

Background Information: Higher Education System in Ireland



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Higher Education System in Ireland

I. General Characteristics

Population	
Total population (I.I.2013) (million) ¹	4.59
Population density (2013) (persons per square kilometre) ²	67.2
Population Structure (2013) (share of total population %) ³	
0-14 years	21.9
15-24 years	11.7
25-49 years	37.7
50-64 years	16.4
65 years and older	12.2
GDP	
GDP per capita in PPS (2013), EU 28 = 100 ⁴	130
GDP year-on-year growth rate (2013) ⁵	0.2
Education (2012) (All levels) ⁶	
Enrolment	
Total (ISCED 0-6)	1,186,459
Tertiary Level of Education (ISCED 5-6)	192,647
Tertiary Education	
Population aged 25-64 years with tertiary education (2012) (%) ⁷	40.0
Population aged 30 – 34 years with tertiary education (2012) (%) ⁷	51.0
Public expenditure on tertiary education (percentage of GDP) (2011) ⁸	1.2

2. Types of Higher Education Institutions

Higher education in Ireland is provided mainly by seven universities, 14 institutes of technology, including the Dublin Institute of Technology, and seven colleges of education. In addition, a number of other third level institutions provide specialist education in fields such as art and design, medicine, business studies, rural development, theology, music, and law.

¹ European Commission. (2013). *Eurostat Compact Guides: Basic Figures on the EU, Winter 2013/2014 Edition*. Luxembourg: Publications office of the European Union.

² Eurostat. (2013). *Population density*. Retrieved from <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00003&plugin=0>

³ Eurostat (2013). *People by age group*. Retrieved from <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/refreshTableAction.do?tab=table&plugin=1&pcode=tps00010&language=en>

⁴ Eurostat. (2013). *GDP per capita in PPS*. Retrieved from <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=teco0114>

⁵ Eurostat. (2013). *Real GDP growth rate*. Retrieved from <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=teco0115>

⁶ Eurostat (2014). *Students by ISCED level, age and sex*. Retrieved from http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=educ_en1rtl&lang=en

⁷ OECD. (2014). *Education at a glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, pp. 44. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/edu/Education-at-a-Glance-2014.pdf>

⁸ OECD. (2014). *Education at a glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, pp. 232. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/edu/Education-at-a-Glance-2014.pdf>

There are seven⁹ autonomous but publicly-funded universities in Ireland which deliver courses and undertake research across the full spectrum of all disciplines. They offer degrees in first (Bachelor), second (Master), and third (Doctoral) cycle qualifications.

The 14 institutes of technology are also publicly funded and provide programmes of education and training from apprenticeship to professional level and to degree level. These courses range over a wide spectrum covering areas such as business, science, information technology, engineering, social sciences, humanities, and music. Each institute of technology, following agreement of its quality assurance procedures with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), validates its own programmes. Additionally, each institute, under delegated authority under the Qualifications and Training Act, 1999, grants its own awards. Most institutes have delegated awarding powers up to Level 9 (Master) on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and about half of them have delegated awarding powers up to Level 10 (Doctoral). Doctoral degrees for the remainder are granted by QQI. Only the Dublin Institute of Technology has similar powers to the universities which have full authority to devise and conduct their own examinations and to confer academic awards.

Colleges of education¹⁰ are devoted predominantly to teacher education of primary and post-primary teachers although, in recent years, some of the colleges offer general degrees and postgraduate studies. The colleges are privately owned but publicly-supported. All of the colleges of education are closely linked to universities either as Recognised Colleges or as Associated Colleges. Accordingly, their academic and quality assurance procedures come within the university framework and follow its patterns.

There are a number of private colleges in Ireland which deliver programmes across a spectrum that includes business, accounting and finance, law, computing science, humanities and social sciences, journalism and media communications, interior design, and fashion design. Most offer a range of certificate, degree, and postgraduate programmes leading to awards from QQI, the Irish body responsible for awarding qualifications in higher education outside the university sector.

