STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

Department for the Economy
An Roinn Geilleagair
www.economy-ni.gov.uk

Cosáin ghairme

Vocational Pathways for Irish-medium Learners: Challenges and Opportunities

November 2026



Prof Noel Purdy OBE, Dr Katie Tate, Dr Emilia Symington,
Dr Mark Ballentine, Kirsty Addison, Dr Claire McVeigh,
Prof Ken Gibson MBE, Prof Adam Boddison OBE

Executive Summary

Aims of the Study

This report presents the findings of a mixed-methods study, funded by the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland), examining the provision of vocational pathways and qualifications for Irish-medium (IM) learners. Drawing on documentary analysis, surveys, focus groups and interviews with learners and key stakeholders, the study identifies the current strengths and limitations of provision and offers recommendations to support future policy and practice.

The study set out to explore the following key research objectives:

- To identify the current vocational qualification pathways available to Irish-medium learners;
- To critically examine the challenges, gaps and barriers affecting the expansion of Irish-medium vocational provision;
- To develop a detailed understanding of awareness and demand for these pathways among IM learners;
- To draw lessons and offer recommendations for policymakers and service providers.

Methodology

The study drew on the perspectives of young people currently in IM post-primary education and young people already engaged in IM vocational qualifications, as well as the perspectives of school leaders, training providers and other key stakeholders. A mixed-methods design was adopted, consisting of desk-based research, surveys and semi-structured interviews:

Phase 1A: Documentary and Policy Analysis and Mapping of Vocational Pathways (Northern Ireland)

A review was conducted of the Department for the Economy's *Skills Action Plan* and related departmental strategies, Irish-medium education and language policy documentation, vocational qualification frameworks and relevant regulatory guidance in Northern Ireland. This analysis was used to map existing vocational pathways relevant to IM learners in Northern Ireland and to identify structural features that may enable or constrain access to vocational qualifications.

Phase 1B: Cross-Jurisdictional Benchmarking (Wales and Republic of Ireland)

A comparative and benchmarking analysis was conducted, focusing on vocational pathways and training models in Wales and the Republic of Ireland. This phase examined governance arrangements, accreditation models, regulatory frameworks and learner support infrastructures to identify transferable practices relevant to the Northern Ireland context.

Phase 2A: Survey Design, Implementation and Analysis

Two short online surveys were developed and sent to IM learners. The first survey was sent to pupils in years 11-14 in IM post-primary schools (n=209). It explored learners' aspirations, awareness of vocational pathways and qualifications,

confidence in progression options, and the quality of information, advice and guidance received. The second survey was sent to learners currently engaged in IM vocational or training provision, including adult and community-based provision and sector-specific training (n=15). This survey focused on learners' lived experience of accessing training through Irish, including entry routes, learner supports and any barriers encountered in practice.

Phase 2B: Interview Design, Implementation and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews and small group discussions were conducted with key stakeholders (n=26), including representatives from IM schools, training providers, awarding organisations and regulators, careers advisers, cultural and language organisations, Northern Ireland government officials, and a representative from Qualifications Wales. These discussions explored barriers to access and progression, experiences of accreditation and assessment through Irish, learner demand, employer engagement, and system-level challenges and opportunities. Focus groups were also conducted with IM post-primary school pupils (n=25) and learners currently engaged in IM vocational or training provision (n=8) to explore their aspirations, awareness of vocational pathways, perceptions of accessibility and confidence in progression routes.

Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of data from the learner surveys, focus groups and interviews with learners, tutors and other key stakeholders, and informed by a critical and comparative review of the relevant research and policy literature, the report presents the following conclusions and recommendations under six key headings:

Upscaling provision

- *Conclusion*: The findings demonstrate a clear and growing demand for Irish-medium vocational pathways in Northern Ireland, reflecting the continued expansion of the Irish-medium school sector and the increasing importance of accessible, high-quality vocational training and qualifications for Irish-medium learners.
- *Conclusion:* Current Irish-medium vocational pathways in Northern Ireland are however limited, with delivery concentrated primarily in West Belfast through Gaelchúrsaí. While some outreach activity exists through this organisation, significant regional disparities in access remain.
- *Recommendation:* Existing Irish-medium vocational pathways should therefore be expanded to meet the growing demand, and provision should be upscaled to ensure equitable access for all Irish-medium learners across Northern Ireland. As an immediate and low-risk route to expansion, consideration should be given to piloting a formal partnership between an established Irish-language provider and one or more Further Education Colleges, enabling Irish-medium delivery to be connected to mainstream FE infrastructure, regulated qualifications, apprenticeship pathways and progression routes.
- *Recommendation:* Building on existing careers information, advice and guidance, particularly within Irish-medium schools, greater attention should be

given across all school sectors, further education colleges and training providers to Irish-medium vocational pathways. This should ensure that learners, parents, education and training practitioners and careers advisers are more fully aware of the pathways available, progression opportunities and their relevance to future employment.

Strategy

- *Conclusion:* The findings highlight the absence of a coordinated, system-wide strategy for Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications, with current provision often reliant on fragmented, localised initiatives and individual goodwill rather than long-term strategic planning.
- *Recommendation:* A coordinated, cross-sector and long-term government strategy is required to support the development, delivery and sustainability of Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications in Northern Ireland. Any strategy should include clear responsibilities, timescales, measurable targets and mechanisms for monitoring progress in relation to learner access, regional equity, qualification availability, workforce capacity and progression outcomes.
- *Recommendation:* Lessons should be drawn from Wales which now has a cross-departmental, government-led approach to Welsh-medium vocational pathways and qualifications. At the same time, it is important to recognise significant political and structural differences between the Welsh and the Northern Ireland contexts.
- *Recommendation:* The findings point to the need for a designated body, centre or intermediary function with explicit responsibility for coordinating Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications provision across the post-compulsory sector, including planning, provider engagement, resource development, workforce support and monitoring of progress.
- *Recommendation:* Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications provision should be explicitly considered within forthcoming vocational qualifications reform to ensure that Irish-medium learners are not excluded from newly developed pathways, qualifications or assessment arrangements.

Long-term, sustainable funding

- *Conclusion:* Short-term and inconsistent funding arrangements were identified as a major barrier to the development, expansion and sustainability of Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications, limiting providers' ability to build capacity, invest in infrastructure and plan strategically for future growth.
- *Recommendation:* The expansion of Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications will require sustained, long-term investment to support the development, delivery and scaling of provision. Funding should be dedicated and, where appropriate, ring-fenced to ensure that Irish-medium vocational provision is not dependent on short-term project funding, local discretion or competition with larger English-medium programmes.
- *Recommendation:* A mapping exercise should be undertaken to identify existing Irish-language capacity within the further education and training workforce, followed by a targeted practitioner development programme to support Irish-speaking staff to teach, assess and develop vocational learning through Irish.

- *Recommendation:* Investment in facilities, infrastructure and updated resources will be necessary to meet growing learner demand and support the delivery of high-quality vocational pathways and qualifications.

Awarding Body Engagement

- *Conclusion:* Engagement with Awarding Organisations remains constrained by issues of market scale, commercial viability, translation costs and assessment risk, resulting in a narrowing range of Irish-medium vocational qualifications currently available in Northern Ireland.
- *Recommendation:* Explore the establishment of an Irish-medium qualifications hub to support and coordinate Awarding Organisation engagement more efficiently, and to address the challenges of financial viability associated with smaller learner cohorts.
- *Recommendation:* Engage with relevant Awarding Organisations to expand the range and availability of Irish-medium vocational qualifications.
- *Recommendation:* As an initial entry point for Awarding Organisations, prioritise qualifications that utilise lower-risk assessment methods such as coursework-based assessment.
- *Recommendation:* Models of shared translation, moderation and quality assurance support should be further explored, including phased approaches in which initial translation support is gradually complemented by the training of Irish-medium practitioners as assessors, moderators or examiners.
- *Recommendation:* Further consideration should be given to the regulatory position regarding the availability of vocational qualifications through Irish, including whether existing or future qualifications policy could place clearer duties on relevant bodies to support Irish-medium access.

Cross-border collaboration and shared resources

- *Conclusion:* Cross-border collaboration emerged as a valuable mechanism for strengthening Irish-medium vocational provision, particularly through the sharing of expertise, resources and approaches already developed within the Republic of Ireland.
- *Recommendation:* Develop long-term partnerships with Irish-medium training providers and Awarding Organisations in the Republic of Ireland to facilitate the sharing of expertise, resources and best practice.
- *Recommendation:* The possibility of adapting Irish-medium vocational resources and qualifications already available in the Republic of Ireland for use in Northern Ireland should be actively explored. It is acknowledged that this may require adaptation to Ulster Irish.
- *Recommendation:* Government departments and Awarding Organisations north and south should actively explore the potential savings to be gained from the joint development and mutual recognition of Irish-medium vocational qualifications between the two jurisdictions.

Further development and research

- *Conclusion:* The findings indicate that there remains a limited evidence base on Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to learner outcomes, employer perspectives, labour market demand and long-term progression pathways.

- *Recommendation:* Identify existing evidence gaps and commission further research to inform future policy development, qualification design and long-term sectoral planning.
- *Recommendation:* In addition to responding to learner demand, policy development should consider how employer demand for Irish-language skills can be strengthened, particularly in public, community, education, childcare, media, heritage, tourism and service-sector contexts where bilingual capacity may have social, cultural or economic value.

Overall, the findings indicate that while important foundations for Irish-medium vocational qualifications already exist in Northern Ireland, provision remains limited and uneven. Addressing the strategic, financial and structural challenges identified in this study will be essential to ensuring that Irish-medium learners have equitable access to high-quality Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications across Northern Ireland.

Acknowledgements

The research team at the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU), Stranmillis University College, Belfast, would like to thank all those who participated in this research project, and in particular the pupils and vocational learners, school leaders, officials and other key stakeholders who so readily agreed to participate in the data collection. Finally, we are grateful to the Department for the Economy (An Roinn Geilleagair) for funding this important and timely research and for the consistent support of Louise Stevenson and Ian Getgood.

How to cite this research report:

Purdy, N., Tate, K., Symington, E., Ballentine, M., McCrudden, K., McVeigh, C., Gibson, K. & Boddison, A. (2027) *Cosáin ghairme - Vocational Pathways for Irish-medium Learners: Challenges and Opportunities*. Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, Stranmillis University College.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary **2**

Phase 1A: Documentary and Policy Analysis and Mapping of Vocational Pathways (Northern Ireland) 2

Phase 1B: Cross-Jurisdictional Benchmarking (Wales and Republic of Ireland). 2

Phase 2A: Survey Design, Implementation and Analysis 2

Phase 2B: Interview Design, Implementation and Analysis 3

Upscaling provision 3

Strategy 4

Long-term, sustainable funding 4

Awarding Body Engagement 5

Cross-border collaboration and shared resources 5

Further development and research 5

Acknowledgements **7**

List of Figures **12**

List of Tables **12**

Chapter 1: Introduction and Methodology **14**

1.1 Research Design and Methodology 14

Phase 1A: Documentary and Policy Analysis and Mapping of Vocational Pathways (Northern Ireland) 14

Phase 1B: Cross-Jurisdictional Benchmarking (Wales and Republic of Ireland) 14

Phase 2A: Survey Design, Implementation and Analysis 14

Phase 2B: Interview Design, Implementation and Analysis 15

1.2 Ethical Considerations 15

1.3 Data Analysis 16

1.4 Research Limitations 16

Chapter 2: Documentary and Policy Analysis: Northern Ireland **17**

2.1 Background and Context 17

2.1.1 Growth of Irish-medium Education 17

2.1.2 Irish Language Frameworks 18

2.2 Vocational Qualification Frameworks 20
2.2.1 Northern Ireland 20
2.2.2 Perceptions of Vocational Qualifications 22
2.3 Irish-medium vocational pathways 24
2.3.1 Post-Primary School 24
2.3.2 Gaelchúrsaí 25
2.3.3 Belfast City Council 26
2.4 Barriers 27
2.4.1 Regulation and Accreditation 27
2.4.2 Resources and Provider capacity 29
2.4.3 Regional Disparity 30
2.5 Conclusion 31
Chapter 3: Benchmarking Minority Language VET: Wales and the Republic of Ireland 32
3.1 Introduction 32
3.2 Wales: Findings Across Five Dimensions 34
3.2.1 Governance and System Architecture 34
3.2.2 Accreditation and Qualification Frameworks 36
3.2.3 Learner Support Infrastructures 39
3.2.4 Provider Capacity and Workforce 42
3.2.5 Enabling conditions 44
3.3 Republic of Ireland: Findings Across Five Dimensions 48
3.3.1 Governance and System Architecture 48
3.3.2 Accreditation and Qualification Frameworks 54
3.3.3 Learner Support Infrastructures 55
3.3.4 Provider Capacity and Workforce 57
3.3.5 Enabling conditions 59
3.4 Comparative Analysis 63
3.5 Transferability to Northern Ireland 69
3.5.1 Transferability Analysis 70

Chapter 4: Irish Medium School Pupil Survey Results 74
4.1 Descriptive Analysis 74
4.1.1 About You 74
4.1.2 Aspirations and Awareness of Vocational Pathways 75
4.1.3 Barriers to Access 80
4.1.4 Final Reflections 81
4.2 Bi-Variate Analysis 82
4.2.1 Gender 82
4.2.2 Year Group 85
4.3 Pupil Open-Ended Response Analysis 90
Chapter 5: Current Irish Medium Vocational Learner Survey Results 94
5.1 Descriptive Analysis 94
5.1.1 About You 94
5.1.2 Access and Entry 97
5.1.3 Assessment and Recognition 100
5.1.4 Current Experiences 101
5.2 Vocational Learner Open-Ended Response Analysis 103
Chapter 6: Qualitative Findings 105
6.1 Access and Availability of Provision 105
6.2 Provider Capacity and System Readiness 111
6.3 Learner Experience 117
6.4 Market Viability and Scale 121
6.5 Employer and Stakeholder Engagement 124
6.6 Comparative Insights 125
6.7 Participant Recommendations 127
6.8 Conclusion 129
Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations 131
7.1 Upscaling provision 131
7.2 Strategy 131
7.3 Long-term, sustainable funding 132

7.4 Awarding Body Engagement..... 132
7.5 Cross-border collaboration and shared resources..... 133
7.6 Further development and research..... 133
References..... 134

List of Figures

Figure 1: Governance and delivery structure of the Welsh VET system
Figure 2: Governance and delivery structure of the Republic of Ireland VET system

List of Tables

Table 1.1. Qualitative data collection participant overview.
Table 4.1. Age of participants.
Table 4.2. School year for participants.
Table 4.3. Participant gender.
Table 4.4. Schools attended by participants.
Table 4.5. Importance of continuing learning through Irish after leaving post-primary school.
Table 4.6. Interest in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish.
Table 4.7. Clarity of available vocational opportunities after school through Irish.
Table 4.8. Source of information or advice about next steps after school.
Table 4.9. Awareness of vocational options available through Irish.
Table 4.10. Perceived main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish.
Table 4.11. Confidence in continuing education or training through Irish if wanted.
Table 4.12. Comparison of Q6 (importance of continuing learning through Irish after school) and gender.
Table 4.13. Comparison of Q7 (interest in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish) and gender.
Table 4.14. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option ‘limited choice of courses’, with gender.
Table 4.15. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option ‘not interested in vocational routes’, with gender.
Table 4.16. Comparison of Q6 (importance of continuing learning through Irish after school) and year group.
Table 4.17. Comparison of Q7 (interest in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish) and year group.

Table 4.18. Comparison of Q8 (clarity of available vocational qualifications after school through Irish) and year group.
Table 4.19. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option ‘lack of information’, with year group.
Table 4.20. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option ‘limited choice of courses’, with year group.
Table 4.21. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option ‘limited spaces available’, with year group.
Table 4.22. Comparison of Q12 (confidence in continuing education or training through Irish after school) and year group.
Table 5.1. Participant gender.
Table 5.2. Age of participants.
Table 5.3. Where do you live?
Table 5.4. Type of training or qualification currently undertaking (or recently completed).
Table 5.5. Type of course currently enrolled in.
Table 5.6. Current training delivery language(s).
Table 5.7. Current qualification assessment language(s).
Table 5.8. How learners first found out about their current training or qualification.
Table 5.9. Ease or difficulty of finding training through Irish in learners’ area.
Table 5.10. Obstacles/barriers faced by learners in accessing their training or qualification.
Table 5.11. Clarity of assessment arrangements for learners’ courses.
Table 5.12. Learners’ feelings about whether their qualification will or won’t be recognised by employers.
Table 5.13. Learners’ opinions on whether their qualifications provide clear routes into further training or employment.
Table 5.14. Perceived course enjoyment.
Table 5.15. Perceived course usefulness.
Table 5.16. Learners’ opinions on whether they would recommend their course to others.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Methodology

This research set out to investigate the provision of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland for Irish-medium (IM) learners. The study was designed to build a detailed understanding of current provision, perceived gaps in the current system, awareness and demand for these pathways among IM learners and opportunities for improvement. This study draws on the perspectives of IM learners currently in vocational courses delivered through the medium of Irish as well as IM post-primary pupils considering progression into vocational pathways. It also draws on the perspectives of a range of stakeholders including school staff in IM post-primary schools, awarding bodies and Irish language organisations. The study follows a mixed-methods design structured across multiple phases, combining desk-based research, online surveys and interviews.

1.1 Research Design and Methodology

The project employed a two-phase mixed-methods design.

Phase 1A: Documentary and Policy Analysis and Mapping of Vocational Pathways (Northern Ireland)

A structured review was conducted of the Skills Action Plan and related departmental strategies, Irish-medium education and language policy documentation, vocational qualification frameworks, and relevant regulatory guidance in Northern Ireland. This analysis was used to map existing vocational pathways and accreditation arrangements relevant to IM learners in Northern Ireland and to identify structural features that may enable or constrain access to vocational qualifications.

Phase 1B: Cross-Jurisdictional Benchmarking (Wales and Republic of Ireland)

A second strand involved a comparative and benchmarking analysis focusing on vocational education and training models in Wales and the Republic of Ireland. This phase examined governance arrangements, accreditation models, regulatory frameworks, and learner support infrastructures, with the aim of identifying transferable practices relevant to the Northern Ireland context.

Phase 2A: Survey Design, Implementation and Analysis

Two short online surveys were developed and sent to IM learners. The first survey was sent to pupils in years 11-14 in IM post-primary schools. It explored learners' aspirations, awareness of vocational and training pathways, perceptions of accessibility to vocational pathways and qualifications through Irish, confidence in progression options, and the quality of information, advice, and guidance received. The second survey was sent to learners currently engaged in IM vocational or training provision, including adult and community-based provision and sector-specific training. This survey focused on learners' lived experience of accessing training through Irish, including entry routes, learner supports, assessment and accreditation arrangements, and any barriers encountered in practice.

The school pupil survey was distributed directly to five schools (two standalone IM schools and three IM units) via email, addressed to either the Principal or the general school contact email address. The learner survey was distributed via email to the

main IM vocational training provider in Belfast. Both surveys were distributed on 10th March 2026 and closed on 25th March 2026.

Phase 2B: Interview Design, Implementation and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews and small group discussions were conducted with key stakeholders, including representatives from IM schools, training providers, awarding organisations and regulators, careers advisers, cultural and language organisations, relevant officials from the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, and a representative from Qualifications Wales. These discussions explored barriers to access and progression, experiences of accreditation and assessment through Irish, learner demand, employer engagement, and system-level challenges and opportunities.

Focus groups were also conducted with IM post-primary school pupils to explore their aspirations, awareness of vocational pathways, perceptions of accessibility and confidence in progression routes.

These interviews were conducted between February and March 2026. The majority of these took place online. Focus groups with post-primary school pupils, current IM VQ learners and interviews with school leaders took place in person on the school and learning site. This approach ensured that insights were drawn from those with lived experience and those involved in the design and delivery of provision. A breakdown of interview and focus group participants is presented in the table below:

Demographic	**Number of Participants interviewed**
IM School Pupils	25
IM VQ Learners	8
School Leaders	4
Other stakeholders, including Awarding Bodies and Irish language organisations	21
Qualifications Wales	1
Total	59

Table 1.1. Qualitative data collection participant overview.

1.2 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) 2024 *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Ethical approval was secured from the Research Ethics Committee at Stranmillis University College. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study and gave voluntary informed consent prior to participation.

Confidentiality was ensured through the anonymisation of participant data. All data was stored securely on encrypted, password-protected servers accessible only to the research team.

1.3 Data Analysis

A total of n= 209 responses were received for the ‘IM School Pupil survey’ and n= 15 responses for the ‘IM Vocational Learner survey’. The data from the two surveys (which included questions on learners’ aspirations, awareness of vocational and training pathways, perceived accessibility of vocational pathways and qualifications through Irish, confidence in progression options and the quality of information, advice and guidance received) underwent descriptive analysis to produce summary results, including for demographics. This was followed by bi-variate analysis for the pupil survey, to explore relationships or trends between the key variables, with a focus on gender and year group comparisons. Bi-variate analysis was not conducted on the VQ learner survey due to a small sample size. Weighted scoring of 5-point Likert-scaled questions was applied across both the descriptive and bi-variate analysis, as detailed in the survey analysis sections. Finally, open-ended survey responses were analysed thematically, using repeating/common words and phrases to provide further insight into learner perspectives and to support the interpretation of quantitative findings.

All qualitative interview and focus group data were transcribed in full and analysed using a thematic approach. Through an iterative coding process, six key themes emerged, reflecting shared experiences of participants, perceived barriers, and priorities for improving the provision of IM vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

1.4 Research Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the response rate for the ‘IM Vocational Learner survey’ was relatively low, which likely reflects the limited availability of such provision in Northern Ireland. The timeframe for data collection also imposed limitations, with schools given a two-week window to complete the survey. No responses were received from the three IM units/streams located in English-medium post-primary schools, meaning that findings from the school survey are drawn exclusively from the two standalone IM schools, which may affect representation. In addition, the scheduling of interviews was limited to stakeholders available up to the end of March 2026.

Chapter 2: Documentary and Policy Analysis: Northern Ireland

This chapter examines the policy and legislative context surrounding Irish-medium education (IME) in Northern Ireland, with particular emphasis on learner access to vocational pathways and qualifications. It outlines the growth of the Irish-medium (IM) sector, the increasing demand for educational provision, and the key policy and legislative frameworks underpinning its development. It then examines vocational qualification frameworks in Northern Ireland, before exploring those currently accessible to IM learners. Finally, it identifies key barriers to accessing vocational pathways through Irish and highlights gaps in current IM provision in this area.

2.1 Background and Context

2.1.1 Growth of Irish-medium Education

Demand for IME has grown across Northern Ireland, where it is now recognised as the fastest-growing area of education (O'Boyle et al., 2023). A recent report by Altram, the lead regional organisation promoting IM Early Years Education in Northern Ireland, suggests that the growth in IME reflects an increasing parental confidence in bilingualism and the cultural, cognitive and social benefits of immersion education, particularly from an early age (Altram, 2025). The benefits of immersion and bilingual education are well-documented, with evidence of positive educational outcomes identified in the IME sector, particularly in terms of academic performance (Gilleece et al., 2012).

The growth of IME in Northern Ireland is evident within the early years sector, which plays a vital role in promoting and sustaining the Irish language by immersing children in a bilingual environment from an early age. Altram reports that 41% of providers in this sector are oversubscribed, suggesting that available places are insufficient to meet demand in several regions (Altram, 2025, pp. 14-15). Beyond early years provision, similar trends are evident across the school system, and the number of IM schools has also expanded; according to the Department of Education (DE) (2025), there are 28 standalone IM primary schools and 7 units, alongside 2 standalone post-primary schools and 3 units. There are also 46 IM nursery settings across Northern Ireland, comprising 23 voluntary/private and 23 statutory settings (Purdy et al., 2025, p. 12).

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2023) forecasts continued growth in pupil enrolment, with primary-level numbers projected to increase from 4,664 in 2022/23 to 5,462 in 2027/28. At post-primary level, enrolment is expected to rise from 1,746 to 2,494 across the same period. At Gaelcholáiste Dhoire in Dungiven, for example, enrolment has increased from 16 pupils in 2015 to 350 in 2025, and is projected to reach 600 pupils by 2030 (Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2025). This growth is further reinforced by the expansion of Irish as a subject in schools, with the proportion of schools offering Irish rising from 35 per cent in 2023 to 41.9 per cent in 2025 (Duff & Collen, 2025, p. 35). Notably, the *A Fair Start* report also notes that the IM sector has a higher proportion of socially and educationally disadvantaged pupils and a greater percentage of pupils on the SEN register (22.4%) compared to English-medium schools (19.3%) (Purdy et al., 2021, p. 66).

These trends indicate sustained growth in IM provision, with significant implications for capacity, resourcing and progression pathways. For example, the growth of IM schools will affect both mainstream and vocational education, requiring an increase in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) graduates. Recent projections suggest that the number of Irish-medium ITE graduates will need to reach 41 graduates per year at primary level and 27 at post-primary level by 2027/28 (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, 2023). Purdy et al. (2025) have noted the importance of this, and have outlined strategies in other jurisdictions, including Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland, and the Basque Country, to support the recruitment and retention of immersion education teachers.

2.1.2 Irish Language Frameworks

The growth of IM provision in Northern Ireland across different age ranges operates within a framework of local, national and international policy. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) provides an important political and legal framework for the protection of minority languages, including Irish, in Northern Ireland. The Agreement recognises the right of communities to use their language and preserve their culture, which forms an important foundation for IM education and related cultural initiatives. It also supports the promotion of Irish in public life, including its inclusion in government policy, education frameworks and community programmes. This was reflected in the GFA's commitment to "*place a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education in line with current provision for integrated education*" (GFA, 1998).

This statutory duty to support IME was later formalised through Article 89 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. This Order states that, "*it shall be the duty of the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education*". This duty is also supported by the Education Authority's (EA) ongoing work in Northern Ireland (Education Authority, 2024). Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta was also established by DE in 2000. It is the official representative body for IME in Northern Ireland and promotes, facilitates and encourages IME across nurseries, primary and post-primary schools.

The 2020 *New Decade, New Approach* agreement also committed to strengthening Irish language provision in Northern Ireland by introducing legislative protection, proposing the appointment of an Irish Language Commissioner and developing a 20-year strategy. These commitments were enacted through the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022. This Act provides additional legislative recognition for the Irish language within Northern Ireland and established the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression to promote diversity. It also established the position of Irish Language Commissioner to protect and enhance the use of Irish, with the aim of strengthening the visibility of Irish in public life. The first Irish Language Commissioner, Dr Pól Deeds, was appointed in October 2025.

An Expert Advisory Panel (EAP) on the Irish Language Strategy was also established by the Northern Ireland Department for Communities (DfC). The panel was tasked with advising on the new long-term 20-year strategy, as pledged in the 2020 *New Decade, New Approach* political agreement. The EAP's report, published in 2022, emphasised the importance of strengthening Irish-language infrastructure, including education and workforce development. In particular, the EAP

recommended that, "*as part of any strategy, the Department for Communities develops an Irish Language Academy*", (p. 93) to support workforce development, economic opportunities, and the growth of Irish-language provision across sectors. The report also makes an explicit reference to vocational qualifications, as recommendations from the EAP highlighted the need to develop "*additional vocational course provision in conjunction with GaelChúrsaí*" (p. 78). In particular, the panel recommended that:

> *"vocational learning through the medium of Irish should be accommodated, based on local demand. Assessment of vocational qualifications through the medium of Irish should also be facilitated"* (p. 64).

The importance of developing vocational qualifications within the IM sector is further emphasised in the Department for the Economy's (DfE) *Skills Action Plan* of October 2025. The Action Plan is a three-year strategic policy framework aimed at developing and strengthening Northern Ireland's skills system and addressing labour market challenges. The plan aims to strengthen Northern Ireland's workforce by aligning education, training and skills development more closely with labour market needs, particularly in emerging sectors and in response to technological and environmental transitions. It focuses on three key themes: collaborating with industry and education partners to develop new ways of working; improving the skills systems by building on the success of institutions, interventions and programmes; and creating an inclusive, forward-looking skills ecosystem that empowers individuals and supports economic transformation.

A key commitment within this Plan is to commission research on IM accreditation and learner support systems by June 2026. The aim of this research is to identify barriers that IM learners may face when accessing vocational pathways and to ensure equitable access to qualifications. This reflects concerns that the skills system, particularly in areas such as Further Education (FE) colleges, apprenticeships and technical qualifications, has historically been designed primarily around English-medium provision. As a result, IM learners may encounter structural barriers when transitioning from IM schooling into vocational pathways. The plan also commits the DfE to examine how learners educated through Irish can participate fully in further education, apprenticeships and other technical training routes. This is reflected in the report's emphasis on the need to:

> *"support the ambition to ensure equitable access to skills and qualifications [and] build the evidence base on the barriers faced by Irish Medium learners. This will include benchmarking accreditation and learner support models across comparable areas."* (DfE, 2025, p. 18)

These developments signal growing recognition of the need to integrate IM learners fully into skills development initiatives across Northern Ireland. In relation to this research, the Minister for the Economy, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, commented that, "*We must support Irish-Medium learners and the ambition to ensure equitable access to skills and vocational pathways*" (DfE, 2026).
While these policy frameworks reflect a growing recognition of the IM sector and the need to support learners across education and employment pathways, they also expose ongoing structural challenges. In particular, several frameworks highlight gaps in the availability of vocational qualifications and accreditation pathways

through Irish. Despite the expansion of the policy landscape, the extent to which these commitments translate into equitable vocational opportunities for IM learners thus remains unclear and underexplored. The following sections therefore examine the current vocational landscape in Northern Ireland, before focusing specifically on vocational qualification opportunities available to IM learners, with particular attention to progression routes and the barriers that may affect participation and attainment.

2.2 Vocational Qualification Frameworks

Vocational qualifications are work-related qualifications designed to develop job-specific skills, assessed primarily through practical rather than academic methods. They play a critical role in broadening participation by providing alternatives to traditional academic pathways and supporting a wider range of learner needs, preferences and abilities. Work-based routes, such as apprenticeships, are particularly significant, as they combine employment with training and offer a more financially accessible pathway into skilled occupations.

Across the UK and the Republic of Ireland, there has been a growing policy emphasis on strengthening vocational pathways alongside traditional academic routes. Bloomer et al. (2022) provide a comparative overview of vocational qualification frameworks across England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, highlighting the diversity of structures, policies and progression routes across these jurisdictions. This section focuses specifically on the framework within Northern Ireland.

2.2.1 Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, vocational qualifications provide a key mechanism for supporting alternative pathways and progression beyond compulsory schooling. These qualifications enable learners to develop skills aligned with labour market needs, while promoting lifelong learning and social inclusion (Purdy et al., 2022). Provision is structured within the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), introduced in 2015 to replace the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). The RQF spans qualifications from Entry Level to Level 8, categorised by level (difficulty) and size (guided learning time) (Ofqual, 2015; DfE, 2024). This framework operates alongside locally maintained accreditation systems, as vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland are overseen by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA Regulation). CCEA Regulation acts as the regulator for all vocational qualifications delivered in FE colleges, training organisations and schools in Northern Ireland (Bloomer et al., 2022). It ensures that awarding organisations meet required quality and standards, and works within the parameters of accredited qualifications, as set out in the Northern Ireland Entitlement Framework Qualifications Accreditation Number (NIEFQAN) file (the list of approved qualifications for use within the Entitlement Framework, managed by the Department of Education).

Common vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland include National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), BTEC and technical awards, and apprenticeships, which provide structured work-based training. These are offered from Entry Level to Level

8, with Entry Level programmes providing important access points for learners who have not progressed through traditional academic pathways and who are not yet ready to access Level 1 study. These include early school leavers, adult returners and those with additional educational needs. These programmes focus on literacy, numeracy, employability and personal development, and are intended to support progression into further vocational learning (Purdy et al., 2022; Bloomer et al., 2022). Progression through Levels 1–3 is also well established in Northern Ireland, with vocational diplomas, Essential Skills provision and apprenticeships forming the core of the system. Higher-level provision (Levels 4 and 5) has also expanded in recent years through Foundation Degrees, Higher National Certificates (HNCs), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), and Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLAs) (DfE, 2024).

Work-based learning programmes play a central role in supporting vocational progression. NI Traineeships, for example, provide opportunities for learners aged 16 and over to gain work experience alongside the development of employability and core skills, including English and Mathematics. These programmes typically take one to two years to complete and are primarily focused at Level 2, with the aim of preparing learners for sustained employment or progression to Level 3 study. Work-based learning is further supported through NI Apprenticeships which combine paid employment with on-the-job training and formal study. While traineeships focus on entry-level skill development, apprenticeships provide structured pathways into sustained employment that enable individuals to earn while they learn. Apprenticeships can range in duration from two to six years and offer qualifications from Level 2 through to HLAs (Level 4 and above) (DfE, 2024).

In terms of the educational context, policy initiatives in Northern Ireland reflect a sustained commitment to broadening access to this range of vocational pathways. The Department of Education's Entitlement Framework[1] (dating back to 2006), for example, was designed to ensure that all learners have access to a broad and balanced curriculum, including vocational options. Since September 2017 under this Framework, post-primary schools have been required to provide pupils with access to a minimum of 21 courses at each phase, with a balance across general (academic) and applied (vocational) options (DE, 2025). These are typically delivered in collaboration with the six FE colleges in Northern Ireland and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), alongside private training providers, employers and Higher Education (HE) institutions (DfE, 2024). Although originally designed to complement academic post-primary education, FE now plays a central role in aligning education and training with labour market needs and supporting economic development. These colleges are positioned as key intermediaries between government, employers and learners and are expected to respond rapidly to labour market needs while supporting inclusive participation (DfE, 2024; Purdy et al., 2022).

Further policy initiatives have sought to enhance awareness and coherence across education and training pathways throughout Northern Ireland. This includes the former DfE policy framework entitled *A 10X Economy* (DfE, 2021), which focused on investment in skills development and recognised the key role to be played by "*our world-class Further Education Colleges and Universities, working in partnership with industry*" (p. 26) in preparing the workforce for the future. This vision prioritised vocational training, apprenticeships and Level 3+ qualifications in digital, engineering

[1] Entitlement Framework, Department of Education. Available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/entitlement-framework

and green technologies. A joint DE/DfE policy framework published in 2022, entitled *Developing a More Strategic Approach to 14-19 Education and Training: A Framework to Transform 14-19 Education and Training Provision* (DE/DfE, 2022), also sought to transform education by strengthening partnerships, enhancing career pathways, and aligning training with economic needs. The Independent Review of Education's final report published in December 2023 (*Investing in a Better Future*) similarly stressed the importance of vocational pathways, of promoting greater curricular choice in post-primary schools to include practical/vocational options, and proposed the development of "pre-vocational courses" from age 14 (p. 44).

This emphasis on vocational qualifications and the wider focus on skills and labour market needs is further reflected in more recent economic policy initiatives. A new Sub-Regional Economic Plan published in October 2024 by DfE and Invest NI (DfE/Invest NI, 2024) is designed to address economic disparities across the region and increase productivity and employment opportunities. The report places an emphasis on delivering professional and technical skills, tailored to meet the needs of local businesses and learners. Programmes such as the Skills Fund, primarily supported by DfE, supports upskilling and re-skilling initiatives to meet economic needs and improve career opportunities. This includes initiatives such as Skills Academies and the Skill Up programme which offers free accredited training courses to people aged 18 and over who are eligible to work in Northern Ireland. As noted above, DfE's *Skills Action Plan* of October 2025 further emphasises the development of the workforce in Northern Ireland through practical training. This Plan is a three-year strategic policy framework aimed at developing and strengthening Northern Ireland's skills system and addressing labour market challenges. The Plan aims to strengthen Northern Ireland's workforce by aligning education, training and skills development more closely with labour market needs, particularly in emerging sectors and in response to technological and environmental transitions.

The policy initiatives highlighted in this section, therefore demonstrate a growing emphasis on vocational and technical education in Northern Ireland as central to economic development and to supporting learners pursuing non-academic pathways.

2.2.2 Perceptions of Vocational Qualifications

While policy frameworks for vocational and alternative pathways have expanded, the conditions under which learners navigate these routes remain uneven, complex and socially patterned. In Northern Ireland, the proliferation of vocational qualifications and providers has resulted in a landscape that is often weakly signposted. As a result, the system is widely experienced as fragmented and difficult to navigate by learners, parents, employers and even higher education professionals. Purdy et al. (2022, p. 118), for example, explored the complex qualifications landscape at Levels 4 and 5 in Northern Ireland and found that levels of awareness and understanding of these qualifications are often very low. They also found that this lack of awareness and understanding is compounded by the proliferation of qualifications, confusion around the terminology used, and the lack of a universal centralised application and admissions system to parallel the UCAS system for university admissions. The challenges surrounding awareness and understanding of the vocational education landscape more broadly are also reflected in the Independent Review of Education's final report published in December 2023 (*Investing in a Better Future*), which referred

to the "*very large numbers of vocational qualifications in use, leading to widespread confusion*" (p. 44). This report subsequently called for a new assessment and qualifications body to "*review the current position at an early date with the aim of simplifying the system*" (p. 44).

