

# SUPPORTING A BETTER TRANSITION FROM SECOND LEVEL TO HIGHER EDUCATION:

## Key Directions and Next Steps



State Examinations Commission  
Coimisiún Na Scrúduithe Stáit






## ■ Foreword by the Minister for Education and Skills

One of my main priorities as Minister for Education and Skills is to protect the integrity and quality of the education system as a whole and the welfare of the students at its centre. There has been a growing awareness in Ireland that closer attention needs to be paid to how different levels of the system connect with one another so that a smooth transition for students from one level into another is assured.

One such key interface lies in the transition made by ever-increasing numbers of our young people from school into our higher education system. This transition looms large, not just for parents, students and teachers in senior cycle but in wider public discourse and the media. Brokering that transition is the Leaving Certificate examination which marks both the achievement of students in second level and which acts as a basis for admission into higher education institutions.

Supporting a better transition for those students requires collective analysis and agreement for collaborative action on all sides. This paper signals that agreement between key partners in second level and in higher education on three key directions for action towards that necessary change.

1. A commitment to address any problematic predictability identified in an analysis of predictability in the Leaving Certificate examination;
2. A commitment to reduce the number of grading bands used in the Leaving Certificate examination;
3. A commitment to significantly reduce the number of programme offerings for a broader undergraduate entry to level 8 honours bachelor degree programmes in the universities and to review level 8 programme provision in the institutes of technology to ensure a mixed portfolio of programmes with denominated and generic entry.



Ireland needs students and graduates who are critical thinkers and problem solvers with an intrinsic enjoyment of acquiring and using knowledge. Reducing over-reliance on rote learning and “teaching to the test” which inhibit that kind of broad learning experience at second level is a key objective of this work. Part of achieving that will lie in addressing problematic predictability in the Leaving Certificate examination and the existence of an unnecessarily granulated grading system.

Entry into highly contested and scarce places in the healthcare professions will not be affected by this commitment to introduce broader entry routes into the arts, business, science and engineering faculties in our higher education institutions. However, for the vast majority of students entering higher education, these new broader entry routes will reduce upward pressure on points through the pooling of places. Just as importantly, it will simplify the complexity of choice and over-specialisation currently experienced by second level students and first year undergraduates at too early a stage in their educational journey.

As an overall package, these three areas of action will act to significantly de-pressurise the learning environment at second level and improve the quality of the student experience in school and in higher education.

This paper marks an important milestone in the advancement of Transition reform that we embarked upon over a year ago following the conference on this very important area held jointly by the NCCA and the HEA. There is still more work to do. I am confident that the willing engagement, commitment and shared dedication by all involved that have brought us this far will see us through to our ultimate objective of a much better transition for our young people out of school and into higher education.



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*Minister for Education and Skills*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by the Minister for Education and Skills	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	4
<b>Part One – Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Beyond the 2011 conference	5
1.1 Context for the work	5
<b>Part Two – Directions</b>	<b>8</b>
2. Introduction	8
2.1 Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination	10
2.2 Grading	15
2.3 Broadening Entry Routes into the Higher Education System	19
<b>Part Three – Further and Future Work for Completion</b>	<b>25</b>
3. Introduction	25
3.1 Additional Areas of Work and Consideration	25
<b>Part Four – Next Steps</b>	<b>28</b>

## ■ 1. Beyond the 2011 conference

The report, *From Transaction to Transition: outcomes of the Conference on the Transition from Second to Third-Level Education in Ireland* (HEA, NCCA, 2011), and the conference held in September 2011 on which it is based, arose from a joint commitment by the Higher Education Authority and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to explore how best to improve the quality of the transition from second level to higher education. This joint commitment had been made in response to research, debate and commentary about the impact of the transition process on both the quality of the senior cycle experience in schools and on the subsequent capacity of undergraduate students to participate effectively in third-level education.

The conference background paper, prepared by Professor Áine Hyland, provided a comprehensive overview of the current debates, of issues identified in research, and of some of the actions that might be taken to address concerns that had become the focus of public debate in this area. This paper reports on the actions taken to date since the conference and directions for this work over the coming year, and in the medium term.

Building on the collaboration initiated by the Higher Education Authority and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and in keeping with the focus of the conference on the continuum of education, rather than on its separate phases and stages, the various areas of work have progressed through a collaborative process between the various stakeholders: the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), Institutes of Technology Ireland (IoTI), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the State Examinations Commission (SEC). This paper is a shared report of all the stakeholders drawing together different strands of work, but all focused on the same challenge of improving the transition experience of young people moving from second-level to higher education.

### ■ 1.1 Context for the work

Considered in isolation, the Leaving Certificate, marking the end of second-level education for students, in and of itself need not be a high stakes examination. However, its additional role in selecting students for admission to higher education increases the stakes and, as a result, has negative effects on teaching and learning. It is now generally agreed that the so-called 'points race' results from a complex interaction involving

- the nature of preparation for and assessment in the Leaving Certificate Examination;
- the manner in which grades are awarded and converted into a points score to rank students for admission to third level;
- the proliferation of entry routes into higher education; and,
- the very high demand for a small number of university courses.

