

# COUNTRY OVERVIEW

## IRELAND 2014



<http://keyconet.eun.org>



## SHORT SUMMARY

Providing a national description contextualizing key competence development in your country [rationale, objectives etc.]:

Key Competence development in schools in Ireland is most visible through curriculum developments at early childhood and primary education and the lower and upper levels of post-primary education. All levels of education are at various stages of curriculum reform and the development and embedding of dispositions and competences are viewed as central to these reforms. The key competences are referred to as *key skills*, in Ireland, and related frameworks have been developed for lower and upper secondary education. *Dispositions* have been identified in the Early Childhood framework, *Aistear*, and how these might be developed as part of the review of the primary curriculum is currently under discussion. The *key skills* are based on the competences set out in the European Framework for Key Competences, but are adapted to suit the Irish context. The approach is an integrated approach in which the competences are embedded into the learning outcomes of the formal curriculum and into the assessment. They are also emphasised in the teaching and learning approaches employed in classrooms. While curriculum and assessment reforms are led from the centre, schools are encouraged to develop competences in ways that work best for them. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has worked closely with schools and teachers in the development of the key skills frameworks. Work has been underway on the embedding of *key skills* in the curriculum for upper secondary for some time and the first subjects to show evidence of this work have been Politics and Society and Mathematics. Biology, Chemistry and Physics also incorporate the key skills. While these syllabuses have now been completed they won't be implemented in schools until a new approach to assessing the sciences has been trialed in schools. As part of a national initiative (*Project Maths*) to reform mathematics education at lower and upper secondary level, a new maths curriculum and assessment model has been developed. It places a strong emphasis on the *skills* and there has been significant change to how mathematics is assessed. This mathematics curriculum is the focus of a new case study this year and can be accessed on the KeyCoNet website. Significant curriculum reforms are underway at lower secondary, and have started to be introduced on a phased basis to all schools since September (2014), and the Key Skills of Junior Cycle have a very strong presence in these reforms.



## KCD INITIATIVES:

What relevant key competence related initiatives (e.g. curricular reform/national strategy/pilot project/public consultation etc. in relation to students' curricula and assessment, teacher training, school organisation, and learning resources) have taken place in your country over the past five years, and which are planned in the future? You may also refer here to the 2012 case notes produced for your country, and any other initiatives which will be the focus of the 2013 case notes.

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### CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

#### Upper secondary education

A review of senior cycle education that commenced in the early 2000s affirmed the role of *key skills* in the formal curriculum. The introduction of key competences largely came about through a high demand, during consultations on senior cycle education, for students to develop a broader range of skills. As curriculum specifications for senior cycle have been reviewed and developed since then great attention has been paid to the embedding of *key skills*. In addition, the NCCA has worked with schools to see how key skills impact on teaching and learning in classrooms and considerable resource materials have been made available for teachers. While developments in this area at senior cycle have been very encouraging, the relatively slow implementation of curriculum reform has limited the impact of this work on teaching and learning and on assessment practices at this level of education to date. However, *Project Maths*, brought major changes to the mathematics curriculum for all second-level students. *Project Maths*, informed by international trends and the Key Skills Framework, develops mathematical competence and also the other key skills. It promotes a 'collaborative' learning culture where mathematics is seen as a network of ideas which teacher and students construct together. Learning is seen as a social activity in which students are challenged and arrive at understanding through discussion. Teaching is seen as a non-linear dialogue in which meanings and connections are explored, misunderstandings are recognised, made explicit and students learn from them. This initiative is the subject of one of the 2014 suite of case studies and can be accessed on the KeyCoNet website.

In addition, work on the transition from second-level to third-level education has been interesting in the context of the development of key skills for upper secondary, where their introduction has been encouraged in the preparation of young people for higher education.

#### Lower secondary education

The focus of reform has now turned to lower secondary education (junior cycle), arising from the findings of a major research project on the experience of post-primary education, along with recommendations from a large public consultation on lower secondary education provision and from commentary on PISA results. The launch of a new framework for junior cycle, by the Minister for Education and Skills in October 2012, signalled a strong commitment to this curriculum and assessment reform over the coming years. Literacy, numeracy and

the six key skills of junior cycle form a key pillar of these developments and these key skills are being embedded in the curriculum and assessment specifications, of all subjects for all schools, over a timeframe that will extend from 2014 – 2020. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Department of Education and Skills, State Examinations Commission, Teachers' Unions, School Management bodies and other stakeholders in education are involved in this reform and the work in the key skills area has drawn particular support. All teachers in Irish post-primary schools and their junior cycle students will be involved in this through its implementation.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is working with 48 schools in a development network and also works with other networks that were established by partner organisations. More information on the Key Skills of Junior Cycle can be found [here](#).

