

Further education and training (FET) learner progression to higher education transitions

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL MEASURE/INITIATIVE

 IRELAND

Timeline

2017 Design **2018 Implementation** **2019 Implementation** **2020 Completed**

ID number 35379

Background

The establishment of the FET-HE transitions reform sub-group in March 2017 was an important policy development within the overall transitions framework led by the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland.

While progression to higher education is only one of the targeted outcomes from FET, it is acknowledged across several national strategies that levels of progression should increase and a more consistent approach to facilitating such progression should be put in place.

Objectives

- (a) map and evaluate current FET-HE transitions practice and data across the two sectors;
- (b) develop proposals so that education and training qualifications from the FET sector are recognised for entry into higher education in an agreed and consistent manner;
- (c) examine specific issues relating to the transition for learners from further education and training into third-level education;
- (d) consider and make recommendations on how best to position further education and training qualifications for points and entry purposes into higher education.

Description

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

Strategic approach

- (a) Common objectives and targets: the Department of Education and Skills should

consider, in partnership with the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Further Education and Training Authority of Ireland (SOLAS), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), further refining and developing objectives and targets for FET-HE access and progression (in addition to the existing access plan commitments).

- (b) Alignment of performance compacts/agreements: the next round of strategic compacts/performance agreements between the HEA/Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and SOLAS/ETBs should reflect commitments at institutional level to the delivery of these common objectives and targets for FET-HE transition, including progression, learner experience and retention.
- (c) Targeted FET-HE funding support: consideration should be given for additional funding and more flexible support for those learners who are identified as part of the access cohort who wish to progress from FET to HE. As a first step, the existing funding supports available should be mapped out. The positive progress of the initial teacher education access initiatives under strand one of the programme for access to higher education (PATH) Fund offers a potential template that could be replicated in other thematic areas. The outcomes from targeted FET-HE funding support initiatives need to be considered.
- (d) Transition process timelines: there should be further consideration of the impact of key dates and milestones in the FET-HE calendar year on the effectiveness of FET-HE transitions to explore whether changes could be made to enhance this process. This should include the calendar for completion of FET courses, processing of funding supports, application for and acceptance of places in HE and the start dates of programmes in both HE and FET.

Reviewing provision

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

Building the research base

- (a) Further analysis of existing transitions data: the existing data requires further analysis and in some cases validation. More data on the retention rates of FET students progressing into HE should be gathered and interrogated. Further work may be useful in capturing fully all the entry routes from FET colleges/programmes/qualifications to higher education. Additional data on the background of learners who transition would also be beneficial, particularly in relation to access learner categories.
- (b) Annual transitions report: the data produced as part of the sub-group's work on FET learner demand for HE, FET-HE progression and retention of FET students within HE should be monitored via annual FET-HE transition reports to assess development and inform work around FET-HE transitions.
- (c) Research on non-take up of HE offers: further research should be progressed to ascertain the reasons why a significant number of FET learners who are offered a

place in HE chose not to take up a place.

- (d) Standardised coding of FET graduates within HEI student record systems: an agreed standardised system of coding FET entrants across the HEIs would help support the research process and the feasibility of such an approach should be considered, as there is a need for a more accurate reflection of what's going on about FET transitions.

Developing consistent approaches

- (a) Technological HE sector provision: THEA held a colloquium bringing institutes of technology (ITs) and technological university Dublin (TUD) together to consider short cycle (level 6) and long cycle (level 7 and 8) provision, including the role of FET in supporting pathways to this provision. This could further kickstart a discussion and process on further development of this approach.
- (b) Standardisation of university entry requirements: the new IUA-led further education progression sub-group will work towards an agreed framework for progression from FET to universities, which will include the standardisation and fairness of the minimum or essential entry requirements sought.
- (c) Thematic transition frameworks: overall, FET-HE transition frameworks, based on collaboration across the sectors and building on existing practice, should be explored around particular disciplines or themed groups of disciplines, with an initial focus on the following areas: social care; ICT; healthcare; early learning and care.
- (i) Widening awareness of FET programmes: the guide to FET provision produced for the sub-group should be regularly updated and distributed to relevant personnel within HEIs.
- (ii) Non-post leaving certificate (PLC) FET progression: HEI access strategies and entry criteria should include recognition of the potential pipeline of those who have completed non-PLC FET level 5 and 6 programmes and achieved qualifications (e.g. apprenticeships, traineeships). A 'back to college' lifelong learning initiative/campaign targeting this cohort, with an interest in upskilling via HE, is worth considering in future.
- (iii) Piloting of a cross HE approach to FET: the FET-HE network, involving universities, IoTs and ETBs, should be supported in considering how a common cross-HE approach to recognising FET qualifications and supporting transitions to IoTs and universities might be piloted.
- (iv) Second chance opportunities: the issue of those HE students who withdraw from programmes should be further considered from a FET-HE transitions perspective. There is a need to identify why students withdraw and to consider whether there are appropriate interventions in FET for these students. This should include examining the feasibility of access to FET options, including access to FET programmes, awards and guidance.
- (v) Integrated approach to FET guidance: the progression of an integrated guidance strategy across FET should assist in ensuring a clear and consistent approach around transitions. This should include the clearer articulation of learner pathways and development of guidance supports and resources to help FET learners navigate progression to higher education on a more systematic basis and to raise awareness of the qualification requirements for progression.

