

# Higher education selection and entry mechanisms:

## *Issues and Options*

Report of the IUA Working Group

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## Part One: Issues

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### 1. Background

Following a meeting between the Minister for Education and Skills and the university Presidents in Spring 2011, the Minister requested the universities to develop ideas and options around how the current selection for students to higher education could be reformed to support the planned enhancements of teaching and learning in senior cycle at second-level.

In making this request, the Minister expressed his concern that the “benefits of any broader [senior cycle] curricular reforms could be undermined by the impact of the demands and pressures of competitive entry requirements for higher education, which can heavily influence teaching approaches, learning behaviours and subject choices for the Leaving Certificate examination.”

The Minister’s request and concerns coincide with the well-publicised views of former and current university Presidents and other leading educational figures in Ireland. There have been growing levels of urgency in the debate in recent years regarding the fitness for purpose of the second-level educational experience, and the influence of the third-level selection and entry system on teaching and learning processes in schools.

The universities fully support the current efforts now underway within the teaching profession, including the Teaching Council, and by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, for major reforms in the second-level schools system, including pedagogical and assessment processes, teacher education, a greater emphasis on student learning and personal development, all in the context of enhanced learning outcomes and preparing individuals for lifelong learning in a broad variety of settings. The universities wish to make a positive contribution to these efforts, in support of very real societal needs in Ireland and of important public policy objectives.

It is in the overall context of these reforms that the universities are responding to the Minister’s concerns, to ensure that third-level admissions procedures do not inhibit the necessary second-level reforms, but rather, support and encourage them. In doing so, the universities implicitly recognise that these second-level reforms will – in due course - also have positive effects at third-level, and complement innovations which the universities and other third-level colleges have been implementing over a number of years, particularly in the areas of teaching and learning, quality assurance, professional development for academic staff, assessment, and an overall enhanced student experience.

This paper has been prepared by a working group, chaired by Professor Tom Collins, former President of NUI Maynooth. The working group comprised representatives of the universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). The members of the group are listed at Appendix 1. The views represented here are those of the group and not a statement of position of any individual institution or the institutional structures which regulate admissions.

In what is intended to be a constructive and positive contribution to the discussions on the topic of transition from second-level to third-level education, the paper presents a series of issues relating to this topic, from the perspective of the working group.

The paper also engages in an initial exploration of a number of possible options regarding changes to third-level selection and entry processes. These options, together with other expert contributions will require considerable further discussion, among the public policy makers and the higher education institutions which have statutory responsibility for determining admission requirements. However, as is currently the case, higher education institutions will most likely wish to take a coordinated and collective approach to the planning and implementation of any developments in this area, in order to ensure equity and transparency for applicants, as well as efficiency and cost-effectiveness for both the applicants and the higher education providers.

### *In summary*

**This report of the working group represents the universities' response to the request by the Minister for Education and Skills for ideas and options around how the current selection for students to higher education could be reformed to support the planned enhancements of teaching and learning in senior cycle at second-level. It is intended as a contribution to the debate being launched by the Minister and as a basis for further analysis and feasibility testing.**

## **2. The 1999 “Points Commission” in today’s context**

In 1997 the then Minister for Education and Science appointed a commission to examine the system of selection for third-level entry. The main reason behind the establishment of this commission was to address educational and social concerns regarding the then third-level entry system’s effects/impact on:

- the personal development of students;
- post-primary level, particularly on the senior cycle, in terms of its influence on teaching, learning and assessment techniques;
- the selection of third-level courses;
- access to third-level of students who have experienced significant educational disadvantage;
- access to third-level of non-standard students, e.g. mature students.

It is worth noting that the context of the work of the Points Commission in the late 1990s was the increased demand and rising competition for higher education places, and specific concerns regarding the five areas outlined above. As will be shown in Section 4 of this paper, much of that 1997 context remains remarkably similar to the today in terms of the effects of demand and supply on HE selection and entry mechanisms.

During the course of its work, the Commission – which became known as the “Points Commission” - undertook a lengthy consultation process and commissioned a number of detailed research papers. An extensive and detailed report was published in late 1999<sup>1</sup>. However, it should be noted that the effects of points on post-primary education were assessed in this report on the basis of the consultation process and contributions from stakeholders, rather than on direct empirical evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> The full report can be accessed at <http://odtl.dcu.ie/mirror/irlgov/educ/pointcommreport99.html>

For example, the Commission considered a number of selection mechanisms other than the Leaving Certificate for third-level entry, including standardised psychometric tests; school references; personal statements; interviews and random selection. However, having examined these options extensively, the Commission did not recommend any of them. The only option which was considered by the Commission to have some merit, a weighted system of random selection from all qualified applicants, was likewise discarded since it was considered that this would not be acceptable to the majority of applicants in this country.

It should be noted that the changes introduced in the Leaving Certificate grades in 1992 (A1, A2, B1, B2, B3 etc. to replace the broader grade ranges of A, B etc. which existed previously), were precisely in order to introduce greater differentiation into the LC results, and explicitly to reduce the extent of random selection which was then taking place at third-level entry between candidates with identical points. However, it should be noted that random selection continues to feature in the current third level entry system where a place is being allocated among two or more candidates with identical points scores.

Although the most recent full data available regarding the participation of target socio-economic groups dates back to 2004, when entry rates for the skilled manual (50%), semi- and unskilled manual (33%) and non-manual (27%) groups were all below the national average entry rate of 55%<sup>2</sup>, there have also been significant developments in the area of widening participation to HE. Policies and strategies for lifelong learning, widening participation and equity of access are in place at national and institutional levels for these target socio-economic groups and other under-represented groups, including mature students, students with a disability, ethnic minorities and travellers. These areas, which were highlighted as areas for improvement by the Points Commission, have undergone considerable development across all higher education providers, with greater awareness regarding the importance of access, and a greater variety of entry routes to higher education. Some of these are discussed in Section 5 below.