In recent consultations on junior cycle reform, for example, it was evident that the 'points' effect was felt in the first three years of second-level education. The effect of the points system is further supported by research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) into student experiences of their schooling (Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011) where the findings clearly point to the impact of the impending exams on young people's experience of teaching and learning in sixth year. Leaving Certificate *classes are characterised by teacher-led instruction, assignment of significant quantities of homework, and frequent practising of previous exam papers* (pp. 235-236). The study authors go on to say that *by sixth year, for many students, particularly those with high aspirations, their identity as learners has changed and they have come to see 'good teaching' as 'teaching to the test', expressing impatience with teachers who seek to provide them with a broader set of educational experiences* (p. 236). The consultation with teachers undertaken to support work on Leaving Certificate grading and reported on in Section 2.2 of this report finds similar patterns.

The stresses that students experience through their senior cycle schooling, and particularly in their final year, have been well documented in the media every year and have been clearly expressed by students *'It's just continuous pressure .... It's a very, very stressful time. There's so much emphasis on this series of exams and anything can go wrong on the day'* (Student at Transition conference, 2011). These stress levels increase as the June examinations looms and *for some students their final year in school is an unhappy experience which they simply want to get through as quickly as possible* (Hyland, 2011, p.4). The ESRI research into the sixth-year experience points to the relationship between this stress and selection for higher education, stating that *the stress experienced by students appears to relate mainly to their own aspirations, with many concerned that they will not get their first choice of higher education course and many students discussing the fear of failing.*

This evidence of the backwash effect on teaching and learning in senior cycle and even into junior cycle, combined with the effect of the stresses experienced by students on their learning experience and enjoyment of learning, has resulted in calls for changes that will improve that experience and allow the time and space to develop a broader range of skills and competences. However, any change and development that seeks to promote original thinking, or the ability to problem solve becomes controversial (in the case of Project Maths for example) or compromised by gaming of the system by students to beat the stakes.

On the other hand performance in the Leaving Certificate has proven to be a good predictor of student performance in higher education. Successive studies carried out since the introduction of the points system indicate that

*the Leaving Certificate continues to be a reliable predictor of student performance in higher education. Research carried out on behalf of the Points Commission in the late 1990s, showed that there was a clear relationship between Leaving Certificate attainment and performance in higher education. In general, students with high points tended to obtain higher grades on graduation. However, the relationship was not linear and various factors such as type of institution, field of study and gender had an impact on performance. Results in mathematics in the Leaving Cert were found to be a particularly good predictor of subsequent academic performance, regardless of the discipline chosen (Hyland, 2011, p16).*

This strong connection between Leaving Certificate achievement and subsequent academic success underlines the need for both second level and higher education to take a joint approach to transitions work.

This collaboration among the Department of Education and Skills, the Higher Education Authority, the Irish Universities Association, Institutes of Technology Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the State Examinations Commission is more than a pragmatic sharing of resources or a strategic 'joining up' of strands of work. It arises from a convergence of ideas about what constitutes quality learning in the senior cycle of second level education *and* in undergraduate programmes in higher education and a shared concern that the very mechanism by which students make the transition from one sector to the other may be working against the kinds of learning valued by both. That mechanism, built around the Leaving Certificate examination and the points system, is the focus of the work presented in this report.

There are other transitions to higher education – for mature learners, for example, or through access programmes and as a progression from further education. However, the conference, and the work that followed, focused on the second-level to higher education transition on the basis that it was this process that was giving rise to concerns about unintended consequences, some of which were working against the kind of learning aspired to in second-level education and key to success in higher education. Work presented here may well have implications beyond the school to college transition, but initially, the focus remains on that transition process in particular.

# Part Two – Directions

## ■ Introduction

The interdependency of the complex set of factors affecting the transition between second and third level described in Part One make it imperative that a whole-of-system perspective which places the needs of the student at its centre is used to find appropriate solutions.

Three key underlying and unifying principles of the approach taken by the partners are:

- I A recognition that good learning outcomes and key competences developed through a high quality student experience at second level provide a firm foundation for successful learning in higher education;
- II A simplified, coherent and streamlined approach to system architecture and processes helps to build a bridge for students at the interface between different levels of education;
- III Our national examination and our higher education admissions systems must have reliability, validity, integrity, equity, fairness and transparency as their hallmarks. It is essential that full public confidence in both systems is maintained.

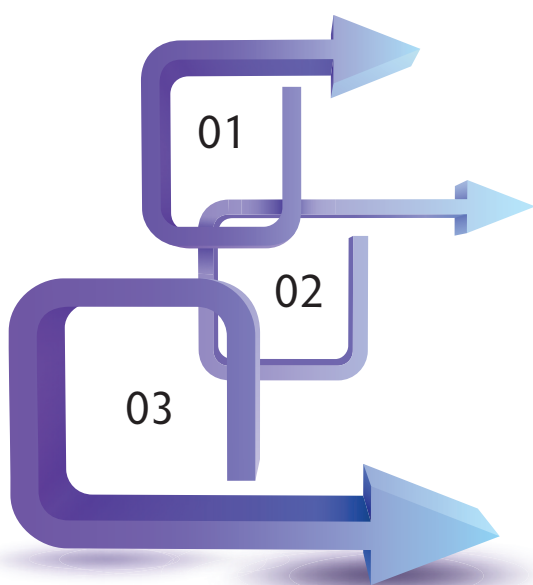
Three complementary key directions for action underpinned by those principles have now been identified and collectively agreed by all partners. Further work is now being undertaken to plan towards the implementation of these three directions. Together they will combine to address the immediate priority to reduce the unnecessarily high stakes of the Leaving Certificate examination.

