An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

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

Transitions Reform Working Paper – June 2020

Department of Education and Skills


thea
TECHNOLOGICAL HIGHER EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

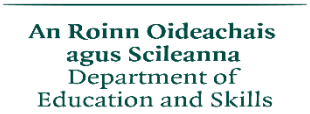

iua
IRISH UNIVERSITIES ASSOCIATION


etbi
Education and Training Boards Ireland
Boird Oideachais agus Oiliúna Éireann


SOLAS
learning works


HEA
HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS


QQI
Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann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1. Introduction

The establishment of the FET-HE Transitions Reform Sub-Group in March 2017 was an important development within the overall transitions framework led by the Department of Education and Skills[1]. While progression to higher education is only one of the targeted outcomes from Further Education and Training (FET), it is acknowledged across several national strategies that levels of progression should increase and a more consistent approach to facilitating such progression should be put in place, and in this regard the Sub-Group was tasked with the following terms of reference:

- *Map and evaluate current FET-HE transitions practice and data across the Further Education and Higher Educations Sectors;*
- *Develop proposals so that education and training qualifications from the FET sector are recognised for entry into Higher Education in an agreed and consistent manner;*
- *Examine specific issues relating to the transition for learners from further education and training into third level;*
- *Consider and make recommendations on how best to position further education and training qualifications for points and entry purposes into higher education.*

The sub-group consisted of representatives from FET and HE providers (via Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) , Irish Universities Association (IUA) and Education Training Board Ireland (ETBI) nominees); the HEA and SOLAS; the higher education – equity of access and further education sections of the Department of Education and Skills; and QQI. The first meeting was held on 11th April 2018 and the sub-group subsequently met on 7th June 2018, 21st September 2018, 30th November 2018, 20th March 2019, 12th June 2019 and 28th January 2020.

The working paper was developed incrementally over the course of these meetings, with working drafts circulated on each occasion, augmented by additional material submitted or presented and the outcomes of sub-group discussions. It is supplemented by a series

[1] https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Regulation-of-Lobbying-Act-2015/Groups-Committees-exempted-under-the-Transparency-Code/Transitions-Reform-Steering-Group.html

of resources which can be used and built upon to support the development of further work on FET-HE transitions:

- Resource A, which summarises all relevant policy and strategic documentation.
- Resource B, which profiles QQI major awards.
- Resource C, which summarises the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) processes across HEIs.
- Resource D, which maps all existing FET pathways to specific HE programmes listed by ETBs.
- Resource E, which provides an overview of all FET programmes.

The resources are published in tandem with the working paper.

The working paper was formally approved at the Transitions Reform Steering Group meeting of 3rd March 2020.

2. Context

In considering the context behind the work of the Sub-group, it is important to acknowledge other initiatives that have focused on FET-HE progression. These include the well-established FET2HE network[2], the Irish Universities Association Access Steering Group, the THEA Academic Affairs Committee, HEA Student Success Group and the DES National Access Plan Steering Group. The Sub-Group sought to ensure that it was consistent with, and built upon, the collaborative work undertaken via these fora.

In addition many national and sectoral strategies have identified the need for a more coherent and equitable transition route for those moving from further education and training to higher education. While a more detailed overview is set out as Resource A the key issues identified in relation to transitions are set out below:

- The ***National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*** refers to the number of instances where institutions in both further education and higher education are collaborating to offer joint access provision to students. It commits to expanding this approach and clarifying the progression routes into higher education to allow many more students to make the transition from NFQ Levels 4 and 5 to Levels 6, 7, 8 and beyond'.
- The ***National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 – 2021*** prioritises the building of coherent pathways from further education and fostering other routes to higher education. It targets an increase in the percentage of new entrants to higher education whose basis for admission is a further education qualification from 6.6% to 10%. A progress review was published in 2018 and noted that FE-HE progression under this definition in 2017/18 was behind target at 7.3%. The 10% target was also reflected in the DES Action Plan for Education 2016-2019.

[2] The network was established in 2015 in the Leinster region with the support of the HEA. It includes representatives from eight ETB partners (Cavan/Monaghan, City of Dublin, Dublin/Dun Laoghaire, Galway/Roscommon, Kildare/Wicklow, Laois/Offaly, Longford/Westmeath, and Louth/Meath) and the four HEIs in the region: Dublin City University, Maynooth University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Athlone Institute of Technology. The FET2HE Network also has representatives from QQI and SOLAS, who signed a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2015. The Network's overall aims are to identify barriers to access, transfer, and progression, to identify good practice in this area, and to see how, as a region, we can create more transparency, more certainty, and more opportunities for students in FET to progress seamlessly to higher education.

- The ***SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019*** acknowledges existing collaboration between SOLAS, QQI and the HEA as well as work by regional clusters on the development of pathways between further and higher education which will support the achievement of progression targets. In numerical terms, the target represents an increase of about 2,000 in the number of new entrant students progressing to higher education based on their further education award. An independent progress review of the strategy was completed in May 2018. The review identified the need for clearer learning pathways into, within and from further education and training and recommended that an overall vision for post-secondary education across both FET and HE be developed.

While these documents set out the current policy context for FET-HE progression, efforts have been further embedded by the introduction of strategic performance frameworks in recent years for both HE and FET.

The first ***Higher Education Strategic Performance Framework*** was established over the period 2014-2016 and involved a process of strategic dialogue and agreement of performance compacts between the HEA and individual Higher Education Institutions which contained commitments across 7 system objectives. One of these objectives related to access and progression and individual plans and targets were set by HEIs in this regard. Following a review of the process in 2017, the second and current Higher Education System Performance Framework for the period 2018 – 2020 also focuses on gathering and monitoring a core set of performance metrics across all institutions. The current framework cites an objective to "significantly improve the equality of opportunity through education and training and recruit a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population", with related targets of 2,000 additional enrolments from socio-economically disadvantaged groups and 1,000 from further education access programmes.