There is also a greater overall level of public awareness regarding the importance of the education system to the overall economic and social well-being of the country. Perhaps the most significant difference between today and 1999 is the growing dissatisfaction on the part of educators, policy makers and employers with what are perceived to be the distortive effects of the points system on education and skills. The current economic downturn has only served to highlight to the broader public some of the inherent and long-term weaknesses in the Irish educational landscape at all levels, including – when compared internationally – the low levels of overall educational attainment within the adult population (particularly those aged 45 and over), and current participation in lifelong learning activities<sup>3</sup>. In that context, options which were considered and ruled out by the Commission might today be found to be more palatable.

### *In summary*

**While the context and issues addressed by the Points Commission are broadly similar to the current situation, developments since its report mandate a need to reassess the points system and its impacts.**

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<sup>2</sup> HEA, National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008-2013 (2008)

<sup>3</sup> HEA, National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008-2013, pp19-21 (2008), also DES, National Strategy for Higher Education, p45 and following (2011)

### **3. Criticisms of the current “Points System’s” impacts**

Criticism of the points system’s impacts on second-level are well known and do not need extensive discussion, but are worth summarising. They include:

- Excessively instrumentalised learning;
- Apparent mismatch between the curriculum and the skills and competencies acquired by students;
- Damage to the student experience due to excessive focus on the terminal examination;
- Distorted choice of both Leaving Certificate and higher education subjects/courses;
- Equal weighting of all Leaving Certificate subjects regardless of perceived or actual degree of difficulty.
- Perpetuation of socio-economic disadvantage.

#### *In summary*

**It is virtually impossible to determine the degree to which these effects are caused by the points system or are affected by other aspects of educational policy. However, any reform of the second-level system to address these concerns can only be successful if it is situated in an overall context of reform, including of the points system. These issues are further explored in the remainder of the report.**

### **4. Demand and supply**

In 2010, more than 80% of the total Leaving Certificate cohort of 55,480 applied through the CAO for a third-level place<sup>4</sup>. Overall age cohort entry rates to higher education increased from 44% in 1998 to 61% in 2010, with Irish HE student numbers growing from 122,000 in 1999 to 165,000 in 2010<sup>5</sup>, an increase of 35%. For reasons which we describe below, the structure of the Irish second level education system creates an unusual demand for education at third level.

At the outset it should be stated that the points system exists because of the need to ration scarce places in higher education and respond to the excess of learner demand over supply. As such its effects can be particularly noticed in areas of high demand and limited supply. These areas include professional programmes such as medicine, education, nursing and the therapies, where there are constant levels of high demand but where both the number of places for Irish/EU students (as well as the number of providers of such programmes) are tightly controlled by the State.

However, even in areas where the numbers of places are within the control of the universities and other colleges, and despite continued expansion of places in the university sector over the last

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<sup>4</sup> Data provided by CAO, July 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See DES statistical reports

<http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=17216&ecategory=46606&language=EN>

decade<sup>6</sup>, there has been a continuous increase in overall demand during that period, resulting in higher points across most areas. It is important to state at the outset that the points system has no function in measuring educational attainment. However, because the system translates educational attainment into a points score whose value varies according to the supply of, and demand for places in particular disciplines, the two are often (erroneously) conflated.

In the current context of predicted ongoing expansion of demand for higher education from approximately 165,000 students in 2010 to between 276,000 to 296,000 in 2031<sup>7</sup>, an increase of between 67% - 78% over current numbers, it is clear that the current levels of incremental annual expansion on the supply side will by no means be sufficient to keep up with this increase in demand, and that competition for places in most areas will continue to increase. Based on the current points system, it could quite reasonably be expected that the points entry requirements for most university courses would continue to increase.

In European terms, Irish second-level education is unusual in that over 90% of the second-level cohort are in an academic 2<sup>nd</sup> level stream (as opposed to vocational), and then over 60% of that cohort enter HE. In many other OECD countries, there is an important second-level vocational stream, with a more differentiated tertiary education system which caters for a broader range of post-second-level learners. By comparison, less than 7% of total Leaving Certificate candidates sit the Leaving Certificate Applied. The virtual collapse in demand for apprentices is likely to exacerbate pressure for third level places. Detailed discussion of this matter is beyond the scope of this paper, however, when the overall issue of supply and demand is being considered it will also be necessary to look at the full range of post-second-level options for school leavers, not just at those within HE.

DES projections regarding student demand will also obviously have enormous consequences for the current HE funding models. The choice of selection and entry systems is also relevant, with different options having very different financial consequences. The HEA is currently undertaking a “sustainability study” to look at these various elements, and we look forward to being able to contribute to those discussions as soon as possible.

### *In summary*

**Demand for higher education in Ireland is extraordinarily high and all indications are that such demand will increase over time. Unless there were to be a currently unforeseeable increase in supply there will continue to be a need for a system to equilibrate demand and supply, both at aggregate levels and among different disciplines.**

**The question, therefore, is whether the existing points system in terms of both its feed forward into third-level and its backwash into second-level remains the optimum way to achieve this.**

## **5. Supplementary admission routes into higher education**

Over the past ten years, a number of “alternative” or supplementary admission routes into higher education are available. These routes are part of the general expansion of higher education over the last ten years but more specifically derive from university and national policies to widen

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<sup>6</sup> From 78,000 students in 1999-2000 to 113,000 in 2009-10: a 45% increase complemented by a large expansion in the IoT sector.

<sup>7</sup> DES, Projections of full time enrolment, Primary, Second and Higher level, 2011 – 2031, p.16ff, [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/stat\\_proj\\_enrolments\\_2011.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/stat_proj_enrolments_2011.pdf)

participation for under-represented groups and improve access for learners who wish to enter higher education but are not applying on the basis of Leaving Certificate.

These supplementary routes include FETAC (formerly NCVA) entry, mature entry, the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), with up to a total of 25% of new entrants coming through these routes in a number of universities. Details of each of routes, as well as data regarding students applying and accepting places into each of them, can be found in Appendix 2.

For most higher education institutions, these routes have now been integrated into the CAO system, meaning that applicants apply to the college of their choice through the CAO, where the application is processed. However, the assessment of these applications is based on the specific criteria which apply to each supplementary entry route, rather than solely (if at all) on the applicant's Leaving Certificate results.

