

# Learning to Work in the 21st Century

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The worlds of education, training, and work have been transformed in recent times and continue to change constantly, with globalisation and digital technology at the centre. This article surveys the evolution in the nature of employment and careers, identifying the driving forces and anticipating what lies ahead for students and workers in Ireland.



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## Introduction

In the last decade of the 20th century, in the literature on vocational issues, signals appeared of changes taking place in the world of work that would significantly affect how people experience employment and develop their careers. These changes were variously described in terms of 'postmodernism', 'post-industrial society', and so on, but a key element identified by most commentators was globalisation. Beck (1999, 2000) developed the term 'reflexive globalisation' to describe the complex interplay of social, political, and economic effects that now influence how the labour market operates in even the most advanced economies.

These effects include the transnational movement of capital; the growth of international businesses in which investment, production, distribution, and marketing may be located in various countries; local disintegration of work communities and the parallel integration of new, transnational employment sectors; and loss of the physical and spatial dimensions of jobs – where workers used to migrate to access jobs in 'successful places', jobs can now move rapidly across countries to seek more favourable locations such as new, purpose-built facilities, low taxation regimes, and suitable workforces. Beck notes that an effect of these changes is a movement away from stable, standardised employment relationships towards flexible, informal, discontinuous, and often precarious labour contracts.

There was also a compelling debate in the career guidance literature about the kind of career that would be experienced by those working in this globalised context. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) describe the phenomenon of 'boundaryless careers' – the opposite of the organisational career, which unfolds in a single employment situation. Hall (2002) describes a move towards 'protean' careers, characterised by mobility, a whole-life perspective, and a developmental progression – essentially managed by the person, not the organisation in which they are employed at any given time.

Another major change now taking place is the rapid shift towards knowledge-based businesses and processes in existing business

models. Apart from the proliferation of knowledge-intensive communities, the trend is for the rapid introduction of new technologies into occupational areas that have until recently been characterised as 'low-tech', so that very few jobs today can be performed without at least some familiarity with computers and communications technology.

This change has been acknowledged in European policy for some time: the Lisbon agenda in 2000 set out as a goal that Europe should become, by 2010, 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. While it may be that this goal is yet to be achieved, there has no doubt been a dramatic change in the range of jobs available in the European labour market. All countries report diminishing traditional trades and professions and the emergence of new occupations, most of which require workers familiar with new technology and capable of continuing learning to adapt to new processes as they are introduced on an ongoing basis.

### A globalised world of work

The knowledge-based, globalised world of work demands a new paradigm of vocational learning, based more on self-directed continuous learning than on initial mastery of a fixed curriculum. To succeed in this world, the worker needs opportunities to achieve learning outcomes appropriate for a career that may be varied and non-linear, leading to qualifications that can enable participation in various occupational roles and that can be extended and adapted through further learning to support career change.

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This learner may well enter and re-enter formal learning at various stages, participating in programmes that are variously designed and delivered in general education, further education, and higher education contexts. This career-long learning goes beyond the constant updating of technical knowledge and skill; it also pertains to the capacity to understand and anticipate change. David and Foray (2002) underscore the importance in a knowledge-based economy of generic learning abilities – learning to learn, knowing what we do not know, the heuristic ability to discover knowledge for oneself. It is as important to have a firm command of such abilities, they say, as it is to be able to master a specific repertoire of technical skills.

To what extent does Beck's analysis of the effects of globalisation apply in Ireland today? Are the new career models described by Hall and by Arthur and Rousseau already being undertaken by Irish workers? In what ways are the concepts of globalisation and new careers affecting the expectations of young people who will soon approach the labour market in Ireland?

The effects of globalisation are already evident in many areas of the economy. This is not surprising, as we have a small, open economy and (with the departure of the UK) the least regulated labour market in the EU.

The effect is most apparent in the big transnational businesses that have located here in recent years. However, it is also the case that many Irish companies have become partners in international businesses or have even been absorbed into multinationals, so that decisions about recruitment and other aspects of human resource management are often conditioned by factors outside the local economy. Even companies that remain wholly indigenous find that they have to compete on global markets, and to do this effectively they need to be as flexible and quick-reacting as their competitors around the world.

In this new world of work, what are the competences that young learners of today will require for the type of new career that may lie before them? Commentators suggest that two meta-competences – identity growth and adaptability – are the core resource, to be augmented at various stages by a range of specific career skills (know why, how, whom, what, where, and when) (DeFillippi & Arthur 1996; Jones & DeFillippi, 1996). How well do learning opportunities in Ireland today support learners to develop these competences and skills? What is being done to enhance current provisions to better address future learning needs?

## Changes in Ireland

The education and training world in Ireland has been transformed over the past 20 years. In the primary sector, new models of school patronage have evolved to meet the changing expectations of a more multicultural generation of parents, and the training of primary teachers has been almost fully integrated into the higher education system. In many of our areas of high population growth, dynamic new post-primary schools offer broad curricula including cutting-edge programmes in new technologies; the Junior Cycle experience for learners has been transformed, and modernisation of the Senior Cycle offer is progressing.

A new further education and training sector has been created, encompassing and refocusing the agendas of a plethora of previous bodies. SOLAS and the education and training boards are already familiar entities, and their work is driving many innovative programmes, including a rapidly expanding range of new apprenticeships, some of which address learning and qualification needs for jobs that did not exist at the turn of the century.

Higher education and training in Ireland now includes several emerging technological universities. In addition to their traditional offer of programmes aimed at students transitioning from post-primary education, most of our higher education institutions now offer a growing number of programmes (many funded through the Springboard initiative) designed to support learners in upskilling and achieving new qualifications for career change or advancement, or to address skill gaps identified in our rapidly evolving labour market.

A key change agent underpinning many of these developments was the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications in 2003, based on the concept of defining qualifications in terms of the learning outcomes

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required for an award. This opened the way for the development of new qualifications at every level in the system, from major awards such as degrees to awards for narrow sets of learning outcomes.

It is perhaps seldom acknowledged that these very significant changes have not been random occurrences: they are all elements in an ongoing process of development, driven by policy lines that have been maintained across several governments and that have involved the participation and collaboration of various government departments and statutory bodies and agencies.

The creation of the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is the most significant structural change in the Irish education system in recent times. In a recent opinion piece, Minister Simon Harris succinctly and explicitly outlines 'a substantial agenda for change' (Harris, 2022): he foresees a 'single system' responding to a learner's 'individual talents, ambitions, and motivations' in which 'every step has to be recognised' with appropriate awards. He signals an end to the notion that tertiary education is to be accessed once in a person's lifetime; as a first step he proposes to create 'a single hub of information for third-level access, where entry requirements and transition opportunities are understood and not hidden away'. He mentions 'joint further and higher education courses', 'apprenticeships becoming the heart of the technological university agenda', 'more Masters and PhD apprenticeship programmes' – and much more.

Clearly, while the education community at large is undoubtedly entitled to feel that they have achieved a lot over the past 20 years, any sense of satisfaction should be leavened by an understanding that the development must continue and that change is to be a fact of life in the years ahead. As Beckett (1989) might have put it, we have to be ready to change – change again – change better!

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