The key skills have been embedded into the curriculum and assessment specification for the subject English which was introduced to all Irish schools from this September (2014) and into nine short courses which are now available for schools. These can be found at <http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Short-Courses>. All other subjects will be reformed over the coming years and the key skills will be embedded in each subject as it is reviewed.

## **Primary education**


Curriculum reform for primary education is currently focused on the language and mathematics curricula and the role of dispositions/skills is currently under discussion.

A national strategy on literacy and numeracy introduced in 2011 is placing a strong focus on the competence development at primary and lower secondary education in Ireland. *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, 2011 – 2020*.

## **Assessment**

To date assessment for certification at the end of lower secondary and upper secondary levels of education in Ireland has been terminal and external. Reform of junior cycle curriculum and assessment will change this allowing for greater variety of assessment methods and more flexibility in their timing.

The approach to the development and assessment of key competences in the Irish education system is to embed the competences in curriculum and assessment specifications and to support their development in teaching and learning approaches and practices. Therefore, they will mainly be assessed through the learning outcomes of the curriculum specifications. However, as the developments at junior cycle progress and proposals for different methods of assessment are considered, other opportunities for the assessment of the *key skills* will be discussed.



Emphasis on assessment for learning in both primary and post-primary schools also contributes to the development of key competences.

### **Teacher education**

There are various initiatives operating in pre-service education colleges. For example, the BSc Science and Mathematics Education course in National University of Ireland, Maynooth runs a 12 week module for student teachers, based on the NCCA *Key Skills Framework*. Students explore key pedagogies including ICT for the development of *key skills* in a very active and participatory way. They teach a topic/s using these methodologies and then assess the learning. Student teachers then report on this assessment using identified criteria.

As developments in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary developments are rolled out in schools, programmes of continuing professional development reflect the emphasis on key competences. There will also be collaboration between the NCCA and initial and continuing teacher education providers.



### **OVERALL KCD APPROACH:**

How would you characterise the overall approach to key competence development in your country? Is it a holistic approach characterised by an overarching strategy, or rather a targeted approach focusing on one or more specific dimension of the education system (student curriculum, assessment, teacher training, school organisation, learning resources etc.)? Does it cover formal and non-formal learning, both primary and secondary school levels?

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The approach to key competences has been moving towards a holistic approach in recent years. Work with schools at upper secondary was instrumental in building awareness and support for the embedding of key competences in curriculum, assessment and teaching and learning. This approach is now very evident in the Framework for Junior Cycle and ongoing work supporting its continuing implementation (since September 2014). This major reform will have the effect of aligning the curriculum, assessment, teacher education, learning resources and school planning. It will be supported by online resources being developed with schools and teachers in the development network of 48 schools. This will cover formal learning in lower secondary education – but developments at primary and upper secondary will also have significant impact on formal learning in coming years.

### **KEY COMPETENCES ADDRESSED:**

Is there a focus on any particular EU key competence/s or a combination of them, or perhaps there is more of a focus on alternative/complementary competences defined at national level?

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The first three competences, communication in mother tongue, communication in foreign languages and mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technolo-

gy are covered in the traditional subject curricula. There are six key skills of junior cycle: Managing Myself; Staying Well; Communicating; Being Creative; Working with Others; and Managing Information and Thinking. Each of the six skills incorporates Learning to Learn and Digital Competence; alongside these Literacy and Numeracy are also emphasised. These six key skills relate to the following key competences of the European Framework: Digital Competence, Learning to Learn, Social and Civic Competences, and Sense of Initiative and Entrepreneurship. The transversal skills of critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem solving, decision making and constructive management of feelings also correspond closely with the six key skills.

## STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED:

Who are the main stakeholders involved in key competence development in your country?

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The main stakeholders involved in these approaches to competence development in Ireland are:

- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- Department of Education and Skills.
- State Examinations Commission.
- Teaching and school management organisations.
- Networks of schools.
- Parent organisations.
- Teacher education organisations.