A similar system of ***Strategic Performance Agreements*** between SOLAS and 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), underpinned by a strategic dialogue process has been established for the further education and training system over the period 2018-2020. The agreements contain individual ETB contributions to six core national FET system targets, including one focused on progression to higher education. This has articulated ETB plans for more learners to transition to other further or higher education courses, with particular focus on bridging pathways through FET and PLC to HE mobility.

There are also an important series of ongoing developments in quality assurance which impact on FET-HE transitions. These include the development of new standards for QQI FET awards, new courses/curricula and, pending legislative change, the inclusion of the awards of other awarding bodies (e.g. professional bodies, UK awarding bodies like City and Guilds and those made by international organisations/sectoral bodies linked to specific industries, technologies or occupations) in the NFQ. A profile of QQI major awards was developed as Resource B.

3. Current FET-HE Progression Links

The linkages between FET and HE in both traditional and new apprenticeships are firmly established with off the job phases for many apprenticeships taking place in both a FET and HE setting. The Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) links some QQI level 5 and level 6 major awards to the first year of selected higher education courses in participating HEIs[3]. Entry is determined on the basis of a common scoring system and in some cases on achievement of specific components or modules. The current links are published by the CAO. Data collated from the CAO indicates that, in 2015, 35 HEIs offered progression in this way from 86 Level 5 QQI major awards and 28 HEIs offered progression from 33 level 6 FET major awards.[4] Universities offer places from a reserved quota for FET award holders. Institutes of Technology generally accept applications based on any CAS or legacy FETAC NFQ level 5 and 6 major awards, in open competition with Leaving Certificate candidates.[5] HEIs may also offer places through reserve quotas for QQI applicants only (for example, to some Nursing Degree programmes). Where a quota applies, FET applicants compete for these places separately from other applicants. Resource C outlines the HELS process in further detail.

Some awards formerly made by FÁS, Teagasc and Fáilte Ireland on the NFQ can enable progression to HEI programmes outside HELS. Some level 6 awards (Advanced Certificates) also provide advanced entry into year two of HE programmes where the awards are in cognate disciplines. Most HEIs have traditionally had links with individual PLC colleges and have enrolled graduates from these institutions into certain higher education courses. Some HEIs offer preferential entry to learners who successfully complete a linked QQI programme in partner Colleges of Further Education and who meet certain criteria often, but not exclusively, based locally within the HEI catchment area. There is however also a substantial flow of PLC graduates accessing degree programmes in the UK (e.g. in areas such as nursing), with 90 specific pathways identified by PLC colleges. Resource D maps all the existing pathways listed by PLC Colleges to HE. Indeed, to feed into the work of the sub-group, SOLAS undertook a mapping exercise to examine existing FET-HE linkages. Using PLC College websites as the primary source,

[3] https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Progression%20Opportunities%20into%20Higher%20Education%20HELS.pdf
[4] Draft Summary overview of audit of awards linked as part of the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS), QQI, 2017.
[5] http://www2.cao.ie/fetac/FETAC_scoring.pdf

in excess of 1,300 entry links to HEIs in Ireland, the UK and Europe were identified, with over 200 advanced entry routes.

In addition to the formal links between QQI level 5 and level 6, there are other access routes to higher education for non- traditional students including those who are mature and/or part-time, travellers, from ethnic minorities, single parents, carers, or disabled. FET is incredibly diverse and includes many learners from these groups, and often the FET link is overlooked due to applicants pursuing other access pathways (e.g. mature, socio-economic, disadvantaged cohorts) on the basis of previously attained Leaving Certificate qualifications, including via the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) or the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) schemes. This can have the effect of underestimating the extent to which learners progress from FET to HE, as confirmed by data considered later in this report.

While there are many strong links between PLC provision and higher education, opportunities for progression from other types of FET are more limited. While demand for such opportunities from the learner will be naturally lower on many of these programmes due to their primary focus on employment outcomes (e.g. traineeships, apprenticeships, specific skills training and VTOS[6]), there is scope to raise awareness of this potential cohort across HEIs and ensure that a learning pathway exists that allows individuals to re-engage with education and training at an appropriate point in the future, even if this is not in the form of immediate HE progression on completion of the FET course. This will become increasingly important as strategies for workforce upskilling and lifelong learning become further embedded.

The sub-group identified that, while there was good knowledge across HEIs about PLC courses, and of apprenticeships across the technological higher education sector, there was more limited understanding about other forms of further education and training and the learning outcomes that they produce. Hence an initial guide to these programmes was put together, as Resource E, and plans are being progressed to bridge this information gap with HEIs. It is likely that the complex multi-programme structure across FET will be simplified as part of the ongoing reform of the system, and this should also support efforts to develop such FET-HE pathways.

[6] Indecon consultants are currently undertaking an evaluation of VTOS and SST and are due to report in 2020.

Of course, guidance plays a critical role in the decisions of individuals to engage in FET as a pathway to HE and to consider HE opportunities while engaging in further education and training. Dedicated guidance counsellors are available in secondary schools and PLC colleges, while other FET learners are served by an adult guidance and information service within HE. There has been a concerted effort in recent years to improve awareness and understanding of FET opportunities across the guidance network, but more needs to be done, particularly around the clearer articulation of potential learner pathways. An important development by SOLAS, the ETBs and other FET providers was the establishment of a FET course hub, Fetchcourses.ie, which offers a course matching function, facilitates online applications and provides learner lifecycle accounts.

The Department of Education and Skills commissioned an independent review of existing career guidance and information for students and adults which was published recently[7], the recommendations will have to be considered in the context of supporting FET-HE transition. The review seeks progress on a more integrated approach to guidance across FET and indeed the wider education and training system, and the development of a single accessible online resource which provides centralised information on learning opportunities and pathways across this system. Closer links between FET guidance staff and HEI access personnel could support efforts in this area.

