

**Submission by Institutes of Technology Ireland to the Department of Education and Skills on
Higher Education Admissions**

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Preamble

Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI) welcomes the invitation by the Minister for Education and Skills to offer opinions and ideas on the current selection systems for higher education.

IOTI concurs with the Minister's view that the current entry selection system (insofar as it deals with the traditional school leaver entry route) has been an objective and transparent entry selection system since its introduction. IOTI is also of the view that, notwithstanding the objectivity and transparency of the current entry selection system for school leavers, there are unintended consequences of the system that are not in the long term interests of students, the Irish education system or the social and economic wellbeing of Ireland.

However, IOTI is concerned that too narrow a focus on the current entry selection system, with its almost sole focus on the 'points system' and entry by school leavers, will result in a missed opportunity to consider the myriad ways in which students can and do enter higher education. Consequently, in addition to responding directly to the specific issue noted in the invitation, we place this matter in a wider context of entry for all learners..

Entry to Higher Education – General Considerations

Currently, approximately 60% of those who enter higher education do so through the CAO points system; the remaining 40% enter in a variety of ways as part-time learners, post graduate students and direct entry students. If the policy ambition of the National Strategy for Higher Education is realised, and flexible learning and part time education become a much greater component of Irish higher education, then the portion of students who do not enter through the CAO will rise. There are significant drivers for this likely shift in mode of entry.

- As a greater proportion of the work force require upskilling and reskilling from an existing base of third level qualifications they will enter as mature students and part time learners.

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- As the funding model shifts to a credit weighted system and will no longer be based on whether a student is full or part-time, there will be a rebalancing in mode of entry and mode of study.
- As the current funding model shifts to one that is delivery mode-neutral flexible, online and e-learning opportunities will become increasingly attractive thus allowing people to work and study at the same time thus driving a shift towards part time study.
- If the growth in demand for higher education, as predicted in the National Strategy, is realised then increasing non standard forms of entry and participation will become an attractive policy option to help reduce the direct exchequer burden.

In addition to these likely shifts in mode of entry and study, there is the impact that an increasingly coherent and vibrant FE sector will have in the admissions, access, transfer and progression processes. From a pedagogical and learner development perspective, **an FE sector that can draw in students, who would traditionally have gone direct to HE (and encountered difficulties progressing), and provide an option for the learner to perform more capably by taking an alternative route through FE and then into HE, would be a welcome development.**

The widening of routes into and through HE in the future will be a welcome development. However, if these entry routes are to be as objective and transparent as the current 'points system' then **equal attention must be given to ensuring that the treatment of prior learning and existing qualifications, *inter alia*, across the system is fair and transparent and that the entry experience for non CAO-entry learners is appropriate.**

Entry to Higher Education – Specific Considerations

When IOTI was approached by the Department in May about proposed reform of selection mechanisms for entry to higher education, the Council of Registrars of Institutes of Technology undertook an analysis of the issues. The Registrars' conclusions are broadly similar to those which have emerged in Professor Hyland's report so, rather than repeat the issues, we have opted to take that report as a starting point.

Like Professor Hyland, we understand that issues with the current system are both real and perceived and we propose consideration of some alternative approaches. It is generally the case that students with high points in the Leaving Certificate will, with few exceptions, be successful in all higher education institutions and programmes. Equally, people with low points in the LC will, with few exceptions, struggle and either drop out or fail. There is a vast middle ground of students where predictions are much more difficult.

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IOTI has concerns with both the content and delivery of many Leaving Certificate subjects, as well as with the unintended consequences of the points system on subject choice and subsequent student preparedness for higher education. However, since those concerns are well articulated in other fora we wish to focus on a limited number of areas for especial attention.

The National Framework of Qualifications

Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications is viewed nationally, and often internationally, as a success story. In many ways it is but it contains an anomaly. The Leaving Certificate is the only descriptor in the NFQ that occupies two levels – Level 4 and Level 5. Does anybody know the difference between an NFQ Level 4 and Level 5 Leaving Certificate? Perhaps we need to assign values to the two levels. If we follow that course, then perhaps students who achieve the Leaving Certificate at Level 4 should progress to programmes below Level 8 on the NFQ.

Numeracy and Literacy

The Minister for Education and Skills described the recent PISA results showing significant declines in both numeracy and literacy for Irish 15 year olds as a wake-up call for Irish education. The results re-enforce our view that an increased emphasis on high levels of achievement in Mathematics and English is long overdue. With regard to the transition between second level and higher education, one of the options we wish to see examined is the inclusion of Leaving Certificate results in English and Mathematics in the calculation of points for entry to all programmes in higher education.

Recoupling of Cognate Disciplines between Second and Third Level

Analysis of Leaving Certificate results would suggest strongly that students perceive certain subjects to be easier in terms of the accumulation of points. Unquestionably, it is an unintended consequence of the points system that students will select subjects likely to give them higher grades (and points) over those likely to be relevant for easier transition to higher education. Quite often, the result is that students enter programmes at higher education with inadequate preparation in underpinning principles or competences developed in cognate areas. We draw the attention of the Minister to the requirement in the International Baccalaureate for students to take subjects across six different groups viz

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native language, additional language, experimental sciences, mathematics, arts and social sciences. We suggest that **either requiring all students at Leaving Certificate to choose a subject from each of these, or similar, categories or require an innovative linking of higher education discipline choice to appropriate subjects studied at Leaving Certificate would lead to a better ‘handshake’ between second level exit and third level entry.** In the absence of this approach it may be necessary to consider some form of **supplementary assessment** (matriculation) by the higher education institutions to ensure an appropriate match between educational background and discipline choice. We recognise the difficulties that such approaches will create for smaller schools and/or the admission’s offices of higher education institutions.

The Generic First Year Programme

IOTI recognises that many second level students entering higher education struggle for a variety of reasons and note the seductive attractiveness of proposals for increasing the generic nature of 1st year. However, we draw attention to the following issues and concerns with adopting a universal approach to this question.

- 1) Where higher education programmes are mainly of four year duration some scope exists to increase the generic component of 1st year – such scope does not exist, or does so to a much lesser extent, in two and three year programmes and these are an integral component of a diverse system of higher education that is the policy objective of the National Strategy.
- 2) Meeting labour market demands is an increasingly important component of higher education and IOTI recognises the special place that short cycle higher education provides in meeting that need. Any diminution of the career orientation of these programmes is likely to lead to a negative response from the labour market.
- 3) Many professional bodies lay down quite rigid and prescriptive curricular requirements for higher education institutions if they are to meet membership practice status. Any dilution of a programme by increasing generic components will likely result in having to extend the programme thus accruing additional costs to the state and the learner. We note recent requirements changes from Engineers Ireland that have *de facto* increased the length of study required from 4 to 5 years.

We recommend that there be **careful consideration of increasing the generic component of 1st year programmes but that where doing so would raise concerns as noted above, that attention be given to using other mechanisms, such as described earlier, to increase retention and success in higher education. Further, we propose that consideration be given to considerably lengthening the academic year, particularly for 1st year students, to**

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help in their assimilation into higher education and thereby reduce the pressure on students and lecturers. It seems somewhat churlish to be attaching blame to the second level system when the academic year in higher education is so short.

Conclusion

The adage that ‘for every complex problem there is a simple solution, that is usually wrong’ applies here. The current entry model has proven to be fair, transparent and objective. We encourage the Minister to ensure that whatever amendments to the process emerge that transparency and fairness are maintained. It is important also that this transparency and fairness should extend to all students who enter higher education from whatever source.