



**4<sup>th</sup> HEA Forward-Look Forum  
11<sup>th</sup> November 2015**

**Skills, Employability and the Post-Secondary Sector: What is the Role for Higher Education?**

**Skills and employability**

Ireland has experienced one of the most dramatic turn-around in economic fortunes over recent years of any country in the euro area.<sup>1</sup> It has moved from the Celtic Tiger era (early 1990s–2007) through a severe recession (2008–late 2013) to being the fastest growing economy in Europe by 2014<sup>2</sup>. Unemployment now stands at close to 9% from a height of 15.1% in February 2012; youth unemployment was registered at 20.3% in March 2015, down from an all-time high of 31.1% in June 2012.<sup>3</sup>

The collapse in employment opportunities and apprenticeship places for school-leavers led to an increase in demand for higher education of approximately 20% with graduate numbers from further education dropping between 2013 and 2014. Mature students did not experience an increase although part-time enrolments did increase between 2008/09 and 2014/15 by about 14% overall (10% undergraduate and 18% postgraduate). Demographic trends suggest demand will continue to grow over coming years from an increasing flow of school leavers. The Department of Education and Skills estimates that demand will reach 213,500 by 2027, an increase of over 45,000 on 2012 enrolment levels.<sup>4</sup> At 51%, Ireland has the highest EU tertiary attainment rate for 30–34 year olds.

The speed of the economic recovery has taken everyone by surprise. Unemployment, while still high, is falling. As higher education expands capacity, demand for quality skilled graduates may be even greater. While target levels of graduate output seemed, until relatively recently, adequate for labour market outcomes, there is increasing evidence of a risk of under-supply. The most recent data on job growth in Ireland shows a labour-market in rapid transition with growing skills shortage in certain areas—in STEM disciplines, but also in other fields such as ICT, European languages, the building industry and digital media.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere in Europe, the proportion of the population in education has also increased, with young people remaining in education longer before joining the labour-market or even returning to education. Youth unemployment remains a problem despite some improvements, with more than one in five young European job-seekers unable to find



a job. In some countries the biggest change has been the surge in the number of young people aged 15–24 who are unemployed and not in education (NEET), with the majority with figures of over 10% in 2014.<sup>6</sup> Corresponding figures for Ireland show that the share of 15–24-year-olds classed as NEETS has dropped from 106,400 or 18% in 2011 to 69,700 or 13% in 2015.

Labour-market estimates suggest that the bulk of new employment opportunities in the future will be for graduates. This is leading to a hollowing-out of the labour-market, creating an hour-glass shape with a “growth in lower wage service occupations, combined with a reduction in middle-wage occupations, leading to concerns of employment polarization”.<sup>7</sup> According to CEDEFOP, “most new jobs, projected to be around 8.5 million, will be in knowledge- and skill-intensive occupations, such as high level managerial and technical jobs”.<sup>8</sup>

Labour-market changes are having an impact on the student cohort; the concept of a “job for life” is becoming as redundant as an “education for life”, and so life-long learning (LLL) is not just a reality but a necessity. In the US the “post-traditional” student-market (i.e. students over 22 years-of-age), is becoming the dominant component of the higher education student population.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, a vibrant educational system needs to support students at all stages of their lifecycle, and to create opportunities for different career choices. This includes creating the talent-pipeline necessary to become excellent, fully independent researchers and research leaders, equipped to become senior leaders in academia or within the private sector.

Ireland presents a distinctive case, bucking the trend across most of OECD countries and across Europe due to its growing population, which saw demand for higher education continue to rise even at a time of declining public investment, and now as its economy rapidly expands. Given that Ireland’s future sustainability depends upon the quality of its graduates and on their collective capacity to advance and apply knowledge and understanding, how well equipped are our graduates and our institutions?

### **Embracing a post-secondary education approach**

Over the years, various terms have been used to describe or define “post-secondary education” and “post-compulsory” including “third-level” and “tertiary” education or “higher education” and “further education”. In the 1970s, UNESCO developed the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) as a framework to



differentiate between shorter practical, technical or occupational skill-focused and longer theoretical programmes. Institutions were similarly categorised. Today many of the strict distinctions are blurring, and employability is an issue of major concern and responsibility for all educational providers, and across all disciplines and fields of study.