The issue of funding and supports for FET learners who transition to higher education has been discussed by the Sub-Group. PLC students can access SUSI and the fund for students with a disability (FSD), with both accommodating progression from FET to Higher Education (although it should be noted that FSD is not available for other FET learners). A report on 'Transition from Further Education to Higher Education' by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education looked at the experiences of those transitioning from FET to HE. It examined 'student motivations and decisions prior to entering higher education, their perceptions of FET, and the factors influencing the transitions of FET students to higher education'. The report found the most frequently cited concerns of students prior to entering higher education were financial. In this context, funding and financial constraints among students transitioning from FET to HE is an issue that merits further consideration.

[7] https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/indecon-review-of-career-guidance.pdf

4. FET to HE – Examples of Existing Practice Models

Building on this overall approach to FET-HE progression, the sub-group identified and discussed a range of collaborative models across FET and HE providers. Some examples demonstrating the key types of response are briefly summarised below:

- **Regional Networks:** The FET-HE Network brought together 2 universities, 2 institutes of technology and 6 ETBs who signed a Memorandum of Understanding to collaborate on enhancing transparent FET-HE pathways and identify opportunities for sharing resources and good practice.
- **Bilateral Strategic Agreements:** Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Galway-Roscommon ETB and Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim ETB committing to promoting and improving equity of access and seamless progression from FET courses to third-level courses in GMIT's Galway and Mayo campuses. This includes aligning Level 6 ETB courses with GMIT courses, to allow FET students advanced entry directly into second year of their GMIT programme.
- **Broad Entry:** Entry to the first year of a large number of degree programmes at UCC is available on a competitive basis to students who present with one of the recognised QQI level 5 or level 6 major awards. Applications are made through the CAO, under which QQI scores candidates presenting with QQI awards, candidates are ranked and reserved places are then offered in order of merit. Quotas are available on programmes available in the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Science, College of Business and Law, College of Science, Engineering and Food Science and College of Medicine and Health. UCC publishes an extensive list of courses that can be accessed with QQI level 5, indicating any additional requirements for modules and grades.
- **Direct Entry:** Learners with the relevant and appropriate QQI Level 5/6 awards and modules may be admitted on a competitive basis to programmes in many IoTs and Universities. There are in excess of 800 links providing specific entry routes to year one of a higher education programme. In Cork Institute of Technology, the Cork Colleges Progression Scheme (CCPS) has been in place since 2006. Under the CCPS certain courses in CIT are linked to particular courses in FET colleges.

CIT reserves a number of places on its linked courses for applicants from these colleges who achieve specified levels and other requirements in their awards.[8]

- **Advanced Entry:** In February 2019 Donegal ETB and Letterkenny IT signed an *Articulation Agreement* to facilitate the progression of learners who have completed either Level 5 or Level 6 QQI Major Awards in DETB for progression onto LyIT programmes; this includes advanced entry from two Major Level 6 programmes into the second year of two-degree programmes.
- **Advanced Entry:** Cavan and Monaghan ETB have a series of arrangements in place which involve students completing the first year of their award locally and progressing to the second year of their award in partner institutions including Athlone IT, Letterkenny IT and DKIT.
- **Memorandum of Understanding:** NEFHEA (North East Further and Higher Education Alliance 2008) signed a MOU to promote access, transfer and progression between further and higher education providers in the North East. The parties to this memorandum are Dundalk Institute of Technology, Drogheda Institute of FE, Cavan Institute of FE, Monaghan Institute, Dunboyne College of FE and O'Fiaich Institute. A wide-ranging MOU is also in place between Donegal ETB, LyIT, University of Ulster and the North West Regional College has been put in place with an initial HEA-funded landscape project will focused on programme mapping, student pathways and progression.
- **Competency-based Entry:** TU Dublin Blanchardstown campus has a competency-based assessment entry route as part of its Learn and Work Programme (Direct Entry). The Higher Certificate in Science in Computing in Networking Technologies is the first programme in ITB's Learn and Work suite. The programme has been designed with industry, combining in-company placement with the required skills and competencies for today's high-tech companies. The Learn and Work programme is supported by ICT Ireland Skillnet.
- **Occupation Focused Initiatives:** In 2017 €2.7m was made available, over a three-year timeframe, for initial teacher education access initiatives under strand 1 of the PATH Fund, focused on target groups including FET award holders. Under the scheme, St Angela's College provided a direct-entry route from FET into the undergraduate BA/Professional Master of Education for the first time. The College

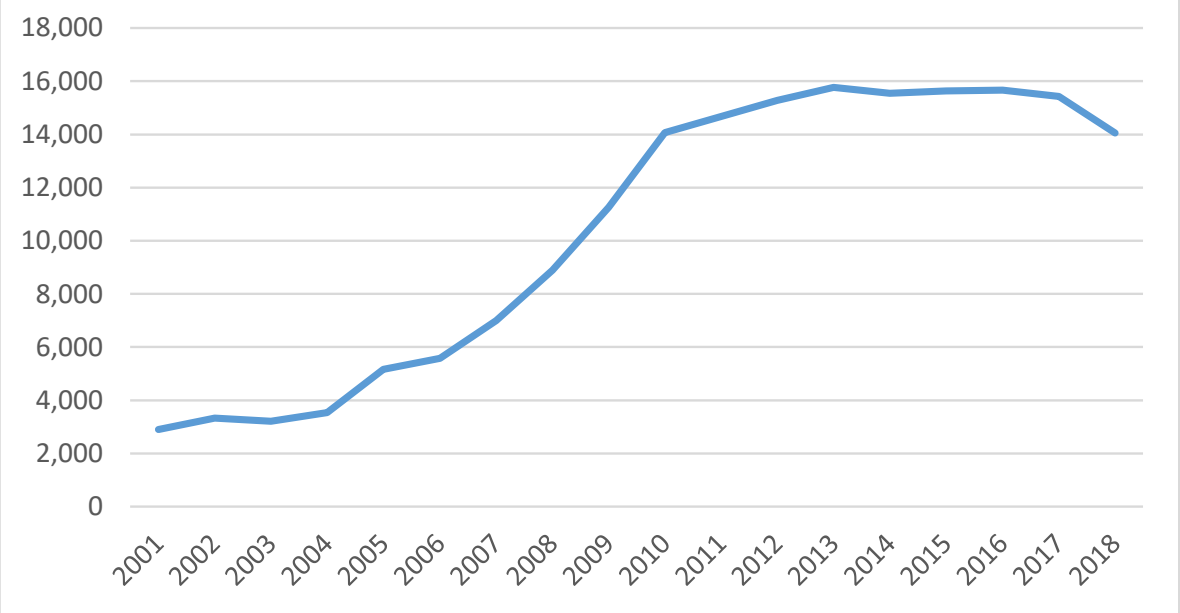
[8] http://www.cit.ie/contentfiles/Access/CCPS/2018/CIT_CCPS_2018%20flyer.pdf

