

From Transaction to Transition:

**Outcomes of the Conference on the Transition
from Second to Third-Level Education in Ireland**

A Report to the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, T.D.

December 2011

Summary overview of recommendations

Proposed Action	Status
Continue closer co-operation between the HEA and the NCCA with a focus in the short-term on STEM and assessment/evaluation in second-level and higher education.	Initiated

Proposed Actions	Status
Complete new curriculum specifications for the three science subjects: Biology, Chemistry, Physics incorporating new methods of assessing scientific knowledge and skills	Underway
Continue with the review of other senior-cycle subjects, commencing with English and modern languages, in order to ensure that assessment approaches are closely aligned to curriculum objectives and learning outcomes	Initiated
The new optional subject Politics and Society is already complete and awaiting implementation. Economics and Art have both been revised and the assessment of both will require the use of problem-solving and critical and analytical skills as well as the use of technology. New science courses, and a new course in Physical Education, are nearing completion as optional subjects that will develop a wide range of skills including team-building, critical analysis, debating, coaching, goal-setting and achievement, performance analysis and development, and digital analysis. As it stands, the resources are not available to support the roll-out of these subjects.	Pending
Explore ways of increasing learners' access to a broad range of subjects in the senior cycle. The possibility for inter-school collaboration and e-learning opportunities should be explored and shared by the NCCA.	Initial scoping as part of the planning period for junior cycle 2012–2014

Proposed Action	Status
Nurture and assess a broader range of generic competencies as part of senior-cycle curriculum and assessment	Initiated

Proposed Action	Status
Introduce a broad range of assessment approaches, including school-based assessment in the junior cycle, and develop teacher and system capacity	Initiated

Proposed Action	Status
The NCCA and the State Examination Commission (SEC) will develop proposals to address any problematic predictability identified in an analysis of predictability in the Leaving Certificate examinations.	Analysis and proposals complete by end 2012.

Proposed Action	Status
Move to replace the current grading system of 14 points with an 8-point system (A1, A2, B, C, D, E NG).	Exploration to be undertaken by the NCCA and SEC, with the involvement of experts in examination grading. Any date for this change can be set when the change to undergraduate entry is in place.

Proposed Action	Status
Conduct research into the viability, and potential benefits and consequences, of including Mathematics and/or English in the calculation of points for all courses	Research paper to be prepared in 2012

Proposed Action	Status
Reinforce the issue of foundational skills and the first-year experience as priorities for concerted action across Irish higher education institutions. The National Academy for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching has potential to facilitate and lead collective action on these issues.	The National Academy will be established in Q2 2012 following consultation with the higher education academic community

Proposed Action	Status
The academic year should be extended in all undergraduate education programmes to accommodate the incorporation of transversal skills without compromising discipline-specific content and academic rigour.	As this action does not require any changes to existing contracts, implementation should commence for first-year programmes without delay.

Proposed Action	Status
The higher education institutions, individually and collectively, should review their undergraduate portfolio with a view to establishing broader entry to undergraduate programmes at level 8. This change needs to be made at system level.	Commencement as soon as possible subject to discussions between HEA , QQAI and higher education institutions

Proposed Action	Status
Higher education institutions should take steps to improve the quality of information on the subject content and learning outcomes of their courses, particularly in the context of broader intake to undergraduate programmes.	Immediate commencement by higher education institutions

Proposed Action	Status
Conduct research into the viability and potential benefits and consequences of introducing graduate-only entry to professional courses, including health-care courses.	Research paper to be prepared in 2012

Proposed Action	Status
The broader issues of access to higher education beyond the quota of full-time places for school-leavers and the issue of entry to part-time programmes will be explored as part of the implementation of the <i>National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030</i>	Initial scoping to be completed by summer 2012

Introduction

This report, and the conference on which it is based, arose from concerns expressed by various interested observers of, and stakeholders in, our education system about aspects of the transition of students from second-level to third-level education. These concerns focused on the implications for the senior-cycle curriculum and the skills and competences of students of the role of the Leaving Certificate exam as the key determinant of access to higher education. Concerns were also expressed about the knock on effects that approaches to learning acquired in second level have in third level and on the quality of graduates and, conversely, the knock on implications that practices and behaviours in third level have on second level students. The conference background paper, prepared by Professor Áine Hyland, provided a comprehensive overview of the current debates about the transition from second-level to third-level education; of some of the actions that might be taken to address concerns that have become the focus of public debate in this area; and of issues identified in recent research.