For these routes, participating universities and other colleges have set aside a quota or number of places in all undergraduate degree programmes, which are allocated on a competitive basis to those who have applied, based on the criteria for each route. This allocation, while still competitive and managed through the CAO, is undertaken separately from the better-known mainstream competitive CAO process through which most school leavers apply.

In 2010, 10,886 individuals were offered and accepted places through the competitive procedures applying to each route. This represents 24% of the net total accepts made through the CAO system in 2010.

It can be seen that the existing supplementary admissions routes, which now operate as an integrated part of the CAO system, cater for very large numbers and proportions of higher education applicants and new students, despite ongoing challenges regarding the need to ensure complete equity of access for all societal groups. However, because of the emphasis on the Leaving Certificate/points system, many of these routes and the numbers using them remain relatively unknown to the general public.

In the current context of examining selection and entry processes to HE, any discussion of these supplementary admissions routes should also include mention of the fact that these routes were all put in place as a form of positive discrimination or "affirmative action", precisely because of the highly competitive nature of the points system. Without such routes, large numbers of applicants from these target groups with the proven potential to succeed in their preferred courses of study would simply not reach the competitive points requirements – particularly in the most high demand courses – and thus lose out on the opportunity to benefit from the professional, social and cultural advantages which HE can bring to themselves as individuals, their families and their communities.

It could, therefore, also be argued that the reservation of quotas of places for applicants through these routes – in the same way as for international students, likewise the target of (different) national policies and institutional strategies – adds further to the general points race by "removing" places from the mainstream competitive process through which the majority of applicants must apply.



### ***In summary***

**Over the past ten years the all-encompassing nature of the points system has been diluted by the development of supplementary entry routes. These routes have been significant for both mature learners and disadvantaged groups. However, they do not lessen the significance of the points system for the majority of the Leaving Certificate cohort seeking a place at third level.**

## **6. The curriculum and assessment interface**

As part of a shared commitment across the entire continuum of the education community, each sector has to be free to best address the developmental and intellectual needs of the student, as these present themselves within that sector, but also in full awareness of the effects of these on the education continuum across the sectors. From this perspective, what happens in second-level must have reference to the requirements of third-level, but not at the expense of the particular and unique life-cycle demands of the second-level student.

Even in the context of current reforms at second level, there remains a considerable debate as to whether the main problem centres more on the assessment system than on the curriculum itself.

In any event, the current assessment system is seen from both the employers' and universities' perspectives as being too narrow and not sufficiently capable of capturing the broader aspects of learning. Business has become more aware of the cumulative nature of educational success. Whether it is the skills of the overall workforce skills or the supply of fourth level researchers, it is acknowledged that these have their roots in the overall quality of the school system and the inculcation of an appetite for learning from an early age. There has been a greater a focus on key skills at all levels of education systems around the world. It has been argued that moving from a content based to a more skills based learning model at an early stage is more likely to equip students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, design, innovation, communications creativity and, above all, an appetite for learning'.

The need for maths support centres and academic writing centres within many higher education institutions to support first year students (and indeed subsequent years) tends to confirm the view that, despite adequate Leaving Certificate examination results, school leavers have not benefited fully from what the curriculum was supposed to provide them with. There is at least a stutable case that the sole focus on a terminal examination, coupled with the current points system's precision in rationing scarce places, promotes a culture of both teaching and learning "to the exam".

It would be preferable to have an assessment system which aligns better with the skills/competences which are valued in broader society, and which are also those sought in higher education. While the Points Commission concluded that the Leaving Certificate examination should continue to be the principal mechanism by which third-level places were allocated, it also recommended that it was necessary to broaden significantly what the examination measures.

However, current research<sup>8</sup> indicates that the Leaving Certificate model results in a narrower learning experience, much more focused on explicit preparation for the exam (including practising previous papers, taking grinds which provide 'notes for the exam' etc.). It remains to be seen whether a different assessment model, one which combined continuous assessment, project work and some exams, would necessarily have the same negative effects, especially if the emphasis was

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<sup>8</sup>Smyth, E., Banks, J. and Calvert, E. *From Leaving Certificate to leaving school: a longitudinal study of sixth year students*. Dublin: Liffey Press/ESRI (2011).

on experiential learning. Students might still feel under pressure to do well, but they could only do well by engaging with different forms of learning and by being assessed on a range of skills and competencies.

During the last ten years, the universities and DIT have introduced in a systematic way much more varied assessment types and modes, which are aligned to assess different types of learning. Given that assessment is the biggest driver of learning behaviour, it would be considered positive if the school system also introduced a more constructivist approach to the assessment of learners, at the same time placing greater value on project work, continuous assessment, team work etc., thus broadening the learning experience and reducing the importance of the final exam. In addition to being worthwhile in itself, such an approach could also be an essential complement to a reformed entry system to higher education.

It has proved difficult to secure support for a system in which second-level teachers make professional judgements around the competencies/standards of students, and which would be needed where continuous assessment is included among the components leading to a final grade. This is in marked contrast to the HE system, where lecturers are entirely responsible for the assessment of their own students – with appropriate quality assurance oversight from external examiners – in equally high stakes contexts, and where informal and formal quality assurance procedures have been successfully devolved to the awarding institutions.

Indeed, it would be desirable if the universities and the second level system could collaborate in their separate attempts to introducing more constructivist approaches to assessment (including through possible joint research), thus learning from each other and reinforcing positive change across the education continuum. Such mutual collaboration would be beneficial for both second-level and tertiary education in their renewed efforts to focus on educational goals and intended outcomes, with increased scope for flexibility and innovation whereby the learner is encouraged to have a more active participatory role throughout the experience.

### *In summary*

**There is a strong case for the reform of assessment systems at second level, drawing on the experience of recent innovations at third level. These systems should co-evolve to meet learner and societal needs. Such reformed assessment systems have the potential to address criticisms levelled at the points system in terms of instrumentalised learning and teaching.**

## Part Two : Options

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The question of whether a school leaving examination should be used to determine access to higher education has been regularly discussed in many OECD countries over many years. Indeed, the origins of the points system in Ireland in the 1960s and the establishment of the CAO in 1976 were based on research regarding the predictive validity of the Leaving Certificate.