Research also indicates that vocational qualifications continue to be perceived as less prestigious than academic pathways, with issues of complexity and lack of clarity reinforcing these perceptions. Purdy et al. (2022, p. 98), for example, found that, despite their practical benefits and high rates of learner satisfaction, vocational routes are often viewed as initially less attractive than traditional academic options. Such perceptions reflect the 'stigma' surrounding vocational education and pathways, with vocational qualifications sometimes regarded as a step 'backwards', carrying less 'prestige', or representing a 'Plan B' in comparison with traditional academic pathways (Purdy et al., 2022). These perceptions are further shaped by social and cultural factors. Selective school systems, parental expectations and long-standing academic hierarchies continue to privilege traditional academic routes, positioning vocational pathways as a residual or 'second-best' option. Purdy et al. (2022, p. 112), for example, suggest that many grammar schools continue to favour traditional non-vocational university routes to employment. In addition, university admissions practices may continue to favour more linear academic trajectories, constraining the perceived status of vocational pathways, and Purdy et al. (2022, p. 10) found that there were calls for greater clarity around which qualifications are accepted and/or favoured by HEIs.

Recent policy initiatives in Northern Ireland have increasingly recognised these challenges and stressed the importance of ensuring parity between academic and vocational qualifications. DE/DfE's 2022 *14-19 Framework*, for example, highlighted "*challenges in terms of parity of esteem between qualifications*" (p.20), notably between academic and vocational qualifications, which it states, "*need to be addressed*" (p.20). Such concerns are also raised in the final report and action of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement (*A Fair Start*) where the panel had similarly noted a "*lack of parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways*" (Purdy et al., 2021, p. 24) and called for "*a cultural change*" to recognise the benefits of both academic and vocational pathways. The report also recommended better communications surrounding the pathways available for learners aged 16 and above, "*including improved careers information and guidance to help learners make the most appropriate decisions when choosing from the qualifications and pathways available*" (p. 24). The Independent Review of Education's final report, (*Investing in a Better Future*), also called for "*parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning*" (p. 50) to ensure vocational qualifications are viewed on the same level as traditional academic routes.

Furthermore, while participation in FE and vocational pathways is relatively high among disadvantaged groups, progression beyond lower-level qualifications remains uneven. Learners from working-class backgrounds, those with additional support needs, and those without family experience of post-compulsory education are less likely to progress to higher-level vocational or higher education routes, even where formal pathways exist (Purdy et al., 2022). This is acknowledged in the *14-19 Framework* published by DE/DfE in 2022, which notes that young people with special educational needs (SEN) may face greater challenges both during the 14-19 phase

of their education and in securing employment after completing their education and training.

Evidence from other contexts reflects similar patterns surrounding the benefits of these qualifications, alongside continued negative perceptions. Rodeiro and Vitello (2023), for example, highlight evidence from England demonstrating the value of vocational qualifications and their role in supporting progression to higher education. For example, BTECs have played a significant role in widening participation in higher education in England, particularly among students from lower participation neighbourhoods and other underrepresented groups (Kelly, 2017). However, vocational pathways in England are still often regarded as inferior to academic routes, which can deter participation (Rodeiro & Vitello, 2023). These arguments are echoed by Bloomer et al. (2022) who highlight a number of tensions within the vocational qualification framework, which continue to shape learner choices and experiences.

Although this evidence relates primarily to English-medium contexts, it nonetheless highlights potential barriers which also apply to IM learners, particularly in relation to qualification prestige, clarity of progression pathways and access to higher education. In the Northern Ireland context, these challenges are further intensified for IM learners, whose progression is shaped not only by structural and social factors, but also by the limited availability and coherence of Irish-medium vocational training provision. These issues are explored in greater detail in the following section.

2.3 Irish-medium vocational pathways

Despite the growing availability of a broad range of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, provision through the medium of Irish remains extremely limited in both scope and accessibility, despite the continued growth of the IM school sector. At present, IM learners face restricted subject choice at post-primary level, while post-school options are largely confined to provision delivered by Gaelchúrsaí and Belfast City Council.

2.3.1 Post-Primary School

The limited availability of vocational pathways for IM pupils has been identified by post-primary schools as a key priority, as they seek to offer a diverse range of courses and qualifications to meet the needs of all learners. In a recent paper, Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, the two standalone IM post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, argue that existing gaps require both short-term intervention and longer-term strategic reform through the TransformED Review of Qualifications (Coláiste Feirste & Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026).

At school level, efforts have therefore been made to address gaps in the provision of vocational qualifications to IM pupils. Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire have established a relationship with the Welsh awarding organisation, WJEC, in recent years to deliver a small number of qualifications in Irish. However, the two schools note that this provision remains limited in scope and has not addressed the broader deficit in vocational qualifications available to IM learners. The report further notes that, although DE has made funding available to CCEA to provide qualifications in Irish for IM schools, a significant burden of work continues to fall on teachers. This

includes responsibility for managing relationships with awarding organisations, developing teaching and learning resources, and undertaking additional professional learning to deliver qualifications effectively (Coláiste Feirste & Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026).

The availability of vocational qualifications to IM learners has been further exacerbated by the withdrawal of Pearson (the awarding organisation) from the IM market in 2020. Prior to this, learners could combine CCEA general and applied A-levels with a range of BTEC qualifications to tailor pathways aligned to their interests and career goals. Since then, the curriculum offer has narrowed significantly. For example, Year 13 pupils at Coláiste Feirste had access to 19 IM qualifications in 2020 (12 applied and 7 general subjects, including vocational Business Studies, travel and tourism, hospitality, drama and sports studies), compared to just 14 IM qualifications in 2025 (7 applied and 7 general subjects). This reduction in applied provision has occurred alongside rising pupil numbers and increasing demand, further constraining learner choice (Coláiste Feirste & Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026). A key structural barrier underpinning these challenges is the limited availability of awarding organisations offering vocational qualifications through the medium of Irish. For example, although CCEA have made a wide selection of courses available, their offer of vocational courses is not as comprehensive as those from other providers such as OCR (Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2025). This restricts both subject choice and progression opportunities, and undermines wider policy objectives, including increasing participation in STEM and improving attainment at Levels 2 and 3 (Coláiste Feirste & Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026).

The limited availability of vocational qualifications has significant implications for learner retention and progression. Evidence from Coláiste Feirste indicates a decline in post-16 participation, with the proportion of pupils remaining in education or training after Year 14 falling from 87% in 2020 to 63% in 2025. Similarly, retention between Year 12 and Year 13 has decreased from 80% to 62.3% over the same period. These trends suggest that the restricted vocational offer is likely to be a significant factor influencing learner decisions to leave IME at post-16, while some students currently need to travel to English-medium schools to access certain courses, which can limit the continuity of their immersion education (Coláiste Feirste & Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026; Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2025).

2.3.2 Gaelchúrsaí

Gaelchúrsaí is a non-profit social enterprise based in West Belfast that delivers vocational, further education, and accredited training exclusively through the medium of Irish for learners aged 16 and above. Gaelchúrsaí was previously part of Belfast Met but moved to its own premises in 2011 in response to growing demand for post-16 and adult education through Irish. It now plays a significant role in addressing a previously underdeveloped area of provision, particularly in vocational and skills-based training, by enabling learners to continue their educational and professional development through the medium of Irish. Although the range of courses delivered through this organisation remains relatively limited, it nonetheless provides a foundation for further development in this area. Gaelchúrsaí also provide some outreach services to other areas across Northern Ireland; however, the extent of this

provision is limited and can be challenging to deliver consistently due to capacity constraints.

The organisation specialises in career-focused training provision while supporting progression into employment within the IM sector. Targeting both young people and adults who wish to re-skill, Gaelchúrsaí offers tailored tutoring and mentorship with a strong emphasis on personal development and career readiness. It works in partnership with OCN NI to deliver accredited qualifications and collaborates closely with local Irish-language networks. The organisation also maintains an established link with the neighbouring IM post-primary school, Coláiste Feirste, to provide vocational qualifications and courses to post-16 students, providing students with the opportunity to study these alongside other A-Level subjects.

Gaelchúrsaí provides practical, employment-oriented courses that enable learners to gain professional qualifications through Irish while maintaining a clear focus on their chosen career pathways. All training is designed to meet the needs of Irish speakers across a range of sectors, supporting the continued use of the language in professional and workplace contexts. Courses delivered at Gaelchúrsaí include: first aid (Level 2 First Aid for the workplace, Level 2 First Aid Essentials, Level 3 Emergency First Aid at Work and Level 3 paediatric First Aid, alongside four further non accredited courses); employability; health and safety (Level 2); safeguarding (Levels 2 and 3); food safety (Levels 2 and 3); classroom assistant (Level 3 Award, Level 3 Certificate, Level 3 Diploma); equality, inclusion and diversity (EDI); joinery; plumbing (Levels 1-3); childcare (Levels 2, 3 or 5); barbering (Levels 1-3); hairdressing (Levels 1-3); beauty therapy (Levels 1-3); and catering (Levels 1-3).

2.3.3 Belfast City Council

At a regional level, Belfast City Council (BCC, 2025a) has also identified a significant gap in vocational pathways delivered through the IM sector. In response to this gap and growing demand for IM provision, BCC delivers a range of employment and skills development initiatives through the medium of Irish. Where vocational qualifications are not currently available through existing apprenticeship frameworks in Irish, BCC collaborates with sector skills bodies to facilitate delivery through partners such as Gaelchúrsaí (BCC, 2025b). These programmes are funded and delivered through Belfast City Council's employment and skills initiatives, including the Belfast Labour Market Partnership, and were developed in response to an identified demand for Irish-speaking employees across sectors such as education, childcare and hospitality. Provision is regionally based, with eligibility typically requiring participants to reside in Belfast, have the right to work, and be unemployed or underemployed. Proficiency in Irish is necessary, as all training is delivered through the medium of Irish. Progression pathways are also available for those already in employment who wish to develop their skills, with employer support and opportunities for career progression required for participation. Participation in these academies is free of charge, as all costs are fully covered by BCC.

Current initiatives include a range of upskilling academies and vocational programmes. For example, the Level 3 Classroom Assistant Academy is aimed at individuals educated through IM instruction or those who are Irish speakers (BCC, 2025b). A Level 5 Early Years Upskilling Academy also supports participants working in IM early years settings to develop qualifications and skills for supervisory or

managerial roles. The programme typically includes a Level 5 Diploma in Leadership for Children's Care, Learning and Development, delivered through a combination of workplace-based learning and monthly classroom sessions in Gaelchúrsaí (BCC, 2025a).

BCC also delivers a Pre-Apprenticeship Programme designed to support progression into apprenticeships within IM childcare settings. This programme provides participants with an introduction to apprenticeship pathways, facilitates engagement with employers, and includes two weeks of work experience in early years settings. It is complemented by classroom-based sessions on bilingual education and immersion learning, as well as employability support such as CV development and interview preparation (BCC, 2025a).

BCC has also introduced a pilot programme, "Inclusive Pathways to Apprenticeships", focused on IM childcare. It is also developing a Level 3 award for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo) in early years settings in partnership with Gaelchúrsaí. This programme is intended to provide participants with an understanding of SEN in immersion education, including key legislation, learning differences, and strategies to support bilingual children. The course will provide a recognised certificate and is intended for practitioners within the IM sector. Internal data for these various programmes suggests strong participation and positive employment outcomes through these academies, with over 90% of completers progressing into employment or enhanced roles (BCC, 2025b, 2025c).

2.4 Barriers

While school-level initiatives, Gaelchúrsaí, and Belfast City Council programmes provide important opportunities, provision for IM vocational qualifications remains limited in scale, geographically concentrated, and insufficient to meet growing sector-wide demand. As a result, vocational pathways through Irish are fragmented and unevenly distributed, making them difficult for learners to access within the current system. This highlights a clear gap between policy commitments to support IM learners and the reality of available vocational provision, raising important questions about the structural factors that continue to constrain development in this area.

Structural barriers, such as limited provider capacity, funding constraints, geographical disparities, and challenges relating to accreditation and regulation, restrict access and progression. Policy initiatives increasingly recognise the need to address these issues. For example, the final report and action plan of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, *A Fair Start* (Purdy et al., 2021), highlights persistent challenges in the IM sector, including the need for enhanced support for Initial Teacher Education, a greater supply of post-primary subject specialists, and improved examination support at Key Stages 4 and 5. These barriers are interrelated, with constraints in assessment, resources, workforce capacity, and geography collectively shaping access to vocational pathways through Irish.

2.4.1 Regulation and Accreditation

A central barrier affecting IM learners across both academic and vocational pathways is the lack of appropriate assessment frameworks, alongside ongoing challenges in regulation and accreditation. A growing body of research has

highlighted the structural difficulties facing the IM sector in Northern Ireland (see Purdy et al., 2021; O'Boyle et al., 2023; Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, 2023; 2025), with particular attention given to the underdevelopment of assessment systems.

O'Boyle et al. (2023), drawing on stakeholder interviews with IM teachers, school leaders and teacher educators in Northern Ireland, identify assessment as "a particularly underdeveloped high-stakes area" (p.29). Participants reported limited availability of suitable diagnostic assessment tools and standardised tests that are "fair, valid, and reliable for use in an IM population in NI" (p.29). This concern is echoed in more recent research, which suggests that the expansion of IM provision has outpaced the development of linguistically and culturally appropriate assessment frameworks. As McVeigh et al. (2026) argue, this has created a tension between sectoral growth and the system's capacity to accurately assess and support learners. McVeigh et al. (2026) also note that unlike their English-medium counterparts, IM teachers cannot routinely rely on centrally produced or commercially available assessment resources; instead, assessment instruments must often be translated, adapted from other dialects, or created entirely from scratch. This raises concerns about validity and equity, particularly in high-stakes assessments where linguistic accessibility may directly affect performance.

Translation processes can also introduce ambiguity or alter meaning, increasing the risk that pupils' knowledge and understanding are not accurately captured. Indeed, while CCEA provides an in-house translation service to support the development of Irish-language materials and to translate coursework and examination content, this does not fully remove the burden from teachers, who continue to develop teaching resources and manage assessment practices. For example, responsibility for addressing errors in translation, such as inaccuracies in examination materials, often falls informally on teachers and schools rather than on the examining bodies themselves. The demand this places on IM teachers is discussed by McVeigh et al. (2026), who note that unlike English-medium schools, where systems and assessments are generally streamlined and automated, IM schools reported having to complete many tasks manually, increasing time demands without corresponding gains in effectiveness.

Assessment practices therefore place a considerable additional burden on teachers, as highlighted in reports by Purdy et al. (2025) and McVeigh et al. (2026), which detail the time required to adapt materials, maintain consistency in moderation, and ensure fairness in assessment. Purdy et al. (2025) subsequently report that teachers in the IM sector work long hours as a result of this extra workload. Research found that they work on average 14.8 hours per week over and above the directed time limit under the Teachers' (Terms and Conditions of Employment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1987. This states that teachers are required to work for 1265 hours in any year, "*exclusive of time spent off school premises in preparing and marking lessons and time spent travelling to and from the place of work*".

The lack of tailored assessment materials has particularly pronounced implications for learners with SEN. There is a notable lack of appropriate assessment materials available in Irish, often requiring teachers to interpret and adapt recommendations produced in English by external professionals such as educational psychologists or occupational therapists. This not only increases teacher workload, but also raises concerns about the consistency and quality of support provided (Purdy et al., 2025). As a result, delays in diagnosis and intervention may occur, with McVeigh et al.

(2026) noting that limited assessment capacity can lead to later identification of SEN among IM learners. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2024) has therefore called for distinct consideration of assessment, workforce development and teacher professional learning within the IM sector, emphasising that assessment, intervention and support are not currently available through the medium of instruction (pp. 3–5). McVeigh et al. (2026) similarly argue that assessment workload in IM schools cannot be understood as a purely technical issue, but must be situated within broader structural conditions, including limited resource availability, staffing shortages, and the absence of IM specific assessment infrastructure.

These regulatory and assessment constraints are also reflected in the limited availability of vocational qualifications through Irish. While some subject areas, such as childcare, media, catering and education are supported, provision in other fields such as business and other emerging industries remains limited. This restricts the opportunities available to prospective learners to pursue vocational pathways through the medium of Irish. The absence of widely recognised accreditation for some IM vocational courses further restricts the transferability of qualifications beyond the IM or bilingual sector. These challenges are closely linked to the capacity of awarding bodies, which face limited funding and a shortage of qualified translators capable of ensuring rigorous quality assurance. Consequently, the development and accreditation of IM vocational qualifications remains constrained. Assessment and accreditation for vocational qualifications through Irish have also been impacted by Pearson's withdrawal from the Irish market, and consequently the availability of suitable qualifications in Northern Ireland remains severely limited.

2.4.2 Resources and Provider capacity

Another significant barrier facing IM education, including provision of vocational qualifications, is a persistent resource gap. O'Boyle et al. (2023) identify this gap as encompassing both material and human resources. Material constraints include shortages of teaching materials and subject-specific textbooks, alongside increasing pressure on school infrastructure as enrolments continue to rise. These findings are reinforced by Purdy et al. (2025) who highlight the impact of inadequate infrastructure on both teaching and learning conditions. In this report, a majority of respondents discussed the inadequacy of school facilities, particularly in relation to play spaces, green spaces, buildings, IT equipment, general resources and classroom space. Principals further acknowledged that poor physical infrastructure negatively affects both pupil enrolment and teacher recruitment and retention, with comparisons frequently drawn to better-resourced English-medium schools.

Resource constraints are also evident in the limited availability of Irish-language teaching materials. Unlike English-medium schools where teachers can easily access materials aligned with the curriculum, educators in the IM sector report a lack of textbooks, past examination papers, and exemplar resources, requiring them to adapt and translate materials from English, or to modify resources from Republic of Ireland dialects to an Ulster dialect (Purdy et al., 2025). This is particularly acute for new IM schools, which often start with little to no existing resource base, placing them at a significant disadvantage compared to more established schools. McVeigh et al. (2026) further note that this lack of resources has far reaching consequences, as it shapes both day-to-day practice and a school's capacity to respond effectively to pupil need. Participants in this study argued that responsibility for resource

development should not rest primarily with individual teachers and schools, but should be addressed through clearer policy direction and sustained institutional support to ensure consistency and equity across provision.

Provider capacity represents a further barrier for learners in IME seeking to progress into employment or training. The rapid expansion of the IM sector has generated substantial workforce pressures, particularly in relation to the supply and retention of suitably qualified staff. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2023) has highlighted the urgent need to address teacher retention and to increase the number of teachers in Northern Ireland who are suitably qualified to work within the IM sector, stating that, “the identified gaps will not be filled for a number of years but work must be initiated to begin to address current gaps and ensure supply for future years” (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, 2024, p. 16). An ongoing shortage of substitute teachers is also noted as a persistent problem in this sector, limiting schools’ ability to maintain consistent provision, and Purdy et al. (2025) note that school leaders frequently struggle to find cover for absent staff. This can lead to increased workloads and disruption to both teaching and professional development, as these shortages can impact on the ability of teachers to attend essential training and networking events. Purdy et al. (2025) also note that classroom assistants play a crucial role in supporting both pupils and educators in the IM sector, yet many schools report an ongoing struggle to find and keep qualified classroom assistants, particularly for pupils with SEN.

McVeigh et al. (2026) also discuss the issue of staffing capacity as a critical constraint on the delivery of assessment in IME. While shortages of staff and classroom support were recognised as system-wide issues, participants in this study described particular pressures within IM settings, where staffing demands were intensified by linguistic requirements, higher levels of identified need, and limited access to specialist roles (p. 78). Participants also described how limited access to classroom assistants and substitute cover placed significant constraints on their ability to carry out ongoing assessment effectively. In the absence of sufficient support staff, teachers reported struggling to balance whole-class teaching with the individual observation, formative assessment and targeted support required to monitor pupil progress, particularly in classrooms with high levels of need. These pressures were compounded where staff were unable to access release time or cover. Altram (2025) report a similar trend in early years provision, where structural issues such as limited career pathways and a lack of pay parity undermine staff retention and long-term sustainability.

Across the sector, demand for qualified educational professionals, including early years practitioners, support staff and teachers, therefore continues to far outstrip supply. This imbalance is reflected in workforce data, with reports indicating that 50% of classroom vacancies within IME remained unfilled as of December 2024 (BCC, 2025b). Such shortages not only constrain current provision but also significantly limit the sector’s capacity to expand. Without addressing these structural resource limitations, the expansion of vocational qualifications through Irish is also likely to remain constrained, as such provision depends on adequate infrastructure, specialist materials, and appropriately resourced learning environments.

2.4.3 Regional Disparity

Another significant barrier facing IM learners seeking to access vocational qualifications and training after school is the uneven geographical distribution of provision across Northern Ireland. Many of the most developed IM programmes are concentrated in specific areas, most notably West Belfast, including provision delivered by Gaelchúrsaí, one of the primary providers of IM vocational qualifications. Outside these areas, opportunities to access vocational qualifications through Irish are considerably more limited, restricting participation for learners in other regions. Regional disparities are further reinforced by the concentration of cultural centres, training providers and IM schools within established Irish-speaking hubs. As a result, learners in rural or less well -served areas may face significant barriers, including long commuting times, limited local provision and the financial and social costs associated with travel.

These regional disparities highlight a broader issue of access, whereby the availability of IM vocational pathways is shaped not only by provision but also by geographic distribution. This has significant implications for equity within the sector, as learners' opportunities are effectively determined by where they live rather than by their educational needs or aspirations.

2.5 Conclusion

The IM sector in Northern Ireland has experienced significant growth in recent years, reflected in the expansion of IM schools and increasing numbers of learners progressing through the system. However, this growth has not been matched by a corresponding expansion of vocational qualifications and pathways available through the medium of Irish. As a result, learners seeking to continue their education or training in Irish beyond compulsory schooling face a limited range of options, and provision remains inadequate relative to demand.

It is important to note that some important developments have begun to address this gap. Gaelchúrsaí provides vocational education, further education and accredited training exclusively through Irish for learners aged 16 and above, while Belfast City Council has introduced upskilling academies and employment programmes delivered through Irish. These initiatives represent important, though localised, efforts to support both school leavers and adult learners in accessing training, qualifications, and employment opportunities through the medium of Irish. Moreover, although Gaelchúrsaí do provide some outreach services to other areas, the extent of this provision is limited and can be challenging to deliver consistently due to capacity constraints.

Despite these advances, provision remains limited, fragmented and insufficient to meet growing demand. The barriers identified throughout this chapter, including insufficient infrastructure, limited provider capacity and challenges relating to assessment and accreditation, continue to restrict the expansion of vocational pathways. These issues are interconnected, as resource limitations constrain staffing and infrastructure, while gaps in assessment frameworks and accreditation hinder the development and recognition of qualifications. Without addressing such barriers, the continued growth of the IM sector will continue to outpace the capacity of the system to support learners' progression into vocational training and employment.

Chapter 3: Benchmarking Minority Language VET: Wales and the Republic of Ireland

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to identify vocational education and training (VET) models delivered through minority languages in Wales and the Republic of Ireland and to assess their transferability to Northern Ireland in support of the Skills Action Plan implementation (Department for the Economy, 2025, p. 18). In both jurisdictions, minority language vocational provision has developed within governance architectures, accreditation systems, and workforce conditions that differ substantially from one another and from the arrangements currently in place in Northern Ireland, where no statutory duty exists to deliver further education, training, or apprenticeships through the medium of Irish. The analysis is therefore structured around five analytical dimensions, applied consistently to both jurisdictions: governance and system architecture; accreditation and qualification frameworks; learner support infrastructures; provider capacity and workforce; and enabling conditions. These dimensions were selected to isolate the structural features that determine whether minority language vocational provision functions as a planned and sustainable element of the education and training system or remains dependent on localised initiative and institutional goodwill.

The consistent application of the same analytical framework to both Wales and the Republic of Ireland enable direct comparisons across jurisdictions with differing legislative, institutional, and sociolinguistic contexts, and provides the evidential basis upon which judgements of transferability to Northern Ireland are made in Section 5 of this benchmarking report. The evidence base comprises published strategy documents; primary legislation and statutory instruments; regulatory frameworks; institutional annual reports and strategic plans; programme documentation; and published evaluations. For Wales, the principal sources include the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022[2]; the Qualifications Wales Act 2015[3]; the strategic plans and published outputs of Medr (the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research)[4]; the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol[5]; Sgiliaith[6]; Qualifications Wales[7]; the Cymraeg 2050 strategy and its successive work programmes and annual action plans; and the Further Education and Apprenticeship Welsh-Medium Action Plan (Welsh Government, 2019). For the Republic of Ireland, the principal sources include the Further Education and Training Act 2013 as revised and consolidated to 28 January 2026[8]; the Official Languages Act 2003[9]; the Official Languages Amendment Act 2021 as consolidated to 1 June 2025[10]; Acht na

[2] Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asc/2022/1/data.pdf
[3] Qualifications Wales Act 2015: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/5/data.pdf
[4] Medr (the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) is an arm's-length body of the Welsh Government established in August 2024 under the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022, responsible for funding and regulating the entire tertiary education sector in Wales. See: https://www.medr.cymru/
[5] The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol is a national body established in 2011 to plan, develop, coordinate, and promote Welsh-medium and bilingual education provision across Wales. See: https://colegcymraeg.ac.uk/
[6] Sgiliaith is a national staff development service based at Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor (part of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai), funded through the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, which supports further education and apprenticeship practitioners in developing their confidence and competence in delivering and assessing through the medium of Welsh. See: https://www.sgiliaith.cymru/
[7] Qualifications Wales is the independent qualifications regulator for all non-degree qualifications in Wales, established under the Qualifications Wales Act 2015. See: https://qualifications.wales/
[8] Further Education and Training Act 2013: https://revisedacts.lawreform.ie/eli/2013/act/25/front/revised/en/html
[9] The Official Languages Act: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2003/act/32/enacted/en/html
[10] The Official Languages Amendment Act 2021: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/act/49/enacted/en/print

Gaeltachta 2012[11]; the SOLAS strategies Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-2024[12]; strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and Education and Training Boards (ETBs)[13]; the corporate strategy of Údarás na Gaeltachta 2021 to 2025[14]; the National Plan for Irish Language Public Services 2024 to 2030[15]; the published provision of Kerry Education and Training Board including its Language Scheme 2020 to 2023 and the Áras Bhréanainn FET centre[16,17]; the SOLAS and QQI Memorandum of Understanding 2024 to 2027, and the published provision of Gaelchultúr (Coláiste na hÉireann)[18]. For Northern Ireland, reference is made to the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022; the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998; the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997; the Department for the Economy's Skills Action Plan; the Department of Education's TransformED Policy Framework for General Qualifications in Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2025); the joint proposal by Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire for an IME Vocational Qualifications Pilot Scheme (Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026)[19,20]; unpublished correspondence from Gaelcholáiste Dhoire to OCR[21] regarding examination access (Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2025), and the COGG Career Opportunities with Irish careers information pack (An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, 2025)[22].

Two limitations should be noted. First, Medr was established in August 2024, and its published documentary record is necessarily limited in scope and depth; the analysis draws on the Commission's Strategic Plan 2025-2030 and initial published outputs, but the operational effects of the new tertiary governance architecture in Wales remain emergent rather than fully documented. Second, the contextual differences between the Gaeltacht and the Northern Ireland Irish-medium sector complicate direct comparison. The Gaeltacht is a geographically defined territory with a constitutionally recognised language community, a dedicated regional development agency in Údarás na Gaeltachta, and a legislative framework under Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 that has no equivalent in Northern Ireland. The Irish-medium sector in Northern Ireland is dispersed, urban as well as rural, and supported by a statutory duty that applies only to school-age education under Article 89 of the Education

[11] Acht na Gaeltachta 2012: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2012/act/34/enacted/en/html
[12] SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) is the state agency in Ireland responsible for funding, planning, and coordinating Further Education and Training (FET). Established in 2013, it replaced FÁS to oversee apprenticeships and local training.
[13] ETBs (Education and Training Boards): The 16 regional statutory authorities in Ireland responsible for state education, including primary and post-primary schools, further education, and vocational training, established under the Education and Training Boards Act 2013: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2013/act/11/enacted/en/html
[14] Údarás na Gaeltachta is a regional state agency responsible for the economic, social and cultural development of the Irish-speaking (Gaeltacht) regions of Ireland.
[15] National Plan for Irish Language Public Services: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/cdb3dc1c/National_Plan_for_Irish_Language_Public_Services.pdf
[16] Kerry Education and Training Board (Kerry ETB) is the statutory authority responsible for education and training in County Kerry. The Board provides primary, post-primary, and further education (FET) services to around 3,100 full-time students and 14,000 FET beneficiaries, serving two Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) regions.
[17] Located in Baile an Fheirtéaraigh (Ballyferriter) in the West Kerry Gaeltacht, the Áras Bhréanainn FET centre was established in 2020 as a core part of Kerry ETB's commitment to education in the region.
[18] Gaelchultúr (Coláiste na hÉireann): Established in 2004, a leading third-level provider of QQI-accredited Irish language education. It offers proficiency-based training ranging from intensive general courses to specialised postgraduate diplomas in translation and workplace Irish.
[19] Coláiste Feirste: The first and largest Irish-medium post-primary school in Northern Ireland, established in Belfast in 1991. It provides a comprehensive bilingual curriculum and serves as a flagship institution for the Irish language revival in the North.
[20] Gaelcholáiste Dhoire: Established in 2015 and based at Dungiven Castle, it is the second independent Irish-medium post-primary school in Northern Ireland, serving the Derry and Mid-Ulster regions through full immersion education.
[21] OCR: Oxford, Cambridge and RSA; a leading UK awarding body that provides academic and vocational qualifications (e.g., GCSEs, A Levels, and NVQs).
[22] COGG (An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta): A statutory body established under the Education Act 1998 to support Irish-medium education and the teaching of Irish in all schools. It coordinates the provision of textbooks, resources, and research for Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna.

(Northern Ireland) Order 1998. This distinction is maintained throughout the analysis, and claims of transferability are qualified accordingly.

3.2 Wales: Findings Across Five Dimensions

The Welsh approach to minority language vocational education and training (VET) is examined here across five analytical dimensions: governance and system architecture, accreditation and qualification frameworks, learner support infrastructures, provider capacity and workforce, and enabling conditions. The analysis draws on published Welsh Government policy documents, the strategic plans and prospectuses of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, Medr, Sgiliaith and Qualifications Wales, and the statutory and regulatory frameworks within which Welsh-medium provision operates. Each dimension addresses the same analytical question: what does the system do, how does it work, and what conditions make it possible. The purpose is to identify the structural features that have enabled Wales to develop Welsh-medium vocational provision as a planned and sustained element of the tertiary education system, and to establish an evidence base against which the current position in Northern Ireland can be assessed.

3.2.1 Governance and System Architecture

The governance architecture underpinning Welsh-medium VET is the product of incremental but deliberate institutional design spanning more than a decade. The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol was established in 2011 as a national body charged with planning, developing, coordinating and promoting Welsh-medium higher education provision across Wales (Welsh Government, 2017a, p. 9; Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2020, p. 6). It was founded as a company limited by guarantee and registered charity, funded principally through annual Welsh Government grants (Senedd Research, 2024). The Coleg was not designed to be a provider of education itself, but rather a national strategic planning body operating on the principle that any academic or vocational discipline could be discussed through the medium of Welsh (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2020, p. 6). The Coleg's remit was initially confined to higher education. Its expansion into further education and apprenticeships from 2018 onwards was the product of a formal review, not an organic development. In August 2016, the Cabinet Secretary for Education established a Task and Finish Group to review the activities and future role of the Coleg (Welsh Government, 2017a, p. 8). The Group received oral evidence from 19 organisations and 30 written submissions over a six-month period (p. 12) and concluded that the Coleg should become a recognised national strategic body for Welsh language development across higher education, further education, and work-based learning (p. 3). The Group received clear evidence from the further education and work-based learning sectors that strategic leadership was needed at a national level to extend the Welsh-medium provision within the various institutions (p. 28). The Welsh Government accepted the recommendation and formally extended the Coleg's responsibilities to the post-16 sector (Welsh Government, 2017b, p. 3).

The funding mechanism for the Coleg is a distinctive governance feature. The Task and Finish Group recommended that the Coleg should continue to be funded directly by the Welsh Government rather than through the Higher Education Funding Council

(Welsh Government, 2017a, p. 34), and this arrangement has been maintained. As of 2024-2025, the Coleg received £2.825 million specifically to expand Welsh-medium FE and apprenticeship provision (Welsh Government, 2024a, p. 4). The Cymraeg 2050 Work Programme committed to providing additional funding over five years to the Coleg for this purpose (Welsh Government, 2021, p. 14). This model channels public resources through an intermediary body that then works with providers, rather than distributing language-specific funding directly to individual colleges or apprenticeship providers. The practical effect is that the burden of planning, resource development, and capacity building for Welsh-medium provision is provided by a specialist national body, not by providers whose primary mission lies elsewhere (Welsh Government, 2021).

The establishment of Medr (the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) in August 2024 represents the most recent and most structurally significant development in Welsh tertiary education governance (Welsh Government, 2024b). Medr was established under the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 as an arms-length body of the Welsh Government, replacing the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and assuming responsibility for funding and regulating the entire tertiary education sector, including further education, higher education, apprenticeships, adult community learning, work-based education, and local authority-maintained school sixth forms (Medr, 2025, p. 3). Staff from HEFCW and the Welsh Government were brought together to form the new body (p. 3). What is most significant for the present analysis is the formal relationship between Medr and the Coleg. Under its fifth strategic aim, Medr commits to encouraging greater use of the Welsh language and increasing participation in Welsh-medium learning and assessment and does so explicitly by taking account of advice from the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol in its designated role under the 2022 Act (Medr, 2025, p. 20). Medr further commits to working with the Coleg and Qualifications Wales to develop and implement a national plan for the Welsh language across the entire tertiary education sector (p. 21). This institutional activity sits within the overarching framework of Cymraeg 2050, the Welsh Government's language strategy with a target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050 and a commitment to doubling the daily use of the language (Welsh Government, 2021, p. 5). The strategy is implemented through successive five-year work programmes, each supported by annual action plans and annual reports which document progress, achievements, and challenges (p. 6). The first Work Programme was published alongside the strategy in 2017, and the second, covering 2021-2026, was published early in the Sixth Senedd term to maintain momentum (p. 5). This provides the VET system with a clear long-term political mandate that transcends individual funding cycles.

It should be noted, however, that the political and public consensus around Welsh-medium education has not been without contestation. Proposals to increase Welsh-medium provision have periodically generated public debate and concerns have been raised by parents, governors, and commentators about the pace and scope of Welsh-medium expansion, the implications for school choice, and the resource implications for English-medium provision (Senedd Research, 2024b). The Cymraeg 2050 strategy itself acknowledged that achieving the one million speakers target would require changes in attitudes and behaviours that could not be assumed (Welsh Government, 2017c, p. 15). The sustainability of the political mandate therefore rests not on the absence of disagreement but on the durability of cross-

party support within the Senedd and the embedding of Welsh-medium targets within institutional planning cycles that are not easily reversed by changes in government.

3.2.2 Accreditation and Qualification Frameworks

The development of Welsh-medium qualifications and assessments takes place within a distinctive regulatory architecture that differs in important respects from the arrangements governing minority language accreditation in other parts of the United Kingdom. Qualifications Wales, established under the Qualifications Wales Act 2015, serves as the independent qualifications regulator for all non-degree qualifications in Wales and carries a specific statutory duty to promote the availability of qualifications through the medium of Welsh. The 2019 Action Plan confirmed that Qualifications Wales maintains a policy that all approved qualifications are expected to be available in Welsh (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 15). This explicit legislative mandate distinguishes the Welsh regulatory environment from that of England, where the qualifications regulator Ofqual operates without an equivalent obligation towards minority language provision. In practical terms, however, the 2019 Action Plan acknowledged that this expectation had not yet been realised across a significant number of qualifications currently offered in the post-16 sector (point 74). To address this gap, Qualifications Wales operates an annual grant scheme designed to incentivise awarding bodies to develop bilingual qualification materials, and a formal mapping exercise has been used to identify priority areas for investment (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 15). The review of the Health and Care sector, for instance, led to the creation of 19 new qualifications made available in Welsh, and subsequent qualification review processes have been expected to yield bilingual provision as standard, requiring not only the provision of bilingual assignments but also transparent assessment processes and a sufficient number of competent assessors (p. 16).