worked with 9 Further Education Colleges in the BMW region to attract 18 FET learners into the concurrent 5-year BA/PME. Pre-entry supports included information sessions, assistance with CAO ITE applications, module delivery in areas of need, as well as ‘in-reach’ activities to bring the students into St. Angela’s College for lectures, workshops and mentoring. These were combined with post-entry academic, financial (scholarships) and personal supports.

5. Analysing Data on FET-HE Demand, Progression and Retention

Robust and verifiable data on demand, progression and retention from FET to HE was identified as being of critical importance to the work of the Sub-Group. As an initial starting point SOLAS and THEA representatives met with the CAO to establish the total number of learners currently applying to progress from FET to HE. As shown in Figure 1, since 2001 the rate of applications from those with a FET QQI award has increased significantly, from under 3,000 to over 14,000 by 2018.

Figure 1: Trends in CAO Demand from Applicants with FET QQI Awards



Source: CAO

Given this growth in CAO demand from FET applicants, and notwithstanding the fact that a significant number of applicants do not meet the requirement of a full major award, the next step was to consider how this translated into acceptances and offers, and a summary of the analysis produced is set out in Table 1. The sub-group considered data from 2017 and 2018, where the net acceptance rate by FET applicants was 54.3% and 54.8% respectively. This was below the total net CAO acceptance rate which was over 59% in both years, meaning FET applicants were less likely on average to take up HE opportunities on offer.

Considering the analysis by level of offer, FET candidates were more likely to accept Level 8 offers than Level 6/7, although of course individual candidates may have received multiple CAO offers, with the likelihood that many would accept the opportunity with the higher level of award. The analysis also revealed the complexity involved in considering the influence of a FET background in progression, with distinctions between those with such experience and those accepted on the basis of such experience (via a FET score), with others with FET awards accepted on the basis of mature entry or previous Leaving Certificate results. The target set within the National Access Plan is driven only by those accepted on the basis of the FET score, meaning that the 7.3% level referenced in Section 2 reflects the 3,517 acceptances as a proportion of the 47,997 overall CAO acceptances. It also omits FET graduates gaining advanced entry into HE degree programmes. For 2018/19, progression under the access plan definition was relatively static, at 7.4%.

Table 1: CAO Offers and Acceptances relating to Applicants with QQI Awards

Category	2017		2018	
Total Number of CAO Candidates	81,091	-	77,785	
Total Net CAO Acceptances	47,997	59.2%	46,624	59.9%
Total Number of candidates with QQI FET (CAO Applicants who mention QQI/FET)	15,435	-	14,059	
Total NET QQI FET Candidate Acceptances	8,382	54.3%	7,707	54.8%
Level 8 offers to candidates with QQI FET awards	9,184	-	8,677	-
Level 8 net acceptances by candidates with QQI FET awards	5,629	61.3%	5,322	61.3%
Level 7/6 offers to candidates with QQI FET awards	8,124	-	7,108	-
Level 7/6 net acceptances by candidates with QQI FET awards	2,753	33.9%	2,385	33.6%
Candidates with QQI FET awards who were offered a course on the basis of QQI FET score	5,343	-	5,160	-
Acceptances based on QQI FET awards Scores	3,517	-	3,457	-
Applicants with Both QQI FET award and Leaving Cert	11,999	-	11,513	-
Applicants with QQI FET awards who are Mature (over 23)	5,274	-	4,870	-
Applicants with QQI FET Result awards and Leaving Cert who are Mature (over 23)	3,216	-	3,020	-

Source: CAO

To supplement this analysis of CAO data, the sub-group has also been able to consider actual progression from FET to HE by linking the SOLAS/ETB FET learner database (PLSS) with the HEA enrolments database. Initially this analysis focused on FET PLC graduates as the primary source of such progression, with 2017 offering the first full year

by which there was a comprehensive record of PLC learners within PLSS. By looking at the overall population of 33,017 2017 PLC learners, it was found that 5,296 progressed immediately to higher education, commencing study with an institution from the beginning of the 2017/18 academic year. Of this cohort, 4,813 entered first year of an undergraduate degree, while 346 secured direct entry into second year of a degree programme, with 137 entering at other levels (e.g. directly into a Masters programme). If you consider this in the context of the overall higher education first year undergraduate intake for 2017/18, it represents around 10.9%. This is above the National Access Plan target of 10% from FET, but as we have noted the access plan definition confines measurement to only those students progressing solely on the basis of their FET qualifications, and not those entering as, for example, mature students or with a dual Leaving Certificate/FET background. These actual PLC progression figures also pick up any CAO applicants that did not declare their FET experience.

To fully understand the progression flows from FET to HE, and to inform an assessment of whether there is a need for a more consistent and systematic approach, the sub-group considered analysis of the ETB area from which the PLC graduate progressed, and the destination institution where studies were continued. To place such data in the context of the relative scale of each ETB and HEI, the total PLC graduates[9] in each ETB and the total new undergraduate entries in the HEI are set out alongside PLC progression levels in Table 2. The small cohort of learners that were able to be tracked from other non-PLC FET programmes to HE is also reflected in the fourth column of the ETB and HEI sides of the table.