Research in Ireland and other OECD countries has repeatedly shown, over the years, that there is a strong correlation between an individual's performance at the Leaving Certificate (or similar school leaving examinations) and higher education performance generally i.e. the predictive validity of the Leaving Certificate continues to be high<sup>9</sup>. This is hardly surprising, given that third-level assessment processes have until recently more or less replicated the second-level assessment system.

However, the correlation between second and third-level performance is not a perfect one and there are a number of other factors which can intervene. These include a student's choice of higher education sector (university or IoT), the field of study and a student's gender. The following sections consider a number of options which could possibly be used to reform current selection and entry mechanisms.

### **7. Key principles of an effective admissions system**

In considering any modification of the points system, we propose that any system for selection and entry to third-level education should be firmly constructed on the following key principles:

- Reward merit and student effort
- Promote equity
- Ensure transparency and simplicity
- Ensure efficiency and cost-effectiveness
- Promote positive educational values and achievements and personal development.
- Not distort other elements of the educational continuum.

A number of these principles were also promoted in 1999 by the Points Commission, and have enjoyed wide support since then.

As has been discussed earlier, the current system has transparency, efficiency and reward for raw effort as its core strengths. However, it is less successful in respect of impacts on equity of access, educational values and the overall educational continuum. However, it has to be acknowledged that developments since the Points Commission's report do not suggest that we are any closer to conceptualising and implementing a "perfect" system. Any reformed system is likely to involve some trade-offs among the above principles.

In that context the working group has discussed a number of possible alternative mechanisms to the current system which would merit further discussion in a wider forum. It should be stressed that these possible mechanisms have not been developed in any way beyond the discussion presented in

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<sup>9</sup> See Points Commission report (1999) <http://odtl.dcu.ie/mirror/irlgov/educ/pointcommreport99.html#s3.2>

this paper, and that no discussions have taken place with a broader range of interested stakeholders other than those included in the working group. Neither have these possible alternatives been discussed in the broader academic community – notably the Academic Councils of the universities and DIT – which have statutory responsibility for determining admissions requirements to their institutions.

Such discussions should also consider the problem of excess demand over supply in a broader educational context, including the perceptions and motivations which influence student choice. There are considerable social pressures in Ireland for students to go down particular routes. Consideration should also be given to those who do not achieve admission to their choice of programme or institution, particularly in the context of a broader educational ecosystem between school, further and higher education, part-time and full-time, mature entry, etc.

The ideas presented here do not address the potential - already commonplace in a number of other countries – for entry to certain professional courses (e.g. medicine, law) to be placed at graduate level only. Such a move would remove some of the most competitive courses from the current points system, possibly reducing some of the current distortions in the process.

Likewise, given that the use of a single method can become a weakness, since any method can be manipulated over time, it may be useful to examine the ideas below bearing in mind that a combination of ideas and scenarios may prove more robust than any single one in isolation.

This paper concentrates on the Leaving Certificate in an Irish context. Given obligations regarding the equal treatment of other EU students, it should be noted that any possible changes made would also need to apply to applicants from other EU countries presenting a wide variety of qualifications. Clearly, this has logistical and potential cost implications.

## **8. Options which could be considered**

The options presented here are situated along a line representing their connectedness between third-level admissions criteria and Leaving Certificate results. At one end of this line the admissions process is continued high reliance on Leaving Certificate results; at the other end of the line the admissions process is much less reliant on Leaving Certificate results, and involves the substantial use of other mechanisms. For convenience, they are presented in three groupings of high medium and low connection to the leaving certificate results.

### **High Connection to Leaving Certificate results**

In a scenario where selection for third-level continues to be fully based on Leaving Certificate results, hopefully following reforms which reflect and reward a broader range of learning outcomes, a number of possible innovations could be envisaged as follows:

#### **8.1 Expansion of Supplementary Entry Routes**

To continue to expand the supplementary entry routes in terms of the sizes of quotas for each route. An advantage is that this would continue to increase participation in HE by under-represented target groups, and encourage greater numbers of applicants from these groups to apply, thus raising overall educational expectations in disadvantaged communities and schools.

Disadvantages of this option include the fact that even with a doubling of quotas, the numbers of places available through these quotas in the high prestige (thus very high demand) courses will, in real terms remain very low, thus continuing effectively to exclude large numbers of potentially qualified candidates from under-represented groups.

A second disadvantage is that such a move would further increase competition for remaining places among the mainstream cohort of applicants, thus raising the points levels even higher and thus possibly reinforcing even further certain negative aspects of the current system, including unintended distortion on learning behaviours at second-level.

## **8.2 Percentile-based points system**

This involves changing the way points are allocated for Leaving Certificate grades, to a percentile-based national ranking system. This would move away from the current system, whereby all higher level A1 grades receive 100 points, and all higher level C1 grades receive 60 points to a system where the points would be awarded based on the relative performance of the student against the relevant cohort taking that subject nationally.

If it is accepted that the purpose of points is to ration places based on the student's attainment relative to that of other students seeking the same place, it could be deemed reasonable to base individual subject points on the same criterion. This would involve using LC grades to place the students in merit order for the subject, with the students with the best grades coming first and those getting worst grades coming last. This merit ranking does not imply attainment of any particular grade, or considerations of pass or fail. Those are matters of academic standard, not merit ranking.

The most obvious way to convert merit ranking into points is to use percentiles with those in the top 1% getting 100 points, those in the next 1% getting 99 points, and so on, with those in the bottom 1% getting 1 point. Adjustments might need to be incorporated into this option for Leaving Certificate subjects with low numbers of candidates and therefore different grade distributions.

An advantage of this option is that it is independent of subject workload, marking differences, grade distribution, etc. It could therefore be considered a fairer system of rewarding student effort. It would reward students taking what are currently regarded as the "harder" subjects. It would also encourage students to sit the subjects which they actually want to study, rather than those where it has traditionally been considered easier to obtain points. It also treats every subject in a similar manner and is easy to understand.

