

Further Education and Training (FET) Progression to Higher Education (HE)

Transitions Reform Working
Paper – June 2020

**Resource A: National Policy Framework
and Strategies**

National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030

Executive Summary

Participation: Changes to system funding and operation will be needed in order to enable the institutions to respond to these needs by increasing the variety and diversity of their provision and improvements in the interface between higher education and further education and training will be necessary to support enhanced progression opportunities.

1) Higher education in a changing society – 1.4 Future Skills: graduates for the 21st Century

The importance of flexibility in provision

The National Framework of Qualifications has provided opportunities for improving the interface between further education and higher education. In the past decade, there have been significant improvements in transfer and progression arrangements for students into and within higher education. The introduction of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and of modularisation and semesterisation (under the Bologna process) will provide opportunities for greater flexibility and progression for students, but the Irish higher education does not currently fully support the kinds of flexible learning that the ECTS facilitates. There is considerable inflexibility in the system, which has been encouraged (inadvertently) by the public funding system.²³ There is very little public funding available for part-time or online students, either through the free fees initiative or through the funding system for institutions, and this has militated against the development of flexible learning programmes.

2) Planning for Future Demand – 2.2 The Upskilling Challenge

The more immediate source of growing demand for higher education is likely to come from the significant numbers within each age group whose current highest level of attainment is NFQ level 4, 5 or 6, achieved either via second-level or further education

2.3 Improving the interface between higher education and further education and training

The National Framework of Qualifications as a platform

The establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in 2001 and the expansion of further education and training have transformed access, transfer and progression for students, and have provided new opportunities for higher education and further education to work much more closely together for the benefit of students. There are already a number of instances where colleges in both sectors are collaborating to offer joint access provision to students. By expanding this approach and clarifying the progression routes into higher education, many more students who wish to progress will be enabled to make the transition from NFQ Levels 4 and 5 to Levels 6, 7, 8 and beyond. The NFQ also provides a strong platform for delivering on our lifelong learning objectives.

In this context, the consolidation of quality and qualifications assurance agencies across the further and higher education sectors that is currently under way is very welcome. This will help to establish agreed learning outcomes, clearer routes of transfer and progression, and binding standards of quality assurance in the upper half of Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications. It will also improve access to further and higher education opportunities for people throughout their lives.

In the area of upskilling, there have been a number of improvements over recent years, particularly in the proportion of new entrants who are accessing higher education via further education. It is vital that these developments are expanded for apprentices and for the broader range of further education graduates.

3) Teaching and Learning - 3.4 Flexibility of Provision

Routes of access and progression

The admissions system to higher education will have to provide a greater variety of access routes for school leavers and those completing further education and training. At the same time it must continue to be – and to be seen to be – rigorous, fair and objective.

5.4 Engagement with the Wider Society - Engagement with other education and training providers

Across the various levels of education and training, there is a clearly identified need for more community-based approaches and for greater coordination between institutions and sectors. Services need to be more appropriate and locally responsive. This is particularly the case in the relationships between higher education, schools, further education and training providers and the wider community, where there is now much greater emphasis on principles of partnership, empowerment, participation and capacity building.

8) Developing a coherent framework for higher education in Ireland

8.7 The evolution of the Institutes of Technology

Distinguishing features of the technological university

A technological university will be distinguished from existing universities by a mission and ethos that are faithful to and safeguard the current ethos and mission focus of the institutes of technology. These are based on career-focused higher education with an emphasis on provision at levels 6 to 8 and on industry-focused research and innovation – this will have to be taken to a higher level in a technological university.

A technological university will also be expected to play a pivotal role in facilitating access and progression (particularly from the workforce) by developing structured relationships with providers of further education and training. In a technological university, the fields of learning will be closely related to labour market skill needs with a particular focus on programmes at levels 6 to 8 in science, engineering and technology and including an emphasis on workplace learning. The concentration of provision at these levels is an important distinction between the existing universities and new technological universities.

3. Policy Context

3.2 The principles that inform the National Access Plan

iv. Pathways from further education to higher education must be improved to broaden opportunities for entry to higher education, meet national skills needs and support regional development.

For many students who go onto further education, their FE qualification is an end in itself and with it they can achieve an entry qualification for the labour market; for others, it is a step along a pathway to higher education. Currently, however, there are not enough opportunities for further education graduates to make the transition to higher education, and the number of students who do so is low.