Reducing the granularity of grade bands and addressing problematic predictability in the Leaving Certificate will help to create the space necessary for a broader learning experience to occur that will improve outcomes at both second and third level.

Offering much broader and common entry routes into higher education institutions where appropriate at level 8 will serve to relieve upward pressure on the points for entry, particularly into the university sector. Across both the institute of technology and the university sectors, streamlining the ever-growing number of different options that must currently be navigated by students at the end of second level should reduce confusion and the potential to make the wrong choices. It will also act to widen the potential future options of undergraduates during their first year in higher education by reducing unnecessary over-specialisation at an early stage in their studies. Entry into highly contested and scarce places in the healthcare professions will not be affected by this commitment to introduce broader entry routes into the arts, business, science and engineering faculties in our higher education institutions.



These key directions for action centre around three principal areas of work that are further described in the next sections:



A commitment to address any problematic predictability identified in an analysis of predictability in the Leaving Certificate examination:

A commitment to reduce the number of grading bands used in the Leaving Certificate examination;

A commitment to significantly reduce the number of programme offerings for a broader undergraduate entry to level 8 honours bachelor degree programmes in the universities and to review level 8 programme provision in the institutes of technology to ensure a mixed portfolio of programmes with denominated and generic entry.

In addition to the three areas where directions are being set out, work is continuing on a number of further areas and this work is summarised in Part Three. It is envisaged that the full set of new arrangements will be announced by the end of this year.

Changes to the Leaving Certificate and the entry system into higher education must be managed carefully. In light of the high stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate examination system and the associated transition into higher education, everyone can rightly expect that major changes will not occur without due notice. The intention, therefore, is that new arrangements will begin to be implemented on a phased basis with the first stages for those students commencing fifth year of second level in September 2014. Details of the timing of implementation will form part of the announcement of the full set of new arrangements to be announced before end 2013.

## ■ 2.1 Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination

### ■ 2.1.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Section 1, the report of the 2011 HEA/NCCA conference *Transition or Transaction? Moving from second to third level education in Ireland*, proposed a series of actions to be taken in dealing with the issues identified. Specifically, in relation to the issue of predictability, the report recommended that

*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.*

In response to this recommendation, the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn, T.D., requested that the analysis and development of proposals to address the issue of predictability be based on an independent external evaluation of the examinations.

Problematic predictability, which refers to a form or level of predictability which can undermine the purpose of an examination, has been defined by the UK regulatory agency *Ofqual in their Predictability Studies Report on GCSE and GCE level examinations (2008)* in this way:

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

Problematic predictability can therefore lead to undesirable teaching and learning behaviours which focus primarily on the test at the expense of breadth and depth of learning and the development of higher order thinking skills.

The DES, SEC and NCCA are committed to addressing the issues of problematic predictability in the Leaving Certificate examination. As a first step in supporting and facilitating the independent external evaluation requested by the Minister, the SEC established an internal working group to carry out some preliminary scoping of the issues surrounding predictability in the Leaving Certificate examinations, which has assisted in framing the terms of reference of the independent external evaluation.

### ■ 2.1.2 Independent External Evaluation

An independent external evaluation of predictability in Irish Leaving Certificate examinations by the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment (OUCEA), under the direction of Professor Jo-Anne Baird, Pearson Professor of Educational Assessment and Director of the OUCEA has been commissioned by the SEC. The research is being carried out in collaboration with Queens University, Belfast.

The following research questions are being addressed in the research:

- What is known internationally about the effects of high stakes examinations upon teaching and approaches to learning, particularly in relation to predictability and rote learning?
- What kinds of learning are the examinations intended to promote?
- How predictable are examination questions in the Leaving Certificate in Ireland?
- Which aspects of this predictability are helpful and which engender undesirable approaches to learning?
- What are the syllabus and assessment design phenomena associated with predictability?
- What subject-specific phenomena are associated with predictability?
- What kinds of examination preparation strategies do teachers and students use? Which of these are influenced by the predictability of the examinations?
- Identify issues to be addressed in an Irish context in relation to the levels of problematic predictability identified in the Leaving Certificate examination.

The evaluation is being conducted in three phases:

■ **Phase 1      Review of the Literature (underway)**

This will ensure that the work builds upon what is already known regarding predictability of the Leaving Certificate examinations.

■ **Phase 2      Examinations Materials Research (June –July)**

This will involve analysis of examinations material in six subjects to find the ways in which predictability is (and is not) manifested and will draw this together with the literature to reflect upon when this may be helpful to the learning process and when it may be detrimental. This research will be conducted on all examination materials provided to teachers and learners relating to the six subjects covering a ten year period. In instances where significant syllabus change has occurred within the last ten years, the materials reviewed will date only from the first examination of the revised syllabus. In addition, the SEC will make scripts from the 2012 examinations in the six selected subjects available to the researchers to facilitate this analysis. The research will largely focus on Higher Level materials, since good grades at this level should be characterised by the display of evidence of higher-order thinking skills to a greater extent than at Ordinary Level.