At the same time, there is a growing concern about an over-emphasis on “university” credentials compared with other post-secondary opportunities. While professional and managerial jobs will increase, according to CEDEFOP, medium-level qualifications, mainly vocational, will account for 50% of the labour force.<sup>10</sup> Recent US projections claim that nearly one-third of job vacancies by 2018 will require some post-secondary qualification but less than a four-year degree.<sup>11</sup>

These developments are leading to renewed attention on the differentiated roles of further education, and higher education, within a broader post-secondary/post-compulsory or, more comprehensively, a “whole of education”, framework. While universities and colleges are a critical part of the puzzle, “there exists a less well understood world of colleges, diplomas, certificates and professional examinations—the world of post-secondary vocational education and training” which provides one or two years of career preparation.<sup>12</sup> In some instances, these qualifications may lead to immediate employment or provide the stepping stone to further advanced qualifications. Whereas educational pathways were seen wholly as part of a widening access and educational progression agenda, it is now understood as part of a broader life-long learning (LLL) framework. Moving beyond an implied academic hierarchy, students of all ages may choose to combine theoretical and skills educational programmes in different ways and at different times.

*Europe 2020* has targeted skills needs for young people, as part of a wider programme of work. And, because the graduate of today is the product of the entire education system, attention is being given to overcoming educational gaps, and embracing all levels and parts of the system in a holistic way to ensure skills and aptitudes are nurtured and developed at all levels of education. Students of today will not simply change jobs many times throughout their lifetime—but will have multiple careers. There are also equity issues, concerning students who are effectively and gradually left behind by the current system, and those who are unable to access the system in any meaningful and sustained way.<sup>13</sup> Evidence shows a widening inequality gap and growing divergence in educational outcomes across many countries; indeed, it is no longer certain that a higher education qualification is sufficient for personal success and social equity.<sup>14</sup> In such circumstances what is role of, and what are the implications for, post-secondary education?



Ireland, like the rest of Western Europe, has tended to focus predominantly on publicly-funded higher education and the traditional 18–22-year-old student who matriculates directly from secondary school and attends a campus-based institution. At a societal level, the Irish public and media seems to give undue attention to the 9% of students achieving 500+ points in the Leaving Certificate examination (and to the one or two students who achieve 600 points) rather than to the 51% who achieve between 300 to 499 points, or to other students and their opportunities. Hitherto the transitions debate has centred wholly around these CAO points, pertaining exclusively to the transition between secondary and HE, with little reference to further/other education opportunities. Little consideration is also being given to mature students or learner-earners, as illustrated in the way the latter are not eligible for free fees.

At a time when Ireland is emerging from recession, and seeking to secure its economic future, does this represent a good opportunity to re-look at the post-secondary landscape and seek to carve out a more integrated and holistic approach?

#### **4<sup>th</sup> HEA Forward-Look Forum**

This recent experience presents two inter-related challenges for higher education: ensuring graduate-capacity and capability in the short term,<sup>15</sup> and preparing students and (re)training adults for employment and employability over their increasingly longer and often uncertain life-span. Is higher education keeping pace with the changing world?

Public debate has taken different forms in different countries, but common concerns include: new graduates lack the skills that employers need; too many graduates study the wrong subjects for available jobs; some graduates are stuck in low-skilled jobs or under-employed; and too many students are being encouraged into higher rather than further/vocational education. There are also concerns about the appropriateness of the curriculum and mismatches between qualifications and deployment in the workplace, with questions being asked about whether graduates have the appropriate balance between practical skills, learning facts and critical thinking. In some cases, questions are being asked about whether college is worth it.<sup>16</sup>

There is growing realisation that students in high-participation societies require deeper embedding of what are called “soft skills” and greater preparation for the types of competences that life-long learning (LLL) requires. This requires a systemic shift from simply knowing facts to using knowledge to promote inquiry, creativity and innovation. Language, artistic and scientific literacy are all important. Research also



shows that students who are more actively engaged in their learning develop the competences that lead to more successful life-long attributes.<sup>17</sup>

Since knowledge and skills have shorter life-spans, more weight may need to be given to competences in the specification of the knowledge and skills required. This applies to both the supply and demand side: higher education and further education will probably have to move towards certification of competences gained through programmes, while employers will need to move towards better specification of the competences required by them. Employers vary depending upon their size and sector; typically, SMEs will focus on immediate skills while larger employers, MNEs and public-sector employers might be more inclined to emphasize competences since they have the resources to fund any specific skills-deficits.