Qualifications Wales's own strategic plan reinforces this trajectory. Its five-year plan commits the regulator to working with awarding bodies to increase the range of qualifications available in both Welsh and English so that the number of learners able to access qualifications in either language increases significantly (Qualifications Wales, 2024, p. 7). The plan identifies a 'Made-for-Wales' focus as a key theme, encompassing the need for an active offer of bilingual qualifications and certainty in the range of qualifications available to learners, particularly in light of emerging policy changes elsewhere in the United Kingdom (p. 4). Through its Choice for All strategy, the regulator is prioritising qualifications to be made available in Welsh across full-time education, post-16 settings and apprenticeships, while also strengthening support for awarding bodies and their capacity to deliver Welsh-medium qualifications and revising the Welsh Language support grant to focus on priority areas, new qualifications and innovative applications (p. 5). The plan further commits to ensuring that the full range of National 14-16 Qualifications are available through the medium of Welsh by 2027 (p. 6). This is significant because it embeds bilingual availability as a design requirement within qualification reform rather than treating it as an afterthought. In its most recent collaborative work, Qualifications Wales has partnered with Medr (the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) and the Welsh Government to identify how the qualification system can support new apprenticeship frameworks, including the introduction of Level 2 construction apprenticeships in bricklaying, site carpentry, scaffolding and building maintenance

announced in February 2026 (Welsh Government, 2026a, pp. 1-4). The Qualifications Wales Action Plan 2026-2028 quantifies the structural vulnerability of the current offer: only 3 per cent of the 3,197 publicly funded post-16 qualifications are approved, made-for-Wales qualifications, with the remaining 97 per cent developed primarily for England and exposed to defunding risks arising from English policy reforms (Qualifications Wales, 2026b, pp. 2-3). As at January 2026, 36 per cent of the post-16 vocational qualification offer was fully or partly available through Welsh (p. 5), and the Plan confirms that work has begun with Medr and Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol on a post-16 national plan to increase Welsh-medium vocational qualifications in strategic priority areas (p. 6). The Plan also confirms that Medr's new Apprenticeship Programme for Wales will launch in August 2027 (p. 8).

Central to the infrastructure supporting Welsh-medium further education is the role of Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, a body whose remit was widened by the Cabinet Secretary for Education to encompass strategic planning for Welsh-medium and bilingual provision across the post-16 sector, as set out in Section Five of the 2019 Action Plan (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 21). The Coleg commissions and funds the development of Welsh-medium and bilingual learning materials across a range of FE subjects, working through subject grants allocated to providers (p. 27) and through the direct commissioning of original Welsh-medium and bilingual e-learning resources (point 67, p. 15). This activity addresses one of the most persistent structural barriers to accreditation through a minority language, namely the cost and complexity of producing parallel-language assessment and learning materials to the standard required for formal qualification purposes. The Coleg's online resource library, Y Porth (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2009), hosts a growing collection of Welsh-medium and bilingual digital teaching resources organised by subject area, level and resource type, covering vocational fields from health and care to childcare, public services, construction and business studies (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2026). According to the Cymraeg 2050 action plan for 2025-2026, the Coleg continues to strengthen and support provision in priority areas such as health and care, childcare, public services, sport and land-based studies within the FE sector (Welsh Government, 2025). In addition, the Coleg awards subject grants in higher education to maintain and expand Welsh-medium provision and has piloted incentive grants and language skills provision planning posts (Welsh Government, 2025, p. 12). Its 2025 manifesto document, Pathways to the Workplace, calls for increased investment to protect existing provision, expand Welsh-medium vocational subjects and establish provision in new disciplines, noting that only 2.1 per cent of the tertiary education budget (excluding sixth forms) is currently spent on Welsh-medium provision (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2025, p. 6). The apprenticeship framework in Wales constitutes a further dimension of the Welsh-medium accreditation landscape. Welsh-medium delivery takes place within the national apprenticeship standard, and the Coleg supports capacity building through strategic projects in priority sectors. In the apprenticeship sector specifically, the Coleg continues to develop capacity and maintain provision in health and care, childcare and public services, while also building the infrastructure to support Welsh language growth across the wider network of apprenticeship providers (Welsh Government, 2025, pp. 12-13).

The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (2025, p. 7) has called for a strategic plan to increase Welsh-medium apprenticeship opportunities, including placing more stringent Welsh language conditions on providers, ensuring the availability of

bilingual tutors, assessors and mentors in the relevant sectors and geographic areas, and directing apprentices who speak Welsh onto bilingual pathways. Since the establishment of Medr under the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (Part 1, Section 1, Subsection (1)), responsibility for designing future apprenticeship provision has transferred to the Commission, which has committed to doing so in consultation with Qualifications Wales and in response to Welsh Government skills priorities (Medr, 2025, p. 15). The 2026 announcement of new Level 2 construction apprenticeships, developed collaboratively by Medr, Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales with industry input, illustrates this tripartite approach in operation (Welsh Government, 2026a, pp. 1-3). The institutional relationship between Qualifications Wales and Medr is further formalised in the regulator's strategic planning. The five-year plan confirms that Qualifications Wales will work with Medr to understand where their respective functions are closely related, for example in the use of qualifications in apprenticeship frameworks, so that both organisations can optimise the efficiency of their work (Qualifications Wales, 2024, p. 10). The plan also acknowledges its dependence upon the strategic approach and priorities of both Welsh Government and Medr for implementing the recommendations of the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales (p. 10).

Medr's Strategic Plan 2025-2030 further commits the Commission to developing and implementing a national plan for the Welsh language across the entire tertiary sector, working with the Coleg and Qualifications Wales to increase Welsh-medium education and assessment, improve Welsh-speaking staff recruitment and retention, and promote professional learning so that more staff are confident to teach through the medium of Welsh (Medr, 2025, p. 21). Statutory guidance on 16-18 local curricula, published for consultation in January 2026, reinforces this direction by requiring Medr to promote the Welsh language within post-16 curriculum planning and to ensure that learners can, wherever possible, continue their studies through the medium of Welsh as they enter post-16 education (Welsh Government, 2026b, Section 3). The workforce dimension of Welsh-medium accreditation delivery is addressed principally through the work of Sgiliaith, a national staff development service based at Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor (part of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai) and funded through the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. Sgiliaith's stated aim is to offer practical advice on good practice, staff training and resources to enhance learners' bilingual skills and experiences (Sgiliaith, 2024). Its National Staff Development Programme provides a range of professional development opportunities for practitioners working in further education and apprenticeships, regardless of their existing Welsh language competence, including a bilingual teaching methodology MA module, a tutors' bilingual pedagogy course, an assessors' bilingualism toolkit, workshops on designing bilingual resources and embedding the Welsh language, a mentoring programme supporting practitioners in real learning situations, and language awareness modules integrated into the PGCE (FE) and Work Welsh programmes (Sgiliaith, 2024). By targeting the linguistic confidence of FE tutors and assessors to deliver and assess through Welsh, Sgiliaith addresses a critical practical constraint on minority language accreditation: the availability of suitably skilled practitioners who can administer assessment processes bilingually.

Despite these innovations, the Estyn (His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales) report of 2025 highlights that a significant 'bottleneck' remains at the higher levels of the language continuum. Although there has been a substantial increase in 'B3' activities, which involve small amounts of Welsh-medium learning,

there has been no corresponding increase in categories requiring a large proportion of Welsh-medium or bilingual delivery over the past five years (p. 5)[23]. Estyn identifies that while the proportion of FE teachers registered to work through the medium of Welsh rose from 11.3% in 2020 to 12.8% in 2024, the primary barrier to further growth is the lack of 'release time' for staff to complete intensive training (p. 19). To bridge this gap, Estyn recommends that Medr and Sgiliaith develop a recognised professional qualification in bilingual pedagogy. Furthermore, institutional models like Coleg Cambria demonstrate that capacity is best enhanced when workforce planning includes financial remuneration and allocated non-contact time, ensuring that professional development does not become an additional burden on an already stretched workforce. The 2019 Action Plan identified the need for an early mapping exercise of internal quality assessors, external assessors and examiners to identify gaps in bilingual coverage and proposed the development of a national database alongside a National Academy of Assessment (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 13). Sgiliaith's distance learning provision, using video conferencing to extend Welsh-medium curriculum delivery from Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor to external schools and colleges, further illustrates how practitioner capacity constraints in minority language contexts are being addressed through technological innovation (Sgiliaith, 2024).

3.2.3 Learner Support Infrastructures

Wales has developed a multi-layered learner support infrastructure designed to reduce the perceived cost and risk of choosing Welsh-medium pathways in vocational education and training. This infrastructure operates across financial incentives, careers guidance, workplace language normalisation[24], and resource provision that systematically encourages learner uptake of Welsh-medium and bilingual study options.

3.2.3.1 Financial incentives and scholarship schemes

The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol operates a suite of scholarship and incentive schemes intended to make Welsh-medium study a financially attractive choice. At higher education level, the Coleg continues to offer undergraduate scholarships to students who choose to study all or part of their course through the medium of Welsh (Welsh Government, 2025). These scholarships function as Lead Scholarships, awarded to students committing to studying their entire programme in Welsh, and Incentive Scholarships for those electing to study a substantial proportion of their credits through Welsh. The Coleg also awards subject grants to maintain and expand Welsh-medium provision at university level, alongside incentive grants that assist providers in creating new Welsh-medium programmes. The 2025-2026 action plan confirms that the Coleg will support pilot projects to expand Welsh-medium

[23] The Welsh-medium delivery model in further education categorises provision on a continuum from B1 (incidental Welsh, such as greetings and basic terminology) through B2 (some Welsh-medium activity within an otherwise English-medium programme) and B3 (a small but identifiable proportion of the programme delivered through Welsh) to B4 (a substantial proportion delivered through Welsh) and B5 (the entire programme delivered through Welsh). The persistent challenge identified by Estyn is that growth has been concentrated at the B3 level, with limited progression to B4 and B5 delivery.

[24] The term 'workplace language normalisation' refers to the process of embedding a minority language into routine professional and vocational settings so that its use in the workplace becomes habitual and expected rather than exceptional or optional. The Cymraeg Gwaith (Work Welsh) scheme, operated by the National Centre for Learning Welsh, supports FE institutions and other workplaces in developing Welsh language provision for staff and learners (Work Welsh, 2025).

audiences, including funding for language posts and posts for planning language skills provision (p. 12).

At further education and apprenticeship level, similar incentive mechanisms have been explored, though these remain less formalised than the HE schemes. The FE and Apprenticeship Welsh-medium Action Plan proposed that Coleg Cymraeg membership should be extended to FE and apprenticeship learners, providing access to Welsh-medium resources and a broader bilingual community (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 9). The Action Plan also recommended that activities be developed to reward learners for their achievements in studying through the medium of Welsh and bilingually, including the potential development of open badges and language skills certificates at Level 3 analogous to the Level 6 Language Skills Certificate available in higher education (p. 10). The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol's strategic plan for 2026-2030 calls for additional funding to create incentive schemes for learners, arguing that only 2.1 per cent of the tertiary education budget is currently spent on Welsh-medium provision (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2025, p. 6).

3.2.3.2 Career guidance and information

Careers Wales, as the national careers service, has a designated role in promoting Welsh-medium vocational pathways and providing bilingual information, advice, and guidance. The FE and Apprenticeship Action Plan assigned Careers Wales responsibility, in collaboration with the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, for establishing a bilingual course and training opportunities database and for developing a marketing plan to promote available bilingual courses and training opportunities according to geographic area (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 22). The Action Plan further identified the need to develop a coordinated national marketing strategy targeting potential learners aged 14-16 to outline the advantages of bilingual vocational study, recognising that provision of information alone is insufficient without active promotion and the tackling of negative perceptions (p. 9). Careers Wales was also assigned responsibility alongside the Coleg Cymraeg for using labour market information to inform projects and activities that support the aspirations and employability of learners (p. 25). The Welsh Government's 16-18 local curricula guidance reinforces this function, expecting that schools and FE institutions collaborate with partners including Careers Wales to ensure learners are aware of the options available to them post-16 (Welsh Government, 2026b, p. 8). The availability of careers information in Welsh, and from advisers who can discuss Welsh-medium options, is recognised in the Cymraeg 2050 strategy as a key enabler of learner uptake.

3.2.3.3 Workplace language normalisation: Cymraeg Gwaith

The Cymraeg Gwaith (Work Welsh) scheme, operated by the National Centre for Learning Welsh, supports FE institutions and other workplaces in developing Welsh language provision for staff and learners (Work Welsh, 2025). The scheme provides a range of training, from online self-study taster courses to intensive residential programmes, and implements specific plans for different sectors, including a national health and care plan (Welsh Government, 2025, pp. 13-14). During 2025-2026, the Centre is placing Welsh language learning tutors in health authorities to carry out training, mentoring, and aftercare, and continues to expand the scheme to collaborate with specialist areas within the sector, including police forces and sports

bodies (p. 14). The FE and Apprenticeship Action Plan welcomed the Cymraeg Gwaith (Work Welsh) scheme and noted that FE institutions had benefitted from the scheme in its first two years of operation. The Plan proposed that the scheme be linked directly with workforce development proposals, with the National Centre for Learning Welsh expecting more strategic recruitment to the scheme (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 11). The significance of Cymraeg Gwaith lies in its function of normalising the use of Welsh in vocational and professional contexts, building an environment in which using Welsh for work purposes is positioned as routine rather than exceptional.

3.2.3.4 Resource infrastructure: the Porth Adnoddau

The absence of suitable Welsh-medium resources has been consistently cited as a major barrier to bilingual study by both learners and prospective learners (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 17). In response, the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol operates the Porth Adnoddau Resource Portal, an online library of Welsh-medium and bilingual digital teaching resources accessible at porth.ac.uk. The portal is described as a library for Welsh-medium and bilingual digital teaching resources, hosting materials across a wide range of subjects relevant to both FE and HE, including health and care, childcare, public services, sport, business studies, and construction. Resources include e-books, lecture recordings, video content, module materials, apps, and training resources, with materials categorised by subject area, resource type, and level of study including post-16 and vocational. The FE and Apprenticeship Action Plan originally proposed the development of a national resources library where learners could access open access materials, with resources licensed openly to allow educators to repurpose them as appropriate (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 15). The Action Plan set out a medium-term target for the Coleg Cymraeg and JISC to develop this library (p. 26). The Porth Adnoddau represents the realisation of this proposal. The Coleg Cymraeg's website confirms that the portal also supports university students, providing access to teaching resources as part of their courses. The portal reduces the burden on individual tutors to develop their own materials from scratch, an important function given the acknowledged shortage of bilingual resources in vocational subjects.

Learner support in Wales operates at multiple, complementary levels: financial incentives reduce the personal cost of choosing Welsh-medium pathways; careers guidance actively promotes bilingual vocational options and ensures learners are aware of available provision; workplace language normalisation through Cymraeg Gwaith builds an environment in which using Welsh professionally feels achievable; and resource infrastructure through the Porth Adnoddau ensures that learners and tutors have access to the materials needed to sustain Welsh-medium study. The cumulative effect of these interventions is to reduce the perceived cost and risk of choosing Welsh-medium pathways for learners, addressing both practical barriers (resources, information) and attitudinal barriers. The absence of a comparable multi-level support architecture in Northern Ireland means that even where Irish-medium VET provision exists, learner uptake may remain low because the surrounding infrastructure to support and encourage minority-language choices is simply not in place. Research into learner attitudes in Wales has shown that while a minority of learners would confidently choose Welsh-medium provision, a significantly larger group would choose bilingual delivery if offered support and reassurance (Welsh

Government, 2019, p. 4). This finding underscores the importance of active support infrastructure in converting latent willingness into actual participation.

3.2.4 Provider Capacity and Workforce

The capacity of providers to deliver Welsh-medium vocational education and training is fundamentally contingent upon the availability and confidence of Welsh-speaking staff. Wales has recognised this constraint explicitly and invested in a range of workforce development mechanisms designed to build and sustain the linguistic competence of FE tutors, assessors, and trainers.

3.2.4.1 Linguistic capacity among FE staff

The challenge of linguistic capacity among FE tutors and assessors is one of the most consistently identified barriers to Welsh-medium VET provision in Wales. The FE and Apprenticeship Action Plan acknowledged that although there had been considerably more focus in recent years on identifying staff who teach or assess bilingually, the data remained incomplete and inconsistent, and did not accurately reflect those individuals who might wish to teach or assess in Welsh but did not feel sufficiently confident to do so (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 11). An early and detailed mapping exercise was identified as a necessary first step, to be undertaken across both the FE and apprenticeship sectors via individual providers, strategic plans, Cymraeg Gwaith planning data, and subject-level plans (p. 12). The Action Plan set a short-term target for the Coleg Cymraeg to map the existing staff resource by September 2020 (p. 24). The Cymraeg 2050 strategy identifies this mapping of Welsh-speaking staff in FE as a baseline priority before targeted workforce development can proceed, recognising that effective planning requires accurate knowledge of the existing workforce capacity.

3.2.4.2 Sgiliaith: specialist practitioner development

Sgiliaith, based at Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, is the specialist organisation supporting FE staff to develop their confidence and competence in delivering and assessing through Welsh. Canolfan Sgiliaith has provided support on bilingualism, Welsh-medium education, and Welsh and English communication skills to FE colleges and other post-14 education institutions across Wales since its establishment in 2001 (Sgiliaith, 2024, p. 2). Sgiliaith's National Staff Development Programme, funded by the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, offers the sector a structured progression through a language skills pyramid encompassing awareness, understanding, confidence, and fluency (p. 4). The programme includes Language Awareness training delivered through the Cymraeg Gwaith programme, an Embedding the Welsh Language Workshop, a Tutors' Bilingualism Toolkit, an Assessors' Bilingualism Toolkit, an Introduction to Bilingual Teaching Course, a Bilingual Teaching Methodology MA Module at Level 7, a Designing Bilingual Resources Workshop, and a Mentoring Programme for lecturers and assessors undertaking PGCE or TAQA (Training, Assessment, and Quality Assurance) qualifications (pp. 6-14). The Bilingual Teaching Methodology MA Module, a 30-credit postgraduate module, is aimed at practitioners who can communicate fluently in Welsh and English but lack the confidence to teach mixed language groups and requires participants to undertake action research evaluating interventions in bilingual teaching (pp. 12-13). Sgiliaith's mentoring programme is also open to practitioners participating in the FE and

Apprenticeships Cymraeg Gwaith scheme. The training is offered free to the FE and apprenticeship sectors because it is funded by the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (p. 2).

3.2.4.3 The Associate Lecturer scheme

The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol's Darlithwyr Cysylltiol (Associate Lecturers) scheme funds partial lecturing posts at higher education level and has been identified as a model with potential application to the FE sector. The FE and Apprenticeship Action Plan proposed that, particularly where staff are widely dispersed geographically or on a subject basis, opportunities should be created for staff to join the Coleg Cymraeg's Associate Lecturers scheme as a means of sharing best practice and maintaining Welsh-medium academic expertise (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 12). The Plan further recommended that the Coleg Cymraeg be tasked with supporting bilingual foundation degrees at FE institutions through subject grants, which could be used to partially support teaching posts (p. 12). The medium-term action plan included the creation of new bilingual lecturer or trainer posts as a priority for the period 2021-2024 (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 26). The Associate Lecturer model is significant because it maintains Welsh-medium academic expertise in subject areas where the number of Welsh-medium learners is too small to justify full-time appointments, a challenge that is particularly acute in the FE sector where Welsh-medium cohorts tend to be smaller than in HE.

3.2.4.4 The challenge of small cohort sizes

According to the Further Education and Apprenticeship Welsh-Medium Action Plan (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 4) a persistent structural challenge for Welsh-medium FE provision is that many providers have insufficient numbers of Welsh-medium learners to run viable separate classes. Data from Learner Voice surveys and the Lifelong Learning Wales Record indicate that approximately 11 per cent of FE learners and 11 per cent of apprentices report being fluent Welsh speakers, with a further cohort of around 5 per cent and 4 per cent respectively describing themselves as conversational. However, only 1 per cent of FE learners and 1 per cent of apprentices expressed a preference to study through Welsh only, with around 11 per cent and 9 per cent respectively preferring bilingual study. Research carried out in other contexts suggests that while a minority of respondents would confidently choose Welsh-medium provision, a significantly larger group would opt for bilingual delivery if offered appropriate support and reassurance.

This pattern necessitates creative delivery models. The FE and Apprenticeship Action Plan (Welsh Government, 2019) also proposed a subject-by-subject development approach, beginning with priority areas such as Health and Social Care, Childcare, and Public Services, with detailed mapping and expert group formation to develop a national vision for each subject reflecting the language skills pyramid model (pp. 13-14). Providers are expected to employ bilingual delivery approaches, streaming within mixed classes, or consortium arrangements across providers to sustain provision where standalone Welsh-medium classes are not viable. This raises the question of whether a similar bilingual delivery approach would represent a viable pathway for Northern Ireland. Given the comparatively small cohort sizes likely within Irish-medium further education, a fully Irish-medium model may encounter the same viability constraints identified in Wales. A bilingual approach, incorporating mixed delivery, streaming, and flexible language use within

programmes, may therefore offer a more sustainable and scalable model for initial implementation. However, its effectiveness would depend on the availability of appropriately trained staff and on institutional capacity to support dual-language delivery within existing provision.

The Coleg Cymraeg's strategic plan advocates placing more stringent conditions relating to Welsh language provision on apprenticeship providers and ensuring bilingual tutors, assessors, and mentors are available in the right sectors and areas (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2025, p. 7). Wales has invested substantially in the workforce dimension of Welsh-medium VET provision, recognising that accreditation and governance frameworks are only effective if practitioners have the linguistic capability to deliver within them. The combination of Sgiliaith for practitioner development, providing a structured progression from language awareness through to MA-level bilingual teaching methodology; the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol for subject expertise, materials development, and the Associate Lecturer model; and formal qualifications in Welsh-medium pedagogy creates a practitioner infrastructure that does not currently exist for Irish-medium VET in Northern Ireland. The Sgiliaith programme alone offers training at every level of the language skills pyramid, from entry-level awareness sessions suitable for non-Welsh speakers through to postgraduate-level modules for fluent speakers seeking to develop bilingual teaching confidence (Sgiliaith, 2024, p. 4). This infrastructure is further reinforced by the FE and Apprenticeship Action Plan's proposals for PGCE incentives, staff ambassador schemes, and staff awards for bilingual teaching (Welsh Government, 2019, pp. 12-13). The Welsh approach recognises that workforce capacity is not simply a matter of recruiting Welsh speakers into teaching roles, but of building confidence, pedagogical expertise, and professional community among existing staff. Without a comparable investment in practitioner development, any Irish-medium VET provision in Northern Ireland risks being constrained by the very workforce limitations that Wales has systematically sought to address.

3.2.5 Enabling conditions

The initial findings for Wales reveal that the Welsh system for minority language vocational education and training rests upon a set of identifiable structural preconditions without which the governance, accreditation, learner support and workforce arrangements described above could not function. The entire system derives its political durability and directional coherence from the Cymraeg 2050 strategy, with its target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050 and a commitment to doubling daily use of the language, operating through successive five-year work programmes supported by annual action plans and progress reports. The strategy is structured around three themes: increasing the number of Welsh speakers, increasing the use of Welsh, and creating favourable conditions in terms of infrastructure and context. This horizon, sustained across successive Senedd terms, insulates Welsh-medium vocational provision from short-term political fluctuation and provides the mandate upon which every other element of the system depends (Welsh Government, 2025). The durability of this mandate is reflected in the institutional planning of individual regulatory bodies. Qualifications Wales projects that with the growth of Welsh-medium education, the number of children and young people able to speak Welsh is projected to grow to 70 per cent by 2050, and commits to collaborating with partners to contribute towards the Cymraeg 2050

priorities (Qualifications Wales, 2024, p. 5). The regulator's grant programme, which subsidises awarding bodies in the provision of Welsh-medium assessment, represents a significant portion of its expenditure, and the five-year plan commits to evaluating the effectiveness of historic spend across its grant portfolio and considering whether the overall grants budget is sufficient to support the work required, particularly in the context of qualifications reform and the Welsh language (Qualifications Wales, 2024, pp. 9-10). The existence of a dedicated national intermediary body is a precondition for coordinated development. The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol was purpose-built to plan, coordinate and promote Welsh-medium education and was never intended to be a provider of education itself (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2020, p. 6). Its expansion into further education and apprenticeships from 2018 onwards was the product of a formal Task and Finish Group review process that received evidence from 19 organisations and 30 written submissions (Welsh Government, 2017a, p. 12). The intermediary model centralises the planning burden within a specialist body, relieving colleges and apprenticeship providers of a function that is peripheral to their primary missions but essential to minority language development (Welsh Government, 2021, p. 14). Without such a body, development remains dependent upon the discretionary priorities and goodwill of individual providers (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 2). Dedicated and ring-fenced funding channelled through the intermediary body is equally essential. As of 2024-2025, the Coleg received £2.825 million specifically to expand Welsh-medium FE and apprenticeship provision (Welsh Government, 2024a, p. 4), a funding arrangement deliberately maintained through direct Welsh Government grants rather than through other funding bodies (Welsh Government, 2017a, p. 34).

The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol's own analysis notes that only 2.1 per cent of the tertiary education budget, excluding sixth forms, is currently spent on Welsh-medium provision, and it has called for increased investment to protect existing provision and expand into new disciplines (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2025, p. 6). The statutory integration of minority language planning within system regulation embeds Welsh-medium provision as a structural feature of the tertiary sector rather than a peripheral concern. The establishment of Medr under the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022, with responsibility for funding and regulating further education, higher education, apprenticeships, adult community learning and school sixth forms (Medr, 2025, p. 3), has been accompanied by a formal statutory advisory role for the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. Medr explicitly commits to taking account of advice from the Coleg in its designated role under the 2022 Act (p. 20) and to developing a national plan for the Welsh language across the entire tertiary education sector in partnership with the Coleg and Qualifications Wales (p. 21). The 16-18 local curricula guidance, published for consultation in January 2026, reinforces this by requiring Medr to promote the Welsh language within post-16 curriculum planning and to ensure learners can continue their studies through Welsh as they enter post-16 education (Welsh Government, 2026b, Section 3).

A specialist workforce development infrastructure is a necessary condition for translating governance and accreditation frameworks into classroom delivery. Sgiliaith's National Staff Development Programme offers a structured progression through a language skills pyramid encompassing awareness, understanding, confidence and fluency (Sgiliaith, 2024, p. 4), providing training from entry-level language awareness sessions through to a 30-credit postgraduate Bilingual Teaching Methodology MA Module (Sgiliaith, 2024, pp. 6-13). This training is offered

free to the FE and apprenticeship sectors because it is funded by the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (p. 2). Without practitioners who possess both the linguistic competence and the pedagogical confidence to deliver and assess bilingually, the regulatory and accreditation architecture described in previous sections would remain inoperative. The Welsh evidence demonstrates that these conditions are constructible, that they have been assembled incrementally through deliberate policy action over more than a decade, and that their cumulative effect has been to transform minority language vocational provision from a marginal activity dependent on individual goodwill into a planned and sustainable element of the tertiary education system.

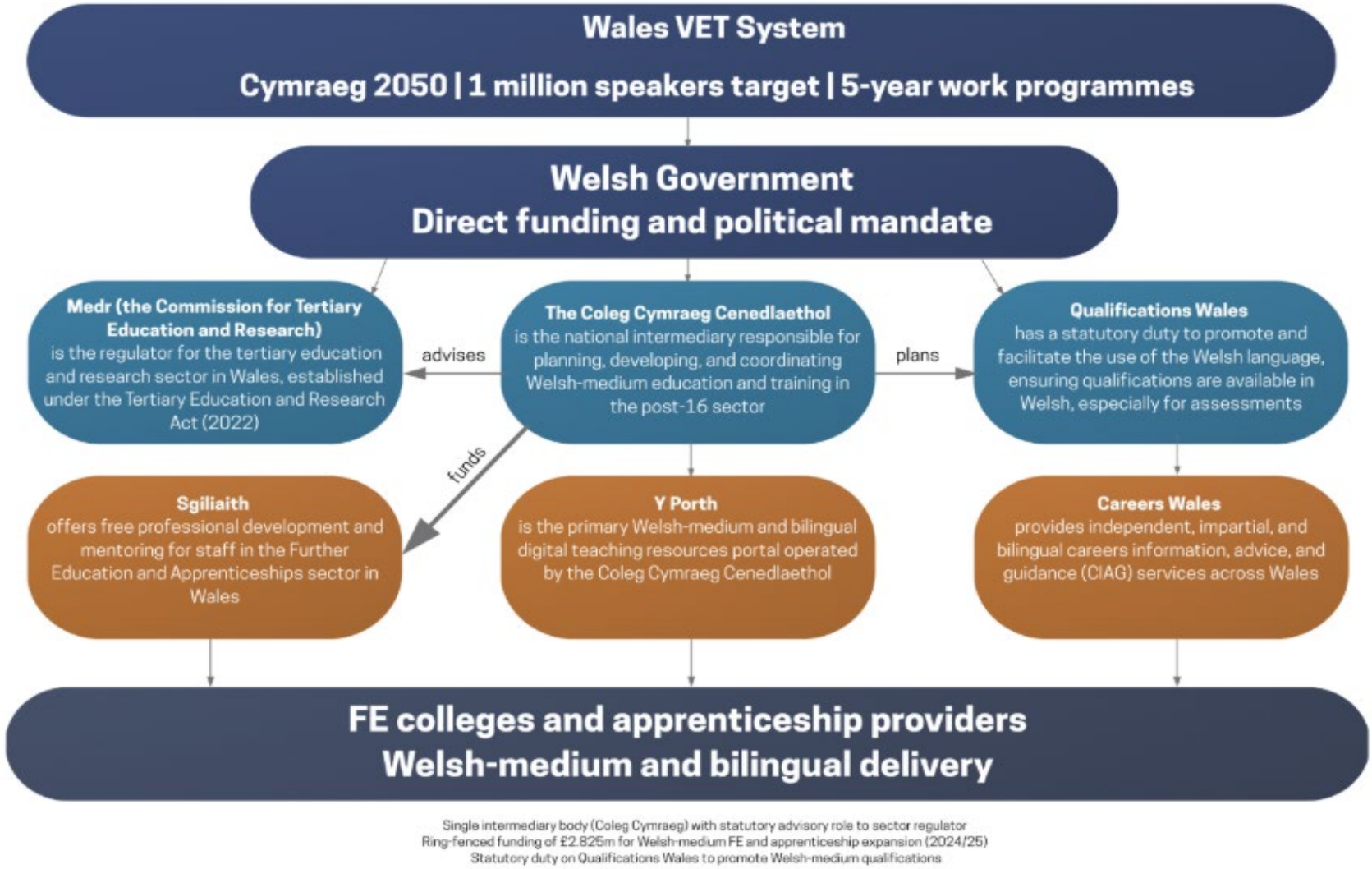


Figure 1:Governance and delivery structure of the Welsh VET system

3.3 Republic of Ireland: Findings Across Five Dimensions

The Republic of Ireland's approach to minority language vocational education and training is examined here across the same five analytical dimensions applied to Wales: governance and system architecture, accreditation and qualification frameworks, learner support infrastructures, provider capacity and workforce, and enabling conditions. The analysis draws on the Further Education and Training Act 2013 as revised and consolidated to 28 January 2026; the Official Languages Act 2003 as amended by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 and consolidated to 1 June 2025; national strategy documents published by SOLAS; the strategic plans and published commitments of Kerry Education and Training Board; the corporate strategy of Údarás na Gaeltachta; the National Plan for Irish Language Public Services 2024-2030; and the published provision of independent accredited providers including Gaelchultúr (Coláiste na hÉireann). Where specific provisions of the Official Languages Act 2003 were introduced by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, this is noted; page references are to the consolidated text of the Official Languages Act 2003 (revised to 1 June 2025) unless otherwise stated. A distinction is maintained throughout between Gaeltacht-specific provision, which is geographically concentrated and serves communities where Irish is the primary spoken language, and wider Irish-language provision, which serves voluntary learners across the state. Both models are relevant to Northern Ireland, but for different reasons and in different ways. The purpose is to identify the structural features that shape the availability of Irish-medium vocational pathways, to assess the extent to which governance arrangements enable or constrain access to those pathways, and to establish an evidence base against which the current position in Northern Ireland can be assessed.

3.3.1 Governance and System Architecture

The governance of further education and training (FET) in the Republic of Ireland is shaped by the Further Education and Training Act 2013, as consolidated to 28 January 2026 (hereinafter referred to as the FET Act 2013), which established SOLAS as the national authority responsible for the planning, funding, and coordination of publicly funded FET (FET Act 2013, s. 6, p. 5). Under Section 7, SOLAS is charged with advancing moneys to Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and assessing whether those bodies perform their functions in an economic, efficient, and effective manner (FET Act 2013, s. 7(1)(c)(d)(f), pp. 5-6), while Section 9 requires SOLAS to prepare and submit five-year FET strategies to the Minister (FET Act 2013, s. 9(1), p. 6). The most recent completed strategy cycle, Future FET: Transforming Learning (2020-2024), set the direction for a system serving approximately 200,000 learners annually, underpinned by state investment channelled primarily through 16 ETBs (SOLAS, 2020, p. 21), with a successor strategy for 2025-2029 currently under development (SOLAS, 2024). The relationship between SOLAS and ETBs is governed through strategic performance agreements, first established in 2018, which link national strategy to regional provision and are assessed by an international expert panel (SOLAS, 2020, pp. 17-18). An observation for this benchmarking exercise is that neither the FET Act 2013 nor the SOLAS strategic framework contains a specific statutory duty in respect of Irish-medium provision within FET. The Act's enumeration of SOLAS functions under Section 7 makes no reference to the Irish language, Gaeltacht communities, or

minority-language medium delivery (FET Act 2013, s. 7, pp. 5-6). This is reinforced by two further features: Section 9(6) expressly requires a FET strategy to include provision for literacy and numeracy but makes no equivalent requirement for Irish-language skills (FET Act 2013, s. 9(6), p. 7), and Section 9(5)(a), which sets out the bodies with which SOLAS may consult on a discretionary basis when preparing a FET strategy, names An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas, Enterprise Ireland, Teagasc, and QQI, but does not include Údarás na Gaeltachta, Foras na Gaeilge, or any other Irish-language body (FET Act 2013, s. 9(5)(a), p. 7). While Section 9(5)(c) allows for consultation with other bodies at SOLAS's discretion, Irish-language organisations are not statutorily specified within the consultation framework. Notably, even the mandatory consultation requirement under Section 9(4) is limited to specified Government ministers and does not extend to any language or Gaeltacht organisation (FET Act 2013, s. 9(4), p. 7). This represents a significant legislative decoupling compared to other tiers of the Irish education system; whereas the Education Act 1998 and the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 contain explicit mandates to support the Irish language, the FET Act 2013 treats the sector primarily as a vehicle for employment and economic skills. It contrasts markedly with Wales, where Qualifications Wales holds an explicit statutory obligation under the Qualifications Wales Act 2015 to promote the availability of qualifications through the medium of Welsh.

The implication is that Irish-language FET is not governed through a specific vertical policy mechanism at national level but is instead addressed through the interaction of separate legislative frameworks: the Official Languages Acts 2003, its amendment in 2021, and Acht na Gaeltachta (2012). The Official Languages Act 2003 places duties on all public bodies, including ETBs and SOLAS, in respect of communication and service provision in Irish. The Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 substantially strengthened this framework. Section 17 of the 2021 Act repealed the previous language scheme system under Sections 11-18 of the 2003 Act and replaced it with a new language standards regime. Section 8 of the 2021 Act inserted Sections 18A-18F into the 2003 Act, establishing the Irish Language Services Advisory Committee under Section 18A. Under Section 18C(1)(a), as inserted by the 2021 Act, the Advisory Committee is charged with preparing and submitting to the Minister a National Plan for the provision of public services through the medium of Irish, the purposes of which include identifying services provided by public bodies that are not provided through Irish and in relation to which language standards should be prescribed under Section 19A(2), and specifying strategies through which public bodies may deliver such services (Official Languages Act 2003 (as amended), s. 18C(1)(a), pp. 14-15, as inserted by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, s. 8). In performing its functions, the Advisory Committee must have regard to the objective of increasing the services provided by public bodies through the medium of Irish, with particular regard to services provided by public bodies in Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas, Gaeltacht Service Towns, and Irish Language Networks (Official Languages Act 2003 (as amended), s. 18C(3)(a), p. 15, as inserted by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, s. 8). The 2021 Act further established a statutory objective that at least 20 per cent of staff recruited to public bodies should be competent in Irish by no later than 31 December 2030 (Official Languages Act 2003 (as amended), s. 18C(3)(b), p. 15, as inserted by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, s. 8). Section 9 of the 2021 Act inserted Sections 19A-19D into the 2003 Act, empowering the Minister to prescribe language

standards to apply to public bodies or classes of public bodies (Official Languages Act 2003 (as amended), s. 19A, pp. 16-18, as inserted by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, s. 9). However, these obligations remain extrinsic to the educational mission of FET: they govern how agencies communicate and provide services rather than what they deliver in terms of curriculum, apprenticeships, or Irish-medium instruction. Their enforcement lies with An Coimisinéir Teanga (the Irish Language Commissioner) rather than with SOLAS or QQI.