### ■ Phase 3 Teachers and learners research (September - October)

Fieldwork will be conducted in 12 schools and colleges across Ireland, representing a range of rural/urban settings, DEIS1 (disadvantaged) and non-DEIS schools and with a range of examination outcomes.

Questionnaires will be distributed to learners in the 12 institutions and these will be followed up with interviews during the fieldwork. Approximately 72 interviews with teachers (6 subjects x 12 institutions) and 12 small group interviews with students are planned in total.

From this work, conclusions will be drawn about the relative predictability of the current suite of examinations and how this interacts with the learning process. A draft final report will be submitted to the SEC by the end of October 2013.

In addition, the review team have been asked to outline indicators of predictability which will assist the DES, NCCA and SEC in continuing to focus on this issue and take corrective action on an ongoing basis.

### ■ 2.1.3 SEC Issues Paper on Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination

The work of the SEC internal working group also included a review of such relevant literature as is available and consultation with the Commission's own internal experts on educational assessment. A paper on the deliberations of this working group, *Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination – An Exploration of Issues*, is being finalised and will be published in due course. The SEC paper provides a definition of predictability in the context of examinations, it differentiates between desirable and problematic predictability and it examines the relationship between rote learning and predictability.

Factors which can contribute to problematic predictability are also identified and discussed in the document; these include syllabus design and presentation issues, such as the presence of excessive choice of content areas, as well as examination structure, design and implementation constraints, and how these interact with the over-riding requirement for equity and fairness to all candidates.

### ■ 2.1.4 The meaning of predictability in the context of examinations

Predictability refers to anything that students might know or guess about an examination in advance of sitting it. Some forms of predictability are positive, such as knowing how long the examination will be, what form it will take, or knowing that it will be faithful to the syllabus. Also, consistency in structure and style, and in the use of language, helps to ensure that students know what they are being asked to do, and assists students in preparing for an examination. These kinds of predictability do not undermine the purpose of the examination, and are an important feature of quality in all examinations and tests.

On the other hand, problematic predictability as earlier defined can undermine the purpose of the examination by inhibiting the capacity of the examination to assess the full range of content and assessment objectives as provided for in the syllabus.

Problematic predictability is therefore a threat to the validity of the examination. Every educational test is intended to measure something about the people who take it. The *validity* of a test is the extent to which it measures what it is supposed to measure. When people use the results of the Leaving Certificate examinations to make judgments and decisions, they are entitled to expect that the examination has done what it was meant to do. Otherwise, these judgments are not soundly based. Validity is therefore the fundamental issue in considering the fitness-for-purpose of any examination.

The purpose of the Leaving Certificate examination is to measure the extent to which each candidate has achieved the objectives of the relevant syllabus. The alignment between the examination and those objectives is critical. Anything that interferes with the capacity of the examination to measure the intended objectives is a threat to validity.

### ■ 2.1.5 Predictability and rote learning

Claims that an examination is predictable are often accompanied by claims that it encourages rote learning at the expense of higher order thinking skills.

*Rote learning* is a process of committing information to memory by frequent repetition, so that it can be recalled immediately, word-for-word, when required. The fact that a person has learned something by rote does not necessarily imply that they do not understand what they have learned, or that they are not able to use, adapt, apply or evaluate the information. However, the term is often used in such a way as to imply a lack of such understanding or ability. This ambiguity between the precise use of the term and the more negative connotations can make it difficult to engage in discussions about the extent to which rote learning of certain kinds of information might be desirable or even important.

When you need to be able to recall information quickly and reliably, rote learning might be the best way to commit it to memory. Examples include memorising telephone numbers or security codes, learning lines for a play, knowing arithmetic tables, etc. Although everyone accepts the need to commit some kinds of information to memory, there is much more debate about the role of rote memorisation in other contexts. The development of a range of different thinking skills is important in education. *Recall* is just one of these thinking skills, but it does have its place as the need to have a solid body of fundamental knowledge is still important. Learning information, by whatever means, is still a necessary part of learning in general. In order to *understand, adapt, apply, analyse, synthesise, and evaluate* information, we need to have access to that information in the first place. Unless the information is available from another source at the time we need it, we have to recall it in order to use it. In those circumstances, the capacity to recall relevant knowledge is a prerequisite to displaying other higher order skills.

The difficulties with rote learning arise when it is used in circumstances where it is not appropriate. The ability to reproduce a particular essay that you learned “off by heart” is unlikely to be of much use in your future life.

However, the ability to write an essay on a given topic by drawing on relevant knowledge, adapting it as required, marshalling your arguments, and communicating them coherently, is likely to be much more useful. We would all like our education system to encourage people to develop this second skill rather than the first.

If a student writes a good response to a question, we do not know whether they learned it off in advance. The examiner must mark the work on its merits. However, an essay that has been learned in advance and reproduced word-for-word will only be a good answer if it is an exact match to the question asked. On the other hand, students with the kinds of adaptive skills we want to encourage are able to cope with variation and a degree of the unexpected in what is asked.

To distinguish between these two kinds of student, we need to minimise the chances of an exact match between the question asked and a prepared answer, and also to be harsh in the treatment of an answer that is not well matched to the question. This then is the connection between predictability and rote learning, as strategic use of rote memorisation has a good chance of success if the questions are predictable, or if deviating from the exact question asked is only mildly penalised. It does not have a good chance of success otherwise.