A disadvantage of this option is that it does not take account of the broader reasons behind the choices made by students, including availability of subjects in the school system, social pressures, etc. ESRI research<sup>10</sup> indicates that the profile of students taking

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<sup>10</sup> Smyth, E. and Hannan, C. *Who chooses science?* Dublin: Liffey Press/ESRI (2002), and Smyth, E. and Calvert, E. *Choices and challenges: the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle education.* Dublin: Liffey Press/ESRI (2011)

different Leaving Certificate subjects varies markedly. Some subjects attract students with high levels of Junior Certificate performance, while others have a broader mix of students. It could be argued that the current system in which students are assessed on the basis of their *own* performance *in a given subject* is the fairest one. If a high proportion of A grades in a particular subject merely reflects the very selective intake into the subject, it could be seen as unfair to penalise these students in points terms. Although research (Smyth and Calvert, 2011) shows that points play a role in subject choice for a minority of students, the main drivers are intrinsic factors (liking a subject, finding it interesting) and the requirements to have particular subjects for college or employment entry.

It could also be argued that the relative workloads and standards in any subject should better reflect the NFQ level descriptors and related outcomes at that level, and that any discrepancies between subjects should be addressed on this basis, rather than ranking students in a given subject on a comparative approach with their peers.

### **8.3 Reduction in granularity of points grading / random selection**

This would regroup Leaving Certificate grades for points purposes into their pre-1992 bands. This could mean, for example, that the same points would be allocated to both A1 and A2 grades, and likewise to B1 and B2 grades. The effect would be to increase the numbers of applicants with the same aggregate points scores (from their best 6 subjects). Available places would be allocated based on aggregate points scores, as at present, with random selection being used to distinguish between candidates on identical points scores where not enough places are available.

An advantage of this option is that it would increase the number of applicants who would meet the points requirements for many high demand courses, thus raising aspirations and creating opportunities for those who might not otherwise have had these. However, following a random selection procedure, not all of these applicants would be offered a place on the course of their choice. To the extent that there is an observed correlation between socio economic status and participation in high demand courses, it could be argued that exclusion by random selection is more socially equitable than exclusion by not having the same socio-economic advantages as those who were offered places.

A disadvantage of this option is that it does not preferentially reward the highest levels of Leaving Certificate performance, thus potentially reducing a student's motivation to achieve the highest result possible. Such a disadvantage could potentially be overcome by combining this option with a second tier of selection – e.g. a weighting process. Such a weighting process could be linked to the choice of Leaving Certificate subjects, their relevance to the student's third-level preferences, and Leaving Certificate grades obtained in these subjects.

### **8.4 Supplementary testing**

In addition to Leaving Certificate grades converted into points, to use standardised psychometric testing tailored for applicants to a range of different programmes, as is currently the case for medicine and for mature entry arts applicants in NUIG, UCC and UCD, and nationally for all mature applicants to nursing (as well as in a number of postgraduate programmes). Such tests are widely used for recruitment purposes in both the public and private sectors, and indeed in selection for higher education in a number

of other OECD countries. The scores for psychometric testing could be added to those obtained through the Leaving Certificate – possibly with some small moderating mechanism, as currently with the HPAT and Leaving Certificate scores - to give an aggregate score for the purposes of determining selection.

An advantage of this option is that it would allow for an additional layer of differentiation over and above the Leaving Certificate and potentially help identify applicants with the necessary attributes for certain professional or academic areas.

Disadvantages include the additional effort and cost involved for the applicant, and the additional administration and costs involved for the HE institutions. A further disadvantage is the possibility that determined applicants (with sufficient resources) will prepare extensively for standardised psychometric testing, in the same way as for the Leaving Certificate, thus negating the positive differential effects which this additional testing might have introduced regarding widening participation and broadening the profile of entry cohorts. Research is currently underway among the medical schools regarding the HPAT test, and data will be available in the future to inform any further consideration of this option.

#### **8.5 Supplementary modes of school based assessment**

To consider, in addition to Leaving Certificate grades being converted into points, additional school-based modes of assessments of the student's progress, other than a terminal exam, which would be incorporated into the HE selection process. In such a scenario, HE entry would be partly decoupled from the Leaving Certificate results, similar to the previous option, but by using school-based information such as, for example, aggregate performance of the student over the previous three years.

An advantage of this option is that it would allow for an additional layer of school-based information regarding the applicant, including her/his performance in a range of subjects over a more extended period of time than just for the Leaving Certificate examinations, which would assist third-level in allocating places. Under this option, the criteria could also include the range of specific subjects studied and their relevance to the candidate's HE choices.

Disadvantages however include the possibility that current reported behaviour among Leaving Certificate students would extend further down into the second-level system, with increased pressure on schools to "game" the system. While in theory rewarding student effort and merit, such an option could also further discriminate against less advantaged schools and candidates with fewer subject choices and other supports, thus militating against the principle of promoting equity among all applicants.

#### **8.6 Supporting evidence from schools**

To consider, in addition to Leaving Certificate grades being converted into points, additional supporting materials provided by second-level schools (e.g. references, etc.) or by the candidate (e.g. personal statements, etc.) which would assist third-level in determining an applicant's motivation, suitability and potential to study a particular academic or professional course.

An advantage of this option is that it would potentially allow for an additional layer of information regarding the applicant – provided by those who have guided the applicant



in his/her learning over the previous years, therefore best placed to provide that information – which would assist third-level in allocating places between equally placed applicants according to motivation and suitability.

A disadvantage is that past experience (when references were still part of the HE application process up until the 1970s, and more recently in the initial years of the HEAR scheme) shows that almost all references received were extremely positive, no matter the quality of the application, and that, unlike for job candidates, it would be impossible for administrative reasons to follow-up on all such references for additional information. Such a system could also be deemed to be putting unfair pressure on the second-level representatives providing such references.

## **Medium Connection to Leaving Certificate results**

In a scenario where selection for third-level would be less based on Leaving Certificate results than at present, but where performance to certain levels in the LC would still act as a matriculation-style threshold score, a number of possible innovations could be envisaged. Use of these options could possibly allow for the discontinuity of schemes such as DARE and HEAR (depending on the level of that threshold), because the highly competitive edge of the current system would be removed, thus moving towards a levelling of the playing field for applicants from less advantaged backgrounds.