Kerry ETB serves as the primary case example of an ETB with significant Gaeltacht responsibilities, its administrative area encompassing the Corca Dhuibhne and Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht regions (Kerry ETB, 2020, p. 4). In 2020, the ETB established a dedicated FET centre at Áras Bhréanainn, Baile an Fheirtéaraigh, providing accredited Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge (TEG) courses – the European Certificate in Irish, which is a CEFR-aligned proficiency certification system administered by Maynooth University – from levels A1-C1 (Kerry ETB, 2025)[25]. Kerry ETB's Language Scheme 2020-2023, prepared under the now-repealed Section 15 of the Official Languages Act 2003 (repealed by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, s. 17), committed the ETB to Irish as the working language of the Dingle FET Centre, providing a minimum of four courses through Irish annually, and co-funding an Irish Education Officer in Uíbh Ráthach with Údarás na Gaeltachta (Kerry ETB, 2020, pp. 4, 15). Until new language standards are prescribed under Section 19A, these scheme commitments remain in force under transitional provisions. Critically, the strategic performance agreement between SOLAS and Kerry ETB for 2018-2020 does not refer to Irish-medium provision, structuring its targets entirely around participation, employment, progression, transversal skills, qualifications, and apprenticeships (Kerry ETB, 2018, pp. 23-28). This confirms that Irish-medium FET governance is, in practical terms, a matter of local initiative shaped by language legislation rather than a feature of the national FET planning system. Kerry ETB is the most fully documented example, but it is not the only ETB with Gaeltacht responsibilities.

Galway and Roscommon ETB (GRETB), whose administrative area encompasses the largest Gaeltacht region in the State (Conamara and the Aran Islands), has also developed Irish-language provision, including an online tutor training course in the three main dialects and plain Irish developed through the Adult Literacy for Life initiative (Oireachtas, 2025b). GRETB has also worked in collaboration with Údarás na Gaeltachta in identifying skills needs in Gaeltacht regions. The Breacadh Scheme further supports ETBs servicing Gaeltacht areas through the development of Irish-language teaching and learning resources, tutor training, and curriculum development. However, the extent of dedicated Irish-medium FET centre provision comparable to Áras Bhréanainn has not been documented across other ETBs to the same degree, suggesting that Kerry ETB's model remains the most developed and institutionalised example. Operating outside the ETB structure entirely, Údarás na Gaeltachta holds a distinct governance position as the regional development agency for Gaeltacht areas. Its Strategy 2021-2025 sets out a vision for the Gaeltacht as a creative, innovative, and viable region where Irish is the living language of the community and first-class employment opportunities are available (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2021, p. 5). The strategy identifies three core themes of enablement, strengthening, and sustainability, with a commitment to enabling people through the

[25] Levels per the Common European Framework (CEFR): A=Basic, B=Independent, C=Proficient.

development and implementation of extensive training and coaching programmes throughout the Gaeltacht and enabling companies through the provision of incentives to develop appropriate training programmes within their businesses (pp. 19-21). A main employment objective of 9,000 persons employed in Gaeltacht client companies by the end of 2025 is set out as a central performance target (p. 23).

Of particular relevance to this benchmarking exercise is the Gaeltacht scholarship scheme, operated by the Department of Education and Skills, which has long functioned as a mechanism for supporting Irish-language immersion learning through attendance at Gaeltacht summer colleges and courses. The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010 to 2030 committed both to a review of the existing scheme with the aim of increasing its effectiveness as an Irish-language support mechanism and to the introduction of a new Gaeltacht scholarship scheme for primary teachers to attend intensive courses in the Gaeltacht (Government of Ireland, 2010, pp. 14, 17). The Strategy further committed to the provision of a scholarship scheme for children from disadvantaged areas to attend courses in the Gaeltacht, alongside funding for Irish summer colleges throughout the country (Government of Ireland, 2010, p. 15). This cross-jurisdictional dimension is underscored by the Northern Ireland Irish Language Strategy 2015 to 2035, which similarly recommended an increase in the number of awards under the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's Gaeltacht Bursary Scheme, described as a scholarship scheme for those from disadvantaged areas to attend courses in the Gaeltacht (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, 2015, para. 4.47, p. 39). The continuity of the Gaeltacht scholarship mechanism across both jurisdictions, albeit administered by different departments and under different legislative frameworks, illustrates a shared recognition that immersive Gaeltacht-based learning serves as a foundational pipeline for Irish-language skills development, a pipeline whose long-term implications for vocational and professional pathways have been acknowledged but not yet systematically governed.

The National Plan for Irish Language Public Services 2024 to 2030 moved significantly further than previous policy instruments by explicitly identifying apprenticeships as a priority area for Irish-language workforce development. The Plan recommended that the feasibility be examined of developing and expanding specific Irish-language programmes at different levels, particularly through the Advanced Irish Language Skills Initiative, including through apprenticeships, Level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications, modules and micro credentials (Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 121). This recommendation was given concrete institutional expression through the Public Service Apprenticeship Plan 2023, which committed the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to the development of a Speisialtoir Gaeilge (Irish Language Specialist) programme, described as a generalist at Executive Officer level with competence in the Irish language, to be developed by the third quarter of 2025 in collaboration with other State departments (Government of Ireland, 2024, pp. 48 to 49). This apprenticeship is designed to combine Irish-language competence with public administration and public management training, in direct support of the statutory objective established by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 requiring that 20 per cent of recruits to the public sector be competent in Irish by the end of 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 49). A Ministerial response to a Parliamentary Question in November 2025 further confirmed that Irish is being advanced through Skillnet Ireland networks, apprenticeships and FET programmes, contributing to the broader policy goal of supporting Irish for professional use in the context of the 20 per cent

public service recruitment target (Oireachtas, 2025). The governance significance of these developments lies not only in their substantive content but in their institutional location: the apprenticeship commitment originates from a Departmental plan for public service workforce development rather than from within the SOLAS or ETB governance architecture, reinforcing the pattern in which Irish-language vocational provision is advanced through parallel policy streams rather than through the national FET planning framework.

The governance significance of the Udaras model lies in its provision of precisely such parallel workforce development mechanisms, including enterprise training, mentoring services, and the gteic digital hub network. By the end of 2020, Udaras na Gaeltachta had established a network of 26 gteic centres, ensuring that office space and workspace of the highest standard would be available to entrepreneurs in all parts of the Gaeltacht where they could access stable, high-quality broadband (Udaras na Gaeltachta, 2021, p. 11). The gteic network is positioned as a strategic initiative for accelerating innovation and entrepreneurship and creating opportunities for remote working in the Gaeltacht, with centres functioning as Gaeltacht digital hubs with a strong Gaeltacht ethos (Udaras na Gaeltachta, 2021, p. 41). Over the period of the Strategy 2021 to 2025, the focus is directed towards adding value to the network through activities including seminars, workshops, classes, and networking opportunities, and towards ensuring that the centres contribute to the entrepreneurial and developmental culture of the Gaeltacht (Udaras na Gaeltachta, 2021, p. 33). Udaras staff also provide a wide range of advice and mentoring services to enterprise, in addition to providing training to those involved in the language planning process, including cooperatives, community committees, language planning committees and officers (Udaras na Gaeltachta, 2021, p. 15). These mechanisms operate entirely outside the SOLAS and ETB funding and planning architecture. The structural nature of this separation is inscribed in legislation: Section 9(5)(a) of the Further Education and Training Act 2013 provides that SOLAS may, for the purpose of preparing a FET strategy, consult with An tUdaras um Ard-Oideachas (the Higher Education Authority), Enterprise Ireland, Teagasc or Quality and Qualifications Ireland (Further Education and Training Act 2013, revised, updated to 28 January 2026, s. 9(5)(a), p. 7). Udaras na Gaeltachta is not included in this statutory consultee list, despite its direct engagement in workforce development, enterprise training and skills-related activity across Gaeltacht regions. Its exclusion is emblematic of the broader structural separation between Gaeltacht-specific economic development and the nationally governed FET system, a separation that means the skills and training dimensions of Gaeltacht community development are neither integrated into nor accountable within the framework through which SOLAS plans, funds and monitors further education and training provision across the State.

Gaelchultúr, operating as Coláiste na hÉireann, received QQI-accredited status in 2013 and offers professional Irish-language certification nationally. From autumn 2022, TEG has certified Gaelchultúr courses offered to civil servants on behalf of OneLearning on a part-accredited basis aligned with the CEFR (Government of Ireland, 2024, pp. 28-29). This model is fundamentally distinct from Gaeltacht-based provision: it operates through a national, voluntary learning market driven substantially by public sector demand generated by the Official Languages Acts and the 20 per cent recruitment target established by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021. Its provision is neither geographically bounded, funded

through the SOLAS-ETB channel, nor integrated into the FET strategic planning framework. A further dimension of the Republic's governance landscape is the role of An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) in producing and disseminating careers information for Irish speakers.

The COGG Career Opportunities with Irish pack provides a structured national resource cataloguing career pathways across ten sectors, including Irish language media, the education system, translation, Irish language organisations, civil service and state organisations, business, STEM, performance and creative arts, sport and wellbeing, and Gaeltacht-based employment (An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, 2025). The pack includes details of third-level courses with Irish across multiple institutions, apprenticeship scholarship schemes operated by Údarás na Gaeltachta, further education and access courses, residency schemes, and bursaries. Notably, the resource extends to Northern Ireland, listing Belfast based universities among institutions offering Irish-related courses and identifying the Gaelchúrsaí Irish Language Training Academy in Belfast as the sole Irish language further education service in Northern Ireland (An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, 2025). While COGG does not function as a careers guidance service in the sense of providing personalised advice and guidance, its role in producing and distributing structured careers information represents an existing cross-border resource that is relevant to the transferability analysis in Section 5.

These governance tiers reveal a system characterised more by fragmentation than by formal coordination, yet one which has generated diverse and, in several respects, effective models of Irish-medium provision serving distinct learner constituencies. SOLAS exercises comprehensive authority over FET strategy and funding but this authority extends to no specific governance of Irish-medium provision; the consolidated FET Act contains no reference to the Irish language in any operative provision (FET Act 2013, pp. 1-24). ETBs develop Irish-medium FET where Gaeltacht geography demands it, but under the impetus of language legislation rather than FET policy. Údarás na Gaeltachta provides parallel workforce development outside the formal FET system. Independent providers such as Gaelchultúr serve a nationally distributed, market-driven demand for accredited Irish-language professional certification that is neither integrated with nor governed by the FET architecture. There is no single statutory body with overarching responsibility for ensuring that accredited vocational education, training, and apprenticeship pathways are available through the medium of Irish, and this absence of a coordinating function distinguishes the Irish system from Wales, where Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol provides a national planning and development role for Welsh-medium post-compulsory provision. However, the multiplicity of providers and funding streams has produced a breadth of entry points that a more centralised model might not have achieved: a territorially embedded ETB centre delivering accredited and community-based courses within the Gaeltacht, an enterprise development agency connecting skills to employment through the minority language, and an independent accredited provider scaling professional certification nationally in response to public sector demand generated by language legislation.

For Northern Ireland, developing Irish-medium vocational pathways under the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, the Republic of Ireland's experience offers both a caution and a resource. The caution is that without an

explicit statutory duty within FET or skills legislation itself, minority-language medium provision will remain dependent on local initiative and structurally disconnected from mainstream vocational planning. The resource is the range of practical models that have emerged: the Kerry ETB approach of establishing a dedicated centre with adapted delivery parameters within a mainstream FET body is directly transferable to the existing further education college structure in Northern Ireland, requiring institutional mandate and operational flexibility rather than new primary legislation; the Gaelchultúr model demonstrates that accredited provision can be scaled through demand generated by public sector language obligations; and the Údarás principle of supplementary, community-embedded skills support, while not directly replicable in the absence of a geographically defined Gaeltacht, has resonance with the potential role of Foras na Gaeilge[26] or any new body established under the 2022 Act. The lesson is that enabling multiple pathways can compensate for the absence of a single integrated system, provided that at least one body is charged with the oversight responsibility to ensure those pathways connect and that gaps in provision are identified and addressed.

3.3.2 Accreditation and Qualification Frameworks

The accreditation system in the Republic of Ireland operates through three interlocking mechanisms: the National Framework of Qualifications maintained by QQI, CEFR-aligned proficiency certification through TEG[27], and provider-level accreditation achieved by organisations such as Gaelchultúr. The governance of accreditation in the Republic of Ireland is anchored in the work of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), an independent State agency responsible for maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), a ten-level framework for the recognition and awarding of qualifications. QQI validates programmes, certifies learners, and conducts institutional reviews of providers' quality assurance procedures (SOLAS & QQI, 2024, p. 5)[28]. As the Memorandum of Understanding between SOLAS and QQI for 2024-2027 confirms, both organisations share a common aim of enhancing the relevance, quality, coherence, and performance of the FET sector, collaborating on matters including micro credentials, apprenticeship qualifications, and the facilitation of diverse quality-assured pathways (pp. 6-7). The MoU also commits both organisations to working together on the approval of Listed Awarding Bodies and the inclusion of their awards in the NFQ, a provision that may create further opportunities for Irish-language organisations to seek recognition within the national framework (SOLAS & QQI, 2024, p. 8). The NFQ is language-neutral in design: it does not distinguish between qualifications delivered in English and those delivered through Irish. It is, however, sufficiently flexible to accommodate Irish-medium providers, and it is this flexibility that has enabled a distinctive model of Irish-language accreditation to emerge (QQI, 2021). The role of Gaelchultúr within this framework illustrates how Irish-medium provision can be delivered through existing regulatory structures rather than through a parallel system. The Oireachtas

[26] Foras na Gaeilge, the body responsible for the promotion of the Irish language throughout Ireland, was founded on the second day of December 1999.
[27] Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge (TEG) is a set of accredited Irish language proficiency exams for adult learners, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).
[28] The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a ten-level framework for the recognition and awarding of qualifications in the Republic of Ireland. Level 1 corresponds to the most basic certifications, and Level 10 to doctoral degrees. NFQ Levels 3-6 span from junior certificate equivalent through to higher certificate/advanced certificate level, covering the range most relevant to further education and training.

briefing of November 2025 confirms that Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim ETB (MSLETB) have partnered with Gaelchultúr to offer a Certificate in Professional Irish (CPI) course at NFQ Levels 3, 4, 5, and 6 (Oireachtas, 2025).

The interlocking relationship between QQI-accredited qualifications, CEFR-referenced standards, TEG proficiency certification, and legislative obligations creates a coherent accreditation ecosystem operating entirely within the mainstream framework, without any separate Irish-medium accreditation authority (Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 29). Beyond the formal accreditation ecosystem, Údarás na Gaeltachta operates an apprenticeship scholarship scheme offering scholarships worth over €2,000 each to Gaeltacht residents undertaking apprenticeships across traditional trades and an expanding range of disciplines including accountancy, auctioneering, and cybersecurity (An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, 2025). This scheme, while not itself an accreditation mechanism, demonstrates that financial incentives have been linked directly to apprenticeship uptake within the Gaeltacht and that the range of apprenticeships supported extends well beyond traditional trade occupations. The evidence suggests that this approach has been both sustained and successful. The scheme has been in continuous operation for over four decades, having originated under Gaeltarra Éireann in the 1970s before transferring to Údarás na Gaeltachta (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2020). A 2022 Dáil parliamentary reply confirmed 122 active participants at that time (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2022), and by 2025 this figure had risen to 152, representing what Údarás described as a substantial increase on the previous year (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2026). The long-term impact is also evidenced by the number of former apprentices who have subsequently established their own businesses within the Gaeltacht, generating employment for the next generation (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2021). For Northern Ireland, this demonstrates that a relatively modest, targeted financial incentive, linked to mainstream accredited apprenticeships, can sustain minority-language community participation in vocational training over several decades without requiring a separate system or bespoke qualifications.

The Republic's experience demonstrates that an Irish-language organisation can deliver accredited qualifications across multiple NFQ levels through partnership with publicly funded ETBs, and that this can be achieved within mainstream quality assurance frameworks. This is the most directly relevant precedent for Northern Ireland, where the question of whether Irish-language organisations could develop accredited qualifications through Awarding Organisations in an open market has not been resolved. The Republic's experience suggests this is achievable within mainstream frameworks, provided quality assurance conditions are met. However, this model has developed within a particular legislative context, including the constitutional status of Irish and the statutory obligations of the Official Languages Acts, which has no direct equivalent in Northern Ireland. The transferability of the model depends not only on the technical capacity of Northern Ireland's qualifications regulators but on whether a comparable policy driver exists to sustain demand for accredited Irish-medium qualifications.

3.3.3 Learner Support Infrastructures

Learner support for Irish-medium vocational provision in the Republic of Ireland operates through two principal mechanisms with distinct characteristics: nationally

available workforce development programmes within the FET system, and a territorial support infrastructure rooted in Gaeltacht governance. The principal mechanism through which accredited Irish-language certification has been made available at no cost to employees is the Skills to Advance programme (Education Matters, 2024, p. 213). The SOLAS strategy Future FET: Transforming Learning identifies Skills to Advance as a flagship workforce development initiative, providing structured engagement between ETBs and employers, flexible upskilling opportunities, and financial incentives to encourage participation, particularly by small and medium-sized enterprises (SOLAS, 2020, p. 41). By 2024, over 83,000 employees had participated in Skills to Advance since its inception, with 25,000 upskilling through the programme in that year alone (Education Matters, 2024, p. 213). The programme's significance for Irish-language provision lies in its use as the funding mechanism through which the CPI has been made available to employees, as demonstrated by the MSLETB and Gaelchultúr partnership offering fully funded CPI places at NFQ Levels 3, 4, 5, and 6 (Oireachtas, 2025). This model demonstrates that accredited Irish-language certification can be embedded within mainstream workforce development funding, with considerable implications for scalability across the sixteen ETBs.

The Oireachtas briefing of November 2025 further references the Breacadh Scheme, which supports ETBs that service Gaeltacht regions to develop language materials, and an online tutor training course in the three main dialects and plain Irish developed by Galway and Roscommon ETB (GRETB) and Údarás na Gaeltachta to support Gaeltacht learners (Oireachtas, 2025). These measures are directly relevant to the expansion of further education and training opportunities through Irish. The demand for Irish-language skills development within the public sector is documented in the National Plan for Irish Language Public Services 2024-2030, which records that the number of civil servants undertaking Irish-language training through OneLearning and Gaelchultúr grew by ninety-three per cent between the spring 2022 and the spring 2024 terms (Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 100). The National Plan confirms that B2 on the CEFR is the minimum standard currently set for Irish-language roles and that the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 established a statutory objective that at least 20 per cent of recruits to public bodies should be competent in Irish by the end of 2030 (Official Languages Act 2003 (as amended), s. 18C(3)(b), p. 15, as inserted by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, s. 8; Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 30).

Complementing the Certificate in Professional Irish pathway, the Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge (TEG), administered by Maynooth University, serves as the sole CEFR-aligned Irish-language proficiency certification system in Ireland, certifying Gaelchultúr courses for civil servants on behalf of OneLearning since 2022 (p. 30). Within the ETB system, Kerry ETB's Áras Bhréanainn centre offers accredited TEG courses at levels A1-C1 (Kerry ETB, 2025). Kerry ETB's Language Scheme further commits the organisation to providing accredited proficiency testing certification for staff (Kerry ETB, 2020, p. 18). The convergence of statutory obligations publicly funded upskilling programmes, and CEFR-aligned proficiency testing creates a learner support ecosystem considerably more developed than any equivalent in Northern Ireland. Údarás na Gaeltachta provides a territorial dimension to learner support through its broader role in enabling Gaeltacht communities. The Údarás Strategy 2021-2025 identifies as a core objective the enabling of people through the development and implementation of extensive training and coaching programmes

throughout the Gaeltacht, and the enabling of companies through a range of incentives to assist them in developing appropriate training programmes (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2021, p. 19). The Oireachtas briefing confirms that Irish is being advanced through apprenticeships and FET programmes, contributing to the broader policy goal of supporting Irish for professional use (Oireachtas, 2025). Kerry ETB's Language Scheme records that the ETB co-funds an Irish Education Officer role in Uíbh Ráthach in partnership with Údarás na Gaeltachta (Kerry ETB, 2020, p. 4), illustrating the collaborative relationship between the Gaeltacht development agency and the regional FET provider.

Against these strengths, the Republic exhibits a gap in personalised careers guidance and transition support. Unlike Wales, where Careers Wales operates with an explicit bilingual remit, there is no careers service in Ireland with a specific responsibility to advise on Irish-medium vocational pathways. Information is distributed across multiple institutional websites and provider platforms, with no single portal for identifying the full range of accredited Irish-medium options. However, this finding should be qualified by the existence of structured careers information resources. The COGG Career Opportunities with Irish pack provides a nationally distributed resource cataloguing career pathways across ten sectors, third-level courses, apprenticeship scholarship schemes, further education courses, and bursaries available for Irish speakers, and extends its coverage to Northern Ireland institutions (An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, 2025). The COGG careers portal at saoloibre.ie further enables users to search for third-level courses and create career profiles. While the Policy for Irish-Medium Education outside of the Gaeltacht has established a Taskforce on Models of Provision to co-design sustainable pathways and inclusive models for the sector, these remain emerging policy objectives rather than established infrastructure (Department of Education, 2024). This asymmetry is directly relevant to Northern Ireland, where the Irish-medium sector is not geographically concentrated. The Republic's experience suggests that financial support and employer incentivisation are necessary but not sufficient conditions for expanding participation: without coherent guidance infrastructure, learner support remains available in principle but inaccessible in practice to those outside established Irish-language networks.

3.3.4 Provider Capacity and Workforce

The sustainability of Irish-medium vocational provision depends on whether a workforce of tutors, assessors, and curriculum developers exists with the linguistic competence and pedagogical expertise to design, deliver, and quality-assure programmes through Irish. In the Republic of Ireland, provider capacity is built by individual institutions rather than planned at a national system level, producing a pattern in which capacity is strongest where geographically concentrated or organisationally specialised. The most fully documented institutional model is Kerry ETB, whose Language Scheme 2020-2023 sets out a systematic approach encompassing three dimensions: recruitment of staff with Irish-language competence, continuing professional development for existing staff, and designation of specific posts as requiring Irish-language competency, including the Centre Manager and all future roles at the Dingle FET Centre (Kerry ETB, 2020, pp. 18, 20). The Scheme commits Kerry ETB to compiling a tutor pool capable of delivering through Irish, to offering a minimum of four courses through Irish annually at the

Dingle FET Centre, and to lowering minimum participant numbers for Gaeltacht delivery (Kerry ETB, 2020, pp. 15, 17). Irish is designated the working language of the Dingle centre, with correspondence to the Gaeltacht community to be in Irish only or bilingually (Kerry ETB, 2020, p. 17). However, the Scheme also identifies the principal constraint: that expanding provision is contingent on identifying suitable tutors in Gaeltacht areas, an acknowledgement that no ready pool exists (Kerry ETB, 2020, p. 17). Kerry ETB employs 196 tutors and 105 teachers across its FET provision (Kerry ETB, 2018, p. 7), but these figures are not disaggregated by language capacity. Outside the ETB system, Gaelchultúr represents the most concentrated repository of Irish-medium delivery capacity. Its role in delivering CPI courses at multiple NFQ levels, its partnership with MSLETB under the Skills to Advance programme (Oireachtas, 2025), and its delivery of Irish-language courses to civil servants on behalf of OneLearning (Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 29) collectively demonstrate that the organisation has built a distinctive and nationally significant capacity in the design and delivery of accredited Irish-language professional qualifications. The small scale of this model is both a strength, providing genuine concentrated expertise in a field where such expertise is scarce, and a limitation, creating structural vulnerability should demand increase significantly beyond a single provider's capacity. Údarás na Gaeltachta contributes to provider capacity development through its broader enterprise and training mission, which includes enabling companies through a range of incentives to develop appropriate training programmes (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2021, p. 19), though its focus is on enterprise development rather than on building the tutor and assessor capacity required for Irish-medium FET delivery. The critical gap is the absence of a national workforce development infrastructure for Irish-medium FET delivery. The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 recognised the need for systematic development of Irish-language capacity in the public service, proposing an independent, standards-based accreditation system for Irish-language competency and specifying that future language schemes would identify posts requiring Irish-language competency (Government of Ireland, 2010, p. 13).

Kerry ETB's Language Scheme represents a partial implementation at institutional level, but the broader system-level architecture has not been established. There is no national programme equivalent to Sgiliaith in Wales, which provides dedicated support for Welsh-medium and bilingual teaching and assessment capability across FET. The SOLAS and QQI Memorandum of Understanding for 2024-2027 identifies capacity building to develop and review curricula, standards, and qualifications as a priority (SOLAS and QQI, 2024, p. 7) but does not address linguistic capacity for Irish-medium delivery. For most ETBs outside the Gaeltacht, Irish-medium FET delivery capacity is not addressed within strategic performance agreements, quality assurance frameworks, or workforce development plans. The implications for Northern Ireland are direct. The Republic's experience demonstrates that building Irish-medium provider capacity is achievable at the institutional level but that without a national programme to expand the pool of Irish-medium practitioners, such capacity remains localised and fragile. Northern Ireland, where the Irish-medium sector is dispersed and where there is no equivalent Gaeltacht infrastructure, faces an even more acute version of this challenge. Any development of Irish-medium vocational provision in Northern Ireland will require a planned approach to workforce development addressing the supply of linguistically competent FET practitioners, the development of Irish-medium assessment capability within quality assurance

frameworks, and institutional incentives for providers to invest in Irish-medium delivery capacity. The Republic's experience suggests that the statutory obligations of language legislation can provide policy drivers for institutional action, but that these alone are insufficient to produce system-wide capacity without dedicated, coordinated investment at the national level.

3.3.5 Enabling conditions

The Republic of Ireland possesses a set of enabling conditions for minority language vocational provision that are, in several respects, more extensive than those available in Northern Ireland but that have not been assembled into the kind of mutually reinforcing system identified in the Welsh analysis. Identifying these conditions, and the reasons they have not translated into systematic Irish-medium FET provision, is essential to the transferability assessment in Section 5 of this chapter. The constitutional status of Irish as the first official language of the State under Article 8 of Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937) provides a foundational legal recognition that has no equivalent in Northern Ireland. This constitutional status underpins the legislative framework of the Official Languages Acts 2003-2021, which places duties on all public bodies, including SOLAS and the 16 Education and Training Boards, in respect of Irish-language service provision. These duties include obligations regarding communication, stationery, signage, and publications under Sections 9 and 10 of the Official Languages Act 2003, supplemented by the additional duties regarding names and addresses (s. 9A), official forms (s. 9B), logos (s. 9C), and public-facing services (s. 9E), as inserted by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, ss. 4-5; and the duty to comply with prescribed language standards under Section 19B, as inserted by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, s. 9. The 2021 Amendment Act strengthened this framework by establishing the Irish Language Services Advisory Committee (s. 8, inserting s. 18A into the Official Languages Act 2003), empowering the Minister to prescribe language standards (s. 9, inserting s. 19A), and establishing a statutory objective that at least 20 per cent of staff recruited to public bodies should be competent in Irish by no later than 31 December 2030 (Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, s. 8, inserting s. 18C(3)(b) into the Official Languages Act 2003, p. 15 of the consolidated Act). This recruitment objective has generated measurable demand for accredited Irish-language professional qualifications, with a 93 per cent increase in civil servant Irish-language training uptake between spring 2022 and spring 2024 (Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 100). As an enforceable statutory objective with a fixed deadline, it functions as a demand driver of a kind that neither Wales nor Northern Ireland possesses in equivalent form. The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 provides a long-term strategic framework analogous to Cymraeg 2050 in Wales (Government of Ireland, 2010). The Strategy identified education, including further and adult education, as a key domain for action and proposed the development of Irish-language capacity across the public service, including through an independent, standards-based accreditation system for Irish-language competency (Government of Ireland, 2010, p. 13).

The National Plan for Irish Language Public Services 2024-2030, prepared by the Irish Language Services Advisory Committee under Section 18C of the Official Languages Act 2003, as inserted by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, s. 8, further identified apprenticeships as a priority area, recommending that

possibilities be examined for developing and expanding dedicated Irish-language programmes including through apprenticeships and micro credentials (Government of Ireland, 2024, pp. 52, 121). These strategic commitments provide a policy environment broadly favourable to Irish-medium vocational development. The territorial governance infrastructure provided by Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 and Údarás na Gaeltachta constitutes a further enabling condition. The existence of a dedicated regional development agency with an explicit mandate to connect language, enterprise, and skills development within geographically defined Gaeltacht areas provides a mechanism for community-embedded workforce development that operates independently of the SOLAS-ETB architecture (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2021, pp. 19-21). The gteic digital hub network of 26 centres, the apprenticeship scholarship scheme, and the GAIRM graduate programme illustrate the practical expression of this mandate (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2021, pp. 11, 15; An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, 2025). This infrastructure has no equivalent in Northern Ireland, where the Irish-medium sector is dispersed rather than territorially concentrated. The flexibility of the National Framework of Qualifications is itself an enabling condition. The NFQ's language-neutral design has allowed Irish-medium providers such as Gaelchultúr to achieve QQI accreditation and deliver qualifications at multiple framework levels without the need for a parallel accreditation system (QQI, 2021; Oireachtas, 2025). The partnership between Gaelchultúr and MSLETB, funded through the Skills to Advance programme, demonstrates that the existing quality assurance architecture can accommodate Irish-medium provision when institutional initiative and funding align (Oireachtas, 2025). This flexibility contrasts with the Welsh approach, where a statutory duty has been placed on the qualifications regulator, but it has nonetheless produced accredited outcomes within the mainstream framework. The critical distinction between the Republic of Ireland and Wales lies not in the presence or absence of enabling conditions but in whether those conditions have been operationalised within the FET system. In Wales, the Cymraeg 2050 strategy, the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, ring-fenced funding, the statutory advisory relationship between Medr and the Coleg, the statutory duty on Qualifications Wales, and the Sgiliaith workforce programme function as mutually reinforcing components of a single system.

In the Republic of Ireland, the constitutional status of Irish, the Official Languages Acts, the 20-Year Strategy, the Gaeltacht governance infrastructure, and the flexibility of the NFQ are all present, but they have not been connected to the FET planning and funding architecture. The Further Education and Training Act 2013 contains no reference to the Irish language in any operative provision (FET Act 2013, s. 7, pp. 5-6). SOLAS strategic performance agreements with ETBs do not incorporate Irish-medium targets (Kerry ETB, 2018, pp. 23-28). Údarás na Gaeltachta is excluded from the statutory consultee list for FET strategy preparation (FET Act 2013, s. 9(5)(a), p. 7). There is no intermediary body equivalent to the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, no ring-fenced funding for Irish-medium FET, and no national workforce development programme for Irish-medium practitioners. The consequence is that the Republic's enabling conditions operate at the level of general policy environment rather than at the level of system design. They have generated effective but dispersed provision through the initiative of individual institutions and providers, as documented in Sections 3.1-3.4, rather than producing a planned and coordinated national approach to Irish-medium vocational education and training. The lesson for Northern Ireland is twofold. First, enabling conditions

alone are insufficient: without deliberate integration into the governance, funding, and regulatory architecture of the FET or skills system, they will not produce systematic provision. Second, the Republic's experience demonstrates that even in the absence of such integration, effective models can emerge where enabling conditions are strong enough to sustain institutional initiative and market demand, and that these models are themselves transferable, provided that at least one body is given responsibility for ensuring coherence across them.

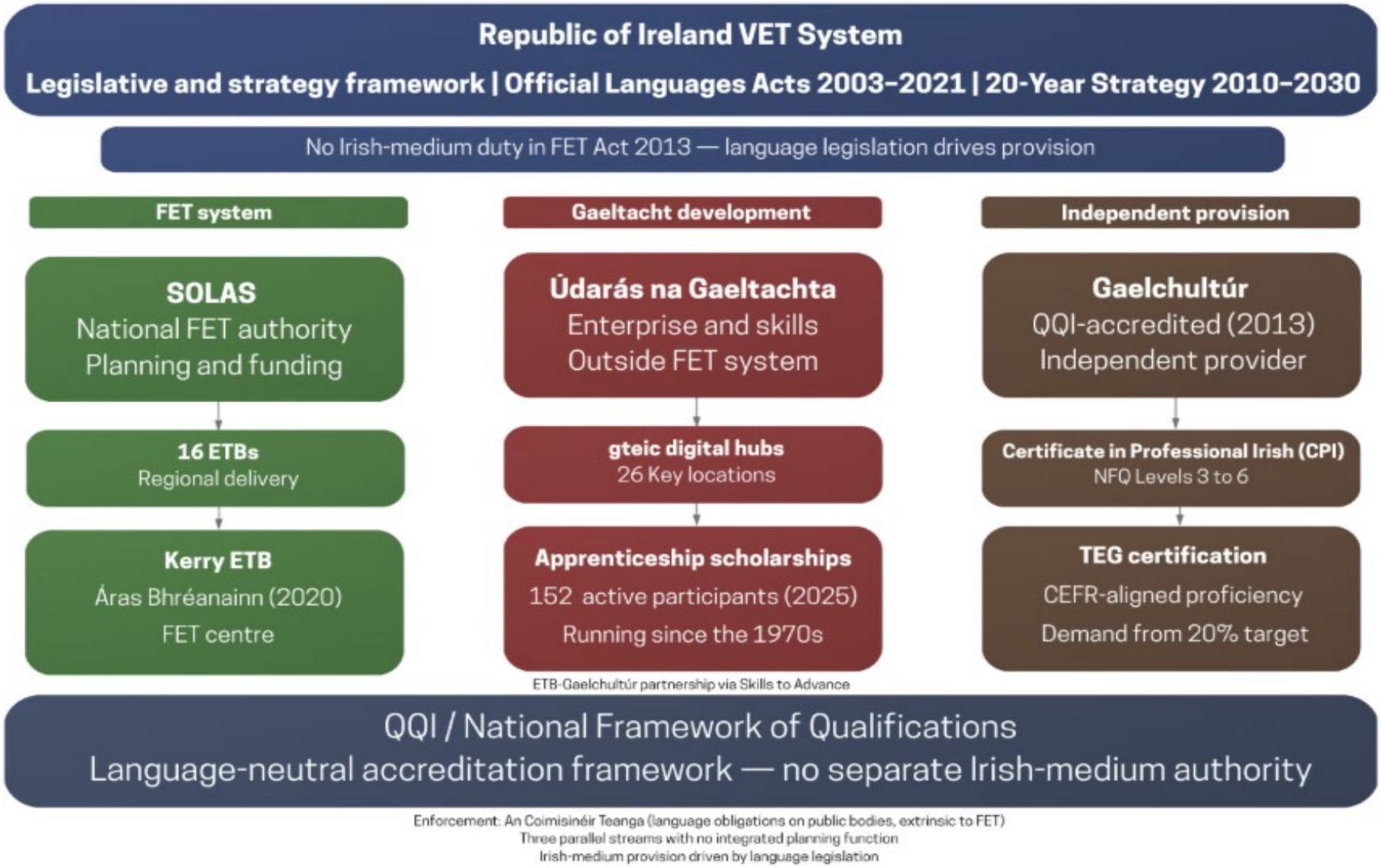


Figure 2: Governance and delivery structure of the Republic of Ireland VET system

3.4 Comparative Analysis

The purpose of this comparative analysis is not to rank the two systems but to identify the structural features that account for the differences in how each jurisdiction governs, delivers, and sustains minority language vocational provision, and to assess the implications of those differences for Northern Ireland. The central finding is that both jurisdictions possess the principal ingredients of minority language vocational provision, including long-term language strategies, legislative recognition, accreditation frameworks capable of accommodating minority language delivery, and institutions with demonstrated capacity. However, the degree to which these have been assembled into a coordinated system differs markedly. Wales has invested in deliberate institutional design over more than a decade, producing a governance architecture in which a dedicated intermediary body (the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol), a sector regulator with an explicit statutory advisory relationship to that body (Medr, under the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022), a qualifications regulator carrying a specific statutory duty towards Welsh-medium provision (Qualifications Wales, under the Qualifications Wales Act 2015), a specialist workforce development service (Sgiliaith), and ring-fenced public funding operate as mutually reinforcing components of a single system.

The Republic of Ireland has generated diverse and, in several respects, effective models of Irish-medium provision, but these have emerged from the interaction of separate legislative frameworks and institutional mandates rather than from an integrated planning function: SOLAS exercises comprehensive authority over FET strategy and funding but without specific governance of Irish-medium provision; Education and Training Boards develop Irish-medium FET where Gaeltacht geography demands it, driven by language legislation rather than FET policy; Údarás na Gaeltachta provides parallel workforce development outside the formal FET system; and independent providers such as Gaelchultúr serve a nationally distributed, market-driven demand for accredited Irish-language professional certification that is neither integrated with nor governed by the FET architecture. The consequence is a system characterised more by fragmentation than by formal coordination, yet one which has produced a breadth of entry points that a more centralised model might not have achieved.