[9] This includes only those learners recorded as completing PLC in 2017. A further 164 were recorded on PLC courses in 2017 who were then found on the HE enrolments database, but as there was no record of them completing their PLC study they were excluded from the transitions analysis

Table 2: PLC Progression to HE 2018 by ETB and HEI[10]

ETB	PLC to HE	Total PLC	%	Other FET-HE
CMETB	283	1728	16.4%	17
CDETB	949	7325	13.0%	16
Cork ETB	696	4338	16.0%	19
Don'l ETB	51	115	44.3%	29
DDLETB	411	2453	16.8%	26
GRETB	375	1277	29.4%	16
Kerry ETB	179	701	25.5%	12
KWETB	164	1084	15.1%	10
KCETB	171	886	19.3%	12
LOETB	86	399	21.6%	10
LCETB	304	1203	25.3%	35
LWETB	55	324	17.0%	9
LMETB	510	1803	28.3%	6
MSLETB	245	1226	20.0%	22
Tipp ETB	92	708	13.0%	15
VSCSS	283	1243	22.8%	-
WWETB	278	1292	21.5%	18
TOTAL	**5,132**	**28,105**	**18.3%**	**272**

HEI	From PLC	UG Entry	%	Other FET
AIT	257	1043	24.6%	19
CIT	377	2072	18.2%	8
DCU	244	3420	7.1%	-
DIT	434	3557	12.2%	17
DLIADT	194	553	35.1%	5
DKIT	279	1194	23.4%	10
GMIT	328	1616	20.3%	11
ITB	184	727	25.3%	7
ITC	293	1181	24.8%	32
ITS	233	1041	22.4%	7
IT Tall	224	829	27.0%	-
IT Tral	179	725	24.7%	13
LYIT	106	932	11.4%	25
LIT	369	1529	24.1%	17
MIC	22	970	2.3%	6
MU	275	3167	8.7%	9
NCAD	122	267	45.7%	-
NUIG	130	3318	3.9%	5
STAC	24	190	12.6%	8
TCD	75	3027	2.5%	6
UCC	294	3573	8.2%	14
UCD	153	4387	3.5%	6
UL	148	2519	5.9%	24
WIT	352	1976	17.8%	14
Other	-	-	-	9
TOTAL	**5,296**	**43,813**	**12.1%**	**272**

Source: SOLAS/ETBI, HEA; CSO

On the ETB side progression rates vary substantially, with over half of the ETBs progressing over one-fifth of their PLC completers and an overall ETB average of 18.3% of PLC immediately progressing to higher education in 2017/18. The immediate nature of the progression measured should be stressed – the analysis does not include PLC learners completing studies in 2016 or any earlier years and then commencing higher education in

[10] Since 2019 ITB, ITT and DIT have merged to create Ireland's first Technological University.

2017/18, discounting those who worked or travelled for a time before progression from FET to HE. This delayed transition aspect will be included as the analysis further develops. It also does not include the sizeable cohort of PLC graduates who continue their studies in higher education in the UK. While the scale of this flow cannot be defined exactly, data gathered by SUSI does record those applying for grant support in order to study at HE in the UK. This revealed that 166 applied for SUSI support for 2017/18 study in the UK (compared with 178 for 2016/17), although this only those from family income backgrounds which would make them potentially eligible for support and does not include what is likely to be another sizeable cohort pursuing UK study without SUSI assistance.

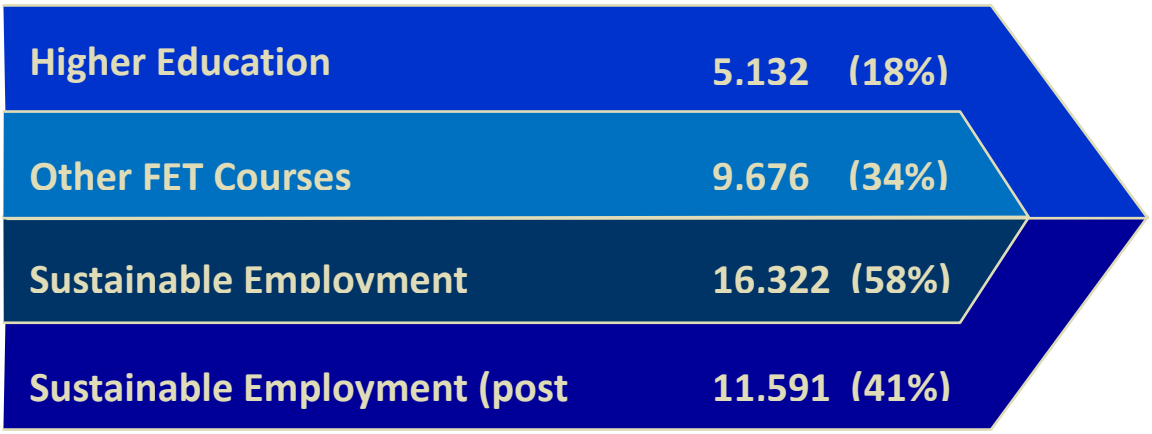
The analysis shows a much higher proportion of IoT entrants progressing from PLC than is the case for universities, with around a quarter of first year entrants with a FET background across many IoTs. It is also striking that particular HEIs with unique specialisms had by far the highest rates of FET progression, with almost one-half of the former's first year entrants having a PLC background. However, the analysis did indicate significant differences between levels of progression when considered against the relative scale of provision on both the ETB and HEI side alone and suggests that there could be scope for a more consistent approach and potentially higher levels of FET-HE transition. The overall level of FET-HE progression recorded was slightly higher than the ETB analysis as it reflected previous participation in PLC, rather than formal completion of study (5,296 against 5,132).

The limited level of transition that can be tracked from other FET provision into HE (272) is not likely to reflect the full extent of progression from non-PLC courses, as the respective academic years lead to a natural transition from PLC to HE, while those completing other FET courses in the latter part of the year are unlikely to progress into HE until the start of 2018/19. Nevertheless, it does demonstrate that wider FET-HE progression is happening, but with significant scope to grow these levels. The work to improve awareness within HEIs of the nature and progression potential of these other FET courses noted earlier will need to be supplemented by promotion of this potential pipeline to individual HEIs and of the future opportunities within HE to the non-PLC FET learner.