The DES and the HEA believe that mechanisms are in place that could help improve this situation:

- The **National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)** provides a mechanism for HEIs to understand qualification levels and awards from all areas of the education system, and this could be used more effectively by HEIs seeking to understand the standard and outcomes of qualifications held by further education graduates and how these fit with entry requirements into higher education.
- The ongoing work by **Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)** on putting in place a national framework for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) should help HEIs to recognise and accredit learning that has been achieved in a nonformal or informal educational context.
- Making the HEAR and DARE schemes available to further education graduates could also make a significant contribution in this area.

The regional Clusters that are being formed as part of the structural changes in the higher education landscape provide a framework of institutions through which students can progress to the level they aspire to. Most HEIs have traditionally had links with individual FEIs and have enrolled graduates from these institutions into certain higher education courses. In conjunction with work being carried out by SOLAS and QQI, such links will be systematised over the next four years, so that any student undertaking a further education course will be aware of the pathways available from their course into higher education. Making these pathways clear is the first priority of the regional Clusters, and some good work has already been done in this area. For example, closer links are being developed between some HEIs and local Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and FEIs, and in some cases this has happened in parallel with the development of online tools that clearly map out all the educational options and pathways available to students in a region.

Further linkages between further education and higher education are proposed in the context of regional development. The ongoing review of apprenticeship training is also leading to collaboration between SOLAS, the FEIs and the institutes of technology. Such partnerships will have a positive impact on overall engagement and increased movement of students between the two sectors.

4. Priority Goals of the *National Access Plan*

4.4 Goal 4: To build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to higher education

Access to higher education in Ireland is too concentrated at the point of school leaving, and this goal is concerned with broadening the opportunities for entry to higher education. This goal focuses

particularly on opportunities for transition from further to higher education, and sets the target of having 10% of new entrants to higher education coming from the further education sector by 2019.³⁴ This is in line with the further education progression target included in the National Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019 published by SOLAS.

In addition to direct entry from further to higher education, the regional clusters will provide the context for much deeper collaboration between FEIs and HEIs. This should include partnership at regional cluster level in the development and delivery by FEIs of higher education access and foundation courses.

Goal 4: Summary of objectives and actions

	Objective	Action	Lead responsibility	Key performance indicator(s)
4.1	To support a more coherent and systematic approach by institutions (working within their regional clusters) providing different pathways and supporting the transition to higher education.	As agreed in the 2014–16 compacts, each regional cluster to map and develop clear student pathways, including those between further and higher education as well as other alternative pathways.	Regional Clusters HEIs/QQI/SOLAS/ETBs	Initial mapping of all pathways supporting entry to Undergraduate programmes in each cluster submitted by HEIs to HEA in 2015. Results of analysis to be published by HEA in 2016 as part of overall report on systems performance.
4.2	To develop and implement RPL across the higher education sector.	All HEIs to put in place a RPL policy and to engage with QQI in the development of an overall national policy framework.	HEIs/QQI/DES	HEI progress to be reviewed in the strategic dialogue process.
4.3	To ensure further education graduates from target groups are eligible for supplementary access routes on the same basis as Leaving Certificate applicants.	To extend the HEAR and DARE schemes in conjunction with stakeholders, to allow for the inclusion of further education graduates.	HEIs/HEAR/DARE	Further education graduates entering through the HEAR and DARE schemes by autumn 2016.
4.4	To increase access to the professions, high points courses and graduate courses by students from target groups.	Review access on access by target groups to professional disciplines and high-points courses. Develop recommendations to increase access to the professions and high-points courses.	HEA/HEIs	Report on recommendations by 2017. Targets included in mid-term review of National Access Plan.
4.5	FEIs and HEIs to work in partnership to develop and	HEIs to review access and foundation course	HEIs/FEIs	Access and foundation courses to be delivered in partnership between

	foundation courses that would be delivered through further education.	provision in collaboration with FEIs as part of work to develop student pathways within regional clusters.		FEIs and HEIs and offered through FE sector by 2019.
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4.5 Goal 5: To develop regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education with a particular focus on mentoring

For communities that currently experience lower than average levels of participation in higher education, we believe that targeted initiatives can make a particular contribution to encouraging higher education take-up. Such initiatives should be developed in partnership with the communities, draw on a deep analysis of all available data at local level that enables greater understanding of the socio-economic groups in the communities, and accordingly should respond appropriately to their expressed needs.