This report will not revisit those debates. Submissions received and published, as well as subsequent stakeholder engagement, generally concurred with Professor Hyland's analysis. There was also broad agreement on the need to move beyond debates (some of which have become perennial in the Irish context) to action. This report focuses on actions. Some of these are already underway, some are proposed for the short term, and some will require further investigation. No single agency or institution is responsible for any of these actions, which will involve engagement and co-operation. However in the case of each, an initial commitment is needed to move in the direction proposed.

At the outset, it is worth noting that this report is not advocating a decoupling of the Leaving Certificate examination from entry to third-level education, although such an action has some minority support. While the current system has some challenges, one of its core strengths is that it is common across all institutions, and easily accessed and understood by school-leavers and their parents. While moving from this to a system that might require multiple applications, or an examination beyond the Leaving Certificate for those aspiring to enter higher or further education, would 'free' the Leaving Certificate examination from its role in selection for third-level, it would offer little benefit to those seeking a third-level place. It has been suggested that such decoupling might result in a devaluing of the Leaving Certificate as a qualification, with the possibility that some might opt out of it to focus instead on the preparation for a university entrance test.

Co-operation between HEA and NCCA

The NCCA has had some engagement with the review of higher education led by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the HEA, and on the development of STEM disciplines across the education system. However the conference on 21st September 2011 represented the first collaborative activity by the HEA and the NCCA, and its success—and the collaborative deliberations it generated—points to the potential for further mutual engagement. Focusing on the continuum of education, rather than on its separate phases and stages, is a welcome development and one that has the potential to contribute to the overall quality of the education system as a whole. In the twenty-first century, the social and economic well-being of countries will be increasingly determined by the quality of their national education and innovation systems. There is an ever-increasing appreciation that responding to contemporary challenges will require collaborative, networked solutions across all levels of education and across all domains of public policy. This conference marks the beginning of close collaboration between two key education agencies. While the transition between second and third level was an obvious place to begin such collaboration, consideration is already being given to further co-operation on STEM and on improving the quality of the assessment and evaluation of educational achievement in second-level and third-level education.

Proposed Action	Status
Continue closer co-operation between the HEA and the NCCA with a focus in the short-term on STEM and assessment/evaluation in second-level and higher education.	Initiated

Second-level curriculum and assessment reform

There was much discussion during and around the conference on the need for learners to have access to a broad and diverse range of subjects and learning experiences throughout their senior cycle culminating in an appropriate qualification to mark the end of their second-level schooling. The broad curriculum and choice currently available to learners was widely endorsed as it had been during the consultation on the future of senior cycle by the NCCA (2003).

The Leaving Certificate examination serves a number of purposes: it offers an end-of-school qualification; it supports and rewards learning in a senior cycle that aims to prepare students for the next phase of learning, and for life; and it supports the selection mechanism for entry to

further and higher education. At the conference there was much comment about the third of these purposes coming to dominate the other two and the need to restore the balance between these purposes. There is consensus, however, as noted earlier, that the Leaving Certificate examination is best positioned to serve as the qualification and the basis for selection for higher education, rather than pursuing the option of a separate selection mechanism.

Criticism of the current model of the Leaving Certificate curriculum and assessment centres on the underdevelopment of critical skills and perceived narrow range of assessment methods, leading to a reductionist approach to learning. Professor Hyland suggests in her paper that the current curriculum in many subjects is not the problem, as syllabus documents seem to require learners to engage critically with subject content and to apply higher order thinking skills. Indeed, there are some further opportunities for even greater focus on skills. Work is already well underway on the development of a *Key Skills Framework* (NCCA, 2011) for the senior cycle, and on the review and development of syllabi within which the key skills are embedded. This review will seek to ensure that a consistent approach to syllabus design and presentation, incorporating up-to-date and relevant learning outcomes, is adopted across all Leaving Certificate subjects. Greater consistency and clarity in this area will ensure that all involved—including students, their parents, those working in further and higher education, and the general public—will have a better awareness of the dynamics of senior-cycle learning. It is also of note that higher education institutions are represented on the NCCA senior cycle committee, and on all of the NCCA's subject committees.