It is also important to acknowledge that progression to HE is only one positive outcome from FET, with a strong focus on securing employment outcomes in PLC and other ETB programmes, while many choose a further study route within the FET system (and indeed the nature of PLC provision itself means that there is often progression from a Level 5 to a Level 6 programme and qualification over a two-year period. Figure 2 illustrates the

high-level outcomes tracked from the 2017 PLC completer cohort. It shows that around half of PLC completers in 2017 remained in education, pursuing further studies in FET (with the majority likely to have moved from a Level 5 to Level 6 PLC programme) or in HE as outlined in detail above. The employment outcomes tracked are also significant, with a proxy measure of 'sustainable employment' developed, representing the securing of the equivalent of 12 weeks of full-time work on a wage of at least the level of the national minimum wage. It should be noted that the analysis across progression and employment is not mutually exclusive (i.e. it is possible to both progress in education and achieve an employment outcome), and indeed the 16,000 in the first employment category reflect a growing trend of PLC students working at the same time as their studies. To get a further sense of the degree to which the PLC experience contributed to getting a job, the sustainable employment cohort was narrowed to reflect only those that could demonstrate the equivalent of 12 full-time weeks work after the recorded date of PLC course completion, which still amounted to 41% of PLC graduates. While the potential noted above to increase PLC-HE progression is clear, this analysis underlines the importance of continuing to recognise that a balance of outcomes must be achieved and direct entry to employment remains a key goal.

Figure 2: High-Level Outcomes from 2017 PLC Completer Cohort



A further aspect of FET-HE transition worthy of examination is the degree to which this takes place in cognate disciplines (i.e. is the FET experience in an area of relevance to the HE programme to which the student progresses). Here analysis is constrained by the lack of consistency on the categorisation of courses within FET and HE. Both are grouped by broad ISCED code, which facilitates the analysis below, but to delve any deeper into links by cognate discipline would require a detailed classification exercise. Anomalies were also found in health and childcare related progression which were categorised

differently between FET and HE despite being in relatively similar disciplines, and hence the cognate progression analysis should be taken as an underestimate. Nonetheless the analysis reveals that even using the ISCED identifier, some 63% of transition movements are within the same field, with the main 'matching' categories in arts & humanities; health; business; & ICT.

A successful FET-HE transitions strategy not only addresses demand, supply/offers, acceptances and progression, but must also take into account the ability of FET graduates to progress through and successfully complete higher education compared to those entering on the basis of the Leaving Certificate. Retention and completion is a contentious issue in examination of the value of higher education, but it is important to try to gauge how well the current FET qualifications prepare students for successful participation in higher education. The sub-group heard anecdotal evidence from access staff in HEIs of how prior FET experience did equip learners with capabilities that serve them well in meeting the demands of higher education, and also looked at conflicting evidence of the impact of a FET background on retention in HE.

For the first time, by linking historic PLC learner data with multi-annual HEA enrolment databases, we have been able to start to look at retention levels of FET graduates in HE. Some initial analysis is set out in Table 3 below, however this should be taken as an indicative guide only at present as there are major caveats around the data which will have to be checked, clarified and further developed in the coming weeks. Table 3 takes the PLC learner data for each of the years shown (class of 2014 represents the PLC students registered for the 2013/2014 academic year, for example) from the PPOD database and searches for these learners within the HEA enrolments database in the following academic year (in this example 2014/15), based on those registered student records system (SRS) in November. It then looks at the proportion of those learners which appear in Year 2 of the enrolments database in the following academic year (2015/16) and again the proportion which appear in Year 3 in the 2016/17 records. Three years is taken as an appropriate window given that this is the minimum length of undergraduate study for a bachelor's degree in HE, and that even for longer programmes the drop-out rate tends to be minimal when a student reaches this point of the course. The Year 1 rate of 100% reflects the fact that this is how we are first identifying the FET-HE transition, by appearance of the student on the first SRS record in November of that year. All attrition during the first year of study, therefore, is reflected in the Year 2 retention proportion. As the analysis develops, we will also incorporate March SRS records to monitor retention at that stage of each academic year. The data also currently only reflects immediate linear

progression, it does not pick up students that have to repeat a year or who take a year out or incorporate advanced entry students who join HE programmes from Year 2 onwards and all of this will be addressed in future iterations of the analysis.

Table 3: Retention of PLC Graduates within HEIs

Year of PLC Graduation	HE Year 1	HE Year 2	HE Year 3
Class of 2017	100%	-	-
Class of 2016	100%	80.0%	-
Class of 2015	100%	81.6%	65.1%
Class of 2014	100%	84.6%	70.7%
Multi-annual Average Retention Rate	100%	83.1%	68.8%
IoTs Average Retention Rate 2013 & 2014 PLC Grads	100%	80.9%	64.3%
Universities Average Retention Rate 2013 & 2014 PLC Grads	100%	89.5%	78.5%

Nevertheless, this early indicative analysis suggests that retention rates of PLC graduates compare favourably to those in HE from lower Leaving Certificate points brackets. While work is ongoing between SOLAS and the HEA to develop directly comparable FET data with general HEI retention analysis, the progression levels indicated, if validated, would seem to validate the anecdotal evidence heard by the sub-group that learners progressing from FET into HEI have a level of preparedness drawn from the former experience which helps them through their degree. It also suggests a higher rate of retention of FET graduates in universities than IoTs, perhaps reflecting the more selective and limited recruitment base in the former. The recent report from the HEA, which looked at completion from 2007/08 over an extended period, found an overall HE completion rate of 76%, with rates of 83% and 74% for university and IoT entrants respectively. The completion rate was 53% for students with Leaving Certificate points from 155-200 and 43% for those with 200-250 points.