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

2017 Design

The establishment of the FET-HE transitions reform sub-group.

2018 Implementation

In 2018, a draft paper was developed and circulated to the sub-committee and the following was noted:

- (a) it was felt that the working paper should have a findings section to tie the analysis to the recommendations;
- (b) there are various meanings to progression to HE and the paper should separate these issues out and tackle them via relevant recommendations;
- (c) the overall point about progression being a much wider issue than access to restricted HE courses should be reflected, in particular, in the breadth of the FET sector (i.e. outline the movement that takes place within FET) and the differing outcomes or expectations students have;
- (d) there needs to be more definition in the policy approach of HE and also the policy approach from FET. The sub-group should seek to align these policy perspectives.

2019 Implementation

In 2019, the key actions set out in the transitions report was discussed by the sub-committee. In summary:

- (a) common objectives and targets: the need for transparent transition parameters and less ambiguity in relation to the data published was acknowledged and is being reflected in the working paper. The complexity of FET-HE progression and the associated related issues have been acknowledged;
- (b) alignment of performance compacts/agreements: there is a need to align FET qualifications with HE entry parameters;
- (c) targeted FET-HE funding support: the impact for those who drop out of HE/FET in terms of funding was also discussed;
- (d) transition process timelines: key dates and milestones in the FET-HE calendar year on the effectiveness of FET-HE transitions were discussed;
- (e) level 5/6 review: QQI, in partnership with the HEA and SOLAS, will embark on a research project on level 5/6 awards;
- (f) feasibility of a common points framework: the view of the sub-group was that research was required in this area and that the ERC would have the expertise to undertake this;
- (g) further analysis of existing transitions data: there is continuing research into retention rates of FET students progressing into HE, and SOLAS is working with the HEA to establish the entry routes from FET colleges/programmes/qualifications to higher education;
- (h) standardised coding of FET graduates within HEI student record systems: personal public services number (PPSN) was considered the primary key for standardised coding across HEI. The General data protection regulation (GDPR) was discussed as one of the main barriers. A suggested solution was to channel data via the Central Statistics Office (CSO) using PPSN;
- (i) thematic transition frameworks: it was suggested thematic desk-based research be carried out to inform evidence-based outcomes on thematic transitions;
- (j) widening awareness of FET programmes: the new website Thisisfet.ie was discussed and the new guidance initiatives (CPD) that are continuing in FET;
- (k) non-PLC FET progression: a policy for HE drop outs was suggested as there is currently no mechanism to identify these individuals until the end of the academic calendar year. The system would list the FET options to those who drop out of HE;
- (l) piloting of a cross-HE approach to FET: there is a need to commission research into the alignment of FET qualifications with the leaving certificate to develop a common cross-HE points system supporting transitions;
- (m) second chance progression: the issue of those HE students who withdraw from programmes could be improved if systems were in place to identify these students early in the academic year and the reasons why they withdraw. A potential FE guide could facilitate these students to enrol on FE programmes.

Action points:

- (a) it was agreed that the paper would be amended to include some of the issues raised. The paper will be circulated to the members of the sub-group for final comments before publication on 'transitions.ie';
- (b) further research on alignment of FET awards and benchmarking with the leaving certificate will be considered further. The issue will be raised with the Transitions

Group.

2020 Completed

Transitions reform working paper was published in June 2020.

Bodies responsible

- Irish Universities Association (IUA)
- Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
- Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS)
- Higher Education Authority (HEA)
- Department of Education and Skills (until 2020)

Target group

Learners

Learners with migrant background, including refugees
Learners at risk of early leaving or/and early leavers
Learners with disabilities
Adult learners

Education professionals

Guidance practitioners

Entities providing VET

VET providers (all kinds)

Thematic categories

Supporting lifelong learning culture and increasing participation

Permeability between IVET and CVET and general and vocational pathways, academic and professional higher education

Providing for individuals' re- and upskilling needs

Lifelong guidance

Ensuring equal opportunities and inclusiveness in education and training

Subsystem

IVET CVET

Further reading

[Transitions reform working paper - June 2020](#)

“ ... ” Cite as

Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). Further education and training (FET) learner

progression to higher education transitions: Ireland. In Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). *Timeline of VET policies in Europe* (2025 update) [Online tool].

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