### **8.7 Threshold entry system**

This would involve a system of threshold entry requirements for each main undergraduate subject area (arts, science, technology, etc.), with the threshold entry requirement set by each HEI at such a level that all eligible applicants should have a reasonable expectation of completing the course.

#### **Variant 1: Random selection above threshold**

All applicants meeting the threshold requirement in the relevant area would then enter a system of random selection in order to allocate available places, assuming there are less places than qualified applicants.

In order to be effective, this option would probably require a bundling together of related courses (e.g. all science courses) for the first and possibly second years of each course, thus reducing the current proliferation of CAO codes with small numbers of student places in each. There has been a proliferation of CAO entry codes in recent years – particularly in some HEIs – with many of these “new” courses having small numbers of places. In some cases, students on these “new” courses share many first year modules with students from similar related courses. Having fewer codes with more places in each course would reduce the competitive edge associated with entry. However, logistical issues surrounding such a move would need to be examined closely – e.g. if all arts and humanities courses were bundled together, how would some universities cope regarding infrastructure (size of lecture theatres, etc.) with a first year cohort in these main areas of up to 1,000 students.

The same possible advantages and disadvantages regarding the concept of random selection apply here as noted above, particularly concerning the principle of rewarding merit and student effort.



**Variant 2: Supplementary assessment above threshold**

This would be to employ selection among those applicants who meet the threshold level, based on the outcomes of additional criteria, which could include standardised psychometric testing or school-based modes of assessment or supporting materials instead of a random selection process.

The same possible advantages and disadvantages regarding standardised psychometric testing, or additional school-based modes of assessment or supporting materials apply here as noted above.

**Variant 3: School quotas**

Here, quotas of places could be allocated to each second-level school in the country, which would then be taken by the highest performing applicants in each of those schools. There are a number of different variants on a “contextualised admissions” approach in operation or being considered by different HE systems internationally<sup>11</sup>. The total number of places reserved through these quotas for all schools would need to be calculated carefully, to ensure that there are still places available for eligible applicants across the second-level system who are not among the highest performers in their school and who therefore do not enter through that school’s quota.

An advantage of this “contextualised admissions” option would be that it could go a long way to improving third-level participation rates among many schools where there is less tradition of progression to higher education, thus raising educational expectations in these communities and families. A potential disadvantage is that – instead of providing positive stimulation in all schools – such a system could perversely encourage some schools or individuals (either applicants and/or their teachers) not to work hard, since a certain quota of places will be available for that school anyway, assuming students reach the threshold entry requirements.

However, further disadvantages of this option could include the creation of new obstacles for non-school entrants (e.g. mature students) and is likely to have unintended consequences for school choice patterns among parents. Furthermore, research on the Texas 10% approach (which admitted the top decile from each high school) found that it was not enough in itself to ensure the admission of minority students from “resource-poor” schools to the most selective HE institutions, as differences were evident in patterns of application, reflecting differential expectations<sup>12</sup>.

Such an option might also need to be considered from the perspective of possibly also being applicable to other second-level EU schools as well as all second-level schools in the Republic of Ireland.

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<sup>11</sup> See Scottish Parliament, *Widening access to higher education: admissions*. Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament (2009) for an overview of these.

<sup>12</sup> Niu, S.X., Tienda, M., Cortes, K. College selectivity and the Texas 10% law. *Economics of Education Review*, 25 (3): 259-272 (2006)

## **Low Connection to Leaving Certificate results**

Possible mechanisms in this category would move much further away from reliance on Leaving Certificate performance by setting lower threshold, or minimum, entry requirements.

### **8.8 Minimum entry requirements / guaranteed first year place**

To move to a system of minimum entry requirements for each main disciplinary grouping (arts and humanities, all sciences – including health sciences, etc) across all institutions. These minimum entry requirements would need to be agreed by all participating institutions. All applicants meeting the minimum requirement in the relevant area would be guaranteed a first-year place at a participating higher education institution in Ireland, with distribution across the country to be based on student preferences and the number of places in each HEI. The pooling of existing places within each main disciplinary area would provide enough places across the country in each area for all applicants.

This option would involve a change in concept from the current system: entry in first year would be to the university for a common one-year preparatory or foundation programme within each main disciplinary grouping, and then, following successful completion of that first year, to a particular course at that university within that broader disciplinary group. This would allow students time to make informed choices regarding the course which best suits them, and also to develop the skills and competences which will be needed to successfully progress into and complete that course.

Since the numbers of places available in these courses would obviously be limited (unless, for example, there are also radical changes to government policy regarding health sector recruitment), there would be a certain amount of competition (based on first year results and preferences) among students to obtain these. However, student preferences at the end of this first year should be considerably better informed than during their final year in the second-level system. From an educational perspective, such an option would be positive, in that it transfers the current difficulties regarding making such choices from second- to third-level. However, this option would only become viable if all courses within each broad grouping had the same first year foundation programme, offering students a wide range of pathways for subsequent years.

As with other options already discussed, logistical issues surrounding such a move would need to be examined closely. Such a system could also lead to the necessity of Level 8 programmes of four years duration in all fields of study across all HEIs. This would have a significant impact on HE finance which is not explored here.

In addition, there could also be significant issues for young people's post-school pathways – what would be the situation for those who are not accepted into 2<sup>nd</sup> year at university? What alternative pathways in education and training would be open for them? Will disadvantaged students be less likely to apply for college because of the risk of incurring costs without getting a degree? It is also possible that such an approach would lead to increased pressures on first-year students, who are already well documented as being vulnerable in terms of mental health etc.

It could be argued that such an approach in HE could lead to unintended social consequences regarding drop-out, time-to-completion and non-attendance, as in a number of other HE systems with very open entry mechanisms. All of these would lead to decreased cost-effectiveness and lower levels of efficiency for Irish HE as a whole.

#### **8.9 Minimum entry requirements lottery**

To move to a system of minimum entry requirements for all higher education institutions. All applicants meeting the minimum requirement would then be entered into a randomised lottery based system.

The advantages and disadvantages of such a lottery based system combined with an open entry mechanism would then apply, as discussed earlier.