Developing competences for problem-solving and innovation, as well as analytical and critical thinking, does not start in higher education. Children entering school now will live beyond the end of this century, and are likely to change careers two or three times over their lifetimes.<sup>18</sup> Resolving these challenges speaks to the growing demographic challenge.

For many countries across Europe, their “working age population will start to shrink” after 2012.<sup>19</sup> Even though Ireland’s fertility rate currently stands at 2.1, the highest in the EU, we will still require inward migration to meet our labour-market needs.<sup>20</sup> Internationalisation is no longer simply a matter of cultural diversity but one of economic necessity. Nurturing and attracting talent is a now a key feature of government policy here, and almost every other country.<sup>21</sup>

These aspects are receiving much public attention and scrutiny because of comments raised by employers and others about the job-readiness of graduates or graduate competences.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, if graduates are not acquiring skills that are valued in the labour-market, there is an opportunity cost for individuals and society.<sup>23</sup>

These developments are challenging traditional assumptions about the role and purpose of higher education, and its relationship with other parts of the education system. How well-prepared is higher education to meet societal and labour market demands, now and into the future? Higher education plays a vital role in pre-employment education; does it need to play a bigger role in life-long learning in the future? To what extent will the mix between pre-employment and LLL change over time and differ between institutions? How closely should the education and training system be aligned with the skill needs of employers, particularly at a regional level? Do we require much greater cohesion across the entire education system in order to



ensure better co-ordination and transitions between education and the labour-market?

The 4<sup>th</sup> HEA Forward-Look Forum provides an opportunity to look at these issues in a new and more comprehensive way. Keynote speakers will present an overview from an international perspective, while respondents and panellists will reflect upon the Irish situation. Overall the focus will be on interrogating issues around skills and employability, and the extent to which the current structure of post-secondary education adequately meets the challenges of the future. As with previous Forward-Look events, the objective is to provide sufficient time for discussion in order to exchange views and refresh our thinking.

Several papers and web links have been included as additional background material.

- OECD, *Higher Education Labour Market Relevance and Outcomes: Elements of an Analytical Framework* (June 2015).
- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, *Over-qualification and Skills Mismatch in the Graduate Labour Market* (August 2015), <https://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/over-qualification-and-skills-mismatch-graduate-labour-market.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Postsecondary Education Partners' Gateway, <https://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/srdc/toc.html>
- *Skills Future*, Singapore, <http://www.skillsfuture.sg>

There will be two sessions:

## **PART 1: MANAGING SUPPLY AND DEMAND IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND FOR THE LABOUR-MARKET**

What is the role of HEIs in enhancing the employment skills of graduates? What is the balance between meeting short-term skill gaps and skills mismatch, and ensuring longer-term competences? Is it the same for all HEIs or are there mission-specific roles? How can or should higher education respond to changing requirements of the labour-market? To what extent should the relationship between education and the labour-market be co-ordinated? Should business and enterprise be more actively engaged in helping define or at least inform programme and curricula? What are the implications for higher education in terms of curriculum and organisation? Can higher



education revolutionize itself sufficiently to meet societal demands and remain globally competitive?

**Chair:** Tom Boland (Chief Executive, Higher Education Authority)

**Keynote Speaker:** Amy Laitinen (Director for Higher Education, New America, Washington, DC.)

**Respondent:** Professor Seamus McGuinness (Research Professor, Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin)

**Discussants:**

Professor Andrew Deeks (President, University College Dublin)

Richard Eardley (Managing Director, Hays Ireland)

Una Halligan (Chairperson, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN))

Professor Brian Norton (President, Dublin Institute of Technology)

**PART 2: EMBRACING A POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION APPROACH**

Is massification driving too many (un-prepared) students into higher education, or specifically universities, or specific programmes, for which they are either unsuited or for which there is no direct employment? Are we neglecting vocational and apprenticeship education, and undervaluing professional education due to insufficient opportunity or prestige factors?<sup>24</sup> Would a post-secondary forum, bringing together key actors from across apprenticeship and work-based learning, further education, higher education and life-long learning help ensure better educational cohesion and societal outcomes? What lessons can be learned from other jurisdictions?