The establishment of the regional clusters and the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) at city or county level provide an opportunity to launch and support such initiatives. Such committees typically have members who represent a wide spectrum of local community interests, including local authorities and other State agencies, local and community bodies, economic and social partners, and including HEIs. Initiatives or strategies that emerge from such engagements should have some or all of the following elements or characteristics.

- A ‘whole-of-education’ approach to access.
- Communication of the value of higher education.
- Provision of clear information on education pathways
- Reinforcement of HEIs’ engagement with communities and other stakeholders.
- The use of mentors/role models from within communities – to enable students to make informed decisions about their post-secondary education options.
- Involvement of parents and teachers as key advisers to students.

A number of successful mentoring programmes have emerged around the country, and these will contribute to the development of a template for such programmes nationally.

Goal 5: Summary of objectives and actions

	Objective	Action	Lead responsibility	Key performance indicator(s)
5.1	To develop strategies for increasing access to higher education in communities with low participation levels.	Local pilot initiatives will be established in the context of the new regional clusters and the LCDCs with a view to increasing access and participation in higher education.	HEIs/HEA/DES	Call for proposals by HEA, 2016. Projects commence, 2016. Review pilot projects, 2018. Increased number of students from target areas, 2019.
5.2	To strengthen the linkages between higher education institutions and local	Implementation by each HEI/regional cluster of civic engagement	HEIs	Report on compacts 2015.

	communities.	strategies. These should be included in compact objectives.		
5.3	To develop mentoring programmes and initiatives for students in second level by regional clusters in collaboration with second level schools, enterprise and community groups.	Regional clusters and local taskforces examine scope for increasing current provision. HEA to identify and disseminate best practice.	HEIs/regional clusters	Programmes in 50% of DEIS schools (2017), 75% (2019). <i>Note: this is an indicator, it does not imply that other schools should be excluded.</i>

5. Targets for increased participation: 2015–2019

5.6 Progression to higher education by holders of further education qualifications

	Current	Target
Percentage of new entrants to higher education whose basis for admission is a further education qualification	6.6%	10%

The target for progression from further to higher education was set in the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019 published last year by SOLAS. Collaboration between QQI, SOLAS and the HEA, and work by Regional Clusters on the development of pathways between further and higher education will support the achievement of this target. In numerical terms, this target represents an increase of about 2,000 in the number of new entrant students progressing to higher education on the basis of their further education award over the next five years.

Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021

3.3 Key Challenges

The extent of progress in respect of pathways from further education and training to higher education is not as advanced as is preferable at this stage in the implementation of the NAP given the important role that further education and training plays in enhancing the educational outcomes of students. Data collated as part of this Progress Review indicates that the rate of increase in the number of students entering higher education on the basis of a QQI-FET award is slow. While links between PLCs and higher education institutions are well established with in excess of 1,200 linkages and there is a significant number of students in higher education with a QQI-FET award¹, challenges remain in establishing transparent supporting structures for building coherent pathways from FET to HE. The establishment of FET-HE Transitions Sub-Group is however a key development in building a consistency of approach in terms of overall national policy on transition from FET to HE.

Progress is limited in respect of the development of access and foundation courses. More substantive collaboration and partnership is required between further education and training and higher education institutions. Further education and training plays a critical role in preparing

¹ It is indeed the case that there is a much larger number of students in higher education with QQI-FET qualifications than recorded in this Progress Review, and data provided by SOLAS indicates that 15% of CAO applicants in 2017 had both Leaving Certificate and QQI-FET qualifications. The baseline data and target set in the current NAP, included in the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019* published by SOLAS in 2014 and in the *Action Plan for Education 2018*, are based only on the number of students that enter higher education on the basis of a QQI-FET qualification. The Progress Review outcome is calculated using the same metrics. The purpose of monitoring students that enter higher education on the basis of a QQI-FET award only is to enable a focus on students who may not have completed post-primary education to Leaving Certificate level or whose Leaving Certificate does not meet the entry requirements for higher education. A candidate is offered a higher education place on the basis of either a Leaving Certificate score or a QQI-FET score, not both. A focus on wider students with QQI-FET qualifications would not serve the purpose of the NAP and its focus on the target groups.

students for higher education and ensuring student success and better educational and labour market outcomes. This action surrounding pathways requires more sustained engagement between QQI, FET, and HEIs.