### **9. Conclusion**

This paper examines issues relevant to the relationship between second and third-level in terms of the overall need to improve the skills and attainments of learners. It examines how selection and entry mechanisms to third-level could be reformed. In doing so, it acknowledges that there is no “perfect” system and that any option or set of options will involve trade-offs. In particular, in the time available, it has not been possible to assess the feasibility of implementation of the various options or groups of options discussed, or to subject them to cost/benefit analysis.

Nevertheless, it is hoped that the paper will provide a useful contribution to the process of reflection and debate launched by the Minister and provide a basis for further engagement by the Universities/DIT and the wider stakeholder group in taking these issues forward.

# Appendix 1: Group Membership

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Tom Collins, NUI Maynooth, Chair  
Clive Byrne, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals  
Ned Costello, IUA  
Tony Donohoe, IBEC  
Kathy Hall, UCC  
Iain Mac Labhrainn, NUI Galway  
Paul McCutcheon, University of Limerick  
John McGinnity, NUI Maynooth  
Michael Mulvey, DIT  
Sue Power, TCD  
Lewis Purser, IUA  
Mark Rogers, UCD  
Anne Scott, DCU  
Emer Smyth, ESRI

## Appendix 2

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### *1. Additional discussion regarding funding mechanisms and student numbers*

It should be noted that while the universities and other colleges can in theory decide on the number of study places in most disciplines, in reality the funding system imposes severe restrictions on the viability of expansion, through both the availability of capital funding to increase physical capacity and through recurrent funding for operating costs. Although recurrent funding is allocated by the state to institutions on the basis of student numbers, the overall level of funding available is fixed at a political level, and has been reducing consistently over recent years. Any increase in student numbers – even when taking the increased “student contributions” into account - therefore reduces and dilutes the overall funding available per individual student. The state funding received per EU student in most disciplines is less than the full cost of that student to the university.

There is also an in-built “negative incentive” in the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model used by the HEA to fund universities, which de facto punishes a university financially if it does not continuously expand student numbers at the same rate as other universities, thereby exposing itself (and other universities) to further dilution of funding per student. The only way to overcome this “negative incentive” would be to establish a cartel between all universities and freeze student numbers completely, which the universities have been unwilling to contemplate.

The universities have therefore continued to expand the numbers of students regularly, but – particularly since 2008 – have done so while recognising and stating publicly that they are doing so for the greater public good and in pursuit of national policy objectives, rather than out of any financial rationale. The shortfall in funding per each EU student has to be alleviated through other sources of funding, including non-EU fee-paying students, philanthropy, and internal cross-subsidization from other university activities.

### *2. Additional information and discussion regarding supplementary admissions routes operated through the CAO*

#### **2.1 FETAC entry**

FETAC applicants to CAO, 2008-2010<sup>13</sup>

	FETAC Applicants	% of Total Applicants	Net FETAC Accepts	% of Net Total Accepts	Accepts as % of all CAO Applicants	Accepts as % of FETAC Applicants
<b>2008</b>	5,498	7.99%	235	0.56%	0.34%	4.27%
<b>2009</b>	9,799	13.13%	1,719	3.77%	2.30%	17.54%
<b>2010</b>	11,711	14.98%	2,360	5.17%	3.02%	20.15%

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<sup>13</sup> Data provided by CAO, July 2011

The data regarding applications to HE from those with FETAC (or previous NCVA) qualifications show a very substantial increase over the period 2008-2010. The number of applicants more than doubled (in both real and % terms), and the number of these applicants being offered and accepting HE places increased by 1,000%, from 235 to 2,360., or from less than 1 in 20 to 1 in 5 of all FETAC applicants.

According to DES<sup>14</sup>, over the period 2007 - 2009, the number of approved Further Education (Post Leaving Certificate) places increased from 30,188 to 31,688 while over the same period, enrolments on the ground by FE providers increased from approximately 30,000 to 38,600, in response to increased demand. This would imply that the numbers of FETAC qualification holders applying to HE, as a % of annual FETAC enrolments, also increased substantially during the period 2008-2010, from less than 20% in 2008 to over 30% in 2010.

However, despite these considerable increases, in overall terms the numbers of FETAC applicants and acceptances to HE could still be considered low: 3% of all CAO applicants, and 5% of all accepts.

## 2.2 Mature entry

Applicants aged 23 or above (mature students) to CAO, 2008-2010<sup>15</sup>

	Mature Applicants	% of Total Applicants	Net Mature Accepts	% of Net Total Accepts	Accepts as % of all CAO Applicants	Accepts as % of Mature Applicants
<b>2008</b>	9,635	14.00%	4,555	10.81%	6.62%	47.28%
<b>2009</b>	9,452	12.67%	6,219	13.64%	8.33%	65.80%
<b>2010</b>	14,910	19.07%	7,132	15.63%	9.12%	47.83%

The data regarding applications to HE from mature applicants (those aged 23 or over at the start of their application year) likewise shows an increase. It should be noted that mature applicants do not have to choose whether to apply on the basis of their Leaving Certificate results (even if taken a number of years previously), or on the basis of their other formal, informal or experiential learning experiences since leaving second-level school. They will be considered first as mature applicants and if unsuccessful through that route will then be able to compete in the school leaver pool if they have the matriculation subjects. In most programmes the universities and DIT have sufficient places for eligible mature applicants. The exceptions are in the high demand programmes where mature places are limited and where most of the mature students would not have the points to compete with the school leaver cohort.

The number of mature applications received between 2008 - 2010 increased by more than 50% to almost 15,000, representing 19% of total applications through the CAO. The numbers being offered and accepting a place also increased by 50%, to over 7,000. More than 15% of all those accepting a place through the CAO system in 2010 were mature students, and almost 50% of all mature applicants who applied through the CAO were offered and accepted a place in HE.

It is important to note that a number of third-level colleges do not use the CAO system for processing applications from mature students. These colleges include four of the Colleges of

<sup>14</sup>DES, PROJECTIONS OF FULL TIME ENROLMENT, Primary, Second and Higher level, 2011 – 2031, (2011)

<sup>15</sup>Data provided by CAO, July 2011

Education, most of the private third-level providers, and one university. In these cases, applications are received by directly by these providers on the basis of Leaving Certificate or other prior learning, and are processed locally. The total numbers of mature students (both applicants and acceptances) in Irish HE are therefore somewhat higher than in the table above.