**Chair:** Mary Doyle (Deputy Secretary, Department of Education and Skills)

**Keynote Speaker:** Professor Ewart Keep (Chair in Education, Training and Skills, and Director of the ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE), University of Oxford)

**Respondent:** Dr. Mary-Liz Trant, Executive Director Skills Development, SOLAS

**Discussants:**

Professor Peter Clinch (Chairperson, Competitiveness Council of Ireland, and Jean Monnet Chair of European Economic Integration & Professor of Public Policy, University College Dublin)

Professor Patrick Clancy (Emeritus Professor, School of Sociology, University College Dublin)

Jacintha Stewart (Chief Executive, City of Dublin Education and Training Board)

Bob Savage (Vice-President and Managing Director, EMC Ireland)



---

<sup>1</sup> K. Whelan (2013) “Ireland’s Economic Crisis. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”, Paper presented at Bank of Greece conference on the Euro Crisis, Athens May 24, 2013. Accessed 7 October 2015, from <http://www.karlwhelan.com/Papers/Whelan-IrelandPaper-June2013.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Finance (2015) “Minister for Finance welcomes CSO data confirming that Ireland had the fastest-growing economy in the EU in 2014”, Accessed 7 October 2015, from <http://www.finance.gov.ie/news-centre/press-releases/minister-finance-welcomes-cso-data-confirming-ireland-had-fastest-growing>

<sup>3</sup> CSO Quarterly National Household Survey, 25 February 2015 (Quarter 4 2014): <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/qnhs/quarterlynationalhouseholdsurveyq4quarter42014/#.VPb5XuG2rGx>; see also <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/ireland/youth-unemployment-rate>

<sup>4</sup> DES (2013) *Projections of Demand For Full-Time Third-Level Education, 2013 – 2027*, p4, Accessed 7 October 2015, from <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/Projections-of-demand-for-full-time-Third-Level-Education-2013-2027.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> A. Beesley (2015) “Building sector seeking rapid return of emigrants, *The Irish Times*, 26 June 2015, <http://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/building-sector-seeking-rapid-return-of-emigrants-1.2263338>; “Making the Right Connections”, Accessed 7 October 2015, from <https://www.electricireland.ie/news-media/article/news/2015/05/18/making-the-right-connection>

<sup>6</sup> EU (2014) “Youth employment: overview of EU measures”, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release MEMO-14-338\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-338_en.htm); European Commission and Council (2015) “Draft Joint Employment Report on the Annual Growth Survey 2015”, Brussels, p6, Accessed 20 October 2015, from [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/2015/jer2015\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/2015/jer2015_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> P. Sissons (2011) *The Hourglass and the Escalator: Labour market change and mobility*, London: The Work Foundation, Accessed 21 October 2015, from [http://www.theworkfoundation.com/downloadpublication/report/292\\_hourglass\\_escalator\\_120711%20\(2\)%20\(3\).pdf](http://www.theworkfoundation.com/downloadpublication/report/292_hourglass_escalator_120711%20(2)%20(3).pdf)

<sup>8</sup> European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2010) “Jobs in Europe to become more knowledge- and skills-intensive”, Cedefop briefingnote, February.

<sup>9</sup> P.J. Stokes (nd) “Hidden in Plain Sight: Adult Learners Forge a New Tradition in Higher Education”, *Issues Paper for Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education*, Washington, D.C. Accessed 15 September 2014, from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/stokes.pdf> ; L. Soares (2013) “Post-traditional Learners and the Transformation of Postsecondary Education: A Manifesto for College Leaders,” Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education. Accessed 27



September 2014, from <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Post-traditional-Learners.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2010) “Jobs in Europe to become more knowledge- and skills-intensive”, Cedefop briefing note, February.

<sup>11</sup> A.P. Carnevale, N. Smith & J. Strohl (2010) “Help Wanted. Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements to 2018”, Washington, DC: Centre on Education and the WorkForce, Georgetown University, Accessed 3 May 2015, from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524310.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> OECD (2014) *Skills Beyond School: Synthesis Report*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264214682-en>. Accessed 17 December 2014, from <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/Skills-Beyond-School-Synthesis-Report.pdf>, p11

<sup>13</sup> E. Smyth (2009) “Junior Cycle Education: Insights from a Longitudinal Study of Students”, *ESRI Research Bulletin* 4/1, Accessed 12 December 2014, from [http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Post-Primary\\_Education/Junior\\_Cycle/Research\\_on\\_students\\_experiences/ESRI\\_Research\\_Bulletin.pdf](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Research_on_students_experiences/ESRI_Research_Bulletin.pdf); see also J. Stiglitz (2013) “Student Debt and the Crushing of the American Dream”, *The New York Times*, 12 May, Assessed 11 January 2015, from [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/student-debt-and-the-crushing-of-the-american-dream/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/student-debt-and-the-crushing-of-the-american-dream/?_r=0)

<sup>14</sup> S. Marginson (2015) “The worldwide trend to high participation higher education: Dynamics of social stratification in inclusive systems”, *Higher Education*, forthcoming.