Alongside addressing the caveats around the data noted above, an important next step will also be to consider whether different patterns of retention are apparent across different discipline groups, course levels or across different institutions which would help to underpin understanding of where FET-HE transitions have worked most effectively, and hence allow the sub-group to look at what has worked in this regard on such a themed basis.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to some further analysis which was undertaken on progression within further education and training during 2017. This identified 43,995 learner movements by 29,410 unique learners, demonstrating a key characteristic of FET

learners engaging in multiple courses. Particularly striking however was the fact that the movements within FET were not universally linear and with large groups of learners moving both up and down the levels of the NFQ framework to avail of opportunities to engage in initial learning, upskilling and reskilling. ETBs have also stressed that many learners with higher education qualifications engage in FET, including in areas such as digital skills, software and marketing which can be applicable to many career settings. By linking historic PPOD PLL learner data to historic HEA enrolment databases, we can get some sense of the scale of this HE-FET effect, with around 2,000 PLC students per annum having some experience of higher education as set out in Table 4, representing just under 10% of PLC enrolments.

Table 4: PLC Students with Previous HE Experience

Year of PLC Enrolment	Previously Enrolled in HE	% of all PLC Enrolments
2012	2078	8.1%
2013	2095	8.3%
2014	1989	8.0%
2015	2450	9.9%

6. Emerging Sub-Group Themes

From the outset one of the aims of the Sub-Group was to gain a greater understanding of how the approach to transitions between FET and HE is operating in practice and, where appropriate, propose improvements to further strengthen progression from FET to HE. Some key findings to date include:

- Current levels of progression from FET to HE is significant and higher than originally thought. The FET-HE progression measured as part of the National Access Plan is only one component of transitions and, while important, the many other routes that exist must also be taken into account. FET learners are not exclusively drawn from the socio-economic groups that are the subject of the National Access Plan, while the impact of different target groups and entry mechanisms on HEI impact must also be considered when assessing overall FET-HE transition performance. It must also be acknowledged that progression to HE is only one of the aims of further education and training.
- Much of the analysis in this report has relied on SOLAS PLSS source data and on progression from PLC to HE by linking this to the HEA enrolment database. The next step is to compare these findings more closely against CAO data to examine the basis on which candidates were offered HE places. Additional work to capture data on direct entry to HEIs (i.e. outside the CAO system) and progression from apprenticeships (which is not tracked via PLSS) will be of value.
- In considering FET-transitions, it is critical to recognise that there is often not ‘upwards’ linear relationship in the way in which learners engage with FET and HE. Analysis of movement across award levels within FET has shown a pattern of learners moving up and down NFQ levels, and there is qualitative and quantitative evidence of those with HE qualifications using FET to upskill or reskill in key areas, with around 2,000 PLC students per annum recorded as having some form of HE experience. With a lifelong learning approach so critical to future economic and societal development, the engagement in multiple courses at different NFQ levels across both FET and HE will be expected to expand significantly.
- There is an open and transparent system that recognises FET awards in the points system for technological HE sector access and which should allow pathways to most TU/IoT degree programmes for successful FET students. Nevertheless, there are inconsistent levels of FET-HE progression across TU/IoTs when considered in terms of the overall first year intake which suggest potential to

increase the overall FET-HE pipeline in future. Better communication of progression opportunities in the technological sector to FET learners is also important.

- FET learner progression to universities is more selective and limited and is realised almost entirely through quotas, with the full number of places on offer not taken up in many cases and some inconsistency in the proportion of first year entrants that such FET quotas target. An IUA Further Education to Higher Education sub-group has been formed to develop a common approach and criteria for access by FET graduates with a view to increasing levels of progression.
- The scope for a holistic and integrated FET recognition system within the mainstream CAO application system would require a comprehensive benchmarking exercise of Leaving Certificate and FET Level 5/6 awards. Nevertheless, there is a strong demand from FET stakeholders for this to be further explored, with the points score that can be achieved on the basis of FET qualifications alone within the technological sector system effectively limiting access to courses with a points requirement of 390 or more, and with no FET points-based system currently in place for the University sector.
- The overlap of FET and HE provision around NFQ Levels 5 & 6 also needs to be considered in greater depth, with a comparison of progression outcomes from Advanced and Higher Certificate awards (to higher education and employment).
- By combining data from CAO, SOLAS/ETB, QQI and HEA/HEI sources a better understanding is developing of the nature, consistency and potential of FET-HE progression. There is a clear opportunity for further analysis of such data to inform the development of responses to facilitate FET-HE transition.
- There is some initial evidence that retention rates of PLC graduates progressing to HE compares favourably with those from lower Leaving Cert points brackets entering HE directly. If validated, this indicates that FET is a good foundation for developing the skills to prosper in a higher education environment, and that potential for a higher rate of FET-HE progression should be explored. There is a lower rate of CAO offer acceptance by FET graduates than from Leaving Certificate holders only, and this also needs to be further examined. The question of whether those who withdraw from an HE programme prior to completion could be facilitated to transition to FET as a response to retention issues in particular areas merits further consideration.

- There is significant good practice and it is important that whatever changes are progressed implemented with regard to FET-HE progression do not undermine this activity in any way. The priority should be on how best to communicate existing progression opportunities, develop more consistent approaches to build on good practice, and whether this is best suited to a sectoral/thematic approach (e.g. tourism, ICT); regional approach (e.g. shared framework at regional level between ETBs & HEIs and involving regional skills fora); or as a comprehensive HE system-based approach.

7. Areas and Actions for Further Consideration

There are many actions being progressed by the different stakeholders involved in the sub-group and the group has served as an excellent mechanism to discuss ideas, share data and good practice that can influence such actions, while also providing a platform for considering opportunities for further work and collaboration. We set out some of the key actions that are being progressed by individual members of the sub-group, or which are being discussed as a collaborative response, for further consideration and development to support FET-HE transitions.