If the problem is not with the curriculum, then it must lie with assessment, the tail that wags the curriculum dog. Assessment approaches are currently being reviewed with proposals under consideration for the assessment of practical work in the sciences and physical education. The examinations for these subjects will assess students' aptitude for problem-solving, as well as their proficiency in the use of technology. The challenge of predictability and 'rote learning' is addressed elsewhere in this report. The work underway at junior cycle is also of note in this regard. Growing assessment capacity more generally across the system in the comparably lower stakes context of junior cycle will inevitably impact on senior cycle.

Some concern was expressed as to the 'real choices' available to learners in all schools. Particular concern was voiced about the limited curriculum choices on offer to pupils in smaller schools, and some anecdotal evidence that these choices are being further restricted due to staffing changes was presented. If the minimum entry to higher education is to be specified and there is to be greater articulation in the future between subjects at second level and

undergraduate programmes, students will need access to more subjects. Finding innovative solutions to this challenge is imperative and will mean sharing teachers and facilities, and using e-learning solutions. This will also be a feature of the junior cycle developments and will provide evidence of good practice that can be shared.

Proposed Actions	Status
Complete new curriculum specifications for the three science subjects: Biology, Chemistry, Physics incorporating new methods of assessing scientific knowledge and skills	Underway
Continue with the review of other senior-cycle subjects, commencing with English and modern languages, in order to ensure that assessment approaches are closely aligned to curriculum objectives and learning outcomes	Initiated
The new optional subject Politics and Society is already complete and awaiting implementation. Economics and Art have both been revised and the assessment of both will require the use of problem-solving and critical and analytical skills as well as the use of technology. New science courses, and a new course in Physical Education are nearing completion as optional subjects that will develop a wide range of skills including team-building, critical analysis, debating, coaching, goal-setting and achievement, performance analysis and development, and digital analysis. As it stands, the resources are not available to support the roll-out of these subjects.	Pending
Explore ways of increasing learners' access to a broad range of subjects for Leaving Certificate. The possibility for inter-school collaboration and e-learning opportunities should be explored and shared by the NCCA.	Initial scoping as part of the planning period for junior cycle 2012–2014

The importance of critical skills for learners transferring from second-level to third-level education was widely commented on during the conference and in the conference papers. The ability to self-direct, to think critically, to communicate, to innovate and to adapt were just some of the competencies that were referred to as being vital for the stage of education and for

successful transition to third level. The *Key Skills Framework* (NCCA, 2009) for senior cycle has already been referred to and work has commenced in the embedding of the key skills as part of the review of senior cycle subjects. These are also part of the developments at junior cycle. A systematic approach to the embedding of these skills in the curriculum and reflecting them in the assessment will avoid the need for ‘add-on’ assessments alongside the Leaving Certificate examination.

Proposed Action	Status
Nurture and assess a broader range of generic competencies as part of senior-cycle curriculum and assessment	Initiated

In order to achieve real change in teaching and learning and assessment approaches, it is recognised that there is a need to build capacity in the system in relation to assessment approaches, starting with school-based assessment in junior cycle. This will develop teacher competencies in a range of assessment approaches and encourage the development of a close relationship between the learning and how it is assessed. Once this capacity is nurtured and developed at junior cycle, the system development will support further change at senior cycle and improve the alignment of assessment with curriculum objectives. A further development worth exploring in this context is the role of technology in broadening the range of assessment methods.

Proposed Action	Status
Introduce a broad range of assessment approaches, including school-based assessment at junior cycle, and develop teacher and system capacity	Initiated

Predictability in the Leaving Certificate examination

Criticism of the Leaving Certificate examination is not new and, in her paper, Professor Hyland charts the trajectory of that criticism, from the earliest exhortation to focus on those elements of human development that do not lend themselves to examinations through to the expression of concerns about the ‘backwash’ effect of a terminal examination system on classroom teaching

and learning in 1986. This predated the observations of the Points Commission on the influence of the points system on subject choice for senior-cycle students and on teachers who teach to the requirements of the test.