3. Study Structure

Ireland joined the Bologna process in 1999¹¹ from a position of broad conformity with the three-cycle structure according to Bologna guidelines. Higher education attainment and student's performance are measured in credit points compatible with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

⁹ Eurydice. (2013). *Ireland: Types of Higher Education Institutions*. Retrieved from: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Types_of_Higher_Education_Institutions

¹⁰ Eurydice. (2013). *Ireland: Types of Higher Education Institutions*. Retrieved from: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Types_of_Higher_Education_Institutions

¹¹ Europa. (2010). The Bologna process: setting up the European Higher Education Area. Retrieved from http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11088_en.htm

First cycle qualification (Bachelor)

- The first cycle qualification includes Bachelor programmes with study duration of three to four years of studies.
- The workload associated with a Bachelor degree varies between 180 and 210 ECTS credits depending on the chosen field of study.

Second cycle qualification (Master)

- The study duration for Master programmes is generally one to two years.
- The workload associated is 60 ECTS credits for a Master programme with study duration of one year or 120 ECTS credits for a two year course.

Third cycle qualification (Doctoral)

- A Doctoral degree is awarded on the basis of a thesis and an oral examination and generally takes around three to four years.

4. Admission Requirements

There are a number of modes of entry to higher education in Ireland, for example through further education courses such as Post-Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs) and access courses. However, the majority of new entrants apply to study at an institution through the Central Applications Office (CAO). Applications for entry to undergraduate courses in universities, colleges of education, institutes of technology, and some other institutes of higher education are processed by the CAO. The aim of the system is to process applications centrally and to deal with them in an efficient and fair manner. The participating institutions retain the function of making decisions on admissions.

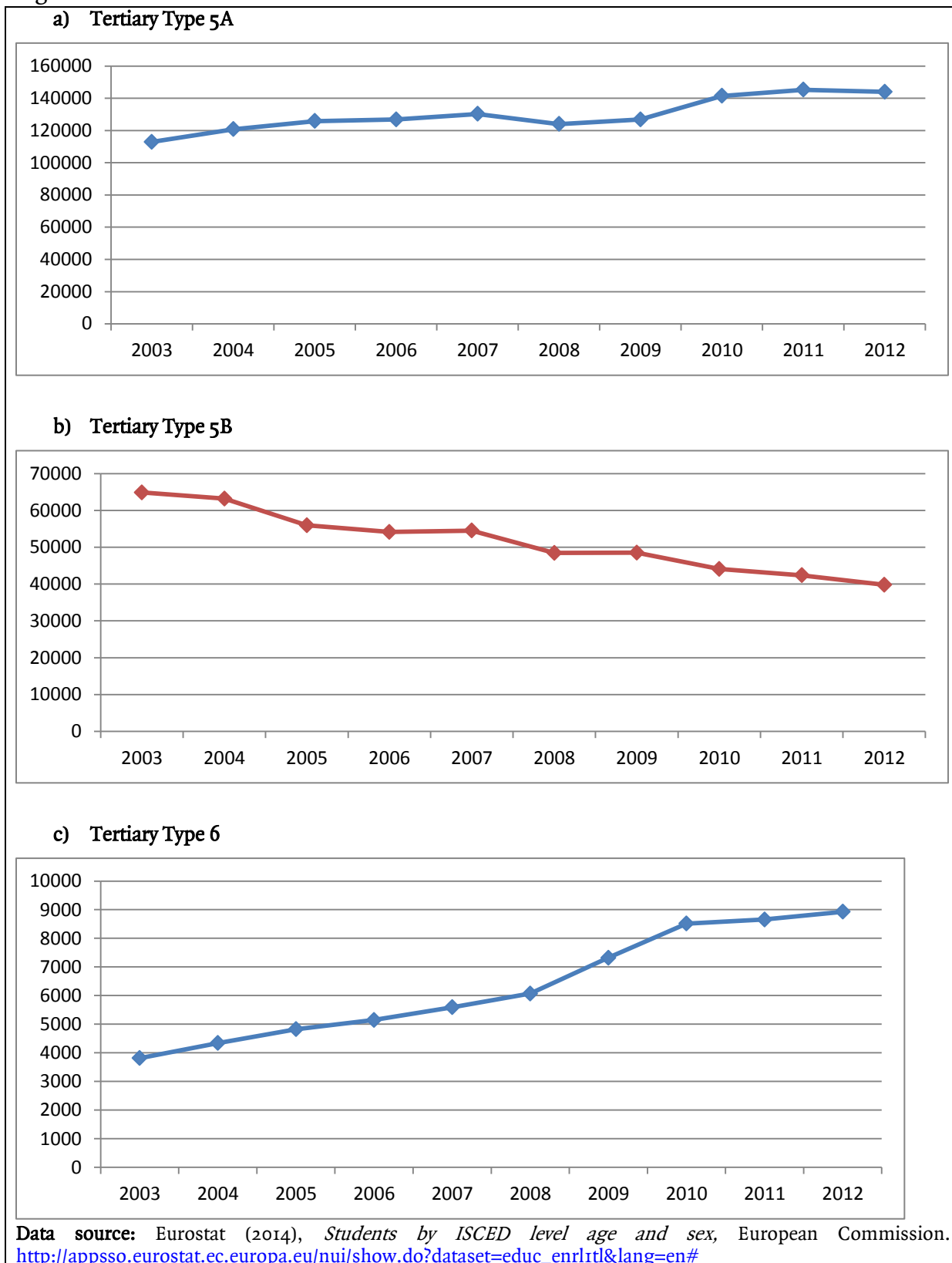
Admission to study at higher education institution normally requires the Leaving Certificate which is awarded after the successful completion of post-primary schooling. Because of the competition for places, each institution may limit the number of students entering first-year undergraduate courses and then allocate places on the basis of points achieved in the Leaving Certificate. For courses such as architecture or art, students are also required to submit their portfolios and take special aptitude tests.