Strategic Approach

1. **Common Objectives and Targets:** The Department of Education and Skills should consider, in partnership with the HEA, SOLAS, the IUA, THEA and ETBI, further refining and developing objectives and targets for FET-HE access and progression (in addition to the existing access plan commitments)
2. **Alignment of Performance Compacts/Agreements:** The next round of strategic compacts/performance agreements between the HEA/HEIs and SOLAS/ETBs should reflect commitments at institutional level to the delivery of these common objectives and targets for FET-HE transition including progression learner experience and retention.
3. **Targeted FET-HE Funding Support:** Consideration should be given for additional funding and more flexible support for those learners who are identified as part of the access cohort who wish to progress from FET to HE. As a first step the existing funding supports available should be mapped out.

   The positive progress of the initial teacher education access initiatives under strand 1 of the PATH Fund offers a potential template that could be replicated in other thematic areas. The outcomes from targeted FET-HE funding support initiatives need to be considered.
4. **Transition Process Timelines:** There should be further consideration of the impact of key dates and milestones in the FET-HE calendar year on the effectiveness of FET-HE transitions with a view to exploring whether changes could be made to enhance this process. This should include the calendar for completion of FET courses, processing of funding supports, application for and

acceptance of places in HE and the start dates of programmes in both HE and FET.

Reviewing Provision

5. **Level 5/6 Review:** QQI, working in partnership with SOLAS, the HEA and key stakeholders, will compare and contrast a selection of Higher Certificate awards/programmes with the outcomes of Level 5/level 6 FET awards/programmes in cognate areas by examining learning outcomes, content, entry standards and progression.
6. **Feasibility of a Common Points Framework:** The potential for a common points framework for progression with FET qualifications to the overall HE system should be explored in order to achieve a more transparent and consistent system of progression. This work could also consider existing HEI practices in accepting non-QQI awards (e.g. BTEC, City and Guilds) for progression. International practice, such as the methodology underlying the UCAS tariffs, merits consideration. Alongside this work, it may be useful to compare and contrast Leaving Certificate and FET awards, initially on the basis of learning outcomes, volume, NFQ level, assessment and quality assurance. Further research in this area is required.
7. **Simplification of FET Funding Programme Structure:** SOLAS should continue to progress efforts to simplify the FET programme structure and more clearly identify FET courses with a primary purpose of facilitating progression to HE and ensure learners are informed of and can access relevant qualifications for HE entry/progression. Consideration could be given to the merits of identifying common prerequisites for progression to HE – whether by discipline or for FET as a whole.

Building the Research Base

8. **Further Analysis of Existing Transitions Data:** The existing data requires further analysis and in some cases validation. More data on the retention rates of

FET students progressing into HE should be gathered and interrogated. Further work may be useful in capturing fully all the entry routes from FET colleges/programmes/qualifications to higher education. Addition data on the background of learners who transition would also be beneficial particularly in relation to access learner categories.

9. **Annual Transitions Report:** The data produced as part of the sub-group's work on FET learner demand for HE, FET-HE progression and retention of FET students within HE should be monitored via annual FET-HE transition reports to assess development and inform work around FET-HE transitions.
10. **Research on Non-Take Up of HE Offers:** Further research should be progressed to ascertain the reasons why a significant number of FET learners who are offered a place in HE chose not to take up a place.
11. **Standardised Coding of FET Graduates within HEI Student Record Systems:** An agreed standardised system of coding FET entrants across the HEIs would aid support the research process and the feasibility of such an approach should be considered, as there is a need for a more accurate reflection of what's going on re FET transitions

Developing Consistent Approaches

12. **Technological HE Sector Provision:** THEA held a colloquium bringing IoTs and TUD together to consider short cycle (Level 6) and long cycle (Level 7 and 8) provision, including the role of FET in supporting pathways to this provision, this could further kickstart a discussion and process on further development of this approach.
13. **Standardisation of University Entry Requirements:** The new IUA led Further Education Progression Sub-Group will work towards an agreed framework for progression from FET to Universities, which will include the standardisation and fairness of the minimum or essential entry requirements sought.
14. **Thematic Transition Frameworks:** Overall FET-HE transition frameworks, based on collaboration across the sectors and building on existing practice should be explored around particular disciplines or themed groups of disciplines, with initial focus on the following areas:
    - Social Care
    - ICT

- Healthcare
- Early Learning and Care

15. **Widening Awareness of FET Programmes:** The guide to FET provision produced for the sub-group should be regularly updated and distributed to relevant personnel within HEIs.
16. **Non-PLC FET Progression:** HEI access strategies and entry criteria should include recognition of the potential pipeline of those who have completed non-PLC FET Level 5 and 6 programmes and achieved qualifications (e.g. apprenticeships, traineeships). A 'back to college' lifelong learning initiative/campaign targeting this cohort with an interest in upskilling via HE is worth considering in future.
17. **Piloting of a Cross HE Approach to FET:** The FET-HE network, involving universities, IoTs and ETBs, should be supported in considering how a common cross-HE approach to recognising FET qualifications and supporting transitions to IoTs and universities might be piloted.
18. **Second Chance Opportunities:** The issue of those HE students who withdraw from programmes should be further considered from a FET-HE transitions perspective. There is a need to identify why students withdraw and to consider whether there are appropriate interventions in FET for these students. This should include examining the feasibility of access to FET options including access to FET programmes, awards and guidance.
19. **Integrated Approach to FET Guidance:** The progression of an integrated guidance strategy across FET should assist in ensuring a clear and consistent approach around transitions. This should include the clearer articulation of learner pathways and development of guidance supports and resources to help FET learners navigate progression to higher education on a more systematic basis and to raise awareness of the qualification requirements for progression.

As noted above, the sub-group has already brought value in facilitating a collaborative approach to FET-HE transitions. It should have an important ongoing role in further considering, supporting and overseeing the progression of the areas for potential development flagged above, reviewing and responding to new data as it emerges, and helping to develop common approaches and address issues that may arise around FET-HE transitions in particular thematic areas.