Dimension	Wales	Republic of Ireland	Key Divergences	Analytical Significance for NI
Governance and system architecture	Single intermediary body (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol) with statutory advisory role to sector regulator Medr under the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (Medr, 2025, p. 20). Dedicated ring-fenced funding of £2.825m for FE and apprenticeship expansion in 2024/25 (Welsh Government, 2024a, p. 4). National plan for Welsh language across entire tertiary sector committed (Medr, 2025, p. 21).	No coordinating body for Irish-medium FET. FET Act 2013 (revised to 28 January 2026) contains no reference to Irish language in any operative provision (s. 7, pp. 5 to 6). Responsibility fragmented across SOLAS (national planning/funding), 16 ETBs (regional delivery), Údarás na Gaeltachta (parallel enterprise/workforce development), and independent providers such as Gaelchultúr. Údarás no present in statutory consultee list for FET strategy (s. 9(5)(a), p. 7).	Wales integrates minority language planning within FET regulation; Ireland treats it as extrinsic, governed by language legislation (Official Languages Acts) rather than FET policy. Strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and ETBs (e.g. Kerry ETB 2018 to 2020) makes no reference to Irish-medium provision (Kerry ETB, 2018, pp. 23 to 28). No Irish equivalent of the Coleg Cymraeg intermediary function.	NI lacks both a dedicated intermediary body and a statutory FET-sector duty for Irish-medium provision. The Kerry ETB model of a dedicated centre within a mainstream FET body (Áras Bhréanainn, est. 2020) is directly transferable to existing FE college structures in the short term. The Coleg Cymraeg model is a medium-term aspiration requiring dedicated funding and institutional design.
A**ccreditation and qualification frameworks**	Qualifications Wales holds statutory duty to promote availability of qualifications through Welsh (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 15). Annual grant scheme incentivises awarding bodies to develop bilingual materials. As at January 2026, 36 per cent of post-16 vocational qualifications fully or partly available through Welsh, though 97 per cent of qualifications remain designated from England and exposed to defunding risk (Qualifications Wales, 2026b, pp. 3, 5). Coleg Cymraeg commissions Welsh-medium learning	Language-neutral NFQ accommodates Irish-medium providers without separate accreditation authority (QQI, 2021). Gaelchultúr (QQI-accredited since 2013) delivers Certificate in Professional Irish at NFQ Levels 3 to 6 through ETB partnership (Oireachtas, 2025). TEG provides CEFR-aligned proficiency certification; certifies Gaelchultúr courses for civil servants since 2022 (Government of Ireland, 2024, pp. 28 to 29). SOLAS-QQI MoU 2024 to 2027 identifies capacity building but not Irish-medium linguistic capacity (SOLAS and QQI, 2024, p. 7).	Wales places a statutory accreditation duty on the qualifications regulator; Ireland relies on the flexibility of a language-neutral framework. Wales has a dedicated body commissioning minority-language materials; Ireland depends on individual providers. National Plan 2024 to 2030 recommends exploring Irish-language apprenticeships and micro credentials (Government of Ireland, 2024, pp. 52, 121) but this remains aspirational. Wales	Ireland's Gaelchultúr/ETB partnership model is the most directly transferable precedent: an Irish-language provider delivering accredited qualifications through a mainstream FE body, validated within existing QA frameworks. A pilot through qualifications regulators is technically feasible. The Welsh statutory duty model is a longer-term legislative aspiration. The TransformED Policy Framework confirms that Northern Ireland intends to keep the qualifications

	resources hosted on Y Porth (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2009). New Level 2 construction apprenticeships developed collaboratively by Medr, Welsh Government, and Qualifications Wales (Welsh Government, 2026a, pp. 1 to 3). Tripartite post-16 national plan for Welsh underway with Medr and Coleg Cymraeg (Qualifications Wales, 2026b, p. 6). Medr's new Apprenticeship Programme launching August 2027 (p. 8).		is also actively mitigating viability risks from English policy divergence; 88 per cent of designated qualifications awarded to post-16 learners had fewer than 100 certificates in 2023 to 2024 (Qualifications Wales, 2026b, p. 3), a small-cohort dynamic that would apply with even greater force to Irish-medium provision.	market open to English and Welsh awarding organisations (Department of Education, 2025), and a forthcoming policy framework for vocational qualifications delivered in schools creates a window of opportunity to embed Irish-medium vocational provision as a design requirement within qualifications reform. The Welsh experience of qualification viability risk in a small market reinforces the case for partnership-based delivery models in NI rather than standalone provision.
Learner support infrastructures	Multi-layered: Coleg Cymraeg scholarships and incentive schemes (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 10); Careers Wales bilingual course database and marketing plan (p. 22); Cymraeg Gwaith workplace language normalisation programme (Welsh Government, 2025, pp. 13 to 14); Y Porth open-access resource portal (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2009). Cumulative effect reduces perceived cost and risk of choosing Welsh-medium pathways.	Skills to Advance programme funds accredited Irish-language certification at no cost to employees, demonstrated by MSLETB/Gaelchultúr partnership (Oireachtas, 2025). Kerry ETB co-funds Irish Education Officer with Údarás (Kerry ETB, 2020, p. 4). No personalised careers guidance service, but COGG produces a structured national careers information pack covering ten sectors with cross-border coverage (An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, 2025). COGG careers portal at saoloibre.ie provides course search and career profile tools.	Wales provides coordinated, multi-level learner support; Ireland provides strong financial/employer mechanisms but lacks guidance infrastructure and a centralised resource portal. Ireland has a unique statutory demand driver (20% target) that Wales does not possess in equivalent form. Neither jurisdiction has fully resolved attitudinal barriers to minority-language vocational uptake. COGG careers information materials provide some cross-border coverage but do	NI lacks both the demand driver (no statutory Irish-language recruitment obligations on public bodies) and the guidance infrastructure. The Skills to Advance funding model is replicable through DfE existing skills programmes. Integration of Irish-medium options within careers guidance is achievable in the short term. The absence of a demand driver is the most significant structural gap.

			not constitute a guidance service.	
Provider capacity and workforce	Sgiliaith national staff development programme funded by Coleg Cymraeg: structured language skills pyramid from awareness to fluency; bilingual teaching/assessment toolkits; MA-level bilingual pedagogy module; mentoring programme. Free to FE and apprenticeship sectors (Sgiliaith, 2024, pp. 2, 4 to 14). Associate Lecturer scheme maintains expertise where cohorts are small (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 12).	Institutional-level capacity building only. Kerry ETB Language Scheme designates Irish-language posts and commits to tutor pool compilation, but acknowledges no ready pool exists in Gaeltacht areas (Kerry ETB, 2020, pp. 17 to 18, 20). Gaelchultúr holds concentrated national expertise but small scale creates structural vulnerability. No national workforce development programme for Irish-medium FET.	Wales has invested in dedicated, system-level workforce infrastructure; Ireland has not. This is the most consequential divergence: governance and accreditation frameworks are only effective if practitioners possess the linguistic competence and pedagogical confidence to deliver within them. Ireland's capacity is localised (Kerry ETB, Gaelchultúr) and fragile.	NI faces the most acute version of this challenge: dispersed Irish-medium sector, no Gaeltacht infrastructure, no practitioner development programme. A Sgiliaith-style pilot is transferable in the medium term. Mapping existing Irish-language capacity within FE workforce is an essential and immediately actionable first step.
Enabling conditions	Cymraeg 2050: 50-year strategy, 1 million speakers target, successive 5-year work programmes and annual action plans (Welsh Government, 2021, pp. 5 to 6, 51). Statutory integration of Welsh-medium planning within Medr. Dedicated Coleg Cymraeg funding. Mutually reinforcing conditions assembled incrementally over a decade.	20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010 to 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2010). Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 provides enforceable demand driver (s. 18C(3)(b), p. 15). No intermediary body, no ring-fenced FET funding for Irish-medium, no statutory integration of Irish-language planning within FET regulation. Favourable policy environment but not operationalised within VET specifically.	Both jurisdictions possess long-term language strategies and legislative recognition. Critical difference: Wales has translated enabling conditions into governance structures, funding, workforce programmes, and regulatory obligations that directly shape classroom delivery. Ireland's conditions operate at a more general level, leaving detailed provision to dispersed actors.	Identity and Language (NI) Act 2022 provides legislative basis but not operational mandate for FET. Necessary conditions: designated body, dedicated funding, accredited pathway, practitioner development, careers guidance integration. Welsh evidence shows these are constructible incrementally.

In Northern Ireland, England and Wales, regulatory bodies for each jurisdiction (i.e. CCEA Regulation, Ofqual and Qualifications Wales) each publish 'Conditions of Recognition' for the qualifications and organisations which they regulate. These are known as the General Conditions of Recognition in England and Northern Ireland, and the Standard Conditions of Recognition in Wales (Ofqual, 2026). One important distinction between Wales and Northern Ireland is the wording on Condition G2 regarding the language of assessment. In Northern Ireland under this condition it is noted that "An awarding organisation must ensure that all Learners taking its qualifications are assessed in English in England, and English or Irish in Northern Ireland, except to the extent that the use of another language is permitted by this Condition" (CCEA, 2025, p.7). Wording on the Welsh conditions differs as it states that "An awarding body must ensure that all Learners taking its qualifications are assessed in Welsh and/or English in Wales except to the extent that the use of another language is permitted by this Condition" (Qualifications Wales, 2017, p.36). As the wording does not specify "and/or" in the Northern Ireland conditions, this has led to challenges in qualification availability and equity for Irish-medium pupils in Northern Ireland.

These issues sit within the wider context of the Northern Ireland Entitlement Framework (EF), introduced through the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. This framework specifies a minimum number and range of courses a school should offer at Key Stage 4 and Post-16, with at least one third of these to be offered as applied courses. It is stipulated that courses should be economically relevant and individually engaging, with clear progression pathways. The Department of Education states that the Entitlement Framework ensures that all young people, regardless of where they live or which school or college they attend, have equality of access to a broad and balanced range of economically relevant and individually engaging courses at Key Stage 4 (Years 11–12) and Post-16 (Years 13–14). However, in a joint proposal, Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire (2026) outline a significant drop in the curriculum offer due to the lack of applied courses available through the medium of Irish, and the subsequent effect on their entitlement offer.

As part of the literature review for this project, the research team requested information on this topic directly from the Irish-medium standalone schools. Answers from Assembly Question AQO 1735/17-22 (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2021) outlined that BTEC qualifications were facilitated through a contractual arrangement between the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the awarding organisation Pearson. Towards the end of 2019, Pearson gave notice of its intention to end that agreement and no longer provide the qualifications through the medium of Irish, with the withdrawal of Level 3 qualifications in September 2021 and Level 2 qualifications in September 2022 (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2021).

In May 2025, a proposal came forward from the Irish-medium sector to OCR, requesting joint working between the sector, OCR and CCEA to create Cambridge Technical courses on a pilot basis (Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2025). Additional primary evidence became available in February 2026, when Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire submitted a joint proposal to develop an IME Vocational Qualifications Pilot Scheme, providing evidence of the need for specific provision of

vocational qualifications for Irish-medium pupils following the withdrawal of Pearson BTEC qualifications (Coláiste Feirste & Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026).

The proposal documents that at Coláiste Feirste, the Year 13 curriculum offer fell from 19 qualifications in 2020 (comprising 12 applied and 7 general) to 14 in 2025 (comprising 7 applied and 7 general), representing a reduction of over 40 per cent in the applied offer. Retention rates between Year 12 and Year 13 declined from 80 per cent in 2020 to 62.3 per cent in 2025, and the proportion of pupils remaining in education and training post-Year 14 fell from 87 per cent to 63 per cent over the same period (Coláiste Feirste & Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026). The proposal attributes these declines principally to the contraction in vocational qualifications and the consequent narrowing of progression pathways.

The two standalone Irish-medium schools proposed a pilot scheme with one particular Awarding Organisation focusing on Cambridge Technical Level 3 Introductory Diploma 2012 suite qualifications in IT, Sport, and Health and Social Care, all of which are 100 per cent internally assessed, thereby reducing both translation and security challenges (Coláiste Feirste & Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026). Both schools confirmed that suitably qualified teachers are in place to deliver these courses. Separately, the principal of Gaelcholáiste Dhoire wrote to one particular Awarding Organisation in May 2025 requesting engagement on a pilot, noting that the existing workaround of pupils travelling by minibus to English-medium schools to undertake Cambridge Technical courses was becoming unviable as sixth form numbers increased (Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2025).

Information provided by GCD (2025) also documented an established precedent through a collaborative working relationship between CCEA and WJEC (Welsh Joint Education Committee - an examination board that provides AS/A-level qualifications in Northern Ireland alongside the local board, CCEA), in which CCEA initially provided translation services for portfolios, examination papers, and scripts, and Irish-medium teachers subsequently underwent training as WJEC examiners (Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2025). This outlines an established way of working and proof of concept that such courses may be developed for Irish-medium pupils.
The Department of Education's TransformED Policy Framework for General Qualifications in Northern Ireland, published in 2026 following the launch of the TransformED Strategy in March 2025, confirms that Northern Ireland intends to keep the qualifications market open, allowing awarding organisations from England and Wales to offer their GCSEs and A levels where they meet the required criteria (Department of Education, 2025). The Framework further confirms that a policy framework for vocational qualifications delivered in schools will be developed subsequently (Department of Education, 2025). This forthcoming vocational framework represents a significant short-term opportunity to embed Irish-medium vocational provision as a structural feature of qualifications reform in Northern Ireland, analogous to the approach taken in Wales where Qualifications Wales has embedded bilingual availability as a design requirement within qualification reform processes.

3.5 Transferability to Northern Ireland

Wales and the Republic of Ireland have each developed minority language vocational provision through distinct governance architectures, accreditation frameworks, learner support mechanisms, and workforce development strategies. Wales has assembled these elements into a coordinated system through deliberate institutional design sustained over more than a decade; the Republic of Ireland has generated diverse and effective models through the interaction of separate legislative frameworks and institutional mandates rather than through centralised planning. The purpose of this section is to assess, dimension by dimension, which elements of the Welsh and Republic of Ireland systems can realistically be adopted within these constraints, to distinguish between what is achievable in the short term through institutional initiative and what requires medium-term legislative or structural development.

Dimension	Wales Model	RoI Model	Transferability	Conditions / Timescale
Governance	Intermediary body (Coleg Cymraeg) with statutory advisory role; dedicated funding	No coordinating body; Kerry ETB dedicated centre model; Gaelchultúr independent provision	HIGH (Wales); MEDIUM (Ireland interim)	Short-term: the question of institutional location is not straightforward. The experience of Gaelchúrsáí (the Irish Language Training Academy in Belfast), which was formerly associated with the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education before establishing itself as an independent provider, illustrates that embedding minority language provision within a larger mainstream institution can create vulnerability to institutional restructuring and budget reductions. An independent model may offer greater operational flexibility and protection from the competing priorities of a large FE college. The choice between an embedded centre and an independent provider model involves trade-offs between institutional security, access to mainstream resources and learner pathways, and the autonomy needed to sustain a minority language mission.

Accreditation	Statutory duty on Qualifications Wales; Coleg Cymraeg commissions materials; 36% Welsh-medium availability across post-16 vocational offer (Qualifications Wales, 2026b, p. 5); tripartite national plan underway with Medr and Coleg Cymraeg (p. 6); 97% of qualifications designated from England, exposing viability risk (p. 3)	Gaelchultúr QQI-accredited at NFQ 3 to 6 through ETB partnership	HIGH (Ireland partnership model); IMMEDIATE (OCR pilot)	Immediate: AO pilot proposed by Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire for September 2026 (Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2026). Short-term: pilot accreditation through AO. Medium-term: statutory duty. TransformED vocational qualifications framework provides window for systemic integration (Department of Education, 2025). Welsh viability data (88% of designated qualifications with fewer than 100 certificates) confirms partnership models essential for small-market provision.
Learner support	Scholarships; Careers Wales bilingual remit; Cymraeg Gwaith; Y Porth resources (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2009).	Skills to Advance funding; Official Languages Act demand driver; no guidance portal	MEDIUM (elements transferable; demand driver absent)	Short-term: employer-funded pilots. Long-term: demand driver equivalent
Provider capacity	Sgiliaith national programme; Associate Lecturer scheme; free to FE sector	Institutional only (Kerry ETB, Gaelchultúr); no national programme	HIGH (Sgiliaith model); LOW (current NI capacity)	Medium-term: pilot practitioner development. Long-term: system infrastructure
Enabling conditions	Cymraeg 2050 long-term strategy; statutory integration in Medr	20-Year Strategy; Official Languages Acts; no FET-specific integration	MEDIUM (Identity and Language Act 2022 provides basis, not mandate)	Long-term: comprehensive strategy. Short-term: Skills Action Plan integration. TransformED vocational qualifications policy framework (forthcoming) provides immediate opportunity (Department of Education, 2025).

3.5.1 Transferability Analysis

This section draws together the key implications emerging from the desk-based review of minority language vocational education and training in Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Its purpose is not to offer final recommendations for Northern Ireland at this stage, but to identify potentially transferable models, mechanisms and enabling conditions which may be relevant to the development of Irish-medium

vocational pathways. These desk-based conclusions are necessarily provisional, as they are derived from documentary and policy analysis rather than from primary empirical evidence. They will therefore be revisited later in the report alongside the findings from surveys and interviews with learners, providers, schools, sectoral stakeholders and other key participants, before being synthesised in Chapter 7 into the study's overall conclusions and recommendations.

The transferability of governance models to Northern Ireland is shaped by a fundamental structural difference: Northern Ireland currently lacks both a dedicated intermediary body whose functions would include strategic planning for Irish-medium post-compulsory provision; coordination across further education colleges and training providers; commissioning of Irish-medium learning and assessment materials; workforce development for Irish-medium practitioners; and monitoring of progress against agreed targets. Such a body could be established under existing powers or as a function of a body established under the 2022 Act that places specific obligations on the further education sector in respect of Irish-medium provision. The Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 establishes a Commissioner for the Irish Language with functions including the enhancement of the development of the Irish language, but it does not create an operational mandate for the further education sector to develop Irish-medium vocational pathways. This represents a significant gap when compared with both comparator jurisdictions. The most directly transferable governance model is the Kerry ETB approach of establishing a dedicated centre with adapted delivery parameters within a mainstream FET body.

A Northern Ireland further education college, particularly one serving areas with significant Irish-medium educated populations, could establish a dedicated Irish-medium FET centre on the Áras Bhréanainn model, designating Irish as the working language, lowering minimum participant numbers for Irish-medium delivery, and co-funding specialist posts in partnership with relevant bodies (Kerry ETB, 2020, pp. 4, 15, 17). The question arises as to whether establishing a new dedicated centre is preferable to expanding the capacity of an existing provider such as Gaelchúrsáí, which already delivers Irish-language training in Belfast. The case for a new centre within the FE college structure rests principally on access to mainstream learner pathways, including apprenticeship frameworks, regulated qualifications, and progression routes to higher education, which an independent provider may find more difficult to offer. However, Gaelchúrsáí's existing expertise, established learner base, and institutional independence represent significant assets. A partnership model, in which Gaelchúrsáí delivers Irish-medium provision under a formal arrangement with an FE college (analogous to the Gaelchultúr and MSLETB partnership in the Republic of Ireland), may offer a more pragmatic and lower-risk pathway than establishing an entirely new centre or requiring an FE college to build Irish-medium capacity from scratch.

This is achievable in the short term within existing further education governance structures, provided that the relevant college and the Department for the Economy agree to pilot such an arrangement. In the medium term, an equivalent of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, a body with the specific function of planning, coordinating, and promoting Irish-medium provision across the post-compulsory sector and funded directly by the relevant department rather than through general FE funding, would address the most critical structural deficit identified in this analysis. Such a body could be established under existing powers or as a function of a body established

under the 2022 Act. The accreditation dimension presents the most immediately actionable transferability pathway. The Gaelchultúr and MSLETB partnership described in Section 3.2 provides the most directly applicable precedent: an Irish-language provider delivering accredited qualifications through a mainstream FE body, validated within existing quality assurance frameworks.

A Northern Ireland pilot could replicate this model by partnering an Irish-language training provider with a further education college, with validation by an existing awarding organisation and funding through an existing workforce development programme. An operational precedent already exists within the Northern Ireland system through the CCEA and WJEC collaboration, in which CCEA initially provided translation services for portfolios, examination papers, and scripts, and Irish-medium teachers subsequently underwent training as WJEC examiners, progressively reducing the translation burden on the awarding body (Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, 2025). The joint proposal by Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire (2026) confirms that a similar model could be applied to OCR qualifications, with CCEA providing translation and quality assurance support during an initial phase and Irish-medium teachers assuming greater responsibility over time. The proposal further notes that the General Conditions of Recognition for Awarding Organisations may already require awarding bodies to offer qualifications in English or Irish, although this interpretation has not been formally tested. The technical and regulatory infrastructure to support this already exists; what is required is institutional will and a policy decision to proceed. The Welsh accreditation model offers a longer-term aspiration. Placing a statutory duty on the qualifications regulator to promote the availability of qualifications through the medium of Irish would require legislative action, but the Welsh precedent under the Qualifications Wales Act 2015 demonstrates that such duties are constructible and enforceable. The forthcoming TransformED vocational qualifications policy framework (Department of Education, 2025) represents the most significant near-term opportunity to embed Irish-medium vocational provision as a systemic requirement within qualifications reform. Learner support infrastructure is partially transferable but faces a distinctive challenge: the absence of a demand driver equivalent to the Official Languages Acts in the Republic or the Cymraeg 2050 strategy in Wales. Northern Ireland lacks a statutory or strategic mechanism that would create sustained demand for Irish-medium vocational qualifications. The attrition data documented in Section 4, showing measurable declines in retention, progression, and applied curriculum breadth following the withdrawal of Pearson BTEC qualifications in 2020, demonstrates that this absence is not a theoretical concern but is producing real consequences at the post-16 transition. The Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 does not create obligations on public bodies to develop Irish-language capacity among their workforce, and there is no equivalent of the 20 per cent recruitment target that has driven a ninety-three per cent increase in civil servant training uptake in the Republic (Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 100). Notwithstanding this constraint, several elements are transferable in the short term. The Skills to Advance model of embedding accredited Irish-language certification within mainstream workforce development funding could be replicated through the Department for the Economy's existing skills programmes. The integration of Irish-medium vocational options within careers guidance is achievable through the existing careers service.

The Cymraeg Gwaith (Work Welsh) model of workplace language normalisation has potential application in Northern Ireland workplaces with Irish-language policies or

aspirations, though at a considerably smaller scale. The transferability of provider capacity and workforce development infrastructure presents the most acute challenge. Northern Ireland, where the Irish-medium sector is dispersed and where there is no equivalent Gaeltacht infrastructure, faces a more severe version of the workforce constraint identified in both comparator jurisdictions. A pilot practitioner development programme modelled on Sgiliaith could be established in the medium term, focused on building the confidence and pedagogical capability of existing Irish-speaking further education staff to deliver and assess through Irish. Such a programme would require mapping of existing Irish-language capacity within the further education workforce, the development of bilingual teaching methodology training, and institutional support for practitioners to undertake such training alongside their existing duties. The Associate Lecturer model operated by the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol is also directly relevant to Northern Ireland, where Irish-medium vocational cohorts will inevitably be small and partial posts may be the only viable means of maintaining subject expertise (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 12).

The enabling conditions for transferability are mixed. The Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 provides a legislative basis for the promotion and development of the Irish language, but it does not create the operational infrastructure, dedicated funding, or institutional obligations that underpin minority language vocational provision in Wales. The Skills Action Plan provides a policy framework for action, but the detailed mechanisms for translating that framework into Irish-medium vocational provision remain to be developed. The comparative evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the following conditions are necessary for sustainable Irish-medium vocational provision in Northern Ireland: a designated body with explicit responsibility for planning, coordinating, and promoting Irish-medium post-compulsory provision; dedicated and ring-fenced funding channelled through that body; at least one accredited pathway for Irish-medium vocational qualifications, developed through partnership between an Irish-language provider and the mainstream further education system; a practitioner development programme addressing the supply of linguistically competent further education staff; integration of Irish-medium vocational options within mainstream careers guidance and learner support infrastructure; and the systematic embedding of Irish-medium provision within the forthcoming TransformED vocational qualifications policy framework (Department of Education, 2025). The Welsh experience demonstrates that these conditions are constructible through deliberate, incremental policy action. The Republic of Ireland's experience demonstrates that effective, if uneven, provision can emerge through local initiative and market demand even in the absence of centralised coordination, and that the models which emerge under such conditions are themselves transferable. The critical lesson is that enabling multiple pathways can compensate for the absence of a single integrated system, provided that at least one body is charged with ensuring those pathways connect and that gaps in provision are identified and addressed. The evidence presented in Section 4, together with the established CCEA and WJEC precedent and the TransformED vocational qualifications framework, collectively indicates that the conditions for an immediate, practical first step are now in place. What remains is the policy decision to proceed.

Chapter 4: Irish Medium School Pupil Survey Results

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

4.1.1 About You

The pupil survey received n=209 responses, and there was a wide range of ages represented in the survey sample (see Table 4.1). Most participants were aged 15 (38%, n=78) and 17 (25%, n=52). 17% (n=36) of participants were aged 16, 15% (n=32) of participants were aged 14, and 5% (n=11) of participants were aged 18. There was a mean age of 15.7 years. The participants were also asked in Question 3 what their school year group was (Table 4.2). Most participants reported that they were in year 11 (49%, n=103) or year 13 (35%, n=74). 10% (n=20) of participants were in year 12, and 6% (n=12) of participants were in year 14, indicating lower proportions of participants from the final (assessment-focused) years of both key stage 4 and 5.

Answer	n	%
14	32	15%
15	78	38%
16	36	17%
17	52	25%
18	11	5%
Response	**209**	**100%**

Q2. What age are you?

Table 4.1. Age of participants.

Q3. What year are you in at school?

Answer	n	%
Year 11	103	49%
Year 12	20	10%
Year 13	74	35%
Year 14	12	6%
Response	**209**	**100%**

Table 4.2. School year for participants.

Participants were then asked in Question 4 to indicate their gender (see Table 4.3). 54% (n=112) of participants responded that they were female, and 44% (n=92) were male, indicating that the survey sample had a relatively balanced gender representation. A small proportion of participants (2%, n=5) preferred not to provide their gender.

Q4. What is your gender?

Answer	n	%
Female	112	54%
Male	92	44%
Prefer not to say	5	2%
Response	**209**	**100%**

Table 4.3. Participant gender.

Question 5 asked participants about which school they attended at the time of completing the survey, as shown in Table 4.4. Two schools were represented in the survey sample namely, Coláiste Feirste with 66% (n=137) participants, and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire with 34% (n=72) participants. There were no participants (0%, n=0) from the three schools with Irish-medium streams who were also invited to participate in the study, as indicated in Table 4.4, namely, St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore, St Catherine's College, Armagh, and St Malachy's High School, Castlewellan.

Q5. Which school do you attend?

Answer	n	%
Coláiste Feirste	137	66%
Gaelcholáiste Dhoire	72	34%
Irish-medium stream at St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore	0	0%
Irish-medium stream at St Catherine's College, Armagh	0	0%
Irish-medium stream at St Malachy's High School, Castlewellan	0	0%
Response	**209**	**100%**

Table 4.4. Schools attended by participants.

4.1.2 Aspirations and Awareness of Vocational Pathways

In Question 6 participants were asked about how important it is to them to continue their learning through Irish after they leave school (see Table 4.5). 26% (n=53) of participants responded that continuing their learning through Irish after school is 'very important' to them, 39% (n=82) of participants stated that continuing learning through Irish is 'quite important', 22% (n=46) were 'undecided', 7% (n=15) responded 'not very important', and 6% (n=13) responded 'not important at all'. Overall, this indicated a positive trend in the sample towards continuing learning through Irish after school, with most pupils selecting 'quite important' or 'very important' as their response.

As detailed in Table 4.5, a weighted scoring methodology was applied to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'very important' (very positive sentiment) to 'not important at all' (very negative sentiment). Positive scores were assigned to positive responses depending on the level of positivity (+1 for 'quite important', +2 for 'very important'), and negative scores were assigned to negative responses depending on the level of negativity (-1 for 'not very important', -2 for 'not important at all'). 0 points were assigned to neutral or 'undecided' responses. The frequencies (n) were then multiplied by the assigned scores to produce weighted scores, and all weighted scores were totalled and divided by the total number of responses (n=209). This resulted in a weighted score on a scale of -2 (highly negative) to +2 (highly positive) to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. This process is repeated for other similar questions throughout this chapter.

In-line with the methodology outlined above, a weighted score of +0.703 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for Question 6, indicating a positive mean pupil response (approximating to 'quite important') for the importance of continuing to learn through Irish after leaving post-primary school.

Q6. How important is it to you to continue learning through Irish after school?

Answer	n	%
Very important (+2)	53	26%
Quite important (+1)	82	39%
Undecided (0)	46	22%
Not very important (-1)	15	7%
Not important at all (-2)	13	6%
Response	**209**	**100%**
Weighted score	**+0.703**	

Table 4.5. Importance of continuing learning through Irish after leaving post-primary school.

Likewise, participants were asked to rate how interested they are in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish, using a similar 5-point Likert scale (see Table 4.6). 16% (n=33) of participants responded that they were 'very interested' in

pursuing vocational pathways through Irish, while 36% (n=75) of participants responded that they were ‘quite interested’, while 28% (n=59) were ‘undecided’, 13% (n=27) responded ‘not very interested’, and 7% (n=15) responded ‘not interested at all’.

As before, a weighted score was calculated on a scale of -2 (highly negative, or ‘not interested at all’) to +2 (highly positive, or ‘very interested’) to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. A weighted score of +0.402 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for Question 7, indicating a low positive mean response in terms of pupil interest in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish after leaving school.

Overall, pupils seem to place a moderately high level of importance on continuing their education through Irish, while they show a lower but still positive level of interest in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish after school.

Q7. How interested are you in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish?

Answer	n	%
Very interested (+2)	33	16%
Quite interested (+1)	75	36%
Undecided (0)	59	28%
Not very interested (-1)	27	13%
Not interested at all (-2)	15	7%
Response	**209**	**100%**
Weighted score	**+0.402**	

Table 4.6. Interest in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish.

However, as shown in Table 4.7, when participants were asked how clear they are about available vocational opportunities after school through Irish, the response is split between moderately positive, and moderately negative, and tending towards undecided. 7% (n=15) of participants responded, ‘very clear’, 32% (n=66) responded ‘quite clear’, 21% (n=43) responded ‘undecided’, 32% (n=68) responded ‘not very clear’, and 8% (n=17) responded ‘not clear at all’.

A weighted score was calculated on a scale of -2 (highly negative, or ‘not clear at all’) to +2 (highly positive, or ‘very clear’) to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. Question 8 produced a weighted score of -0.029 on a scale from -2 to +2. This indicated a negligible low negative mean pupil response tending towards neutral or ‘undecided’ for how clear pupils are about available vocational opportunities after school through Irish.

Consequently, clarity of vocational opportunities through Irish appears to be an area requiring improvement. This would offer support to pupils who are ‘quite clear’, or ‘undecided’, and would be of particular benefit for pupils who find such opportunities to be ‘not very clear’ or ‘not clear at all’. In fact, the proportion of pupils who

responded that they were ‘very clear’ about the available vocational pathways through Irish is very small in comparison, further indicating that there is room for improvement in conveying information, and developing awareness of available opportunities amongst Irish-medium pupils.

Q8. How clear are you about what vocational opportunities are available to you after school through Irish (e.g., training, apprenticeships, employment etc.)?

Answer	n	%
Very clear (+2)	15	7%
Quite clear (+1)	66	32%
Undecided (0)	43	21%
Not very clear (-1)	68	32%
Not clear at all (-2)	17	8%
Response	**209**	**100%**
Weighted score	**-0.029**	

Table 4.7. Clarity of available vocational opportunities after school through Irish.

As detailed in Table 4.8, participants were asked where they have received information or advice about their next steps after school (Question 9). Most participants selected ‘school’ (78%, n=163) and ‘family or friends' (68%, n=143). A relatively large proportion also selected ‘online/social media’, while ‘Irish-medium organisations’ received 11% (n=22), ‘external careers advisor’ received 10% (n=20), and a very small proportion of participants (6%, n=13) selected ‘I haven’t received any advice’.

Therefore, ‘schools’ and ‘family or friends’ appear to be the most common sources of information or advice about next steps after school for Irish-medium pupils in the survey sample. In addition, a relatively large number of pupils access such information or advice via ‘online/social media’, suggesting that digital channels play a significant role in how they seek and engage with guidance on these opportunities.

This highlights the most frequently consulted sources of information or advice, and those that are less commonly accessed by Irish-medium pupils. Furthermore, the majority of pupils in the sample report being able to access at least one source of guidance, with only a small number indicating that they do not receive any advice. There were also negligible responses for ‘none of the above’ and ‘other’ (both with n=1, rounding down to 0%).

Q9. Where have you received information or advice about your next steps after school? (select all that apply)

Answer	n	%
School	163	78%
Family or friends	143	68%
Online/social media	68	33%
Irish-medium organisations e.g. Gaelchúrsaí	22	11%
External Careers advisor	20	10%
I haven't received any advice	13	6%
None of the above	1	0%
Other (please specify):	1	0%
Response	**209**	**100%**

Table 4.8. Source of information or advice about next steps after school.

Table 4.9 details the pupil responses to Question 10 ("Are you aware of any of the following options available through Irish?"). The results demonstrate that most Irish-medium pupils are aware of 'Post-16 Stay at School' options available through Irish (62%, n=129), and relatively significant proportions are also aware of 'Apprenticeships' (31%, n=64) and 'Skills for Life and Work' (28%, n=58) options. Pupils express less awareness of 'Academies' (11%, n=23) and the 'Obair Programme' (11%, n=22). Thus, 'Post-16 Stay at School' emerged as the option with which pupils in the survey were most familiar. However, a relatively significant proportion of pupils in the sample selected 'none of the above' (17%, n=36), suggesting a lack of awareness of the options provided and pointing to potential gaps in how information about these pathways is communicated or accessed.

Q10. Are you aware of any of the following options available through Irish? (select all that apply)

Answer	n	%
Post-16 Stay at School	129	62%
Apprenticeships	64	31%
Skills for Life and Work	58	28%
None of the above	36	17%
Academies	23	11%
Obair Programme	22	11%
Response	**209**	**100%**

Table 4.9. Awareness of vocational options available through Irish.

4.1.3 Barriers to Access

Participants were asked what they think the main barriers are to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish (see Figure 4.10, Question 11). A wide range of barriers were identified, with four out of five pupils (80%, n=168) indicating that the 'limited choice of courses' was the greatest barrier to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish - this represented by far the most frequent response by survey participants. This was followed by 'lack of information' (44%, n=93) and 'assessment or exams not available in Irish' (44%, n=91). Interestingly, 33% (n=70) of pupils in the survey sample expressed 'concerns that the qualifications might not be recognised by employers'. Smaller numbers of pupils also selected 'limited spaces available' (23%, n=49), 'financial pressures' (19%, n=39), and 'travel or location issues' (16%, n=34). Only 15% (n=31) of the sample indicated that they were 'not interested in vocational routes'.

Thus, the 'limited choice of courses' appears to be the most significant barrier identified by the pupils in the survey sample, with other barriers further compounding this issue to a lesser but still significant extent, such as 'lack of information', 'assessment or exams not available in Irish', and 'concerns that the qualifications might not be recognised by employers'.

Q11. What do you think are the main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish? (select all that apply)

Answer	n	%
Limited choice of courses	168	80%
Lack of information	93	44%
Assessment or exams not available in Irish	91	44%
Concerns that the qualifications might not be recognised by employers	70	33%
Limited spaces available	49	23%
Financial pressures	39	19%
Travel or location issues	34	16%
Not interested in vocational routes	31	15%
Other (please specify):	1	0%
Response	**209**	**100%**

Table 4.10. Perceived main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish.

4.1.4 Final Reflections

As shown in Table 4.11, participants were asked how confident they were that they could continue their education or training through Irish after school (Question 12).

There was a wide distribution of responses. For example, 24% (n=49) of pupils selected ‘very confident’, 31% (n=65) of pupils selected ‘quite confident’, 22% (n=46) of pupils selected ‘undecided’, 19% (n=40) of pupils selected ‘not very confident’, and 4% (n=9) of pupils selected ‘not confident at all’. This indicates a neutral or ‘undecided’ to positive swing with respect to pupil confidence in being able to continue their education or training through Irish.