<sup>15</sup> M. O’Halloran (2015) “Too much emphasis on third level education, Minister admits”, *The Irish Times*, 10 June, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/too-much-emphasis-on-third-level-education-minister-admits-1.2244332>; J. Fitzgerald (2015) “Achieving an educated workforce is a long-term strategy”, *The Irish Times*, 2 June 2015, <http://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/achieving-an-educated-workforce-is-a-long-term-strategy-1.2233507>

<sup>16</sup> P. Walker (2014) “UK has more graduates but without skills and social mobility to match”, *The Guardian*, Accessed 17 December 2014, from [http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/sep/09/uk-more-graduates-skills-social-mobility-match-oecd?CMP=new\\_1194](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/sep/09/uk-more-graduates-skills-social-mobility-match-oecd?CMP=new_1194); W. McGuinness (2013) “Half Of Recent College Grads Work Jobs That Don’t Require A Degree: Report”, *Huff Post*, 29 January, Accessed 17 December 2014, from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/29/underemployed-overeducated\\_n\\_2568203.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/29/underemployed-overeducated_n_2568203.html); see film *The Ivory Tower*, Accessed 17 December 2014, from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3263520/>

<sup>17</sup> F. Avvisati, G. Jacotin & S. Vincent-Lancrin (2013) “Education HE Students for Innovative Economies: What International Data Tells Us”, *Tuning Journal for Higher Education*, 1:223-240, Accessed 17 December 2014, from [http://www.oecd.org/edu/cei/11\\_Educating\\_Higher\\_Education\\_Students\\_for\\_Innovative](http://www.oecd.org/edu/cei/11_Educating_Higher_Education_Students_for_Innovative)



[Economies.pdf](#)

<sup>18</sup> C. Tsai (2014) “The Case for Social Innovation Micro Credentials”, *Stanford Social Innovation Review Blog*.

[http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/the\\_case\\_for\\_social\\_innovation\\_micro\\_credentials](http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/the_case_for_social_innovation_micro_credentials)

<sup>19</sup> Europa, “Agenda for new skills and jobs”, Accessed 17 December 2014, from

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=958>

<sup>20</sup> R. Noack & L. Gamio (2015) “Map: Where Europe is growing and where it is shrinking”, *Washington Post*, 23 June 2015,

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/06/23/map-where-europe-is-growing-and-where-it-is-shrinking/>

<sup>21</sup> DJEI (2014) *Policy Statement on Foreign Direct Investment in Ireland*, Ireland, Accessed 22 September 2014, from

[http://www.djei.ie/publications/enterprise/2014/Policy\\_Statement\\_FDI\\_Ireland\\_July\\_2014.pdf](http://www.djei.ie/publications/enterprise/2014/Policy_Statement_FDI_Ireland_July_2014.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> IBM (2015) *Pursuit of relevance. How higher education remains viable in today’s dynamic world*. Accessed 8 October 2015, from

<http://public.dhe.ibm.com/common/ssi/ecm/qb/en/qbe03676usen/GBE03676USEN.PDF>

<sup>23</sup> See OECD (2015) “Higher Education labour market Relevance and Outcomes: Elements of an Analytical Framework”, Paper prepared for the Education Policy Committee, EDU/EDPC(2015)13.

<sup>24</sup> M. Mourshed & J. Patel (2014) *Education to employment: Getting Europe’s youth into work*, Washington, D.C.: McKinsey & Co., Accessed 17 December 2014, from

[http://www.mckinsey.de/sites/mck\\_files/files/a4e2e\\_2014.pdf](http://www.mckinsey.de/sites/mck_files/files/a4e2e_2014.pdf). The report says more than half of young people taking an academic course would have preferred a vocational one, but were put off by disorganisation and lack of prestige.