Earlier in this decade the NCCA noted, in a report following a consultation on senior cycle education, that the influence of the points system was undermining the overall aims of senior cycle education.

However in recent times the focus of this criticism has shifted somewhat, from the 'backwash' effects of the examination and its role in selection for higher education, to the examination itself and in particular to what are perceived to be elements of predictability in the case of some examinations. This perception has resulted in reports of candidates memorising pre-packaged answers and essays and their strategic deployment in the right 'slots', to gain the maximum marks, and thus, the maximum points score.

Ironically, just as this criticism of apparent predictability has become more vocal, and particularly focused on the memorisation of packaged content or 'rote learning', public criticism of any departure from expected examination question style or structure or predicted topics, has also grown. Both positions were noted at the conference, as was the media commentary on the Leaving Certificate examination papers, which tended, in many instances to equate quality with predictability and, in turn, to equate predictability with fairness to candidates. As was pointed out at the conference, in the absence of analysis and evidence, it cannot be assumed that these criticisms are justified.

Such public concerns and comment regarding predictability is not confined to the Irish examination system. In 2008 the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual), which has responsibility for the regulation of assessment, examinations and qualifications in England, and for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, conducted a specific piece of work to investigate predictability in examinations. . Its finding that, in both England and Northern Ireland, examinations and qualifications are provided by a range of agencies and boards led to the introduction of legislation to ensure that the comparability of standards is maintained by all providers. Five different awarding bodies participated in the study, which focused on subjects which had been the subject of comment and concern about predictability.

The definition of predictability adopted by Ofqual is of interest within the context of the Irish debates:

*A predictable examination was defined as one in which the nature of the examination paper could be sufficiently accurately predicted to mean either that the examination was not testing the full range of content expected or that it would not be assessing the assessment objectives as defined in the specification. In particular, a highly predictable examination would tend to reward recall of knowledge even when it was ostensibly assessing analysis or evaluation.*¹

It is also of interest that Ofqual acknowledged that predictability in examinations is not necessarily a negative feature, with a distinction being drawn between desirable and undesirable predictability. It is important, they concluded, that question papers do not contain major surprises from one examination to the next. In such a scenario the paper would be measuring how well candidates cope with these surprises rather than the knowledge, understanding and skills developed in the course of study. Desirable predictability offers enough clarity and consistency for candidates to demonstrate their learning with confidence while still maintaining the efficacy of the examination in testing the aims and objectives of the course.

In its deliberations on predictability, Ofqual looked at the specifications (the syllabi in an Irish context), the examination papers, and at candidates' scripts, and they conducted interviews with a number of teachers and students. They also undertook some statistical analysis of particular questions. The study found that undesirable predictability arose when a number of factors came into play. For example it showed that a particularly detailed subject specification can give rise to formulaic question styles; that a paper giving a wide choice of questions can encourage candidates to 'avoid' sections of the course; and that questions which are limited in range, or too regular in the selection of topics or sub-topics covered, can increase predictability and diminish the breadth of candidates' learning.²

To date no review of this kind has been undertaken in respect of the Irish Leaving Certificate examinations. At the conference, the absence of such research was the subject of comment and features in the response made by the Central Applications Office. It would seem appropriate then, to recommend a similar 'predictability study' be undertaken by the SEC in collaboration with the NCCA. Given that we have only one awarding body, a study of the same breadth and depth as that undertaken by Ofqual may not be necessary. The absence of evidence one way or another is fuelling adverse comment about the quality of the Leaving Certificate examination. The generation of such evidence by the SEC should be a priority.

¹ Ofqual, *Predictability Studies Report: A Study of GCSE and GCE Level* (2008), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 29.

