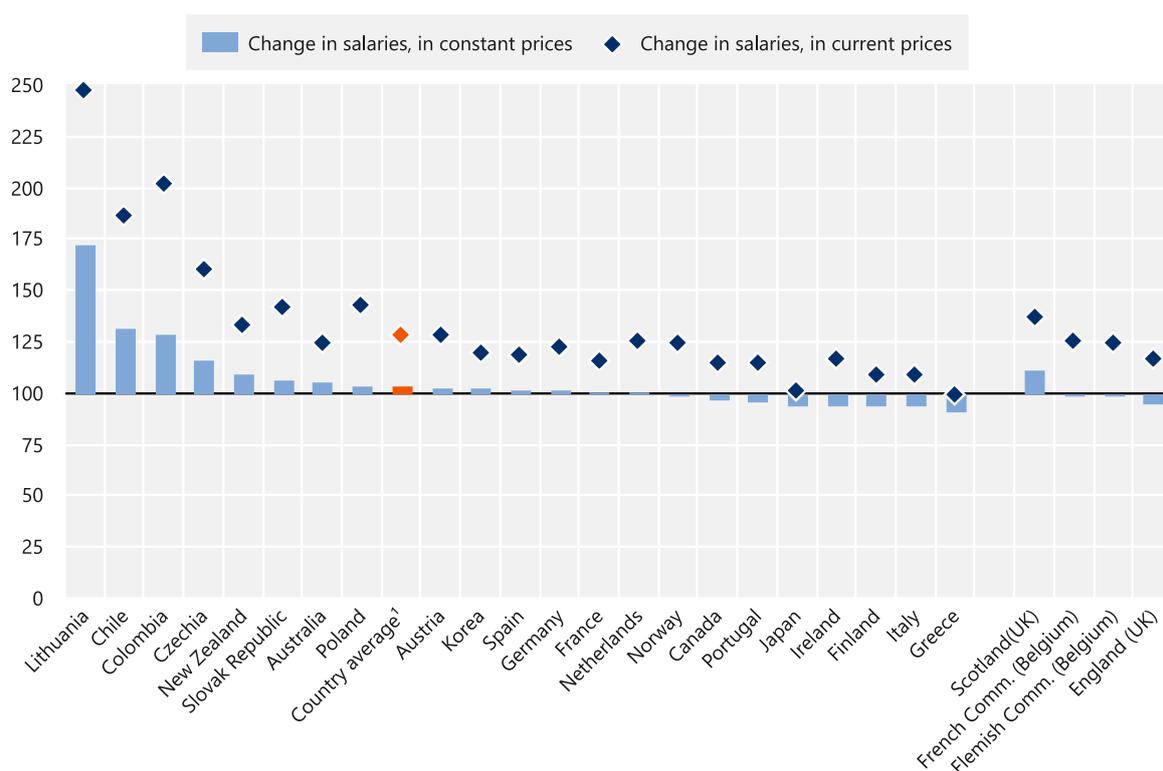
- Across the OECD, public authorities are responsible for the vast majority of spending on education, particularly at compulsory levels. In Ireland, 99% of total expenditure on primary institutions comes from public sources, which is above the OECD average of 93%. Private expenditure makes up a greater share in tertiary education in many countries. In Ireland, the share of public expenditure on tertiary education is 69%, compared to an OECD average of 68%.
- The distribution of government expenditure on education by level of government differs between countries. In some countries, all final expenditure on education comes from central governments, whereas in other countries all final expenditure comes from local or regional governments. In Ireland, the central government is responsible for 100% of final expenditure on primary education.
- Governments have to decide how to allocate funds across policy areas. Education (including R&D) is a major expenditure item and accounts for 10.0% of all public expenditure on average across the OECD. In Ireland, this share is higher with 11.7%.

### Teachers, the learning environment and the organisation of schools

- The share of teachers leaving the profession varies considerably across countries. Among countries with available data, between 2% and 12% of teachers leave the profession each year. In Ireland, the share is at the lower end of this range with 3%. Although typically around 2% of teachers retire each year (2% in Ireland), the share of teachers resigning fluctuates more widely between nearly 0% to up to 10%. In Ireland, it is 1% in 2022/23. However, the resignation rate should be interpreted with caution, as it depends on many aspects, such as teachers' contractual status and general labour market characteristics.
- Between 2015 and 2023, nominal statutory salaries increased by 16% in Ireland for lower secondary teachers with 15 years of experience. Most of this increase compensated for the rising cost of living. In real terms (i.e. adjusted for inflation), teachers' salaries decreased by 6% over the eight-year period compared to an average increase of 4% across countries with available data (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Change in lower secondary teachers' statutory salaries between 2015 and 2023**

Index of change in annual salaries of teachers with most prevalent qualifications after 15 years of experience (2015 = 100)



**Note:** The change in constant prices refers to the change in salaries assuming the same level of purchasing power between 2015 and 2023 (that is, in 2015 prices), whereas change in current prices refers to the nominal change in salary amount between 2015 and 2023.

1. Excludes Australia, Chile and Colombia as data for some years are missing between 2015 and 2023.

Countries and other participants are ranked in descending order of the change in salaries in constant prices.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table D3.6 and Table X2.5. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).



- The work of teachers consists of a variety of tasks including teaching, but also preparing lessons, grading assignments and communicating with parents. The number of hours that teachers are contractually obliged to teach varies greatly across countries. In Ireland, teachers at lower secondary level have to teach 704 hours annually. This is similar the OECD average of 706 hours per year.
- Countries make different choices about whether to operate many small schools or fewer large schools. In Ireland, the median primary school has 16 students per grade compared to the OECD average of 27. The largest 5% of primary schools in Ireland have 58 or more students per grade, while the OECD average is 91 or more. At the other end of the scale, the smallest 5% of primary schools have 3 or fewer students per grade compared to an OECD average of 5 or fewer students per grade. Although small schools are important for ensuring primary education is accessible, especially in sparsely populated rural areas, they can be costly to run and may have to resort to multi-grade teaching.
- Most education systems involve students and parents in the governance of public schools. In most countries, it is compulsory for parents' representatives to be included in the governing board of public schools. Student participation is less widespread, but still common. In Ireland, the participation of parents in governing body of public schools is required, and the participation of students is not required.
- Student-teacher ratios vary between countries and between levels of education. On average across the OECD, there are 14 students per teacher in primary education, 13 students in lower secondary education and 13 students in upper secondary education. In Ireland, the corresponding numbers are 13 in primary education and 12 in upper secondary education. While lower student teacher ratios allow teachers to focus more on the needs of the individual, they require higher overall spending on teacher salaries and have to be weighed against alternative spending priorities.



### More information

For more information on Education at a Glance 2024 and to access the full set of indicators, see: <https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en>.

For more information on the methodology used during the data collection for each indicator, the references to the sources and the specific notes for each country, see Education at a Glance 2024: Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

For general information on the methodology, please refer to the *OECD Handbook for Internationally Comparative Education Statistics 2018* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264304444-en>).

Updated data can be found on line at <http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/5q> and by following the StatLinks  in the publication.

Explore, compare and visualise more data and analysis using the Education GPS: <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/>.

Questions can be directed to the Education at a Glance team at the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills: [EDU.EAG@oecd.org](mailto:EDU.EAG@oecd.org).

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