A weighted score was, as before, calculated on a scale of -2 (highly negative, or ‘not confident at all’) to +2 (highly positive, or ‘very confident’) to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. A weighted score of +0.502 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for Question 12, indicating a low positive mean pupil response tending towards ‘quite confident’ for how confident the pupils are that they will be able to continue their education or training through Irish after school.

Q12. How confident are you that you could continue your education or training through Irish if you wanted to?

Answer	n	%
Very confident (+2)	49	24%
Quite confident (+1)	65	31%
Undecided (0)	46	22%
Not very confident (-1)	40	19%
Not confident at all (-2)	9	4%
Response	**209**	**100%**
Weighted score	**+0.502**	

Table 4.11. Confidence in continuing education or training through Irish if wanted.

4.2 Bi-Variate Analysis

4.2.1 Gender

As shown in Table 4.12, Question 6 (“How important is it to you to continue learning through Irish after school?”) was analysed with respect to the gender of respondents.

A weighted score was, as before, calculated on a scale of -2 (highly negative, or ‘not important at all’) to +2 (highly positive, or ‘very important’) to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. A weighted score of +0.911 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for female pupils, indicating a moderately positive mean pupil response tending towards ‘quite important’ for how important the pupils consider continuing learning through Irish after school. However, a lower weighted score of +0.457 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for male pupils, indicating a low positive mean pupil response tending somewhat towards ‘quite important’ for how important the pupils consider continuing learning through Irish after school.

Thus, across the survey sample it can be deduced that female pupils are more likely than male pupils to feel that it is important to them to continue learning through Irish after school.

Q6 How important is it to you to continue learning through Irish after school?

Q4 Gender	Not important at all	Not very important	Undecided	Quite important	Very important	Grand total	Weighted score (-2 to +2)
Female	5	3	23	47	34	**112**	**+0.911**
Male	8	11	22	33	18	**92**	**+0.457**
Prefer not to say	0	1	1	2	1	**5**	**+0.600**

Q4 Gender	Not important at all	Not very important	Undecided	Quite important	Very important	Grand total
Female	4%	3%	21%	42%	30%	**100%**
Male	9%	12%	24%	36%	20%	**100%**
Prefer not to say	0%	20%	20%	40%	20%	**100%**

Table 4.12. Comparison of Q6 (importance of continuing learning through Irish after school) and gender.

As shown in Table 4.13, Question 7 ("How interested are you in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish?") was also analysed with respect to the gender of respondents.

A weighted score was, as before, calculated on a scale of -2 (highly negative, or 'not interested at all') to +2 (highly positive, or 'very interested') to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. A weighted score of +0.670 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for female pupils, indicating a moderately positive mean pupil response tending towards 'quite important' for how interested pupils in the survey sample are in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish. However, once again a much lower weighted score of +0.109 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for male pupils, indicating a very low positive mean pupil response tending towards neutral or 'undecided' for how interested the male pupils in the survey sample were in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish.

Thus, across the survey sample it can be deduced that female pupils are more likely than male pupils to be interested in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish.

Q7 How interested are you in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish?

Q4 Gender	Not interested at all	Not very interested	Undecided	Quite interested	Very interested	Grand total	Weighted score (-2 to +2)
Female	5	11	24	48	24	**112**	**+0.670**
Male	10	13	34	27	8	**92**	**+0.109**
Prefer not to say	0	3	1	0	1	**5**	**-0.200**

Q4 Gender	Not interested at all	Not very interested	Undecided	Quite interested	Very interested	Grand total
Female	4%	10%	21%	43%	21%	**100%**
Male	11%	14%	37%	29%	9%	**100%**
Prefer not to say	0%	60%	20%	0%	20%	**100%**

Table 4.13. Comparison of Q7 (interest in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish) and gender.

Interestingly, when the responses to the Question 11 option 'limited choice of courses' (Table 4.14) were analysed further by gender, as shown in Table 4.17, the response rate by female pupils was much higher (90%, n=101) than for male pupils (67%, n=62). This suggests that across this sample of pupils, female pupils were much more likely than male pupils to feel that the limited choice of courses was a barrier to them accessing vocational courses through Irish.

Q11 Limited choice of courses

Q4 Gender	Limited choice of courses	Sub-sample	%
Female	101	112	**90%**
Male	62	92	**67%**
Prefer not to say	5	5	**100%**

Table 4.14. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option 'limited choice of courses', with gender.

A further contrast is highlighted through the analysis of responses to the Question 11 option 'not interested in vocational routes' (Table 4.15). As shown in Table 4.19, there were low numbers of pupils from all genders in the survey sub-sample, however, male pupils (21%, n=19) were much more likely than female pupils (8%, n=9) to say that they were 'not interested in vocational routes'.

Q11 Not interested in vocational route

Q4 Gender	Not interested in vocational routes	Sub-sample	%
Female	9	112	**8%**
Male	19	92	**21%**
Prefer not to say	3	5	**60%**

Table 4.15. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option 'not interested in vocational routes', with gender.

Several other questions were analysed in this way to explore possible differences by gender. For instance, Question 8 ("How clear are you about what vocational qualifications are available to you after school through Irish?"), Question 9 (in particular the option that they had not received any advice about vocational options through Irish), and Question 11 (in particular the option that a lack of information represented a barrier to accessing vocational qualifications). However, in each instance, the differences by gender were minimal and not significant.

4.2.2 Year Group

As shown in Table 4.16, Question 6 ("How important is it for you to continue learning through Irish after school?") was analysed with respect to respondent year group at school.

A weighted score was, as in the previous sub-section, calculated on a scale of -2 (highly negative, or 'not important at all') to +2 (highly positive, or 'very important') to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. A weighted score of +0.495 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for year 11 pupils, indicating a low positive mean pupil response tending from 'quite important' towards neutral or 'undecided' for how important the pupils consider continuing learning through Irish after school. By contrast, however, a higher weighted score of +0.700 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for year 12 pupils, indicating a moderate positive mean pupil response tending towards 'quite important' for how important the pupils consider continuing learning through Irish after school. There was even higher weighted score for year 13 pupils (+0.838) tending towards a mean response of 'quite important', and a further increase again for year 14 (+1.667) tending towards 'very important'. Thus, the perceived importance of continuing learning through Irish after school, increases on average, with each subsequent year group. There is a noticeable increase between years 13 and 14 (Δ 0.829), with year 14 pupils significantly more likely to feel that continuing learning through Irish after school is important, when compared with their younger peers from the lower year groups.

Q6 How important is it to you to continue learning through Irish after school?

Q3 Year group	Not important at all	Not very important	Undecided	Quite important	Very important	Grand total	Weighted score (-2 to +2)
Year 11	10	8	24	43	18	**103**	**+0.495**
Year 12	0	2	6	8	4	**20**	**+0.700**
Year 13	3	5	16	27	23	**74**	**+0.838**
Year 14	0	0	0	4	8	**12**	**+1.667**

Q3 Year group	Not important at all	Not very important	Undecided	Quite important	Very important	Grand total
Year 11	10%	8%	23%	42%	17%	**100%**
Year 12	0%	10%	30%	40%	20%	**100%**
Year 13	4%	7%	22%	36%	31%	**100%**
Year 14	0%	0%	0%	33%	67%	**100%**

Table 4.16. Comparison of Q6 (importance of continuing learning through Irish after school) and year group.

As shown in Table 4.17, Question 7 (“How interested are you in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish?”) was also analysed with respect to respondent year group at school.

A weighted score was, as before, calculated on a scale of -2 (highly negative, or ‘not interested at all’) to +2 (highly positive, or ‘very interested’) to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. A weighted score of +0.311 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for year 11 pupils, indicating a low positive mean pupil response. In addition, a similar weighted score of +0.200 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for year 12 pupils. There was again a similar, although slightly higher weighted score for year 13 (+0.473). However, there was a significant increase for year 14 (+1.083) tending from a ‘quite interested’ towards a ‘very interested’ average pupil response.

Thus, the respondents in year 14 in this sample demonstrated by far the highest level of interest in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish, followed by year 13 with a difference in weighted score of Δ 0.610.

Q7 How interested are you in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish?

Q3 Year group	Not interested at all	Not very interested	Undecided	Quite interested	Very interested	Grand total	Weighted score (-2 to +2)
Year 11	9	13	30	39	12	103	+0.311
Year 12	1	2	10	6	1	20	+0.200
Year 13	4	12	18	25	15	74	+0.473
Year 14	1	0	1	5	5	12	+1.083

Q3 Year group	Not interested at all	Not very interested	Undecided	Quite interested	Very interested	Grand total
Year 11	9%	13%	29%	38%	12%	100%
Year 12	5%	10%	50%	30%	5%	100%
Year 13	5%	16%	24%	34%	20%	100%
Year 14	8%	0%	8%	42%	42%	100%

Table 4.17. Comparison of Q7 (interest in pursuing vocational pathways through Irish) and year group.

As shown in Table 4.18, Question 8 (“How clear are you about what vocational qualifications are available to you after school through Irish?”) was also analysed with respect to respondent year group at school.

A weighted score was, as before, calculated on a scale of -2 (highly negative, or ‘not clear at all’) to +2 (highly positive, or ‘very clear’) to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. A weighted score of -0.136 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for year 11 pupils, indicating a very low negative mean pupil response. A weighted score of +0.550 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for year 12 pupils, indicating a moderate positive mean pupil response. There was a low positive weighted score for year 13 (+0.108). However, interestingly, there was a significantly different response from the year 14 pupils (-0.917), suggesting that they were ‘not very clear’ about what vocational opportunities were available to them after school through Irish. This negative sentiment among the year 14 pupils is significant when compared with their younger peers in the other lower year groups. Therefore, and despite year 14 pupils showing the highest levels of importance and interest with respect to vocational qualifications through Irish, they are most likely to say they are unclear about available vocational opportunities through Irish.

Q8 How clear are you about what vocational opportunities are available to you after school through Irish (e.g., training, apprenticeships, employment etc.)?

Q3 Year group	Not clear at all	Not very clear	Undecided	Quite clear	Very clear	Grand total	Weighted score (-2 to +2)
Year 11	8	37	23	31	4	**103**	**-0.136**
Year 12	0	4	5	7	4	**20**	**+0.550**
Year 13	4	23	14	27	6	**74**	**+0.108**
Year 14	5	4	1	1	1	**12**	**-0.917**

Q3 Year group	Not clear at all	Not very clear	Undecided	Quite clear	Very clear	Grand total
Year 11	8%	36%	22%	30%	4%	**100%**
Year 12	0%	20%	25%	35%	20%	**100%**
Year 13	5%	31%	19%	36%	8%	**100%**
Year 14	42%	33%	8%	8%	8%	**100%**

Table 4.18. Comparison of Q8 (clarity of available vocational qualifications after school through Irish) and year group.

This distinction is further reflected in the responses to Question 11 where pupils were asked to indicate whether they felt that 'lack of information' was a barrier to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish (Table 4.19). As shown in Table 4.19, the percentage of pupils in year 11 (34%, n=35), year 12 (35%, n=7), year 13 (55%, n=41), who felt that 'lack of information' was a barrier was much lower than among year 14 pupils where 83% (n=10) selected this option. Consequently, the percentage of pupils identifying 'lack of information' as a main barrier to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish, increases significantly with each subsequent year group. Year 14 pupils appear to be highly impacted by a 'lack of information'.

Q11 Lack of information

Q3 Year group	Lack of information	Sub-sample	%
Year 11	35	103	**34%**
Year 12	7	20	**35%**
Year 13	41	74	**55%**
Year 14	10	12	**83%**

Table 4.19. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option 'lack of information', with year group.

A similar pattern emerges again in the analysis by year group of the responses to the Question 11 option 'limited choice of courses' as a barrier to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish (Table 4.20). As shown in Table 4.20, there were consistently high percentages of pupils across the various year groups in the survey sub-sample, namely, year 11 (79%, n=81), year 12 (70%, n=14) and year 13 (82%, n=61), but among the year 14 pupils, the option was selected by 100% (n=12) of the respondents, indicating that Year 14 pupils appear to be most highly impacted by a perceived 'limited choice of courses'.

Q11 Limited choice of courses

Q3 Year group	Limited choice of courses	Sub-sample	%
Year 11	81	103	**79%**
Year 12	14	20	**70%**
Year 13	61	74	**82%**
Year 14	12	12	**100%**

Table 4. 20. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option 'limited choice of courses', with year group.

Furthermore, a similar pattern emerges from the analysis by year group of the Question 11 option 'limited spaces available' as a main barrier to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish (Table 4.21). As shown in Table 4.21, there were moderate percentages of pupils across years 11-13 who selected this option [year 11 (13%, n=13), year 12 (30%, n=6), year 13 (30%, n=22)] but the response from the pupils in year 14 was significantly higher with more than two thirds (67%, n=8) selecting this option. Therefore, year 14 pupils appear to also be most highly impacted by the 'limited spaces available'.

Q11 Limited spaces available

Q3 Year group	Limited spaces available	Sub-sample	%
Year 11	13	103	**13%**
Year 12	6	20	**30%**
Year 13	22	74	**30%**
Year 14	8	12	**67%**

Table 4.21. Comparison of Q11 (main barriers to accessing vocational qualifications through Irish) option 'limited spaces available', with year group.

Finally, as shown in Table 4.22, Question 12 ("How confident are you that you could continue your education or training through Irish after school if you wanted to?") was analysed by participant year group.

A weighted score was, again, calculated on a scale of -2 (highly negative, or 'not confident at all') to +2 (highly positive, or 'very confident') to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. A weighted score of +0.330 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for year 11 pupils, indicating a very low positive mean pupil response. A slightly higher weighted score of +0.500 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for year 12 pupils, indicating a moderate positive mean pupil response. Again, there was a slightly higher weighted score for year 13 (+0.784). However, there was a noticeable decrease in confidence for year 14 pupils (+0.250) when compared with peers in the other year groups, and notably a third (33%, n=4) indicated that they were 'not confident at all' that they could continue their education or training through Irish if they wanted to.

Q12 How confident are you that you could continue your education or training through Irish if you wanted to?

Q4 Gender	Not confident at all	Not very confident	Undecided	Quite confident	Very confident	Grand total	Weighted score (-2 to +2)
Year 11	4	27	24	27	21	103	+0.330
Year 12	0	2	7	10	1	20	+0.500
Year 13	1	10	15	26	22	74	+0.784
Year 14	4	1	0	2	5	12	+0.250

Q4 Gender	Not interested at all	Not very interested	Undecided	Quite interested	Very interested	Grand total
Year 11	4%	26%	23%	26%	20%	100%
Year 12	0%	10%	35%	50%	5%	100%
Year 13	1%	14%	20%	35%	30%	100%
Year 14	33%	8%	0%	17%	42%	100%

Table 4.22. Comparison of Q12 (confidence in continuing education or training through Irish after school) and year group.

4.3 Pupil Open-Ended Response Analysis

All survey participants responded to Question 13, which asked them to suggest improvements to increase the vocational/training opportunities available in Irish. The coding of pupil responses resulted in nine themes that highlighted both aspiration and barriers in relation to undertaking vocational qualifications through Irish-medium, following school. More specifically, pupils consistently expressed a strong interest in learning through Irish, whilst also identifying systemic problems.

Dominant themes included, 'increased funding', and 'more course choices, opportunities and availability', which pupils directly interrelated. The repeated emphasis on financial investment, for example, "*More money to increase vocational/ training opportunity's available in irish*"[29], "*The school gets more money to do more stuff likr a barbering cours and have more opportunities*", and "*More money for even more courses*", conveyed a perception amongst the pupils, that current provision is under-funded and is restricting or limiting opportunity and choice. Pupils also demonstrated an awareness of how funding links to outcomes such as careers, guidance and employability, noting that, "*If more funding was given to Irish education there would be a larger increase in job availability and information for those seeking vocational/training opportunities*." Importantly, one response highlighted the need for strategic allocation of funding, noting that, "*Figuring out what courses have the most demand would help increase overall opportunities whilst making best use of funding*".

Indeed, considering choice, opportunity and accessibility, other pupils recommended, "*More schools*", "*More availability*", "*More pathway programmes in irish*", "*More sites and programmes through irish*", and "*To have more courses in irish, i feel like there's a lack of irish courses*". This was also coupled with a clear demand for parity with

[29] The responses from the survey present the pupils' comments without edits, in line with best research practice. Spelling and grammatical errors have therefore been retained to preserve the original wording of the pupils' responses.

English-medium provision, with pupils suggesting, "*more courses and apprentices were available through Irish*", "*more courses available and more exams and assessments in irish*", "*More gcse options and a levels options and out side of school places for help because it's very hard to learn in irish*", "*More A level choices*", and "*More gcse options*". Limited progression routes following Irish-medium education was an additional barrier identified in this regard, with one pupil recommending that, "*The ea. could offer a university in Irish or a collage*". Thus, indicating the extent of awareness of these barriers amongst the surveyed pupils, with respect to Irish-medium vocational training, including in contrast with English-medium education and long-term progression into further and higher education, and employment. Overall, these two themes collectively reflected a strong sense that current provision is systemically limited, which may restrict both access, long-term engagement, and successful outcomes.

Considering this, 'employers and employability' also emerged as a key theme, which revealed concern amongst pupils, about the real-world value of Irish-medium vocational qualifications. Pupils wanted stronger alignment between Irish-medium vocational pathways and the labour market, asking to, "*Promote Irish language in a way that makes employers want to hire through Irish or that makes companies want to offer opportunities through Irish*". The perceived gap between Irish-medium vocational learning and employment was reinforced by other pupils who stated that, "*There aren't many jobs in irish and not much of a career through irish*" and requested "*More options/jobs available through irish*". The survey pupils offered recommendations, including, "*Start having more jobs that need irish or use irish*" and "*More acceptance of the language in job spaces*". There was also a desire amongst pupils for more practical and training-linked employment opportunities, with one pupil asking for, "*More courses being able to get a job through irish*", and another pupil asking for, "*More roles avalabile in apprenteships*", further conveying linkage between choice and opportunity, with employability. Some responses demonstrated nuanced thinking about sectoral integration, such as, "*A mix of public sector hiring, specialized bilingual training for key industries (media, tech, childcare), and funding for workplace language immersio*n" and "*More oppertunities available in STEM and opptertunities combining Irish with careers not necessarily linked directly to Irish*". The response, "*If more jobs were available in Irish that don't involve politics*", suggested that pupils want Irish to function as a practical, transferable skill, rather than a niche or politically associated one, with respect to employability. Furthermore, the need for improved career awareness, and value placed on direct involvement of employers, was captured in the comment, "*More information given like guest speakers to show the carers u can get through irish*".

This linked directly to 'more Information and Awareness', where the surveyed pupils identified a lack of clear communication about opportunities. Statements such as, "M*ore wider access to information about them*", "*More information given through schoo*l", and "*More information/ advertising*", point to systemic shortcomings in how options are presented. Pupils also highlighted the role of educators in promoting information and awareness of Irish-medium vocational opportunities, with the response, "*Promote the courses and ensure that teachers are making the students aware of what courses are avilable*". In addition, the response, "*Explain it better*", underscored how current messaging may be unclear or insufficient, accompanied by a call for earlier and more pro-active intervention, "*Workshops/assemblies in schools from GCSE onward so students are aware earlier about possible future*

opportunities", and "*More discussion regarding opportunities in Irish*". Collectively, these responses suggested that even where opportunities exist, they may not be visible or well understood by pupils.

In the theme, 'improved language support and teachers', pupils shifted focus to the quality of the learning experience. The need for pacing and subject comprehension was evident in, "*Giving time to learn all the different topics in irish and not rushing topics on to the pupil*". Support mechanisms were also highlighted including a need for, "*Better and more reliable translators*", and "*More regular irish speakers*", suggesting that linguistic immersion and accuracy were key concerns for the pupils. Additionally, the response, "*More teachers from different subjects etc*", reflects a perceived shortage of subject-specialist teachers to deliver through Irish, which may limit both course availability and quality.

Another identified theme was 'more teaching, learning and assessment resources', which provided one of the most detailed insights into structural inequities. While the response, "*Provide more resources*", established resources as a barrier in Irish-medium vocational pathways, the extended response below, highlighted more specific systemic barriers:

"*Being able to have the necessary resources available, being provided with the 'normal' resources that every other non-Irish school has would be a great help, for example all of [name of curriculum and assessment body] GCSE through to A2 mandatory course textbooks are only provided in English making learning the curriculum even harder than it already is and on top of this, if you are using past paper from [name of curriculum and assessment body]'s website you are only ever able to find 3-4 past paper that have an Irish translation and you can never get the mark scheme in Irish they are only ever in English which makes marking past paper extremely difficult as there are different key words needed to achieve marks when writing in Irish than there is in English*."

This quote illustrated not only a lack of resources, but a systemic disadvantage compared to English-medium learners, particularly in assessment preparation and fairness.

The results above, strongly echo the findings of *A Fair Start* (Purdy et al., 2021), and O'Boyle et al. (2023), who identified significant challenges with respect to Irish-medium resources, assessment, and language support and subject specialist teachers, as well as information and guidance for perspective students, in comparison with English-medium education (Purdy et al., 2025). The results also correspond strongly to identified issues surrounding the perceived recognition and value of vocational education in society (Purdy et al., 2022), whilst further highlighting difficulties more specific to Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications in the Northern Ireland social and economic context.

The broader sociolinguistic context was captured in the theme 'language in society', where pupils recognised that educational change alone is insufficient without wider societal support. Aspirational statements such as, "*If everyone in the country spoke Irish*", "I*f more people had more recognition for the language*", and "*More people speaking the language*", conveyed recognition of, and reflected a desire for cultural value, visibility, and ultimately, normalisation of Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications in wider-society, especially given the concern of politicisation above. Practical social spaces where Irish language can be utilised, were also

clearly important amongst the surveyed pupils, with one pupil for example, recommending, "*To have more places like youth clubs and sports centres with irish*".

In fact, the theme 'continuing in Irish' highlighted the existence of learner identity and consequently, a strong desire to progress via Irish-medium, longer-term. The statement, "*Rather learing it in irish as i have been using irish in school since i have yous it all my life*", reflected a strong personal and educational attachment to the Irish language. This stance suggested that for some pupils, Irish-medium vocational learning is not simply a preference but an integral part of their social and educational identity, reinforcing the importance of maintaining Irish-medium progression pathways, and fostering the ability to be an active member of society via Irish-medium.

'Government Engagement' appeared briefly as a theme, but pointedly, in the response, "*Ask the goverment*", indicating that pupils ultimately see responsibility for change at a policy level. Despite its brevity, this statement from a surveyed pupil reflected an understanding that many of the identified barriers, for example, funding, provision, recognition, all require governmental action.

Chapter 5: Current Irish Medium Vocational Learner Survey Results

5.1 Descriptive Analysis

5.1.1 About You

The current Irish medium vocational learner survey received n=15 responses. The survey sample consisted of 67% (n=10) males, and 33% (n=5) females, as shown in Table 5.1.

Q2. What is your gender?

Answer	n	%
Male	10	**67%**
Female	5	**33%**
Prefer to self-describe:	0	**0%**
Prefer not to say	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.1. Participant gender.

The sample was also distributed across ages 16 (13%, n=2), 17 (33%, n=5), 18 (47%, n=7) and 19 (7%, n=1) (see Table 5.2). Consequently, most participants were aged 17 or 18, with a mean age of 17.5 years.

Q3. What age are you?

Answer	n	%
16	2	**13%**
17	5	**33%**
18	7	**47%**
19	1	**7%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.2. Age of participants.

As conveyed in Table 5.3, the survey sample consisted of participants who lived in two geographic areas namely, Belfast (93%, n=14), and County Antrim (7%, n=1). Thus, Belfast was the most common area by a significant margin, and there were no participants from the remaining counties.

Q4. Where do you live?

Answer	n	%
Belfast	14	**93%**
County Antrim	1	**7%**
County Armagh	0	**0%**
County Derry/Londonderry	0	**0%**
County Down	0	**0%**
County Fermanagh	0	**0%**
County Tyrone	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.3. Where do you live?

Most participants in the survey sample were participating in 'Skills for Life and Work' (47%, n=7) or 'Post-16 Stay at School' (46%, n=7), with n=1 (7%) participant undertaking an 'Apprenticeship' (see Table 5.4). No participants in the survey sample selected 'Academies'.

Q5. What type of training or qualification are you currently undertaking (or recently completed)?

Answer	n	%
Skills for Life and Work	7	**47%**
Post-16 Stay at School	7	**46%**
Apprenticeships	1	**7%**
Academies	0	**0%**
None of the above	0	**0%**
Other (please specify):	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.4. Type of training or qualification currently undertaking (or recently completed).

As conveyed in Table 5.5, most participants stated that they are completing 'plumbing' (27%, n=4), 'childcare' (27%, n=4), 'joinery' (26%, n=4) and 'catering' (20%, n=3) courses. The sample was similarly distributed across these four options.

Q6. What type of course are you currently enrolled in?

Answer	n	%
Plumbing	4	**27%**
Childcare	4	**27%**
Joinery	4	**26%**
Catering	3	**20%**
Barbering	0	**0%**
Hairdressing	0	**0%**
Beauty Therapy	0	**0%**
Classroom Assistant	0	**0%**
Other (please specify):	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.5. Type of course currently enrolled in.

Furthermore, when participants in the survey sample were asked in Question 7 about the language through which their training was delivered, there was a mix of delivery languages reported (see Table 5.6). The most common response was ‘all through Irish’ (47%, n=7), followed by ‘mostly through Irish (with some English)’ (33%, n=5), and ‘mostly through English (with some Irish)’ (20%, n=3). Thus, participants learn in Irish to varying degrees from some, to all instruction delivered through Irish.

Q7. Is your current training delivered:

Answer	n	%
All through Irish	7	**47%**
Mostly through Irish (with some English)	5	**33%**
Mostly through English (with some Irish)	3	**20%**
All through English	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.6. Current training delivery language(s).

Likewise, there was a mix of qualification assessment languages reported in the survey sample (see Table 5.7). The most common response, as for delivery

languages, was ‘all through Irish’ (46%, n=7), followed by ‘mostly through Irish (with some English)’ (27%, n=4), and ‘mostly through English (with some Irish)’ (27%, n=4). Thus, the entire survey sample indicated that their assessment was in Irish to varying degrees from *some* assessment in Irish to *all* assessment through the medium of Irish. Interestingly though, the proportions of Irish language assessment do not conform to the proportions of Irish language delivery, thus indicating inconsistencies between the language(s) of instruction and assessment. This is most noticeable for participants who selected ‘mostly through English (with some Irish)’ for both instruction and assessment language, where assessment proportion was higher with an additional 7% (n=1). The sample size, however, is too low to establish any statistical significance in this case.

Q8. Through which language are you assessed for your current qualification?

Answer	n	%
All through Irish	7	**46%**
Mostly through Irish (with some English)	4	**27%**
Mostly through English (with some Irish)	4	**27%**
All through English	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.7. Current qualification assessment language(s).

5.1.2 Access and Entry

As summarised in Table 5.8, most participants first found out about their training or qualification at ‘school’ (73%, n=11) by a significant margin, followed by ‘family or friends’ (13%, n=2), ‘word of mouth’ (7%, n=1), and ‘Irish-medium organisations’ (7%, n=1). No participants selected ‘online/social media’, ‘employer’, ‘further education college’, or ‘careers advisor’.

Q9. How did you first find out about your current training or qualification?

Answer	n	%
School	11	**73%**
Family or friends	2	**13%**
Word of mouth	1	**7%**
Irish-medium organisations e.g. Gaelchúrsaí	1	**7%**
Online/social media	0	**0%**
Employer	0	**0%**
Further Education college	0	**0%**
Careers advisor	0	**0%**
Other (please specify):	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.8. How learners first found out about their current training or qualification.

Participants were asked in Question 10 about how easy or difficult it was to find vocational training opportunities through Irish in their area (see Table 5.9). 13% (n=2) of participants responded that finding training through Irish in their area was ‘very easy’. 53% (n=8) of participants stated that finding training through Irish in their area was ‘quite easy’, 7% (n=1) stated ‘undecided’, 27% (n=4) responded ‘quite difficult’, and 0% (n=0) responded ‘very difficult’. This indicates a generally mixed response, with a slight positive tendency, regarding how easy pupils find it to access training opportunities through Irish in their local area.

As detailed in Table 5.9, a weighted scoring was again applied to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘very easy’ (very positive sentiment) to ‘very difficult’ (very negative sentiment). Positive points were assigned to positive responses depending on level of positivity (+1 for ‘quite easy’, +2 for ‘very easy’), and negative points were assigned to negative responses depending on level of negativity (-1 for ‘quite difficult’, -2 for ‘very difficult’). 0 points were assigned to neutral or ‘undecided’ responses. The frequencies (n) were then multiplied by the assigned points to produce weighted points, and all weighted points were totalled and divided by the total number of responses (n=15). This methodology resulted in a weighted score on a scale of -2 (highly negative) to +2 (highly positive) to establish overall direction and level of negative, neutral/undecided, or positive sentiment. This process is repeated for other similar questions throughout this chapter. In-line with the proportions above, a weighted score of +0.533 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for Question 10, indicating a low positive mean response of ‘quite easy’, tending somewhat towards neutral or ‘undecided’ for ease or difficulty in finding training through Irish in their area.

Q10. How easy or difficult was it to find training through Irish in your area?

Answer	n	%
Very easy (+2)	2	**13%**
Quite easy (+1)	8	**53%**
Undecided (0)	1	**7%**
Quite difficult (-1)	4	**27%**
Very difficult (-2)	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**
Weighted score	**+0.533**	

Table 5.9. Ease or difficulty of finding training through Irish in learners area.

Participants were also asked in Question 11 if they faced any obstacles/barriers in accessing their training or qualification (see Table 5.10). The most reported obstacle/barrier was 'limited choice of courses' with 40% (n=6), followed by a 'lack of information' with 20% (n=3). A few participants also reported facing issues with 'limited capacity/spaces available' for their courses and 'qualifications not available through Irish', both with 13% (n=2). 6% (n=1) of the survey sample selected 'travel or location issues'.

Q11. Did you face any obstacles/barriers in accessing your training or qualification? (select all that apply)

Answer	n	%
Limited choice of courses	6	**40%**
Lack of information	3	**20%**
Limited capacity/spaces available	2	**13%**
Qualifications not available through Irish	2	**13%**
Other (please specify):	2	**13%**
Travel or location issues	1	**6%**
Financial concerns	0	**0%**
Assessment or exams not available in Irish	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.10. Obstacles/barriers faced by learners in accessing their training or qualification.

5.1.3 Assessment and Recognition

Participants were asked in Question 12 about how clear the assessment arrangements are for their course (see Table 5.11). 53% (n=8) of participants responded that their assessment arrangements were 'very clear'. 47% (n=7) of participants also stated that their assessment arrangements were 'quite clear'.

As previously, a weighted score of +1.533 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for Question 12, indicating a very positive mean response of 'very clear' for how clear the assessment arrangements are for their course. This indicates that clarity of assessment arrangements for vocational training courses through Irish does not appear to be a significant issue for learners in the sample.

Q12. How clear are the assessment arrangements for your course?

Answer	n	%
Very clear (+2)	8	**53%**
Quite clear (+1)	7	**47%**
Undecided (0)	0	**0%**
Not very clear (-1)	0	**0%**
Not clear at all (-2)	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**
Weighted score	**+1.533**	

Table 5.11. Clarity of assessment arrangements for learners' courses.

Participants were then asked in Question 13 if they feel that their qualification will be recognised and valued by employers (see Table 5.12). The vast majority of participants (93%, n=14) selected 'yes', that they do feel that their qualification will be recognised and valued by employers. One participant was 'not sure' (7% of survey sample).

Q13. Do you feel that your qualification will be recognised and valued by employers?

Answer	n	%
Yes	14	**93%**
No	0	**0%**
Not sure	1	**7%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.12. Learners' feelings about whether their qualification will or won't be recognised by employers.

As shown in Table 5.13, participants were asked whether they felt that their training or qualification provides clear routes into further training or employment (Question 14). Again, a very high proportion of participants (93%, n=14) selected ‘yes’, that their training or qualification does provide clear routes into further training or employment. Just one participant was ‘not sure’ (7% of survey sample).

Q14. Does this training or qualification provide clear routes into further training or employment?

Answer	n	%
Yes	14	**93%**
No	0	**0%**
Not sure	1	**7%**
Response	**15**	**100%**

Table 5.13. Learners’ opinions on whether their qualifications provide clear routes into further training or employment.

Thus, the sample of participants all indicated that employer recognition and value with respect to their qualifications, as well as clarity of post-qualification routes into further training or employment, are largely not problematic considerations.

5.1.4 Current Experiences

Participants were asked in Question 15 about how enjoyable their course is (see Table 5.14). 60% (n=9) of participants responded that their course is ‘very enjoyable’. 40% (n=6) of participants also stated that their course is ‘quite enjoyable’, thus indicating a positive response to Question 15, with 100% of participants enjoying their courses.

As previously, a weighted score of +1.600 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for Question 15, indicating a very positive mean response of ‘very enjoyable’ for how enjoyable participants find their courses.

Q15. How enjoyable is your current course?

Answer	n	%
Very enjoyable (+2)	9	**60%**
Quite enjoyable (+1)	6	**40%**
Undecided (0)	0	**0%**
Not very enjoyable (-1)	0	**0%**
Not enjoyable at all (-2)	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**
Weighted score	**+1.600**	

Table 5.14. Perceived course enjoyment.

Participants were asked in Question 16 about how useful their course is (see Table 5.15). 73% (n=11) of participants responded that their course is 'very useful', while 27% (n=4) of participants also stated that their course is 'quite useful'. This indicated a positive response to Question 16, with 100% of participants finding their courses useful.

As previously, a weighted score of +1.733 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for Question 16, indicating a very positive mean response of 'very useful' for how useful participants find their courses.

Q16. How useful is your current course?

Answer	n	%
Very useful (+2)	11	**73%**
Quite useful (+1)	4	**27%**
Undecided (0)	0	**0%**
Not very useful (-1)	0	**0%**
Not useful at all (-2)	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**
Weighted score	**+1.733**	

Table 5.15. Perceived course usefulness.

Participants were asked in Question 17 if they would recommend their course (see Table 5.16). 33% (n=5) of participants responded, 'yes definitely'. 60% (n=9) of participants also stated, 'yes probably'. This indicates a positive response to

Question 17, with 100% of participants stating that they would recommend their course to others.

As previously, a weighted score of +1.267 on a scale of -2 to +2 was obtained for Question 17, indicating a very positive mean response tending from ‘yes definitely’ towards ‘yes probably’ for participants recommending their courses.

Q17. Would you recommend your current course to others?

Answer	n	%
Yes definitely (+2)	5	**33%**
Yes probably (+1)	9	**60%**
Undecided (0)	1	**7%**
Probably not (-1)	0	**0%**
Definitely not (-2)	0	**0%**
Response	**15**	**100%**
Weighted score	**+1.267**	

Table 5.16. Learners’ opinions on whether they would recommend their course to others.

5.2 Vocational Learner Open-Ended Response Analysis

All survey participants responded to Question 18, which asked them to suggest improvements to increase the vocational/training opportunities available in Irish. Four main themes emerged from the thematic coding of the open-ended survey responses.

The responses from current learners provided a more focused, experience-based perspective compared to the broader, more aspirational views expressed by pupils. While the themes were fewer and the comments more concise, they offered valuable insight into the day-to-day realities of undertaking vocational qualifications through Irish-medium. The emphasis shifted from system-wide change to immediate improvements in teaching, resources, and learning environments.

The theme of ‘more Irish lessons’ reflected a desire for increased instructional time and deeper engagement with the language. The suggestion of, “*Additional Irish lessons in the year*”, indicated that learners may feel current provision is insufficient to fully support their understanding, particularly in a vocational context, where subject-specific terminology can add complexity. This points to a need not just for increased exposure to Irish, but for sustained and structured language development integrated into vocational study.

Closely related is the theme, ‘improvement of learning materials’, which highlighted a practical barrier to effective learning. Learners explicitly called for, “*Better textbooks*

in Irish", and noted that, "*If more of the textbooks were made in Irish it could possibly improve a good bit*". These current learner responses suggested that existing materials may be limited in quality, availability, or accessibility, reinforcing challenges already identified in the pupil results. The implication is that even when courses are delivered through Irish, the supporting resources, particularly textbooks, do not yet provide full parity with English-medium education, potentially hindering comprehension and successful outcomes.

The theme of 'classroom environment resources' introduced a more subtle but important dimension of the learning experience. The suggestion to, "*Add more Irish things on the walls*", reflected a desire for a more immersive and supportive linguistic environment. This can be interpreted as an effort to normalise Irish within the classroom space, reinforcing vocabulary, cultural identity, and everyday usage. This also suggested that current learners value not only formal instruction, but also visual and environmental cues that support language acquisition.