Subsequent to the grading system introduced in 1992, two other major developments also served to dramatically change the impact of the Leaving Certificate examination on the education system. The first of these was the publication of marking schemes, which was introduced in 1998 and which resulted in all students and teachers having access to material that previously was only available to those teachers involved in marking examinations. The second, introduced in the same year, was the facility for candidates to view their marked scripts in advance of deciding whether to lodge an appeal. These two measures introduced an unprecedented level of transparency into the examinations, allowing students to see both the marking schemes and how they were applied to their work. Of course the consequence is that it also allowed teachers and students to see how to generate the type of work that would conform to the requirements of the marking schemes. It is this phenomenon—the focus on the specific requirements of a marking scheme rather than on the syllabus—that has given rise to suggestions that examinations have become about ‘cracking the code’. This compromises the validity of the assessment, as it transforms what would otherwise be indicators of an underlying level of achievement into targets in their own right. Instead of focusing on learning and the achievement of syllabus objectives, the focus switches to trying to trigger the indicators, by whatever means appears most efficient.

It is unlikely that these two significant developments will be reversed, and it is not the intention here to argue in favour of reducing such transparency. However it must be recognised that these positive developments have had this particular negative consequence. This poses a great challenge to the assessment system. Evidence from all over the world shows that, when the stakes are high, ‘teaching to the test’ will occur. This is perhaps even more acute in the case of the Leaving Certificate in which the quest for points, and the potential value of every mark in the context of a 14-point grading scale, compels students and teachers to use measures which were put in place to support openness, transparency and public confidence in the system, for purposes which were never intended. The proposed study on predictability may yield some evidence in this regard.

Proposed Action	Status
The NCCA and SEC will develop proposals to address any problematic predictability identified in an analysis of predictability in the Leaving Certificate examinations.	Analysis and proposals complete by end 2012.

Leaving Certificate grading

The Ofqual study concluded that particular features of examinations may not impact negatively in themselves, but can, when combined with other features, conflate to produce unintended consequences. One feature of the Leaving Certificate examination, the grading system introduced in 1992, merits some attention in the context of unintended consequences of examination practices.

Until then, Leaving Certificate results were reported on a seven-point scale of A-B-C-D-E-F and NG with grade boundaries at 15% intervals. In 1992, at the request of the higher education institutions, this was expanded to a more granular system of A1-A2-B1-B2-B3 -C1-C2-C3-D1-D2-D3, E, F and NG. In this system A1 constitutes a cut score of 90% + followed by sub-grade boundaries at 5% intervals down to 40%. The change was made in response to concerns that the broader grade bands did not differentiate sufficiently between students (in other words, too many students were achieving the same points score) resulting in the widespread use of random selection to allocate places. The latter was not popular (as noted in the CAO submission) with parents nor with students. Of note, this change to a 14-point grading scale for reporting Leaving Certificate achievement was made, not to improve the quality of reporting, but to improve the means by which the results of the examination could be used for selection for third-level education. There was no press for this change from within the school system.

This level of granularity does not exist in comparable examinations. Only in A-level double awards, which has an 11 point scale and where the qualification is the equivalent of two full A-level subjects, is there a grading system that approaches the current Leaving Certificate arrangements of 14 different points. In A-levels, the 11-point scale is used only when the volume of the qualification is of a size to support it. Given that a Leaving Certificate subject is generally viewed as two-thirds of a single A-level (based on the UCAS tariff http://www.ucas.com/students/ucas_tariff/tariffables/), the requirement in Ireland to deliver even more detailed information from a much smaller qualification seems excessively demanding and presents significant challenges in producing assessment tools which are capable of reliably delivering the level of fine discrimination demanded by a 14-point grading scale.

A return to a seven-point scale, or even an eight-point scale (leaving two points within the A grade to encourage the highest achievers—a system weakness according to our PISA data) would support greater reliability and validity of the examination grades. Coupled with the proposal to change how undergraduate courses are organised, this change could reduce the

‘race’ for points. It would also, it has been suggested, reconnect the Leaving Certificate examination with its original purpose as the examination associated with the senior cycle of post-primary education.

However making this change, and making a change in the pathways to undergraduate studies (as recommended later) for the same cohort would be unwise. Given the stakes, the transition process should bear only one major change at a time. The recommendation is that the first action should be the change in the configuration of undergraduate studies as outlined.

There was also a suggestion that a new way of reporting on Leaving Certificate performance, based on percentile scores that would be generated from the current grades, be introduced. However it is doubtful that public confidence could be maintained in a system where the grade awarded was the result of an adjusted score of some kind.