If the level of predictability is such that rote memorisation becomes a more efficient way to succeed than developing the skills that the question intends to assess, then it is reasonable to say that the examination is encouraging inappropriate rote learning. On the other hand, if the amount of variation in the questioning is sufficiently great, then the amount of rote memorisation required in order to be confident of responding well is so large that it is no longer an efficient strategy for success. In this case, it is *not* reasonable to say that the examination is encouraging rote learning, even if some students still attempt to prepare for it in this way or are encouraged to do so.

### ■ 2.1.6 Factors that can contribute to problematic predictability

Sometimes the structure of a syllabus, the amount and nature of the choice it offers to students and teachers, the particular words or phrases used in the syllabus document and the assessment, as specified in the syllabus, can constrain examiners in a way that the syllabus designers did not foresee or intend, as can logistical constraints involved in delivering the examinations. Examiners in a subject will usually try to ensure that all topics on the syllabus receive reasonable coverage over time. This inevitably results in attempts to second-guess the examination, based on an analysis of the topics that have been examined in recent times. This generates many predictions that may or may not be realised. Those involved in drafting examinations may themselves be influenced by perceived past patterns in the selection of content, and this could lead to their selection of content being, to some extent, predictable.

A further challenge arises when a syllabus has been in place for an extended period of time as it can be difficult to frame examination papers in completely fresh or sophisticated ways. Work has been undertaken on revising a range of Leaving Certificate syllabuses - this work will be reviewed and updated in the context of developments in the particular subject areas prior to implementation.

### ■ 2.1.7 Managing change

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has measures in place to help ensure that its examinations are valid. Furthermore, measures are in place to minimise the level of problematic predictability. These range from a focus on the issue in the drafting of examination papers in order to avoid predictability, to the application of significant penalties in instances where candidates present work which clearly does not specifically relate to the question asked. However, there is much public commentary each year as to undue levels of predictability in the Leaving Certificate examinations. The independent external evaluation, commissioned by the SEC at the request of the Minister, is therefore crucially important in order to assess the extent to which Leaving Certificate examinations are predictable

In cases where an inappropriate level of predictability has become established in a subject, measures to address it will be carefully managed so as to ensure fairness to candidates. The driver/source of the problem will be identified; possible solutions will be thoroughly interrogated as will the implications of change. This process involves a targeted multiagency approach between the DES, the SEC and the NCCA.

## ■ 2.2 Grading

### ■ 2.2.1 The issue and action proposed

Following the September 2011 conference, in correspondence from the Minister for Education and Skills, and in a paper by the Irish Universities Association, the question was raised as to whether the 14 grade points (at each of two levels) in the Leaving Certificate examination might have unintended consequences for the nature of the examination, and for the experience of senior cycle education. There were calls for a return to the pre-1992 grading system based on a belief that broader grade bands might have a positive impact on the design and marking of Leaving Certificate examinations, and on how learners and teachers prepare for the examinations. Those who advocate the use of broader grade bands believe that the use of narrow grade bands puts pressure on students to achieve marginal gains in examination performance, and as a consequence focuses excessive student attention on the detail of the assessment process rather than the achievement of broader learning objectives. The additional grades (beyond A, B, C, D, E, F and NG) were introduced in 1992 at the request of the universities and the CAO amid concerns about the increasing use of random selection for college places. The change was relatively uncontroversial at the time in the face of a general welcome for the move to end a reliance on random selection of students for the allocation of places to a number of high-points courses. It is clear that any broadening of grade bands will have to be accompanied by changes to higher education selection methodologies that would limit the need for random selection.

In commentary at and after the conference, observations were made that in any change, consideration might be given to keeping the A1 and A2 grades to incentivise high-achieving students. Conversely, other commentary focused on the particular need to collapse these grade points in order to avoid excessive expectations of the same student group.

### ■ 2.2.2 The work of the expert group

To pursue the issue, an expert group was convened by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The group comprised researchers in the field of examination and testing, senior staff of the NCCA and the State Examinations Commission and two international experts in the field of assessment and examinations. The group noted that the current granularity of the grading system had been introduced to support the third level selection process rather than to improve the quality of measurement or reporting of achievement at the end of second-level education. A comparable grading system is not in use in other jurisdictions where end of school examinations determine higher education access (Scotland and England for example). As far as the members of the group were aware, no other examination, where results are reported in grades, includes 14 points as in the Irish context.

At the initial expert meeting, those gathered to discuss the issue agreed that further evidence was needed to inform deliberations and advice. Firstly, some idea of the impact of the *current* Leaving Certificate grading system on teachers' classroom and assessment practice in senior cycle was needed. It was decided to pursue this by means of an on-line consultation with teachers led by NCCA. Second, the impact of any changes in the grading on the overall distribution of grades needed further investigation and the Educational Research Centre in Drumcondra and the State Examinations Commission agreed to conduct some modelling based on the application of 'new' grading systems to the results of the 2012 Leaving Certificate cohort.