Finally, the theme 'more course options' echoed one of the strongest themes from the pupil survey results. The calls for, "*More courses*", and "*Other choices*", indicated that even those engaged in Irish-medium vocational learning perceive limitations in the range of options available. This reinforces the idea that restricted choice is not just a barrier to entry for prospective learners, but an ongoing constraint for those already engaged as learners in Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications.

Thus, current learners focused on immediate, tangible improvements that would enhance their educational experience. Together, both pupils and current learners pointed to a consistent conclusion, while there is clear commitment to Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications, meaningful progress depends on investment, systemic change, social and economic recognition, and enhancements with respect to the learning experience.

Chapter 6: Qualitative Findings

This chapter presents the key findings from the qualitative data collection, drawing on twenty-two focus group interviews with a range of stakeholders, including school pupils, learners currently enrolled on a vocational qualification, educators, awarding bodies, sectoral organisations, and policy representatives. The analysis identifies a set of interrelated themes that shape the development of vocational qualifications and pathways through the medium of Irish.

The findings suggest that the challenges facing Irish-medium vocational provision are not located in one part of the system alone. Rather, they arise from limited subject availability, unequal access, provider capacity constraints, workforce shortages, market viability, qualification recognition, and the need for stronger strategic coordination. Across the dataset, participants highlighted both the demand for expanded provision and the structural barriers that currently limit its development.

The first key theme examines access and availability of provision, focusing on the limited range of subjects available through Irish and the consequences this has for learner choice, progression and language continuity. The second theme explores provider capacity and system readiness, including constraints relating to space, staffing, resources, workload, funding and strategic coordination. The third theme considers learner experience, highlighting both the positive identity-affirming role of Irish-medium vocational learning and the challenges learners face in navigating progression pathways. The fourth theme examines market viability and scale, considering the commercial realities of qualification development, the role of awarding bodies, and concerns around recognition and sustainability. The fifth theme explores employer and stakeholder engagement, including demand-led provision, employer understanding, and cross-sector collaboration. The sixth theme considers comparative insights from Wales, England and the Republic of Ireland, before drawing together participants' suggested opportunities and recommendations for strengthening Irish-medium vocational pathways.

6.1 Access and Availability of Provision

Across the dataset, participants emphasised the limited range of provision available through the medium of Irish. Pupils, in particular, consistently described the current availability of provision as insufficient and restrictive.

> *"No, in my opinion, there isn't a lot of courses in Irish." (Pupil)*

> *"I don't think there are enough options in Irish. They're definitely not enough. There is some, but not as much as there needs to be." (Pupil)*

> *"I feel like we don't really offer much [courses in Irish], especially through like engineering and stuff… I think the only job like you can do in Irish is actually being a teacher, or, like, teaching Irish." (Pupil)*

> *"The students are absolutely saying that there needs to be a more, a wider offering of subjects." (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta)*

> *"There's definitely not enough choice of subject available." (VQ Pupil)*

Stakeholders also highlighted limited provision:

> "*Stakeholders have… previously outlined concerns regarding provision for Irish-medium educated young people who may move into FE or other forms of education or training post-16." (Department of Education)*

These references to the limited vocational provision highlighted a more systemic concern about the lack of parity in subject provision between Irish-medium and English-medium education, with Irish-medium learners reporting a narrower curriculum offering in comparison with their English-medium peers.

> *"Certainly, in Irish-medium, there is definitely lack of parity. I am from Belfast, so I know what's available there compared to here!" (School leader)*

> *"If you look at an English-medium school, they have a suite of awarding bodies and a suite of qualifications that they can choose from." (School leader)*

> *"They have to be given equality to our pupils, and that isn't equality. Every other pupil can access a range of subjects, and a range of awarding bodies… The [Irish-medium] College is tied to [name of curriculum and assessment body] and see only the curriculum at [name of curriculum and assessment body], it's a* [*name of curriculum and assessment body] curriculum only. It's the only school, as far as we're aware, that has a [name of curriculum and assessment body] only curriculum in the entire north. That's not equality." (Gaelchúrsaí)*

> *"I think just everything that's given to English schools, I think should be available in Irish as well, because obviously it does give us a very unfair advantage. But yeah, I think it's an unfair advantage for us, because obviously we don't get that opportunity to do stuff. Like, it's very limited here, and what is available to us." (Pupil)*

There was a commitment among key stakeholders to ensure parity with English-medium schools:

> *"CCEA has established quality assurance processes to ensure that assessments taken through the medium of Irish are moderated, marked and awarded in a manner that maintains standards consistent with those of equivalent assessments taken through the medium of English." (CCEA)*

> *"The Department is exploring the potential for the creation of a range of vocational qualifications through CCEA which would then be available to schools in Irish. This would have the advantage of providing a secure range of vocational qualifications for the sector." (Department of Education)*

Limitations in provision were not only evident in the range of subjects available, however, but also in the capacity within those subjects. Even where vocational options had been introduced, access remained highly restricted.

“It's very limited, not just in terms of subject, but even numbers within the subject, like, so they've introduced plumbing and joinery in the last couple of years, four places each.” (School leader)

This limitation is further shaped by geographical accessibility and awareness of provision beyond the local school context. While learners may be informed about available pathways, these are often perceived as constrained by both location and medium of delivery.

“Our students are well prepared for the next steps. They know what's available… And they're well aware [that] what's available is mostly in English. But I don't think that they would be aware of the breadth of courses available at [Irish-medium VQ provider], largely because I don't think that at 16 years of age, they'd be wanting to move up to Belfast to study there.” (School leader)

This issue is compounded by the way subject choices change on a yearly basis. Learners describe how sometimes decisions made at GCSE did not translate into viable A-level options, meaning they are either unable to study their preferred subject or have to move to another school.

“They're not really thinking of, like, what A levels are they going to pick until it actually comes to it like, you're just thinking of what GCSEs and then once you pick that GCSE, it might not be an option for the A level, then you're left with no other option other than to move school if you want to do that subject.” (Pupil)

For some learners, the lack of available subjects resulted in a forced movement out of Irish-medium education and into an English-medium setting, where there were more options available.

“It's wee bit heart-breaking when you have somebody who feels comfortable in the school, wants to learn, but we just don't have a course that will meet their needs. And it's vocational courses that are the issue.” (School leader)

“There are loads of people who move to do their A Levels… they have to go because that’s the subject they want to do.” (Pupil)

“That’s the bad thing about the school is that we don't have like enough subjects to do that we want to do. So, we have to move somewhere else to do them.” (Pupil)

“Either I learn in English or I would just have to do subjects here that won't really benefit me in the future.” (Pupil)

The pattern of outward movement from Irish-medium education was therefore not simply a matter of individual preference, but a structural consequence of limited provision within the system.

“No one wants to leave the school… But there simply isn't the opportunity for them here, I can't, with conscience, say to them or their parents, but why don't you just stay and do this? Because you're really limiting their aspirations.” (School leader)

“We shouldn't have to exist in a system that is causing students to leave due to lack of availability of courses that are available to other students in the education system.” (School leader)

This outward movement was seen to have broader consequences for confidence in Irish-medium education. Where pupils are unable to follow a full immersion pathway, participants suggested that parents may begin to question whether Irish-medium education can provide a complete and sustainable route through post-primary and post-16 education.

“So, the absence of vocational qualifications is… affecting the confidence that parents and the community have in Irish-medium education, because if you can't follow a full immersion programme, that starts to raise doubts in parents’ minds, for example, where their children are actually going. And we've seen that to a small extent in the transfer from P7 to year 8. We're now seeing it in the transfer at post 16, that more pupils and their parents are choosing to go to English medium to finish their education due to better range of qualifications.” (School leader)

For some learners, transitioning out of the Irish-medium system due to limited subject availability has longer-term consequences for their engagement with the language. Participants described how, once immersed in an English-medium environment, opportunities to use Irish diminish significantly, resulting in a noticeable decline in fluency over time.

“If we're like learning all the stuff in Irish here, and then we have to go and learn completely different in a different language or try and take on like a new subject and learn it through English. I think it would be really difficult.” (Pupil)

“People we know would like go to English speaking secondary schools and lots of them now don't know as much Irish as they used to, they’re not as fluent as they used to be.” (Pupil)

“My sister went to [English-medium secondary school] and then she's just, like, can’t speak any Irish anymore, and I'm, like, speaking to her in Irish, and she didn't really understand me.” (Pupil)

“I think even that happens when pupils transfer from P7 into English medium, particularly the grammars, and sometimes they run into problems. I've heard of pupils being told off because they didn't know some basic things. But actually, they did know it! They just didn't know it in English.” (School leader)

“I would get a high percentage every year of [Irish-medium] top students looking to go to the likes of [comprehensive school], which is just down the street, transferring to there and doing their A levels. And they're going to struggle for a while, because it's getting all the terminology in English. (DfE Careers)

Participants emphasised that this shift involves adapting not only to new terminology and modes of learning, but also to a fundamentally different educational environment and culture. The move away from the community-oriented nature of Irish-medium

schooling can be particularly difficult, requiring learners to navigate unfamiliar systems and expectations at a critical stage in their educational journey.

> *"Children who have spent their whole education through the medium of Irish, jump into English-medium settings at that stage, to head on down to the Tech. It's not appropriate. The transition would be difficult, and not even just in terms of, you know, language and the content of the course, but actually the whole environment. Irish-medium education is steeped in pastoral care… and to come out of that zone and sort of navigate your way, you know it is different." (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta)*

> *"I had a parent in yesterday, and she has a year 12 pupil who isn't settled very well in school… When the pupil doesn't show up for class, we would be ringing home… [Parent] said, "Look, I know my pupil, my son or daughter isn't very academic, but I don't think that they're ready for Tech or for leaving school yet". And they need those extra two years to mature, to get their life experience, become more confident in themselves before they leave this sort of nurturing and supportive environment and head to somewhere where maybe it's more, you know, fend for yourself." (School leader)*

As an alternative to fully transitioning out of the Irish-medium sector, some schools have attempted to address gaps in provision by facilitating access to individual subjects through English-medium settings on a part-time basis. While this approach allows learners to remain within the Irish-medium school for the majority of their education, it nevertheless reflects the limitations of what can be offered internally.

> *"Where our own school can't offer a subject, our pupils have the opportunity to study through the medium of English. For example, we may only have one pupil wanting to do A-level Chemistry, and it would be impossible to run up with a class like that, whereas, you know, you know, [English-medium school nearby] could facilitate that one pupil through the medium of English… But, you know, we're beginning to see that that is having an impact on the immersion nature of the school, where the students aren't doing everything through Irish." (School leader)*

This type of arrangement appears to be relatively widespread, with one participant suggesting that it is a routine feature of provision rather than an exception.

> *"I think if most of our students had their way, they would probably like to stay in school full-time, here, as opposed to going out to one of our partner schools in the learning community. But I would… hazard that there's probably over half of our students that will go out on a weekly basis, to courses in other schools." (School leader)*

The pupils described how transitioning from an Irish-medium school to an English-medium school presented significant educational and linguistic challenges.

> *"My brother used to go here up until fifth year, and wanted to do engineering, and the school didn't provide it so he had to go to [English-medium school] and he found it really difficult, moving, because he didn't understand, like he*

has to do Irish and all there and they said it's just all the terms are different and stuff." (Pupil)

Despite these constraints, there was some indication that provision was beginning to develop. Learners recognised significant efforts to expand opportunities and expressed a sense of cautious optimism with the recent growth in provision.

> *"They've expanded more courses than there was last year… It's good that they're expanding. They're becoming bigger and put more subjects and more apprenticeships and all." (VQ pupil)*

Alongside issues of overall provision, participants highlighted significant regional variation in access to Irish-medium vocational opportunities, with options differing depending on geographic location. In more rural areas, access to Irish-medium post-primary provision is limited, which in turn constrains both educational continuity and future aspirations.

> *"The regional differences are absolutely huge. I taught in [name of provincial town] for seven years and you know, the nearest Irish-medium post-primary school is over 45 minutes away on a bus for the pupils, and that's a stream.[30] And so, when I talk about vocational availability or aspirations, I think that there's still a link missing in the chain, and that that pathway needs to be clear so that pupils can't aspire to something that doesn't exist." (Gael Linn)*

Even where provision does exist, it is often highly centralised, requiring learners to travel significant distances to access it. As a result, participants emphasised that the Irish-medium learner experience is shaped by uneven access to provision at different stages of the education system.

> *"It's the only Irish-medium secondary school here. So, our students, and we know that from childcare, because when we do the childcare and they're in placements, they're very often in East Belfast, North Belfast, so it's, while it's centred here in West Belfast, our cohort comes from all over." (Gaelchúrsaí)*

> *"We can't compare an Irish-medium pupil who has 14 years of immersion in Belfast compared to a pupil who has gone through seven years of Irish-medium education and doesn't have an opportunity to transition to an Irish-medium post-primary school, or an Irish-medium stream, because their educational opportunities are completely different. Pupil A in Belfast has an opportunity at the moment, which is absolutely phenomenal, to have 14 years of education, even if they don't finish the post 16 education in school completely through the medium of Irish, whereas pupil B in Fermanagh or Omagh may go seven years through immersive education, and then they go to a post-primary school that they're not even able to study Irish at year 9, year 10, never mind GCSE, never mind A level." (Gael Linn)*

[30] An Irish-medium stream (or unit) in a Northern Ireland school is a dedicated, separate class within an English-medium school where children are taught some or all elements of the NI curriculum through the Irish language. It allows students to experience language immersion while sharing the same campus, facilities and social events as the rest of the school.

Associated to issues of provision and access was the question of how effectively the current system is able to meet the needs of learners within Irish-medium education. Participants emphasised that a broad and flexible curriculum is essential in supporting different pathways beyond school, including both academic and vocational routes.

> *"Through contact with the Irish-medium sector CCEA has been made aware of a desire for learners to have access to a greater range of vocational qualifications." (CCEA)*

> *"It's very, very important to meet the needs of all pupils, and that's really why the Entitlement Framework was set up and to recognise that not all learners are the same. They have different learning styles, they have different needs, they have different aspirations, and all of that needs to be met, and if it is met in a broad and balanced curriculum, then they will succeed, both in education and then in life. So, our pupils are being hit hard in that regard." (School leader)*

A further dimension of this issue relates to the relationship between availability of provision and learner aspiration. Participants highlighted that aspirations cannot develop in isolation from the opportunities that are realistically accessible within the system.

> *"I think there's a difference between aspiration and availability. Availability creates aspiration, and aspiration can be there. But if there's no availability, what do you aspire to?" (Gael Linn)*

> *"I feel that there are quite a lot of gaps in learners' aspirations and the opportunities currently available. Now, again, one of the things is the gaps between certain levels, but particularly when you get up into the higher level… As learners start to achieve in the language and start to get higher and higher, quite often, there's not a lot of places for them to go with that." (Turas)*

These challenges were associated with the structural constraints of the qualifications system, which limit the extent to which Irish-medium schools can offer a broad and balanced curriculum. Participants highlighted that provision is heavily dependent on a small number of awarding bodies, which significantly narrows the range of available courses.

> *"There's a certain limit to the variety and breadth of courses that we can offer, because [name of curriculum and assessment body] is the only awarding body that is obliged to provide courses through the medium of Irish." (School leader)*

> *"Currently, the only offering [of vocational courses for Irish-medium schools] that they have is through WJEC, and they can offer, they offer a small range of qualifications, but not enough to fill you know, the gap… They're not obligated, so our pupils are at a disadvantage then." (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta)*

6.2 Provider Capacity and System Readiness

A central issue within provider capacity was the availability of resources. Across the dataset, participants consistently identified space as a primary limiting factor in both sustaining and expanding provision.

> *“The lack of space thing is big. We can't grow anymore because of the constraints space wise.” (Gaelchúrsaí)*

> *“We just do not have enough space… We would like to put on more classes, but we just don't have the space. So, it's money, staff and space really is limiting what we can do.” (Turas)*

> *“We need a bigger room, like a bigger space to work in, and then hopefully, probably get another building.” (VQ Pupil)*

> *“They need more space.” (Belfast City Council)*

> *“Continued growth within the sector has created pressures in a number of areas, including accommodation, school capacity and workforce sustainability… Stakeholders have highlighted the importance of ensuring that infrastructure and support arrangements keep pace with learner demand. The Department continues to invest in accommodation and capital projects across the sector… Longer-term consideration of these issues forms an important part of the developing IME Strategy.” (Department of Education)*

Many courses also require specialist facilities, equipment and trained staff, which are not easily accommodated within existing school infrastructure.

> *“It's a health and safety issue… The sector is growing. But it’s dangerous in those trades to teach in that small space.” (Gaelchúrsaí)*

> *“A lot of the courses that are highly successful, involve a lot of specialist skills and equipment. So if you're doing the hair and beauty course, I think you need to have the salon kitted out and the joinery courses, I think they need to, you know, trained people that will that know how to use the machinery, the machinery itself, and a workshop to use it.” (School leader)*

> *“I’ve always wanted us to run motor mechanics or sparking. But there’s just no room. It’s one of those trades where it's going to need significant space and equipment.” (Gaelchúrsaí)*

Despite these constraints, there was evidence of significant effort at provider level to overcome resource limitations. Learners recognised the extent to which staff actively seek to improve provision, and school leaders described themselves as adaptive within constrained conditions.

> *“If there is something needed, [teachers] will try their hardest to get it. Like with all the machines… It would’ve been easier if I had the machines earlier, but now that we'll have them from that, from this point on, it'll be so much easier.” (VQ Pupil)*

> *“We are fairly adaptable… Even for academic subjects, we've had to work on our own resources a lot, and be very self-kind of guided, and look at our own*

training purposes and all of that kind of stuff. And so, we are an adaptable and flexible kind of sector. Irish-medium schools do have that ability to roll with the punches." (School leader)

The availability of teaching and learning materials emerged as a significant aspect of provider capacity. Participants highlighted that while there has been effort to ensure access to Irish-medium materials, provision remains reliant on translation processes rather than original resource development.

> *"Any of CCEA's qualifications (Entry Level Qualifications (ELQ), Level 1, Level 2, GCSE and GCE) can be made available to the Irish-medium (IM) sector upon request. This includes the translation of specifications, assessment materials and support resources, and CCEA intends to continue this approach. This provision enables learners in the IM sector to undertake teaching, learning and both internal and external assessments through the medium of Irish." (CCEA)*

Despite these efforts, participants emphasised that the range of available materials remains limited in comparison to English-medium contexts.

> *"There is extra workload there with any new course… The materials are not always there, readily available in Irish. So, there is a demand on the teachers who are delivering these courses to actually translate and sort of adapt the material to suit the learners." (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta)*

> *"Some of the worksheets will be in English. And then, whoever is teaching us, they will translate it for us." (VQ Pupil)*

> *"Nobody is going to provide a textbook. There's lots of textbooks out there on childcare and joinery, on hairdressing, none of them are in Irish. So, then the teachers are sourcing English-medium materials. There's no extra time to translate it." (Gaelchúrsaí)*

> *"Stakeholders have consistently highlighted the additional challenges associated with delivering an immersion curriculum where teaching and learning resources are often not available in Irish… Research has found that many teachers spend considerable time translating and adapting or developing materials for classroom use. Schools have also identified a need for assessment tools designed specifically for learners educated through an immersion model." (Department of Education)*

These limitations in available materials have implications for staff workload. In the absence of a sufficiently wide range of Irish-medium resources, educators are required to invest additional time in sourcing, translating and adapting materials to meet learners' needs.

> *"Our workload is immense; our workload is huge. But if we want to deliver bespoke training that we know, you know, we know the ins and outs of it all. We know what's needed. We have such great relationships with the practitioners on the ground, in a sense that we know what they need, they can*

come to us with, you know, so for us to deliver training, it would be really good support." (Altram)

"Evidence also suggests that some graduates who complete Irish-medium ITE programmes do not subsequently enter or remain in the sector, highlighting concerns around workforce retention and career progression." (Department of Education)

"We're very mindful of workload… The mechanics of [name of awarding organisation] and going through their loops and hoops can be quite cumbersome. And whenever they change how they operate, we have to change our approach." (Altram)

This pressure is compounded by what was described as an overreliance on goodwill within the system. This leads to staff adopting multiple roles and responsibilities beyond their usual duties, often without recognition or reward.

"There's too much of an overreliance on people's goodwill… People stay and they work their socks off." (Altram)

"It's about that equality being there… Depending on goodwill is actually no good anymore." (Gaelchúrsaí)

"The staff on the ground are expected to do their day's work. They're expected to clean, they're expected to do their observations now and take courses on top of that. And they actually don't even have 'If you get this course, you might get a pay raise'. They don't even have that incentive there either." (Altram)

Participants identified staffing capacity as another constraint on system readiness, particularly relating to the shortage of specialist teachers, particularly those who are both subject specialists and proficient in Irish.

"A growing body of research and stakeholder engagement highlights distinct challenges in developing and sustaining professional qualifications through Irish, including within Initial Teacher Education (ITE)." (Department of Education)

"One of the most significant challenges facing the sector continues to be teacher supply and wider workforce sustainability. Stakeholders regularly highlight difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified teachers, particularly post-primary subject specialists, substitute teachers, classroom assistants and staff with specialist special educational needs (SEN) expertise." (Department of Education)

"We're limited both by access to specialist teachers, and that brings in teacher supply issues. We can't deliver qualification unless you have a teacher." (School leader)

"Finding tutors is a huge issue. They're occupationally competent in their field, but they are not teachers. We're making teachers out of joiners and plumbers." (Gaelchúrsaí)

Stakeholders also highlighted how they were attempting to address these issues:

> *"To address these issues, the Department continues to support dedicated Irish-medium ITE pathways, ring-fenced training places and professional learning opportunities. Measures to strengthen workforce planning and attract new entrants to the profession, including the recently introduced teacher bursary scheme, are also expected to support the future sustainability of the sector." (Department of Education)*

> *"All professional learning whether delivered as part of the Education Authority's annual Programme of Offer, or more recently through the implementation of TransformED, is fully accessible to practitioners in Irish-medium settings. This includes the full continuum of support for teachers and leaders at all stages of their career, ensuring that Irish-medium educators benefit from the same high-quality development opportunities available across statutory nursery, primary and post-primary schools." (Department of Education)*

Challenges are also apparent in the mismatch between existing qualification pathways and the needs of vocational educators. While there are established routes for training Irish-medium teachers, these are not always accessible or appropriate for practitioners entering from industry.

> *"[ITE Provider] has a special provision for Irish-medium teachers. We could do with something to try and bring these tradesmen and women in and get them sped up in some way… A certificate in teaching." (Gaelchúrsaí)*

This issue is further compounded by the practical barriers to staff development and upskilling, particularly in contexts where staffing levels are already stretched.

> *"If you can't get staff cover, you are faced with staff having to do training in the evenings or at night. So there needs to be some other incentive, to get staff to attend the training, because if you have a core staff, are already qualified by social services to be in that setting, why would they give up their evenings for eight weeks to attend training that is obviously going to better their practice?" (Altram)*

In response to these constraints, some providers described the need to adopt pragmatic but short-term solutions, in order to sustain and develop provision. However, the solutions reflected a tension between maintaining the integrity of Irish-medium delivery and ensuring that courses can be offered.

> *"I'm conscious that in order to not hold us back, if an English speaker is the answer to get us up and running, then that's what we'll do." (Gaelchúrsaí)*

Even where such approaches enable provision to move forward, they do not resolve the deeper structural constraints within the assessment and qualification system, which continue to place significant demands on staffing. The requirement for multiple specialists for each subject for the purposes of marking and moderation creates additional pressure to source suitably qualified personnel and creates additional workload pressures.

> *“A key challenge is the requirement for graduates to possess both professional competence and high levels of Irish-language proficiency, including the ability to teach curriculum content through Irish using appropriate subject-specific terminology. This narrows the potential pool of entrants to Irish-medium professional pathways. Teachers in the Irish-medium sector are also required to develop specialist immersion-education skills, supporting pupils' language acquisition alongside curriculum learning. This creates additional training requirements beyond those associated with mainstream teacher education.” (Department of Education)*

Alongside challenges in teaching and specialist roles, participants also highlighted wider staffing shortages across the system, particularly in support, coordination and development functions.

> *“Currently, there is not somebody in [name of curriculum and assessment body] who's specifically a key contact person. When the schools contact [name of curriculum and assessment body], they're sort of thrown from pillar to post you know they could get somebody different… It's very sort of ‘higgledy, piggledy’. It can be difficult for them to navigate any issues.” (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta)*

> *“We don’t have a resources officer, which is a big challenge for us.” (Altram)*

Participants also highlighted a discord between demand for Irish-medium provision and the ability of providers to deliver it. In several cases, demand was described as exceeding available places, resulting in restricted access even where courses are offered.

> *“There's only so much capacity that they have in terms of being able to deliver and that's why we’ve a waiting list. I think we have a waiting list of 35 [pupils] at the minute.” (Belfast City Council)*

Underlying many of the provider capacity issues identified across the dataset is the issue of short-term and insufficient funding, which significantly limits the ability of providers to plan, grow, and respond to demand. Participants highlighted how uncertain funding cycles restrict long-term development and strategic investment.

> *“With the funding being constantly on that kind of short leash, on a yearly basis, it doesn't allow for us to grow as an organisation and to build capacity, because we can't do a longer-term development plan.” (Altram)*

> *“There's a need for multi-year budgets, in this. So there needs to be a longer-term vision. And this, this sector is only growing, and it needs to be supported. So there needs to be a multi-year budget. There needs to be statutory budget allocation.” (Belfast City Council)*

At an operational level, funding constraints were also closely tied to capacity and infrastructure challenges, creating a cyclical barrier to expansion.

> *“The capital is an issue, but then if you don't have the numbers, then you don't have the budget. We need more students in to have the money to buy the*

things, but we're not really ready for a massive class, but we need them, you know?" (Gaelchúrsaí)

Participants also identified the absence of a coherent, joined-up strategic approach as a significant constraint on the development of Irish-medium vocational provision. In particular, school leaders and educators described how their current activity is fragmented, rather than guided by a clear, system-wide vision.

> *"A lot of what we do is done in silos, and there's no overarching strategy." (Gael Linn)*

> *"It does come down to the basics of rather than a big strategy, it comes, for me, we need just what the English speakers have; more space, and, yes, the support within the department, so that everybody in the chain understands that this is a thing, and this is how it works, and it works exactly the same, and they are entitled to exactly the same." (Gaelchúrsaí)*

> *"Strategy should determine what gaps there are and what gap needs filled but that isn't the case in our society, because we don't have this overarching strategy." (Gael Linn)*

In particular, early years provision was described as being insufficiently integrated into wider planning and policy discussions, despite its foundational role in language development.

> *"When you're looking at any development work that's going on for Irish-medium education, on the whole, Irish-medium early years was often forgotten about as well." (Altram)*

Participants pointed to a lack of coordinated working across government departments, particularly in relation to education and skills policy. While they described some level of engagement, this was depicted as fragmented and limited in impact.

> *"The Department of Education and the Department for the Economy don't seem to be addressing this issue together. They have engaged with us. We haven't had very much outcome, but at least they have engaged over the years with us, as have [name of curriculum and assessment body], Department for the Economy less so and it's difficult to get all of them in the same room." (School leader)*

These insights further reinforce the need for system-level coordination and infrastructure to support delivery, particularly in areas that currently rely on *ad hoc* or informal processes. Participants emphasised that the absence of a clear coordinating mechanism limits both strategic oversight and practical implementation.

> *"I think what's missing is a real coordination of what is needed, what the current landscape looks like, and also, how can we promote this as an attractive career pathway… To have somebody there that is able to go around the post-16 events, and engage directly with the schools." (Altram)*

6.3 Learner Experience

Participants enrolled in Irish-medium vocational provision generally spoke positively about their experiences. Learners valued the practical nature of their courses, the one-to-one support from staff, the sense of community, and the opportunity to continue using Irish in a setting connected to future employment.

> *“I felt like I wanted to get out and actually work to know what I wanted to do. Rather than being in school and doing all the studying with no experience, I wanted to actually get out and start working and do a course for a job.” (Pupil)*

> *“We all love studying [VQ qualification]… I’m so thankful I chose to study here to be honest.” (Pupil)*

> *“I enjoy how you can get involved, and it’s very one-to-one. You get a lot of support.” (Pupil)*

Learners consistently emphasised that learners have diverse needs and preferences, and that vocational pathways, irrespective of the language of instruction, play a critical role in supporting different learning styles and aspirations.

> *“It's so important because all students learn differently. People have different interests, of different abilities.” (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta)*

> *“If I'm sitting in the class, I'm not focused… But if I'm actually able to do it with my hands, I’d rather do that rather than just sit in a class and write out books.” (VQ Pupil)*

> *“I felt like I wanted to get out and actually work to know what I wanted to do. Rather than being in school and doing all the studying with no experience, I wanted to actually get out and start working and do a course for a job.” (VQ Pupil)*

> *“We need to recognise that general qualifications, i.e. GCSEs and A levels, aren't right for everybody.” (OCN)*

> *“I did do A levels… And then at the end of it just wasn't for me… I feel more different down here, especially with the placement setting. Like you do understand it more when you're out in the setting.” (VQ Pupil)*

At the same time, the Irish-medium context was frequently described as a highly relational and community-oriented learning environment, which contributed positively to learner experience.

> *“They're very comfortable here. We've got a good atmosphere in the school.” (School leader)*

> *“Here, it's more a community. And what I’ve noticed of Irish-medium compared to English, is in here I’m an equal. There's none of that, ‘I’m the teacher, you're the student’ thing. Here, everyone's kind of an equal.” (VQ pupil)*

> *“[Pupils] came here to be plumbers, or they came here to be joiners. But then they become part of something else. And it is about letting them know you're on the same footing as me here! We don't have a staff room in here. You go*

into that kitchen and you make yourself a cup of coffee, and there'll be students in there making a cup of coffee too… And I'll sit down with them, and it's not, it's not an us-them." (Gaelchúrsaí)

"It's a sense of community. We're all here together. I just really, I love it." (VQ pupil)

"We're much more than just Irish classes. We're a community here, a community of language speakers and language learners. And that really is the secret, because people come in here and they feel at home." (Turas)

A key feature of learner experience was the strong intrinsic motivation to continue using and developing Irish, often linked to identity, continuity and perceived value of the language. Learners described wanting to sustain their language skills and integrate them into future pathways.

"I've been learning Irish my whole life… I'd rather do it in Irish. Sometimes English sort of put me off a bit, because I know more Irish than English." (VQ pupil)

"There's no point wasting all the Irish you already have. You might as well carry on with it." (Pupil)

"I wanted to continue on the Irish language. That was a big one for me as well, because I know a few people after school and stuff, they've dropped it completely. I wanted to continue. I want to keep it alive." (VQ pupil)

"I wanted to pursue my education through Irish." (Pupil)

"The difference between now and 40 years ago, was my granddad hadn't the opportunity to learn Irish, whereas now we have the opportunity, and we're making the most of it." (VQ pupil)

"I've learned it since, like, nursery, so I've basically been speaking Irish my whole life, basically. So, it'd just be like, a shame if I stopped speaking once I got older." (Pupil)

This motivation continued as learners considered their future career options, with many pupils expressing broad aspirations to pursue opportunities through Irish.

"Because we're so used to, because people went to an Irish secondary school, I would probably want to be able to do a career through Irish." (Pupil)

"I don't know yet, but I would like to do something through Irish." (Pupil)

"I think I want to teach Irish." (Pupil)

"We know ourselves, the Irish schools are always crying out for staff and people who you are fluent in it. So… we would want to work in an Irish primary school if we were to work with kids or in an Irish workplace." (VQ pupil)

Other learners recognised that limited availability of such roles may require them to consider broader options.

> *“I would prefer to be an Irish setting. But, if I got offered a job, I would consider anywhere.” (VQ pupil)*

> *“I know teaching would be the only thing that you could fall into to do, through Irish teaching. Teaching or, like, translating. There's not much opportunities.” (Pupil)*

Despite these positive aspects, there were significant gaps in progression pathways, particularly at key decision points within the education system. This absence of long-term visibility was seen to impact subject choice at an early stage, with pupils making GCSE decisions without a clear understanding of how these choices connect to post-18 opportunities. As a result, learners may select pathways that do not align with future options, reinforcing uncertainty and limiting progression.

> *“Our pupils at year 10, age 14, don't have a clear pathway forward to post-18. And that's what we're looking at, that there would be streamlined pathways there… There is a lack of clarity when pupils are making their GCSE choices as to where they will eventually go.” (School leader)*

Participants described difficulties in transitioning between levels, and highlighted how learners can become demotivated and disengage when progression routes are unclear or inaccessible.

> *“There's a massive, massive jump between A level, or the diploma and the degree. And again, as adult learners, that's very, very hard to reach.” (Turas)*

> *“If you're an adult learner, there's a big jump between GCSE and A level, and unfortunately, what happens then is people, they're not able to make, to make that jump, and it demotivates them, and you lose them.” (Turas)*

> *“A lot of the vocational pathways with the Irish language… are geared to people who have maybe come through the Irish-medium system. So, there's a presumption of a certain level of Irish there already… But for adult learners, you're just coming into the language, if they want to go down those pathways and maybe work in the Irish-medium sector, it's a lot more difficult to go on or to qualify for those courses.” (Turas)*

These challenges are further compounded within structured vocational routes such as apprenticeships, where additional qualification requirements can create further barriers to progression. Participants noted that learners are often required to complete literacy, numeracy, or IT qualifications alongside their vocational training, increasing the overall complexity and workload of the pathway.

> *“There are additional barriers there that people do experience, like having to complete a parallel qualification or vocational qualification. They also do literacy, a qualification in literacy, or numeracy or IT, and they as part of the apprenticeship framework, and that can be a barrier for people. So, the apprenticeship programme doesn't suit everybody, and this was a good way*

of testing people out if the framework was suitable for them or was it best, just going, solely doing the qualification, and also if the sector was suitable for them." (Belfast City Council)

Similarly, school-based stakeholders identified a cohort of learners whose mixed academic and vocational profiles were not well supported within the current system.

"We have a group of pupils in the middle who will, most likely, go on to higher education, or possibly to higher education through further education, and that's where the limitations in terms of the vocational curriculum really affects those pupils opportunities. They will be capable of doing one or two traditional A Levels, assessed through external exam at the end. But they also have a different skills profile, where they're very good at working on their own, independently, or doing coursework-type research and assessments." (School leader)

Perceptions of vocational pathways also influenced learner experience. Participants noted ongoing challenges in positioning vocational qualifications as credible and valuable, particularly within contexts where academic progression is prioritised.

"There is still a bit of a stigma attached to vocational pathways in the community that we're working hard to dispel here." (School Leader)

"The demand, in our opinion, that demand is definitely there. The issue is, a lot of Irish-medium schools are streams, so are non-selective, but they sit within a grammar school to some extent. So, it's trying to show how, trying to sell that form of a qualification in terms of people automatically thinking that people are going to go into university, and the universities won't accept that qualification." (Gael Linn)

6.4 Market Viability and Scale

Participants framed market viability as a central constraint shaping the availability of Irish-medium vocational qualifications. At its core, this issue was understood as a tension between demand, scale and the commercial realities of qualification provision. Several participants emphasised that the Irish-medium sector operates within a relatively small and niche market, which significantly limits its attractiveness to awarding bodies.

"We're always a little voice. We are always small in numbers or underrepresented." (Altram)

Participants also highlighted that low perceived demand may, in part, reflect a broader lack of understanding about Irish-medium education and its everyday reality. Misconceptions about the language and how it is used in educational settings were seen to contribute to its marginalisation, and to an underestimation of the number of learners engaging with Irish.

"Sometimes people just don't understand it. They're like, "Do you speak Irish all day? Do you speak Irish?" Like, yes, we go to an Irish school. We speak Irish all day, every day." (VQ pupil)

> *“It is not appreciated how many people are studying Irish throughout Northern Ireland, and the importance of that is quite often just not recognised.” (Turas)*

Concerns about feasibility, demand and scale were acknowledged both by awarding organisations and by providers within the Irish-medium sector itself. While participants recognised the importance of expanding provision, there was also a clear awareness that development must take account of learner numbers, costs, sustainability and the commercial realities of qualification delivery.

> *“Many of the AOs offering these qualifications here are based in England and do not have the capacity / skills to offer their qualifications in Irish. CCEA currently facilitates the translations of WJEC qualifications but if the number of qualifications needing to be translated were to increase significantly there would be implications for capacity and funding within CCEA to ensure that the quality of the service was maintained.” (CCEA)*

> *“Demand is currently low. However, this is likely influenced by the wider political and financial challenges being experienced at present, which may be impacting uptake.” (OCN)*

> *“As an independent awarding organisation, not directly funded by government, we must carefully consider expected uptake when designing and offering qualifications, particularly where additional costs may arise for providers. While there is often clear interest, this does not always translate into sustained demand in practice.” (OCN)*

> *“CCEA Regulation has also facilitated an arrangement with the Welsh Awarding Body WJEC to ensure that Irish-medium learners continue to have access to additional vocational qualifications in the medium of Irish. This supersedes a previous arrangement relating to Pearson BTEC qualifications. CCEA Regulation keep this under regular review… Qualifications being delivered in schools in Northern Ireland (NI) must be approved by the Department of Education (DE) before teaching of the qualification commences.” (Department of Education)*

These concerns are intensified by the commercial nature of awarding organisations, which operate on a cost-recovery or profit basis.