Proposed Action	Status
Move to replace the current grading system of 14 points with an 8 point system (A1, A2, B, C, D, E, F and NG).	Exploration to be undertaken by the NCCA and SEC, with the involvement of experts in examination grading. Any date for this change can be set when the change to undergraduate entry is in place.

The role of English and Mathematics in matriculation

A further question posed at the conference was whether the matriculation requirements might be amended to include English and Mathematics in the calculation of points for all students, and all courses. The rationale for this is to support improvement in literacy and numeracy skills. Furthermore there is evidence that prior educational attainment is the strongest predictor of successful progression through higher education. This is reflected most clearly in Mathematics which is the strongest predictor of successful progression among higher education students. Attainment in English in the Leaving Certificate examination is also a strong indicator of progression. Caution must be exercised here as, if all learners are required to present English

and Mathematics for points' calculation, it will be important to ensure that they all have access to higher level English and Mathematics. Requiring learners to present English for points' calculation may have implications for learners for whom English is not their first language.

Proposed Action	Status
Conduct research into the viability and potential benefits and consequences of including Mathematics and/or English in the calculation of points for all courses	Research paper to be prepared in 2012

The learning objectives of undergraduate education should be refreshed

In the design of undergraduate education now and into the future, greater attention should be directed to the reinforcement of foundational competences such as study skills, research skills, quantitative reasoning, essay writing and critical thinking, particularly for new entrants. Over time, it is anticipated that the reforms to the Leaving Certificate outlined earlier, particularly the work on key skills, will advance these skills more explicitly through the senior cycle and higher education institutions will develop them further according to the broader learning outcomes in respective programmes. The relevant set of skills will vary in emphasis and in style by faculty but there will be substantial scope for mutual learning across disciplines. The proposed National Academy for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning can play a critical role in facilitating concentrated collective reflection on the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education and advance our understanding of the transition between second-level and higher education.

Proposed Action	Status
Reinforce the issue of foundational skills and the first-year experience as priorities for concerted action across Irish higher education institutions. The National Academy for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching has potential to facilitate and lead collective action on these issues.	The National Academy will be established in Q2 2012 following consultation with the higher education academic community

The reforms proposed above must be implemented in a manner that does not compromise the discipline-specific content and academic rigour of undergraduate higher education. Therefore an extension of the academic year, which in many cases has been shortened by the introduction of

modularisation, is recommended. Commencing the undergraduate academic year from early September would be one obvious way to accommodate this.

Proposed Action	Status
The academic year should be extended in all undergraduate education programmes to accommodate the incorporation of transversal skills without compromising discipline specific content and academic rigour.	As this change does not require any changes to existing contracts, implementation should commence for first-year programmes without delay.

Broader entry routes to higher education

In the conference background paper, Professor Hyland noted the proliferation and fragmentation of courses that has occurred in undergraduate education over the last decade. For example she noted that *“the number of Level 8 courses (on the CAO list) doubled between 1998 and 2008, with many of these courses being very narrowly specialised.”* It is recommended that higher education institutions review their undergraduate portfolio with a view to reducing the number of denominated courses and introducing more generic first-year courses. In many higher education institutions, this will not require major change in their actual course provision, but it will involve substantial change in others. A comprehensive review of undergraduate provision is recommended for all institutions. In determining eligibility for generic first-year courses, higher education institutions should set realistic minimum requirements and this reform should be accompanied by a re-statement of the basic entry requirements for each faculty.

The broadening of entry to undergraduate higher education will reduce the number of choices available to students and will reduce the level of competitiveness currently driving the system. Moreover generic first-year courses will enable higher education to address some of the shortfalls which they will have identified in the incoming students. The establishment of broader entry programmes at undergraduate level (e.g. by faculty) is likely to result in a general moderation in the cut-off points for entry at the higher end. However it will increase entry points relative to the less sought-after branches or subject-areas within faculties. There may be a

small number of specialist areas, teacher education being one, where this format is not applicable.