Progression to higher education by holders of further education qualifications

	Current	Target
Percentage of new entrants to higher education whose basis for admission is a further education qualification	7.3%	10%

Source: CAO

A marginal increase has also been recorded in respect of participation rates by holders of further education and training qualifications. The scale of the challenge to realise the 10% target for 2019 is significant. However, PATH 3 partnerships between higher education institutions and further education institutions should help the achievement of this target in the second phase of implementation of the NAP. It is also anticipated that the work being undertaken by the Transitions Sub-Group in mapping pathways from further education to higher education will drive progress in respect of this target.

Policy Implementation Priorities

It is recommended that progress in building coherent pathways from further education and training and fostering other entry routes to higher education is monitored as part of the Strategic Dialogue process. However, it must be acknowledged that higher education institutions are not the only stakeholders within the NAP and that the further education and training sector and the community education sector also have a key role in its successful implementation. There must be an emphasis on improving transparency for learners and ensuring that there is greater visibility surrounding progression options to higher education. In this respect, the establishment of the SOLAS led FET-HE Transitions Sub-Group under the Transitions Working Group is a welcome development.

More work is needed in advancing progress in relation to the development of access and foundation courses by higher education institutions for delivery through further education institutions. While it is a stated national policy, it does not appear to be a policy that is being aspired to across the sector. This is a challenging action involving collaboration between further and higher education institutions and QQI.

It is recommended that priority is given to actions that are related to the challenges identified for the second phase of implementation of the NAP and where progress is less advanced. It is suggested that particular priority is given to the building of pathways between further education and training and higher education, the embedding of access and foundation courses within further education, and to the clarification of the mainstreaming ambition.

Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019

Section 6: Active Inclusion/ Literacy and Numeracy

6.1.4 Community Education

Therefore it is important that the community education sector continues to be supported in its work and that it can clearly demonstrate the benefits, outcomes and progression options for learners.

Clear access and progression routes from this provision to other FET and to higher education will need to be developed.

Section 8: Progression of FET Graduates to Higher Education

Key points in this section

- Exploratory data matching (QQI, 2013) indicated that at least 18% of FETAC major award-holders in 2009 went on to higher education, with a further 21% taking another FETAC qualification.
- The HEA proposes setting a new target for students progressing from further education, planning to make up 6.6% of the entrant cohort in 2014 and 10% by 2016.
- It is important that SOLAS/ETBI and the ETB sector take advantage of existing cluster structures and proposed Technological Universities to deliver an increasing number of more seamless progression pathways to HE and to identify employer skill needs at local and regional level.

Levels from further to higher education in Ireland have increased significantly in recent years. The vast majority of this group enter courses in the Institutes of Technology, however an increasing proportion are entering courses in the universities and other institutions. Key measures to increase movement between FET and other forms of education and training are the availability of the data infrastructure to accurately track learner pathways. Exploratory data-matching indicated that at least 18% of FETAC major award-holders in 2009 went on to higher education, with a further 21% taking another FETAC qualification. In September 2010, a HEA Taskforce on access courses finalised new policy advice which recommended that new, enhanced partnership agreements should be developed between further and higher education providers on access provision and on routes of progression from further to higher education.

QQI has a key role to play if better progression routes from FET to HET are to become a reality. The 2012 Qualifications Act defines Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP) for movement into and between programmes of education and training with recognition for knowledge, skill and competence previously acquired. A general function of QQI in the opening to the legislation, Part 2 Section 9 (g), is to determine policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners by providers. QQI therefore sets the basis for ATP; approves/facilitates and advises (depending on the type of provider) the provider's ATP procedures; and monitors and reviews effectiveness of implementation of those procedures.

More general routes of access from further to higher education were assessed in 2009; a study completed by the National Access Office showed that at least 3,000 students progressed in the previous year to higher education via routes such as the Higher Education Links Scheme, the Pilot Scheme for institutes of technology, and through other informal routes agreed between local further and higher education providers. The HEA proposes setting a new target for students progressing from further education, planning to make up 6.6% of the entrant cohort in 2014 and 10% by 2016. Since 2013, a new scoring system has been in place for further education learners to apply through the CAO for further education places.