The admission requirements to a Master programme in Ireland are set by the institutions themselves which typically requires an Honours Bachelor's degree. Admission to a programme leading to a Doctoral degree requires a Master degree. Holders of an Honours Bachelor degree can transfer into a Doctoral programme after the completion of one year in a Master research programme.

5. Enrolment Levels

Figure 1 shows trends in enrolment levels (ISCED 5, 5B and 6, ISCED 97) in Ireland between 2003 and 2012. The enrolment levels in Tertiary Type 5A have increased slightly; those in Tertiary Type 5B have decreased whereas in Tertiary Type 6 have increased considerably.

Figure 1: Trends in Enrolment



6. Registration and/or Tuition Fees

Ireland operates a “free fees” policy for full-time undergraduate students. Most undergraduate students attending publicly funded third-level courses do not have to pay tuition fees. Under the terms of the Free Fees Initiative, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) pays the fees to the institutions directly. The institutions charge an annual student contribution, formerly called the student services charge. It is also known as a registration fee and it covers student services and examinations. The student contribution rate for the academic year 2014/2015 is 2,750 Euro. It will rise to 3,000 Euro for the academic year 2015/16.

7. Financial Support for Students

The main source for financial support for students in Ireland is the student grant the amount of which depends on factors such as family and personal income. The student assistance fund provides financial support for students at higher education institutions who experience either temporary or ongoing financial difficulties. Eligible costs include support towards their rent, childcare costs, transport costs and books, or class materials. All students registered in an approved third level course are eligible to apply for this fund.

Students with disabilities are eligible to apply for a fund which provides them with additional supports and services while studying at a higher education institution in Ireland. The Fund for Students with Disabilities aims to ensure that students can participate fully in their academic programmes and are not disadvantaged by reason of a disability. Eligible students can receive assistance from the Fund from PLC level right up to Doctoral level.

The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) allows qualifying persons to return to full-time education in approved courses while continuing to get income support. The BTEA allows people in receipt of certain social welfare payments to retain those payments whilst participating in approved full-time courses in further and higher education.

All publicly-funded higher education institutions such as the universities or the colleges of education have an access office which provides support and advice for students in financial matters regarding in particular the student grant scheme and the student assistance fund.

Additionally, there are a number of scholarships available in Ireland offered by institutions and organisations for undergraduate and postgraduate students. Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Irish Research Council (IRC) provide scholarships, through a competitive process, for postgraduate research students studying at an Irish institution.

This report is based on the following sources:

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