### ■ 2.2.3 The consultation with teachers

An online survey was developed to gather feedback from teachers on their grading and marking practices with senior cycle students. The consultation opened on December 14th and closed on January 20<sup>th</sup>. Two-hundred and forty teachers responded, and almost all availed of the option to give more extended feedback, beyond the tick box answers to the survey questions. Respondents welcomed the opportunity to offer their views.

A report on the consultation with detailed analysis of the responses is being compiled. The feedback from the teachers who participated showed that, as might be expected, the grading system used in the Leaving Certificate examination became more significant in classroom practice as the examination approached. However, teachers emphasised the importance of broader feedback to students, comments as well as grades, and reported using percentage marks or broader grades rather than the granular (A1, A2, B1, B2 etc.) grades as part of their feedback strategies. Some teachers reported negative reactions from students and parents where comment only feedback was provided.

As the examination approached, the published marking schemes also became more influential on classroom practice. These are provided by the SEC to Leaving Certificate examiners to ensure inter-rater reliability and inter-candidate equity and subsequently published on line as an important element of the openness, transparency and quality of the examination system.



For some participants in the consultation however, the influence of the marking schemes was less than benign. Their concern was not with the marking schemes themselves, which were generally seen as an invaluable guide for teachers and students and an important support in examination preparation. Rather, the concerns expressed related to expectations from students and parents that these marking schemes should drive classroom practice. The report on the consultation notes that teachers feel under pressure to coach students in how to frame responses to optimise their performance, rather than, as one teacher said, just *letting the students rely on their own knowledge and way of wording the answer*.

This pressure was tangible in the consultation responses to all questions, and in many of the open comments made at the end of the survey. Optimising performance should be a positive dynamic in any educational setting; in the responses it was clear that the drive for higher grades, and as a consequence, higher points, was seen as having a negative effect on teaching and learning at second level.

#### ■ 2.2.4 The exploration by the Educational Research Centre and the State Examinations Commission

Following the initial meeting of the expert group, the SEC and the ERC explored the potential impact of two alternative approaches to grading – an 11 point scale (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2, D1, D2, E, F, NG) and an 8 point scale (A1, A2, B,C,D,E,F,NG) on the results of the 2012 Leaving Certificate examination. For the purposes of the research, the results achieved by the 2012 cohort were hypothetically 're-graded' and the same common points scale used by the higher education institutions was applied.

As might be expected, there is a substantial increase in students getting the same points score with an 8 point scale, but no substantial increase with an 11 point scale. On an 11 point scale, 93.9% of students would get a points score within 10 points of what they score on the 14 point scale. On the 8 point scale, it's 82.6%.

The SEC and ERC exploration noted that if a change was made, some consideration of how to deal with more students on the same points score would be needed. Further, depending on the change made, some review of the current 100 point scale would also be needed.

#### ■ 2.2.5 Moving away from the 14 point scale

The question of moving back to the pre-1992 system or forward to a modification of that arrangement arises from a belief that to do so might have both a symbolic value (to move the Leaving Certificate examination towards the purposes associated with the end of second-level, and away from purposes of selection) and a practical outcome (to change any teaching, learning and assessment practices in senior cycle that might be associated with having atomised granular grades).

It is important to note that changing the number of grading points will have little impact on the process of examining, or on the design of papers or questions. Examinations are marked to a marking scheme based on raw marks (not grade points), and examiners report based on the main grade bands of A, B, C etc. The sub-grades of A1, A2, B1 etc are then mechanically assigned at the very end of the process.

The work of the SEC and ERC has been useful in showing the impact of two potential alternatives to current grading arrangements and flagging potential consequences and challenges of any change. Their work also highlights the importance of such modeling before any changed arrangement is finalised.

The consultation with teachers showed that the current 14 point grading scale has little *direct* impact on teaching learning and assessment at senior cycle. Therefore, it is arguable that changing the scale may not of itself give rise to improved experiences for students and their teachers in senior cycle.

What *does* impact on those learning experiences are the expectations of parents, students and the system more generally, of what must be done (and what must not) in class and school tests to get the highest grades possible, and thus the highest possible points score. The purpose of the Leaving Certificate examination as a representation of achievement at the end of second-level education has been overwhelmed by its selection function.

Moving away from a 14 point grade system can help in changing expectations. It can signal that the purpose of the Leaving Certificate as the end of school examination is as important as its selection function. The grading system cannot serve one *or* the other. It needs to serve both, and it needs to serve both in the best interests of all students – not just those who wish to use their Leaving Certificate grades for entry to higher education.

The NCCA, the SEC and the Department of Education and Skills with the help of national and international experts are now working on finding the approach to grading that reduces the number of grading bands and offers this best fit. This would need to be underpinned by careful consideration by higher education institutions, in partnership with the NCCA and the SEC, of the common points scale and how any new grading system would be used to select students for entry to higher education.

## ■ 2.3 Broadening Entry Routes into the Higher Education System

### ■ 2.3.1 Introduction

Key higher education recommendations emerging from the deliberations at the *Transitions* conference were that higher education institutions should have fewer and broader entry routes to level 8 undergraduate education. This recommendation has been very significantly advanced, with clear direction emerging in relation to how universities and institutes of technology intend to implement broader entry routes.