Quality of information

The move to faculty-based entry will also afford an opportunity for higher education institutions to develop better and clearer information for second-level students on the subject content and learning outcomes of particular programmes. Particular emphasis can be placed on the skills needed for successful learning across the faculty, and on the fields of study associated with a discipline. Reference was made at the conference, and in commentary, to the fact that new entrants are sometimes surprised to find, for example, that Mathematics comprises a significant element of their studies in the first year.

Proposed Action	Status
The higher education institutions, individually and collectively, should review their undergraduate portfolio with a view to establishing broader entry to undergraduate programmes at level 8. This change needs to be made at system level.	Commencement as soon as possible subject to discussions between HEA , QQAI and higher education institutions

Proposed Action	Status
Higher education institutions should take steps to improve the quality of information on the subject content and learning outcomes of their courses, particularly in the context of broader intake to undergraduate programmes.	Immediate commencement by higher education institutions

Review Level 6 provision

The Irish higher education system benefits from a strong range of provision, and qualifications at levels 6 and 7 play a critical role in addressing national skills needs. There is a contradiction at the heart of an argument that proposes a broad curriculum upon entry to higher education but which does not undermine the vocational orientation of level 6 and 7 programmes. It may be

possible to broaden curricula without compromising level 7, but, in accordance with the definitions underpinning the National Framework of Qualifications, level 6 qualifications must maintain a strong skills component. The extension of the academic year in level 6 programmes could focus on underpinning the up-skilling requirement with skills sets to improve learners' retention and completion of programmes.

Graduate-only entry

As part of the reform of course provision, Professor Hyland suggested that serious consideration should be given to deferring entry to professional courses, including health-care courses, until after a foundation year (or years) have been completed by students. The introduction of graduate-only entry into medical and veterinary schools would alleviate the intensity of competition that arises in the current 'points race'. However this proposal raises many issues that would need to be explored more fully. These issues include fee-levels for postgraduate provision and the potential impact on non-EU student numbers in the Irish higher education system. While undergraduates from a broad range of disciplines would be eligible to apply for Medicine, the introduction of graduate-only entry to medical schools would provide a significant boost for undergraduate science in Irish higher education.

This reform would have wider benefits beyond the medical profession. It would simultaneously raise the stakes and the motivation levels within undergraduate programmes in Irish higher education. Further, as we enter a phase of steady demographic increase in senior cycle students which will increase the competition for higher education opportunities over the next two decades, such a reform would serve as a pre-emptive measure against an acceleration of a points race.

Proposed Action	Status
Conduct research into the viability and potential benefits and consequences of introducing graduate-only entry to professional courses, including health care courses.	Research paper to be prepared in 2012

Access routes

Access to higher education must be considered in the context of equality of opportunity and in the context of lifelong opportunity. Substantial progress has been achieved in the establishment of alternative entry routes to higher education, for example through the HEAR/DARE access

routes and through the articulation of progression routes from further education. There has also been considerable progress in advancing the flexible learning agenda through greater opportunities for part-time learning and the recognition of prior and experiential learning in mature-student entry to higher education. These developments will be maintained, supported and developed.

Proposed Action	Status
The broader issues of access to higher education beyond the quota of full-time places for school leavers and the issue of entry to part-time programmes will be explored as part of the implementation of the <i>National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030</i> .	Initial scoping to be completed by summer 2012

Concluding remarks

There is consensus on the need for reform in assessment and a deeper appreciation of the impact that assessment has on the learning experience. The objective of reform is to ensure that our modes of assessment correspond to the skills and abilities that we seek to nurture through our education system. In addressing the learning needs of students, it is important to acknowledge the increasing diversity of aptitudes, talents and interests within the student body. A key objective of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, the implementation of which is on-going*, is the creation of a coherent system of higher education which accommodates a range of institutions with distinct missions and diverse programmes. This diversity of talent nurtures the creativity that is needed to sustain a knowledge-based society. The primary concern of the NCCA and the HEA is to ensure that the system of provision for education, and the policy environment in which it operates, is coherent and effective in serving the advancement of knowledge, national development and the public good. The connections between agencies at second and third level will be deepened to ensure coherence and symmetry in the interface between the two levels. These connections will also be extended to ensure coherence with other levels of post-secondary and further education.