## KCD IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES:

How does the implementation of key competence development/reform in school education function in your country? (*e.g. process followed, political commitment, consultation with stakeholders and their respective roles, incentives for stakeholders, dedicated funding, teaching material, definition of goals and standards, assessment and evaluation mechanisms, impact on teacher training/professional development and school practices/leadership, scaling-up approach, based on research/evidence? etc.*)

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Key competence development in school education is closely aligned with mainstream reforms in curriculum and assessment. As part of these reforms there are consultation processes that involve all of the key stakeholders.

Two approaches have been taken in this respect:

### **Policy development**

Key competence development is incorporated in the development of curriculum and assessment reforms: new junior cycle development, primary curriculum reforms and senior cycle subject developments. Therefore funding, teaching resources, training and professional development are all aligned with the mainstream reforms. This commences with a policy document outlining the framework for the reforms, followed by an implementation strategy and the subsequent rollout of the programme of reform.

### **Work with schools**

Significant work with schools, undertaken through a number of projects undertaken by the NCCA, on the impact of key skills on teaching and learning has added to the research evidence base supporting the introduction of key skills and the approach taken to their implementation. The initial work in this respect was with a number of senior cycle subjects and the gathering of evidence in the form of activities, video evidence and teacher and learner reflections added to the knowledge base and played a strong advocacy role in the development of key competences in other developments. This approach is now continuing with the establishment of a network of 48 schools to support the initial phase of the junior cycle developments.

## **OBSTACLES AND FACILITATORS:**

What would you identify as obstacles and/or facilitators to developing and implementing a key competence approach in your country's education system, or to more generally introducing any type of educational reform related to the definition of key competences and revision of the curriculum, and to joint collaboration on such issues relying on the input from those working on different dimensions (e.g. teacher training, learning resources etc.)?

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The centrally developed, externally assessed nature of the Irish education system at secondary level present a challenge to implementing and assessing cross-curricular competences such as learning to learn, creativity and innovation. Teachers see themselves as subject teachers.

To date, the prevalence of external assessment has been a limiter of change in classroom practices and more innovative teaching and learning. Forthcoming changes to these arrangements at lower secondary have the potential to open up opportunities for real change.

### **Facilitators**

- School networks that provide evidence of real teachers in real classrooms benefiting from working with key skills.
- Plenty of usable resource materials that teachers can use and share.






- Bringing teachers together to learn from each other.
- Assessment that allows for the assessment of a broad range of competences and assessment over time.
- A good evidence base – from research and from practitioners.
- All stakeholders sharing a common understanding of key competences in their own contexts.
- Strong public awareness and support.
- Engagement with business and industry interests.

Initial teacher education programmes have undergone a major review resulting in programmes becoming a two year Master's level qualification, The Professional Master of Education. This should result in more space for the development of key competence pedagogies within the courses. The learning outcomes, set out by the Teaching Council, encompass the standards of teaching, knowledge, skill and competence together with values, attitudes and professional dispositions which are central to the practice of teaching.





## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/USEFUL URLs:

-  Key Skills for Senior Cycle Education:  
[http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Post-Primary\\_Education/Senior\\_Cycle/Key\\_Skills/](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Senior_Cycle/Key_Skills/)
-  Key Skills of Junior Cycle:  
<http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Planning/Key-Skills>  
[http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Curriculum/Key-Skills-\(1\)](http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Curriculum/Key-Skills-(1))
-  Initial Teacher Education:  
<http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/teacher-education/initial-teacher-education-ite.4576.html>

## ABOUT EUROPEAN SCHOOLNET






European Schoolnet is the coordinator of the KeyCoNet project.

European Schoolnet is a network of 31 Ministries of Education from across the European member states, leading educational innovation at European level. As a major international think tank, European Schoolnet operates key European services in education on behalf of the European Commission, member Ministries of Education and industry partners.

European Schoolnet's activities are divided among three areas of work:

- Policy, research and innovation: information sharing and evidence building.
- Schools services: enhancing cooperation between schools across Europe.
- Advocacy: how ICT and digital media contribute to transforming teaching and learning processes.

### Join us on

-  <http://europeanschoolnet.org>
-  Key Competence Network on School Education – KeyCoNet
-  #21skillscourse  #KeyCoNet
-  <http://www.europeanschoolnetacademy.eu/web/keyconet>

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