Despite the strong growth in applications and acceptances in recent years, as mentioned earlier in this paper, it is recognised that overall education attainment levels among the adult population in Ireland are still very low when compared with other OECD states<sup>16</sup>. The National Strategy for Higher Education discusses this “upskilling challenge” in detail, and projects a tripling of demand from mature students from 5,500 in 2009 to over 16,000 in 2025. The current economic and labour market context makes this challenge all the more urgent. The National Strategy’s recommendations to level the playing field for part-time HE students, so that they no longer have to pay higher fees than full time students, will also stimulate this demand.

### 2.3 HEAR entry

HEAR is the Higher Education Access Route, a nation-wide scheme which targets school leavers from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds, as defined by the National Access Strategy (HEA, 2008). HEAR was established by the universities and DIT based on the evidence that socio-economic disadvantage can have a negative effect on how well a student does at school and whether they go on to college.

Eligibility for HEAR is based on a multi-indicator assessment, using financial, social and cultural indicators widely used and accepted elsewhere in Irish educational and social policy contexts. Eligible applicants can compete for entry to all higher education programmes in participating institutions on reduced Leaving Certificate points, and also benefit from additional academic and financial supports while in college.

The development of HEAR as a national scheme was supported by the Strategic Innovation Fund from 2007-2011; during this period the number of participating institutions increased from 8 to 17. As part of this development, during 2009-2010 the HEAR application process was mainstreamed as part of the overall CAO process.

HEAR applicants 2008-2010<sup>17</sup>

	HEAR Applicants	% of Total Applicants	Net HEAR Accepts	% of Net Total Accepts	Accepts as % of all CAO Applicants	Accepts as % of HEAR Applicants
<b>2008</b>	1,819	2.64%	713	1.7%	1.0%	39%
<b>2009</b>	3,008	4.03%	682	1.5%	0.9%	23%
<b>2010</b>	8,399	10.74%	1,118	2.45%	1.43%	13.31%

NB: the data over these 3 years are not strictly comparable, as the scheme was evolving during this period, and the number of participating institutions increased. In 2008 and 2009 the scheme was not fully integrated with CAO, so the % for these years are indicative only.

The number of HEAR applications grew rapidly during this period, due to increased visibility of the scheme but also to its expansion being restricted to applicants from the designated DEIS schools to being open to applicants from all schools. The numbers of eligible applicants has also grown, albeit

<sup>16</sup> DES, National Strategy for Higher Education (2011), p45 and following

<sup>17</sup> Data provided by participating HEAR institutions (for 2008-2009) and CAO (for 2010).

at a slower rate, showing that the multi-indicator approach used by HEAR to determine eligibility for the scheme is robust and successful in targeting those applicants at greatest socio-economic disadvantage.

Given that the HE participation rates for these target socio-economic groups remain well below national averages (HEA, 2008), there is considerable additional potential for numbers entering HE through the HEAR scheme to expand, assuming that the primary and second-level school systems can continue to work with families and communities to raise overall educational expectations and achievements of these under-represented target groups, and thus contribute to realising their potential and ability to participate in third-level.

## 2.4 DARE entry

DARE is the Disability Access Route to Education, a nation-wide higher education admissions scheme which is designed to help increase the numbers of students with a disability in higher education. DARE has been set up by the participating universities and other colleges based on the evidence that disability can have a negative effect on a student's performance in the school system and also on their likelihood of progressing to higher education.

Eligibility for DARE is based on criteria established by the participating institutions, following advice from professional and social organisations specialised in each main category of disability. DARE offers places to eligible school leavers on a reduced points basis. Eligible applicants can compete for entry to higher education programmes in participating institutions on reduced Leaving Certificate points, and also benefit from additional academic and financial supports while in college.

The development of DARE as a national scheme was supported by the Strategic Innovation Fund from 2007-2011; during this period the number of participating institutions increased from 8 to 13. As part of this development, during 2009-2010 the DARE application process was mainstreamed as part of the overall CAO process.

### DARE applicants 2008-2010<sup>18</sup>

	DARE Applicants	% of Total Applicants	Net DARE Accepts	% of Net Total Accepts	Accepts as % of all CAO Applicants	Accepts as % of DARE Applicants
<b>2008</b>			280	0.7%	0.4%	
<b>2009</b>	3,024	4%	280	0.6%	0.4%	9.25%
<b>2010</b>	2,309	2.95%	400	0.88%	0.51%	17.33%

NB: the data over these 3 years are not strictly comparable, as the scheme was evolving during this period. In 2008 and 2009 the scheme was not fully integrated with CAO, so the % for these years are indicative only.

As with the HEAR scheme, given that the HE participation rates for students with a disability remain well below national averages (16% in 2008 as compared to national average of 55%<sup>19</sup>), there is further potential for numbers entering HE through the DARE scheme to expand.

<sup>18</sup> Data provided by participating DARE institutions (for 2008-2009) and CAO (for 2010).

<sup>19</sup> HEA, National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008-2013 (2008)



## **2.5 Summary re supplementary admissions routes**

Based on the above data for these four supplementary admissions routes, it can be seen that in 2010, significant numbers of applicants used the CAO system to apply to an Irish university or other college through such an entry route. Although the total numbers of applicants using these routes in 2010 add up to over 37,000, or more than 47% of all applicants using the CAO system in 2010, these figures are certainly an overstatement, given the possibilities for double-counting across these various routes (i.e. the same candidate may have applied, for example, using both the FETAC and the Mature routes, or using both Mature and DARE routes).

It is very important to note that the tracking of students entering through these “alternative” routes in the universities and DIT has consistently shown, in a variety of studies, that their retention and completion rates are similar if not better than through the mainstream route. It should be noted however that, although quotas of places are reserved on all courses for entrants through these routes, the real numbers of these students on the “prestige courses” each year can be very small, given the overall restrictions on student numbers in these areas. It should also be noted that the FETAC and Mature students do not enter higher education as school leavers; the issues they face are therefore somewhat different to the main challenges for those entering directly from school through the mainstream points system.