Regional HE clusters have been established as part of the reform work in higher education. There are two priorities set out for the clusters: in the first instance, to develop new pathways to and within higher education and co-ordinated academic planning within HET. It will benefit both FET and HET sectors to ensure clear and strong joining-up of strategy and actions so that further and higher education are perceived in principle and in practice as a coherent, complementary and well-functioning part of the Irish education framework.

At a recent HEA first round of strategic dialogue, which included meetings with cluster groups as well as individual higher education institutions (HEIs), new liaison work between the HEIs and ETBs was evident, building on existing pathways and links. To further support this work, it is planned that the HEA will develop guidance for the HEIs on what would constitute appropriate pathways and address the real challenges that have been there for some time. It is important that SOLAS/ETBI and the ETB sector works closely with the HEA and QQI to take advantage of existing structures to, inter alia, deliver more seamless progression pathways for FET graduates and to learn at first hand from employers what their FET skills are and the effectiveness and relevance of FET programmes.

In addition to the progression from FET to higher education it is important to note that a significant number of people with a higher education qualification access and benefit from FET upskilling and reskilling options. For example, around half of the individuals who were referred to FÁS training programmes by DSP in 2012 had a Leaving Certificate or higher education qualification. Of the circa 12,000 people who took part in eCollege programmes in 2013, 33% had a higher education qualification.

Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018 – 2020

OBJECTIVE 4: SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE THE EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY THROUGH EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND RECRUITS A STUDENT BODY THAT REFLECTS THE DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL MIX OF IRELAND'S POPULATION.

Ireland is one of only a few countries in the European Higher Education area that uses targeted measures to increase participation in higher education by under-represented groups, and is among the leading countries in providing alternative entry routes and in enrolments by students whose parents did not participate in higher education.

The third National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015 – 2019) was launched in December 2015. The vision of the National Access Plan is to ensure that the student body entering into, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. There are 6 key target groups identified in the Plan. These comprise:

Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education

- First time, mature student entrants
- Students with disabilities
- Part-time/flexible learners
- Further education award holders and
- Irish Travellers

The Plan contains targets to increase participation rates by each of these groups. In order to achieve these targets, the Plan contains more than 30 actions around the following 5 key goals –

- To mainstream the delivery of access within Higher Education Institutions
- To assess the impact of access initiatives
- To develop access data
- To building coherent pathways
- To develop regional and community partnership.

The latest data available from the HEA shows that access to third level by disadvantaged groups is improving. In particular, the number and share of students from disadvantaged backgrounds rose from 22% to 26%, and of students with a disability rose from 7% to 11% between 2012/13 and 2014/15.

We will carry out a mid-term review of the National Access Plan 2015-2019 in 2018 to assess progress against the Plan’s goals, objectives and targets and to consider how these can be refined or further developed, particularly in view of new initiatives, including and better data that becomes available.

High level targets

- All HEIs will have a Student Success Strategy in place by 2020 which will embed whole-of-HEI approaches to institutional access strategies.
 - Implement new data initiatives and indicators to support the development and implementation of evidenced based National Plans for Equity of Access by 2019.
 - Implement the strands of the Programme for Access to Third Level (PATH) Fund to support the implementation of the National Plan for Equity of Access 2015-2019.
 - Sustain the expansion from underrepresented groups with 2,000 additional enrolments from socio-economically disadvantaged groups and 1,000 from Further education access programmes.
 - Increase in enrolments from DEIS schools by ensuring that every such school will be participating in a HEI led access programme.
 - Completion rates for students from disadvantaged cohorts will be specifically targeted for improvement
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Action Plan for Education 2017

Goal 1: Improve the learning experience and the success of learners

Improve transitions in order to support children and young people: Research shows that it is important to support children and young people as they move between levels of the education and training system. Significant progress has been made to improve this.

Goal 2: Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs

Measure	Target Indicator
Access to Higher Education	<p>Increase proportion of full time and part-time mature entrants to higher education to 24%, from a current rate of 19%, by 2019</p> <p>Increase proportion of students with disabilities as % of all entrants to higher education to 8%, from a current rate of 6%, by 2019.</p> <p>Increase participation by students progressing from further education into higher education to 10%, from a current rate of 6.6%, by 2019</p>

Action Plan for Education 2019

Goal 3: We will equip education and training providers with the skills and support to provide a quality learning experience

A Strategic Action under this goal is to: Increase the alignment of higher education and further education and training to achieve a more integrated tertiary education system.