In August 2012, the Irish Universities Association published a report entitled *“Reform of Selection and Entry to University in the Context of National Educational Policy”* and established a Task Group to develop specific, sequenced and detailed proposals for reform of university selection and admissions. This Task Group has developed a set of principles which if adopted would lead to a significant reduction in the number of separate entry routes to undergraduate study in the university sector. The chief officers of the seven universities have agreed to recommend to their respective Academic Councils that these principles be adopted simultaneously by the seven universities, and if they are adopted, the universities would, in a collaborative and transparent process, revise their portfolio of entry routes.

The Institutes of Technology held a national conference on 11 March 2013 to explore Transition issues. An issues paper was prepared ahead of the conference, which provided an analysis of Transitions issues and which contended that the differentiation in mission between the Institutes and other higher education institutions had different impacts on schooling, and upon the transition experience of second-level students entering third-level.<sup>1</sup>

The Institutes of Technology have also considered the growth in the number of separate entry routes to that sector. It is acknowledged that there are important differences between the university sector and the institute of technology sector, with the latter offering programmes that are employment-focussed and inherently specialised. Nonetheless, the institutes of technology also propose to review their portfolio of entry routes to level 8 programmes, and in particular to examine the extent to which there are programmes with an overly narrow base of entry.

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<sup>1</sup> The conference papers and proceedings are available at <http://www.iottransitions.ie>

### ■ 2.3.2 Fewer and broader entry routes in the university sector

The IUA report *“Reform of Selection and Entry to University in the Context of National Educational Policy”* included as a central recommendation that the sector should address the proliferation of specialized denominated entry routes and revert to having fewer broader entry routes. The recommendation was expressed in the following terms:

*Much of the “heat” in the “points race” arises from those courses where places are most limited and thus points are highest. A move to greater common entry would be challenging but would significantly alter the dynamic of competition for university places. It is desirable that institutions progress towards greater common entry, while noting that there will continue to be a particular challenge regarding competition for entry into highly selective programmes such as the health professions and other similar areas.*

There has been enormous growth in recent decades in the number of separate denominated entry routes to higher education, many admitting very small numbers of students, with the number of entry routes tripling over the past 20 years. While in some cases this is attributable to the introduction of new programme areas the vast majority of new entry routes admit students to specialised sub-streams in arts, science, business and engineering.

The IUA Task Group on Reform of Undergraduate Selection and Entry is charged with guiding the implementation of a major reduction in the number of separate entry routes to university, a reduction sufficient to significantly alter the dynamic of competition for university places. A significant change in the dynamic of competition will only be achieved by a significant reduction in the number of entry routes. The Task Group also notes that such a move has the potential additional benefit of reducing premature specialisation of students at an early stage in their learning. The Task Group recognizes that there are important differences in how the individual universities organise their curricula, and therefore there will be differences in how a move to broader entry routes might be achieved. The Task Group propose, therefore, a set of principles to which the seven universities might agree, which would then serve to guide a collaborative process of reform. These principles have been discussed and agreed by the chief officers of the seven universities and the Presidents and Provost have agreed to recommend them for adoption by their respective Academic Councils.

The principles and consequent process are as follows:

*The universities will work together to reduce the number of entry routes to the minimum number necessary for efficient and academically appropriate allocation of places to applicants. An entry route is necessary and should be maintained (or a new entry route established) if:*

- *it is required to admit students to a broad area of study (e.g. arts, science, business, engineering)*
- *it is generally accepted that a separate entry route is required (e.g. music)*
- *it is required to admit students to a specific professional programme (e.g. nursing, journalism)*

- *it is required to ration places where there is a significant excess of demand over supply (e.g. physiotherapy, psychology).*
- *it is required to admit students to a small number of disciplines or fields of study which are identified and differentiated strategic priorities for the institution in question..*

*Where denominated entry routes are required to ration places on highly specialised streams or pathways within programmes that have restricted capacity, universities will give consideration to whether selection to such streams should occur post-entry on the basis of results in first and/or second year examinations.*

*Universities will, in a collaborative and transparent process, revise their portfolio of entry routes guided by these principles with a view to completing the transition to the new approach at the earliest opportunity consistent with the need to ensure effective delivery of their portfolio of programmes*

The advantages of such a proposal are:

- simplification of the system and simplification of student choice;
- points levels will equilibrate to the level dictated by the excess of demand over supply, and will not be inflated by entry routes with low student numbers;
- points levels will be more stable from year to year;
- avoidance of premature specialisation on the part of students.

The proposal should not be assessed in isolation, as the success of other aspects of the reform process (broadening grade bands, refining the calculation of points scores, or the use of additional forms of assessment other than the Leaving Certificate) may depend on an overall simplification of entry routes.

The possible difficulties and disadvantages of this proposal include the following:

- The reduction in entry routes may create significant pedagogical and logistical problems within the higher education institutions, including increases in class sizes, and difficulties allocating students to different subject areas within the programme.
- The proposal will have little or no effect on the competition for places in very high demand programmes such as the health professions, and so long as these direct undergraduate entry routes to these professions remain, they are likely to exert a significant influence on teaching and learning behaviours at second level.
- The generic nature of entry routes runs counter to the drive for institutional differentiation, and reduces the ability of institutions to highlight their different profiles and programme offerings.
- Specialised undergraduate entry routes are common internationally, and a move to more generic entry may place the sector at a disadvantage in terms of international student recruitment

The Task Group acknowledges that there were positive reasons for the increased use of denominated entry, allowing universities to

- highlight specific learning pathways within a broad area of study;
- differentiate course offerings in each institution from those of others;
- show the labour market relevance of a programme;
- create a focus on institutional strengths;
- raise the public profile of the institution by highlighting areas where the institution has major strengths.