> *“The awarding organisations are commercial entities so they're having to make money. If it doesn't make financial sense to them, they're not going to buy into it. And the Irish-medium sector, the economy of scales, isn't there.” (Gaelchúrsaí)*

The structure of the open qualifications market was identified as exacerbating these challenges. While it enables breadth of provision in English-medium contexts, it disadvantages Irish-medium provision where demand is lower.

> *“It's an open market. So, the open market works well for English-medium schools, whereas it works badly for Irish-medium schools.” (School leader)*

> *“We're victims of the open market in qualifications.” (School leader)*

The fixed costs associated with qualification development and maintenance was presented as an additional constraint on developing more vocational qualifications through the medium of Irish. This creates a disproportionate burden for small cohorts, particularly when compared to large-scale English-medium uptake.

> *"Translation is not a one-off cost. Qualifications have to be reviewed approximately every three years. So, any changes then have to obviously go through the language expert again and a scrutineer, because we have to make sure that it's the right translation as well so there's kind of a scaffolded cost there, once you make that commitment." (OCN)*

Participants highlighted that translation is not a straightforward or neutral process, but one that carries risks for both accuracy and assessment validity. In particular, concerns were raised about the precision of subject-specific terminology, where even minor discrepancies in translation can have significant consequences for learners' performance.

> *"Research has found that many teachers spend considerable time translating and adapting or developing materials for classroom use. Schools have also identified a need for assessment tools designed specifically for learners educated through an immersion model." (Department of Education)*

Some participants also pointed to broader socio-political and cultural dynamics as shaping the viability of Irish-medium provision. The Irish language itself was described as carrying a degree of enduring political sensitivity, which can act as a barrier to engagement and development.

> *"I think here in the North there's, there's the barrier itself is, you say Irish language and it's like, "oh, I really don't want to talk about that". You know, there's an awful lot of that right across the board… Think about the Irish language, anything we wanted to run at the beginning, we were told, yes, but what about Ulster Scots?" (Gaelchúrsaí)*

Participants emphasised that any expansion of Irish-medium vocational provision must be underpinned by a focus on quality, purpose and sustainability.

> *"The Department will also work closely with the sector and aim to identify any positive opportunities to make vocational qualifications available through the medium of Irish." (Department of Education)*

> *"CCEA remains committed to making its qualifications available on request through the medium of Irish and to facilitating access to additional qualifications through its translation services, capacity permitting." (CCEA)*

> *"If you sort of overload with a range of vocational qualifications, and it turns into, well, let's tick that box, then quality is compromised. So, we need to make sure that the qualifications are quality assured and they're properly overseen in their design and delivery." (Altram)*

Forthcoming changes may begin to address some of these challenges.

“The Department will be launching a new TPL Platform in 2027 which will contain bespoke resources for the Irish-medium sector and is working with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) to establish a dedicated Irish-medium Learning Community.” (Department of Education)

6.5 Employer and Stakeholder Engagement

Engagement with employers, policymakers and wider stakeholders emerged as a critical component in both sustaining and developing Irish-medium vocational provision. This involvement spans formal political structures, advisory groups and sector-specific forums, reflecting an effort to influence decision-making and raise awareness of the distinct needs of Irish-medium provision.

“We engage with and attend the All-Party groups for anything that's relevant to Irish-medium early years.” (Altram)

“We've been involved with that and involved in as many working groups as possible that are looking at the wider early years picture and ensuring that there's an Irish-medium early years voice there.” (Altram)

“Linkage with political representation is very important.” (Altram)

“A lot of it involves stakeholder engagement and ensuring that we are involved in those relevant forums… And aside from that, reaching out to any of those political reps that have a particular focus on early education or just general education and childcare, to ensure that they're aware of us and our role and the complexities and challenges that the sector faces.” (Altram)

At the level of provision, employer engagement was described as a key driver of vocational programme design and delivery. In particular, demand-led models, such as training academies, were seen to play an important role in aligning provision with labour market needs. Participants highlighted strong demand within specific sectors, particularly childcare and classroom support roles, where Irish-medium provision is expanding rapidly and where employment outcomes are consistently high.

“There's huge demand for upskilling, so childcare and classroom assistants will be the largest demand… They're hugely successful in terms of outcomes across all our academies, and over 90% of people go into work or, are in a better job as a result of the academy. So, and that's because the employer demand is there.” (Belfast City Council)

“There's a range of Irish cafes and restaurants popping up within the Irish speaking community. And there's demand for catering, for example. So, we deliver that. We introduced barista training last year, and that was delivered through the medium of Irish.” (Belfast City Council)

More broadly, participants emphasised that where employer demand exists, provision can be developed and scaled accordingly. The role of training programmes was therefore framed as bridging the gap between supply and demand, ensuring that learners are equipped with the skills required to access available employment opportunities.

“There's no shortage of employers. All our academies are demand driven. So, if there's no employers, we don't run them, or we scale up and scale up or scale down on demand. But the employment opportunities are there… And we use the academies to bridge that gap.” (Belfast City Council)

Cross-border collaboration also emerged as an important dimension of stakeholder engagement. Participants described partnerships with organisations in the Republic of Ireland and Wales as a valuable means of sharing resources and strengthening provision, particularly in the context of limited funding and capacity in Northern Ireland.

“CCEA also collaborates with WJEC (awarding organisation based in Wales), by facilitating the translation of a range of its qualifications.” (CCEA)

“CCEA Regulation has also facilitated an arrangement with the Welsh Awarding Body WJEC to ensure that Irish-medium learners continue to have access to additional vocational qualifications in the medium of Irish. This supersedes a previous arrangement relating to Pearson BTEC qualifications. CCEA Regulation keep this under regular review.” (Department of Education)

“When certificates are delivered in Irish, we include a note reflecting the language of delivery. This presents an opportunity to highlight bilingual achievement and cultural competence. It would be valuable to explore how this recognition supports learners, particularly in terms of employment prospects and how it may offer an added benefit in the labour market.” (OCN)

Participants also highlighted practical challenges in securing Irish-medium work placements, particularly in vocational areas where workplaces operate primarily through English. This limits opportunities for learners to fully apply their language skills in professional contexts and may dilute the immersive nature of their training.

“It'll be ‘wait and see’ whether they can get the tutors in through the medium of Irish language… I say it will take a generation for that to come through so in another 15, 20 years, you know, it will be interesting to see where they are with this.” (DfE Careers)

6.6 Comparative Insights

Comparative insights from other jurisdictions highlighted that the challenges facing Irish-medium vocational provision in Northern Ireland are shaped not only by language, but by wider system design. Wales was repeatedly identified as a useful comparator, particularly because Welsh-medium provision is more systematically embedded within the qualifications landscape. In Northern Ireland, qualifications may be delivered in either Irish or English, whereas in Wales there is a legislative requirement to provide qualifications in Welsh (see Chapter 2). This distinction was seen as significant because it creates a stronger structural expectation around Welsh-medium provision, compared to the more optional or uneven position of Irish-medium provision in Northern Ireland.

> *“With English-medium and Irish-medium education, people think that it's two separate pathways, and it shouldn't come together, but that's not the case. And if you look at Wales in particular, everything's parallel.” (Gael Linn)*

> *“Obviously, Wales is the gold standard, because they set targets and they have legislation, and there's no, there's no alternative but to do it.” (School leader)*

> *“In Northern Ireland, qualifications must be offered in English and stroke or Irish, and I believe that that sort of gives a certain mental leeway for awarding bodies not to fulfil their obligations to the Irish-medium sector.” (School leader)*

At the same time, the Welsh experience also illustrates that statutory or regulatory support does not remove all challenges. The participant from Wales described a complex qualification landscape, particularly in vocational provision, where the range of qualifications is extensive but only a small proportion are approved for public funding at post-16 level.

> *“Things are a lot easier in Wales, in the sense that we have more than one awarding body in Wales, but we have one major awarding body… And part of when we made the new National Qualification offer at 14 to 16 available in terms of the GCSEs the general qualifications, there was a special condition put in place that to offer one GCSE, you had to offer the whole range. So that's why we only have one awarding body when it comes to the general qualifications in Wales. But when it comes to vocational qualifications, it's a lot more complicated than that. At the moment, in Wales, there's over 3000 qualifications that are available for public funding in Wales. Only 3% of those post 16 are approved.” (Qualifications Wales)*

The Welsh experience therefore reflects similar tensions to Northern Ireland, in that there was a commitment to equal access for Welsh-medium learners, but within a qualification landscape shaped by market share and complications regarding parity of esteem.

> *“We have to ensure that what they're producing is economically viable in terms of, you know, their market share in Wales. So that's the main problem that we've got at the moment. The qualification landscape is vast. They're absolutely complex. It's difficult for colleges and learners to be able to navigate everything that's in that space, but there's some tensions, and there's some difficult questions for us all the time regarding parity of esteem. So, we want to make sure that learners and Welsh-medium learners in Wales, they have equal access to qualifications.” (Qualifications Wales)*

The Welsh comparator highlights the importance of strategic coordination and relationships across the system. Participants described efforts to work more strategically with post-16 providers and awarding bodies, while acknowledging that much of this still depends on informal engagement and relationship-building.

> *“Much of this is really just having that open dialogue, encouraging award relationships, and the links between awarding bodies and providers*

themselves, trying to facilitate that relationship as much as we can." (Qualifications Wales)

Participants also pointed to the Republic of Ireland as an example of a system where Irish-medium provision is more structurally embedded and this system was viewed as potentially better aligned to the needs of Irish-medium learners in Northern Ireland, particularly because of its centralised qualification structures. Participants suggested that a more closed system, where a single examinations body has responsibility for provision, may be better able to ensure a broader and more equitable range of subjects.

> ***"****The Republic of Ireland system would suit us a lot better, which would meet our needs a lot better. And then, so then the question is, like, why can't we do some of the courses that are available in the Republic?" (School leader)*

> *"If it was a closed market and one examinations body, the way they have in the Republic, then they're obliged to provide a wide range of vocational and academic subjects for other pupils and everybody. It's a level playing field." (School leader)*

However, participants also recognised that cross-border transferability is not straightforward.

> *"The issues are exacerbated more by partition, where the number of children in Irish-medium education is divided between North and South and two education systems, and you know all the different resources. A textbook that might work for leaving cert history won't for A level history, etc… For a very small sector, it would suit us a lot better if there was more kind of collaboration across the across the border, or else, more equal opportunities from the open market." (School leader)*

England was also referenced as a comparator in relation to pathway development. Participants noted that the development of clearer vocational and academic pathways, including T Levels and alternative vocational qualifications, gives learners in England a wider range of options than is currently available to Irish-medium learners in Northern Ireland. Participants also highlighted that the range available nearby makes the absence of equivalent Irish-medium options more visible.

> *"When I'm looking at [provision in local English-medium schools], it gives me a bit of an insight into what is available, but also gives me an insight into what is not available, in terms of the Irish-medium sector, and where our students are losing out, and where our students are going to be disadvantaged." (School leader)*

6.7 Participant Recommendations

Participants identified a range of practical opportunities to strengthen Irish-medium vocational provision. While many of the challenges outlined in previous sections are structural, there was a clear sense that targeted interventions, particularly at system level, could significantly improve both access and sustainability.

A recurring theme was the need to embed Irish-medium considerations at the earliest stages of policy and qualification design, rather than treating them as an add-on. Participants highlighted how current approaches, particularly reliance on *post-hoc* translation, create delays and reinforce a sense of marginalisation within the system.

Alongside this, participants emphasised the importance of sustained and strategic investment. This included capital funding, long-term core funding, and statutory support to enable providers to plan, expand and respond to demand effectively. Without this, growth was seen as constrained and reactive rather than proactive.

> *"It's the capital funding, statutory and departmental support and longer-term core funding for this, I think is key to its success." (Belfast City Council)*

Workforce development was also identified as a key area for intervention. Participants proposed both immediate and longer-term strategies, including incentivising specialist skills, expanding training pathways, and developing coordinated workforce planning mechanisms. In particular, the unique skill set required for Irish-medium provision was seen as insufficiently recognised within current structures.

> *"There's opportunities there for them to actually fully acknowledge the unique skill set that's required to work in Irish, early Irish immersion. And you know what we, what we are kind of advocating for, is that there's an incentive of some description there where that skill set is recognised and rewarded in some kind of incentive around salary uplift, or a kind of differentiation between a traditional practitioner that's delivering an English-medium programme." (Altram)*

At a system level, participants identified opportunities for a more coordinated and strategic use of existing infrastructure and partnerships. This included more proactive engagement with awarding bodies and regulators, such as developing Irish-medium hubs, training Irish-speaking moderators, and leveraging expertise within organisations like CCEA. There was also a clear call for stronger oversight of workforce development, including the introduction of a dedicated coordination role to promote pathways, engage stakeholders, and identify gaps across the sector.

> *"One of the recommendations is to look at workforce development and creating a coordinator kind of role, like a workforce development officer that could oversee the promotion of the sector as a pathway, and also look at engaging with all the different stakeholders that are involved across the north in delivering Irish-medium education or early year services, and looking at where the gaps are." (Altram)*

There was strong support for exploring cross-jurisdictional collaboration, particularly with the Republic of Ireland, where aligned provision could help address gaps in the current system.

> *"We had raised with the Department the question around, could we explore any of the vocational offerings that are available in the south… If we could tap into that, if there were small tweaks that needed done to make it appropriate*

for a qualification here… There definitely is an openness to explore those opportunities." (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta)

Participants further emphasised the importance of strengthening engagement with awarding organisations, including advocating for greater accountability and, where necessary, applying pressure to expand provision.

> *"Can [the Department] approach the examination bodies and try to put a bit of pressure… If [Awarding Body] are not happy to offer through the medium of Irish, could we not pull the whole of the north out of that?" (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta)*

> *"This is about the Department of Education and Minister being able to put pressure on exam boards to deliver qualifications in Irish." (School leader)*

In addition to system-level changes, there were practical recommendations aimed at improving delivery and accessibility. These included better coordination of translation services, development of shared resources, and clearer infrastructure to support providers.

> *"When we go to translate a qualification into Irish it would be useful if there was almost like a website or something we could go to, that has like an approved list of providers you can access. Because at the moment, what we've had to do is… trawl the internet, or invite organisations that we know that offer a translation service, to tender for that work." (OCN)*

6.8 Conclusion

Overall, the qualitative data collection demonstrates that Irish-medium vocational provision is shaped by a complex interaction of demand, capacity, system design and market conditions. Participants identified a lack of parity between Irish-medium and English-medium provision, particularly in relation to the breadth of subjects and qualifications available. This limited availability has practical consequences for learners, including restricted subject choice, disrupted progression pathways, movement into English-medium settings and potential loss of language confidence and fluency.

At the same time, the data highlights that the issue is not simply one of demand. Despite significant demand for Irish-medium vocational pathways, providers face constraints including limited space, insufficient staffing, lack of teaching materials, heavy workload, short-term funding and limited strategic coordination. These constraints mean that even where there is appetite for provision, the system is not always ready or resourced to deliver it sustainably.

The findings also show that vocational provision through Irish has distinct value for learners. Participants described Irish-medium settings as community-oriented, with learners expressing strong motivation to continue using Irish in education, employment and wider life. However, this motivation is often undermined by unclear progression routes, limited career visibility, and a narrow range of recognised qualifications. For some learners, particularly those whose strengths are more

practical or coursework-based, the absence of suitable vocational pathways represents a significant barrier to realising their potential.

A further cross-cutting finding is that the development of Irish-medium vocational qualifications cannot be separated from the wider qualifications market. The commercial nature of awarding bodies, the relatively small scale of the Irish-medium sector in Northern Ireland, the costs and risks of translation, and concerns around long-term recognition all shape what is considered economically viable. Comparative insights from Wales and the Republic of Ireland suggest that stronger structural obligations, clearer coordination and parallel planning can support minority-language provision, although these systems also face challenges relating to scale, complexity and workforce capacity.

Participants suggested that there is a need for a more strategic and coordinated approach. This includes embedding Irish-medium considerations at the beginning of qualification and policy development, investing in workforce and infrastructure, strengthening engagement with awarding bodies, improving translation and resource systems, exploring cross-border collaboration, and developing clearer progression pathways from school into further education, training, employment and higher education.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of data from the learner surveys, focus groups and interviews with learners, tutors and other key stakeholders, and informed by a critical and comparative review of the relevant research and policy literature, the report presents the following conclusions and recommendations under six key headings:

7.1 Upscaling provision

- *Conclusion:* The findings demonstrate a clear and growing demand for Irish-medium vocational pathways in Northern Ireland, reflecting the continued expansion of the Irish-medium school sector and the increasing importance of accessible, high-quality vocational training and qualifications for Irish-medium learners.
- *Conclusion:* Current Irish-medium vocational pathways in Northern Ireland are however limited, with delivery concentrated primarily in West Belfast through Gaelchúrsaí. While some outreach activity exists through this organisation, significant regional disparities in access remain.
- *Recommendation:* Existing Irish-medium vocational pathways should therefore be expanded to meet the growing demand, and provision should be upscaled to ensure equitable access for all Irish-medium learners across Northern Ireland. As an immediate and low-risk route to expansion, consideration should be given to piloting a formal partnership between an established Irish-language provider and one or more Further Education Colleges, enabling Irish-medium delivery to be connected to mainstream FE infrastructure, regulated qualifications, apprenticeship pathways and progression routes.
- *Recommendation:* Building on existing careers information, advice and guidance, particularly within Irish-medium schools, greater attention should be given across all school sectors, further education colleges and training providers to Irish-medium vocational pathways. This should ensure that learners, parents, education and training practitioners and careers advisers are more fully aware of the pathways available, progression opportunities and their relevance to future employment.

7.2 Strategy

- *Conclusion:* The findings highlight the absence of a coordinated, system-wide strategy for Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications, with current provision often reliant on fragmented, localised initiatives and individual goodwill rather than long-term strategic planning.
- *Recommendation:* A coordinated, cross-sector and long-term government strategy is required to support the development, delivery and sustainability of Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications in Northern Ireland. Any strategy should include clear responsibilities, timescales, measurable targets and mechanisms for monitoring progress in relation to learner access, regional equity, qualification availability, workforce capacity and progression outcomes.

- *Recommendation:* Lessons should be drawn from Wales which now has a cross-departmental, government-led approach to Welsh-medium vocational pathways and qualifications. At the same time, it is important to recognise significant political and structural differences between the Welsh and the Northern Ireland contexts.
- *Recommendation:* The findings point to the need for a designated body, centre or intermediary function with explicit responsibility for coordinating Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications provision across the post-compulsory sector, including planning, provider engagement, resource development, workforce support and monitoring of progress.
- *Recommendation:* Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications provision should be explicitly considered within forthcoming vocational qualifications reform to ensure that Irish-medium learners are not excluded from newly developed pathways, qualifications or assessment arrangements.

7.3 Long-term, sustainable funding

- *Conclusion:* Short-term and inconsistent funding arrangements were identified as a major barrier to the development, expansion and sustainability of Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications, limiting providers' ability to build capacity, invest in infrastructure and plan strategically for future growth.
- *Recommendation:* The expansion of Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications will require sustained, long-term investment to support the development, delivery and scaling of provision. Funding should be dedicated and, where appropriate, ring-fenced to ensure that Irish-medium vocational provision is not dependent on short-term project funding, local discretion or competition with larger English-medium programmes.
- *Recommendation:* A mapping exercise should be undertaken to identify existing Irish-language capacity within the further education and training workforce, followed by a targeted practitioner development programme to support Irish-speaking staff to teach, assess and develop vocational learning through Irish.
- *Recommendation:* Investment in facilities, infrastructure and updated resources will be necessary to meet growing learner demand and support the delivery of high-quality vocational pathways and qualifications.

7.4 Awarding Body Engagement

- *Conclusion:* Engagement with Awarding Organisations remains constrained by issues of market scale, commercial viability, translation costs and assessment risk, resulting in a narrowing range of Irish-medium vocational qualifications currently available in Northern Ireland.
- *Recommendation:* Explore the establishment of an Irish-medium qualifications hub to support and coordinate Awarding Organisation engagement more efficiently, and to address the challenges of financial viability associated with smaller learner cohorts.

- *Recommendation:* Engage with relevant Awarding Organisations to expand the range and availability of Irish-medium vocational qualifications.
- *Recommendation:* As an initial entry point for Awarding Organisations, prioritise qualifications that utilise lower-risk assessment methods such as coursework-based assessment.
- *Recommendation:* Models of shared translation, moderation and quality assurance support should be further explored, including phased approaches in which initial translation support is gradually complemented by the training of Irish-medium practitioners as assessors, moderators or examiners.
- *Recommendation:* Further consideration should be given to the regulatory position regarding the availability of vocational qualifications through Irish, including whether existing or future qualifications policy could place clearer duties on relevant bodies to support Irish-medium access.

7.5 Cross-border collaboration and shared resources

- *Conclusion:* Cross-border collaboration emerged as a valuable mechanism for strengthening Irish-medium vocational provision, particularly through the sharing of expertise, resources and approaches already developed within the Republic of Ireland.
- *Recommendation:* Develop long-term partnerships with Irish-medium training providers and Awarding Organisations in the Republic of Ireland to facilitate the sharing of expertise, resources and best practice.
- *Recommendation:* The possibility of adapting Irish-medium vocational resources and qualifications already available in the Republic of Ireland for use in Northern Ireland should be actively explored. It is acknowledged that this may require adaptation to Ulster Irish.
- *Recommendation:* Government departments and Awarding Organisations north and south should actively explore the potential savings to be gained from the joint development and mutual recognition of Irish-medium vocational qualifications between the two jurisdictions.

7.6 Further development and research

- *Conclusion:* The findings indicate that there remains a limited evidence base on Irish-medium vocational pathways and qualifications in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to learner outcomes, employer perspectives, labour market demand and long-term progression pathways.
- *Recommendation:* Identify existing evidence gaps and commission further research to inform future policy development, qualification design and long-term sectoral planning.
- *Recommendation:* In addition to responding to learner demand, policy development should consider how employer demand for Irish-language skills can be strengthened, particularly in public, community, education, childcare, media, heritage, tourism and service-sector contexts where bilingual capacity may have social, cultural or economic value.

References

Altram (2025). *Irish Medium Early Years Immersion Education State of the Sector Report 2025: Executive Summary*.

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (2025) Career opportunities with Irish [Careers information pack]. Dublin: COGG. Available at: https://cogg.ie/gairmeacha/

BBC (2026). First V-level subjects announced with aim to prepare for future jobs. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cz6e7004dj9o

Belfast City Council (2025a). *Irish Medium Employment Academy Prospectus*, Belfast: Belfast City Council.

Belfast City Council (2025b). *Irish Medium Apprenticeship Pathway Overview,* Belfast: Belfast City Council.

Belfast City Council (2025c). *SEN Leaflet: Diploma in Special Educational Needs (Irish Medium schools) and Level 3 Award for Special Educational Needs Coordinators in Early Years (NCFE),* Belfast: Belfast City Council.

Bloomer, S., Purdy, N. Gibson, K., and Orr, K. (2022). *The Assessment of Vocational Education and Training Qualifications: a review of European policy and practice*. Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU).

Coláiste Feirste and Gaelcholáiste Dhoire (2026). *Expanding awarding-body access for Irish-medium secondary schools: joint proposal to develop an IME vocational qualifications pilot scheme*. February. Unpublished proposal.

Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (2009). Porth resources. Available at: https://colegcymraeg.ac.uk/en/students/university/porth-resources/

Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (2020). *Setting the pathways of success: the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol's strategic plan 2020/21 to 2024/25*. Carmarthen: Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol.

Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (2021). *Report of the trustees and financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2021*. Carmarthen: Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol.

Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (2025). Pathways to the workplace: a vision for Welsh-medium and bilingual tertiary education: 2026 to 2030. Carmarthen: Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. Available at: https://colegcymraeg.ac.uk/media/fsnbllce/manifesto-coleg-cymraeg-en.pdf

Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (2026). *Porth Adnoddau'r Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol*. Available at: https://www.porth.ac.uk/

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2024). *The Provision for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Irish-medium Education*. Belfast: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2025). *Reviewing the Review: An Audit of Progress on the Review of Irish-medium Education (2008)*. Belfast: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. (2023). *Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in The IrishMedium Sector: A proposed action plan to address the dearth of teaching staff at primary and post-primary level in the Irish-medium sector*. Belfast: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

Cook, W. (2013). *Vocational Education in English Schools: Protecting Options for Pre-16 pupils*. UK: Institute for Public Policy Research.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) Regulation. (2025). *Guidance for awarding organisations on setting and delivering the assessment (Section G).* https://www.ccea.org.uk

Department for Communities (2022). Irish Language Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Recommendation Report. Available at: https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/irish-language-strategy-expert-advisory-panel-recommendation-report

Department for Education (2026). Irish Medium Education, Year: 2022/2023. Available at: Irish Medium Education 2022.23.pdf

Department for Education, Entitlement Framework. Available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/entitlement-framework

Department of Education (2025). *Circular 2026/06- Delivering the Entitlement Framework Guidance to Schools 2025/26*. Available at: Circular 2026/06-Delivering the Entitlement Framework Guidance to Schools 2025/26 | Department of Education

Department for the Economy (2026). Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland Statistics. Available at:https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/apprenticeships-northern-ireland-statistics#toc-1

Department for the Economy (Feb. 2026). Archibald announces research to strengthen opportunities for Irish Medium vocational learners. Available at: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/archibald-announces-research-strengthen-opportunities-irish-medium-vocational-learners

Department for the Economy (2024). *Careers Occupational Information Unit - A guide to career entry routes*. Available at: Careers Occupational Information Unit - A guide to career entry routes | Department for the Economy

Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland) (2025). Skills action plan. October. Available at: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/skills-action-plan

Department for the Economy/Invest NI (2024). *Sub-Regional Economic Plan.* Available at: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/sub-regional-economic-plan

Department of Education (2024). Policy for Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/policy-for-irish-medium-education-outside-of-the-gaeltacht/

Department of Education (Northern Ireland) (2025). TransformED: policy framework for general qualifications in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Department of Education. Available at: TransformED NI layout.pdf

Duff, J., and Collen, I. (2025). *Language Trends Northern Ireland, 2025*. British Council Northern Ireland. Available at:

https://nireland.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language_trends_2025_report_-_embargoed_until_wednesday_4_june_00.01.pdf

Education Matters (2024). Ireland's education yearbook 2024. Dublin: Education Matters.

Estyn (2025). Increasing the use of the Welsh language in the post-16 sectors: evaluating the effectiveness of Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol Welsh-medium and bilingual training schemes for the further education and apprenticeships sector. Cardiff: Estyn. Available at: https://estyn.gov.wales/improvement-resources/thematic-report-increasing-the-use-of-the-welsh-language-in-the-post-16-sectors/

Gaelcholáiste Dhoire (2025). Letter to OCR regarding examination access for Irish-medium education pupils. 15 May. Unpublished correspondence.

Gaelchultúr (2025a) Certificate in Professional Irish (CPI) programme. Available at: https://www.gaelchultur.com

Gaelchultúr (2025b) Dublin City Council: case study. Available at: https://www.gaelchultur.com/en/the-publicsector

Gicheva, N. and Petrie, K. (2018). *Vocation, Vocation, Vocation - The role of vocational routes into higher education*. Available at: https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/the-role-of-vocational-routesinto-higher-education/

Gilleece, L., Shiel, G., Clerkin, A., and Millar, D. (2012). *The 2010 national assessments of English reading and mathematics in Irish-medium schools: Main report*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.2381.7123

Government of Ireland (2010). 20-year strategy for the Irish language 2010 to 2030. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (2024). An Plean Náisiúnta um Sheirbhísí Poiblí Gaeilge / National plan for Irish language public services 2024 to 2030. Dublin: Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/cdb3dc1c/National_Plan_for_Irish_Language_Public_Services.pdf

Government of Ireland (2026). Action plan for Irish language public services 2026 to 2028. Dublin: Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/4bc52cfd/PG_2026-2028_faoin_PNSPG.pdf

Houses of the Oireachtas (2022) Written Answers: Apprenticeship Programmes, 26 April. Available at: Apprenticeship Programmes: 26 Apr 2022: Written answers (KildareStreet.com) (Accessed: 5 May 2026).

Kelly, S. (2017). *Reforming BTECs: Applied General qualifications as a route to higher education*. Higher Education Policy Institute, Report 94. Available at: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2017/02/Hepi_Reforming-BTECs-Report-94-09_02_17-Web.pdf

Kerry ETB (2018) Strategic performance agreement 2018 to 2020: Kerry Education and Training Board. Tralee: Kerry ETB/SOLAS.

Kerry ETB (2020) Official Languages Act 2003: language scheme 2020 to 2023. Tralee: Kerry Education and Training Board.

Kerry ETB (2025) FET Irish language provision. Available at: https://www.kerryetb.ie/further-education-training/further-education-training-programmes/further-education-training-irish-language-provision/

Kerry ETB (2026) Language scheme. Available at: https://www.kerryetb.ie/further-education-training/organisation-support-development/irish-language-office/language-scheme/

McVeigh, C., Symington, E., McCrudden, K and Tate, K. (2026). *Tackling Disadvantage in Irish-Medium Education through Addressing the issues with Assessment*. Belfast: Stranmillis University College.

Medr (2025). Strategic plan 2025 to 2030. Cardiff: Medr (Commission for Tertiary Education and Research).

Northern Ireland Assembly. (2021, March 15). Oral question AQO 1735/17–22. Oral Question AQO 1735/17-22

O'Boyle, A., Engman, M., Ortega, Y., and Turkan, S. (2023). "*Fair? Shared? Supported? Examining expectation and realities for Irish-medium practitioners" A research report on the additional competences and associated workloads of the Irish-medium practitioner*. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. https://www.comhairle.org/english/about/publications/

Ofqual. (2015). *Explaining the RQF. GOV.UK. https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2015/10/01/explaining-the-rqf/*

Ofqual. (2026). *Conditions of recognition: Main differences at a glance (accessible). GOV.UK.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofquals-conditions-of-recognition-main-differences-at-a-glance/conditions-of-recognition-main-differences-at-a-glance-accessible

Oireachtas (2024) Dáil Éireann debates (unrevised): written answer 42 [National Plan for Irish Language Public Services 2024 to 2030], 19 September. Available at: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-09-19/42/

Oireachtas (2025) Irish language: parliamentary questions (34th Dáil), 27 November 2025. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas. Available at: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-11-27/589/

Oireachtas (2025b) Parliamentary question – 27 November 2025, Question No. 589. Available at: <Oireachtas Parliamentary Question 589>

Purdy, N., Gibson, K., Orr, K., and Tsang, K. (2022). *Perceptions of Level 4 and 5 Qualifications in Northern Ireland*. Available at: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/perceptions-level-4-5-qualifications-in-ni.pdf

Purdy, N., Logue, J., Montgomery, M., O'Hare, K., Redpath, J., and Demie., F. (2021). *A Fair Start*. Available at: A Fair Start

Purdy, N., McVeigh, C., Ballentine, M., and Symington, E. (2025). *Teacher Workload in the Irish-Medium Sector: Evidential Insights*. Belfast: Stranmillis University College.

QQI (2021) National Framework of Qualifications. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications

Qualifications Wales. (2020). *Standard conditions of recognition.*

Qualifications Wales (2024) *Strategic priorities: 5 year plan 2024 to 2029*. Newport: Qualifications Wales.

Qualifications Wales (2026a). Statement on new apprenticeship courses in construction. Available at: https://qualifications.wales/news-views/statement-on-new-apprenticeship-courses-in-construction/

Qualifications Wales (2026b). *Post-16 vocational qualifications in Wales: action plan 2026 to 2028*. Newport: Qualifications Wales.

Richards, B. (2016). *Passports to Progress: How do vocational qualifications help young people in building their careers? Part One*. UK: Social Market Foundation.

Senedd Research (2024) What is the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and what is its future? Available at: https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/what-is-the-coleg-cymraeg-cenedlaethol-and-what-is-its-future/

Senedd Research (2024b). Welsh Language and Education Bill: support for the principles but concerns over workforce capacity. Available at: Welsh Language and Education Bill: support for the principles but concerns over workforce capacity

Sgiliaith (2024). Rhaglen Datblygu Staff Cenedlaethol / National Staff Development Programme: prospectus. Colwyn Bay: Grŵp Llandrillo Menai.

Sheilds, R., and Masardo, A. (2015). *Changing patterns in vocational entry qualifications, student support and outcomes in undergraduate degree programmes*. UK: Higher Education Academy.

SOLAS (2020). *Future FET: transforming learning. The national further education and training (FET) strategy 2020 to 2024*. Dublin: SOLAS.

SOLAS (2024). Strategy consultation 2025 to 2029. Available at: https://www.solas.ie/pages/strategy-consultation-2025-2029

SOLAS and QQI (2024). *Memorandum of understanding between the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) 2024 to 2027*. Dublin: SOLAS/QQI.

Údarás na Gaeltachta (2020). Enhanced Apprenticeship Scholarship Scheme worth €200,000 announced by Údarás na Gaeltachta to assist Gaeltacht communities, 26 June. Available at: https://udaras.ie/en/news/enhanced-apprenticeship-

scholarship-scheme-worth-e200000-announced-by-udaras-na-gaetlachta-to-assist-gaeltacht-communities/ (Accessed: 5 May 2026).

Údarás na Gaeltachta (2021). *Straitéis / Strategy 2021 to 2025*. Na Forbacha: Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Údarás na Gaeltachta (2022). 50 Apprenticeship Scholarships announced by Údarás na Gaeltachta under the Apprenticeship Scholarship Scheme, 31 January. Available at: https://udaras.ie/en/news/50-apprenticeship-scholarships-announced-by-udaras-na-gaeltachta-under-the-apprenticeship-scholarship-scheme/ (Accessed: 5 May 2026).

Údarás na Gaeltachta (2025). *Apprenticeship scholarship scheme / GAIRM graduate programme*. Na Forbacha: Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Údarás na Gaeltachta (2026). Annual Report 2025. Na Forbacha: Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Vidal Rodeiro, C., and Vitello, S. (2023). “Progression to post-16 education in England: the role of vocational qualifications,” *Research Papers in Education*, 38(2), pp. 164–186. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2021.1961295

Welsh Government (2017a). *Review of the activities of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol: the Task and Finish Group's report*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government (2017b). Response to the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol Task and Finish Group report. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government (2017c). Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers. Cardiff: Welsh Government. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-12/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy.pdf

Welsh Government (2019). Towards Cymraeg 2050: a million Welsh speakers: further education and apprenticeship Welsh-medium action plan. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government (2021). Cymraeg 2050: work programme 2021 to 2026. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Welsh Government (2024a). Evidence paper on draft budget 2024 to 25: Welsh language budgets within the Education and Welsh Language Main Expenditure Group. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/draft-budget-2024-2025

Welsh Government (2024b). Written statement: Commission for Tertiary Education and Research operational date. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-commission-tertiary-education-and-research-operational-date

Welsh Government (2025). Cymraeg 2050: Welsh language strategy action plan 2025 to 2026. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2025/3/4/1743083484/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy-action-plan-2025-2026.pdf

Welsh Government (2026a). New apprenticeship courses in construction to be introduced in Wales. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/new-apprenticeship-courses-construction-be-introduced-wales

Welsh Government (2026b). 16 to 18 local curricula guidance [Consultation document]. 28 January. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/16-18-local-curricula-guidance-html

Wolf, A. (2011). *Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report*. UK: Department for Education.

Work Welsh (2025).Work Welsh services. Available at: https://learnwelsh.cymru/work-welsh/work-welsh-services/

Legislation

Acht na Gaeltachta 2012. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937). Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html

Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (SI 1998/1759 (NI 13)). Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/contents

Education Act 1998 (No. 51). Dublin: Irish Statute Book.

Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 (SI 1997/1772 (NI 15)). Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1997/1772/data.pdf

Further Education and Training Act 2013 (revised, updated to 28 January 2026). Dublin: Law Reform Commission. Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2013/act/25/enacted/en/html

Higher Education Authority Act 2022 (No. 31). Dublin: Irish Statute Book.

Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, c. 45. London: The Stationery Office.

Official Languages Act 2003 (revised to 2021). Available at: https://revisedacts.lawreform.ie/eli/2003/act/32/revised/en/html

Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 (No. 49). Dublin: Stationery Office. Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/act/49/enacted/en/pdf

Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. Dublin: Irish Statute Book.

Qualifications Wales Act 2015, anaw 5. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/5/contents

Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022, asc 1. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asc/2022/1/contents