There is particular concern that the introduction of broader entry routes should not disadvantage the sector in recruiting international students, who often expect quite specific entry pathways. The Task Group recommends for further consideration an approach which may preserve the positive features described above without requiring the introduction of specific denominated entry routes. This is where a three-letter code is appended to the course code to allow the applicant to indicate in advance which of the available learning pathways within the programme they would prefer to pursue post-entry, and guarantees them a place on that pathway if they are admitted to the programme, but need not restrict them to that pathway once admitted.

22

For example, an applicant to a Science programme at a university, with course code NU300 might indicate any one of the following

- NU300 BIO Biological Science
- NU300 GES Geological and Earth Science
- NU300 PHY Physical Sciences
- NU300 UND undecided
- NU300 CPH Chemical and Pharmaceutical Sciences
- NU300 CHB Chemical Biology

The admissions process ranks all applicants for NU300, irrespective of their indicated programme pathway, and admits students to the programme (not the individual learning pathway) until the programme is full, so there is only one points level for the programme.

This has significant advantages over the use of denominated entry to differentiate programme offerings and highlight areas of specialism and strength: most importantly it profiles the full range of learning pathways available in a programme. It is entirely feasible that the different three letter codes could be used as separate entry routes for international students.

This system clearly will not work to ration places in specialized pathways for which the demand significantly exceeds supply, and institutions will be understandably cautious about guaranteeing places within different subject areas. However, it is worth noting that:

- undenominated entry routes currently offer such a guarantee, and where entry to a specialism ultimately must be restricted, places may be allocated on the basis of first-year examination results;
- the first-preference demand for many denominated entries does not significantly exceed supply;
- the demand for different subject specialisms within a programme tends to be relatively stable year-on-year;
- institutions would have some advance warning of the level of student interest in different subject areas.

#### ■ 2.3.4 Institutes of Technology and the transition from second-level to third-level education

Arising from their conference in March 2013, the Institutes of Technology are of the view that any changes in the system of admitting students to third-level must take account of the diversity of learners, and of the wide spectrum of point scores, that characterise entrants into higher education across all institutions.

#### ■ 2.3.5 Broadening entry in the Institutes of Technology

In developing a sectoral approach to the issue of broadening entry routes into third-level, the Institutes of Technology are mindful of the following points:

- A key element of the Institutes mission is to deliver programmes with a strong employment focus, and in some instances such programmes need a greater level of specificity than might otherwise be the case. The denominated titles that are used in the sector arise, in the main, from the process of designing the programmes and are intended to meet industrial and enterprise requirements. The retention of a portfolio of programmes with denominated entry will therefore remain an essential element of the Institutes' educational provision.
- The Institutes also provide shorter professional courses at Levels 6 and 7 of the National Framework of Qualifications, which cannot have a broad foundation. Some of these programmes are also linked to Level 8 programmes, as part of a ladder system of certification. In these particular instances, a broad common entry foundational first year would not be conducive to the operation of the ladder system.

- The Institutes recognise that the number of denominated programmes has grown exponentially in the past twenty years, and that this may cause confusion to some students, when it comes to choosing their courses through the CAO system. To obviate those instances where it does occur, a number of the Institutes already offer parallel common entry routes in particular disciplines.

The Institutes of Technology acknowledge that they, no less than other higher education institutions, must fulfill their responsibility for engaging learners in their transition to higher education, particularly through the design and delivery of their programmes. To this end, the Institutes will review their programmes to ensure a mixed portfolio of programme with denominated and generic entry. In particular, they will:

- Look at introducing common entry in parallel to denominated entry in all institutions.
- Examine the extent to which there are programmes with an overly narrow base of entry, particularly where there are complementary programmes which could be offered under one CAO code.

The Institutes believe that such a review will only be possible and effective if pursued in conjunction, and in sequence with the institutional reconfigurations currently underway as part of the implementation of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. They also acknowledge that the State may need to mitigate unnecessary proliferation of programmes, and that the issue can be addressed in the context of the strategic dialogue process with HEA.



# Part Three – Further and Future Work for Completion

## ■ 3. Introduction

The three key directions that will support a better transition from second level into higher education outlined in Part Two represent a clear commitment from all the partners involved to those changes. Further work and refinement is proposed for each of these directions including:

- An independent external evaluation of predictability in Leaving Certificate examinations;
- Expert analysis of a new grading band structure;
- Development of new broader entry routes into higher education programmes

The directions form part of a broader suite of measures being considered by the partners across second level and higher education. Some of these issues were signalled for further research and consideration as part of the set of recommendations in the report of the 2011 HEA/NCCA conference *Transition or Transaction? Moving from second to third level education in Ireland*. Others have emerged during the course of intensive discussion and analysis that has taken place collectively and within the separate sectors as part of this process towards negotiated change.

## ■ 3.1 Additional areas of work and consideration

All future consideration and analysis will be underpinned by the three principles (I – III) outlined in the introduction to Part Two and a recognition that the outcome must be a fair, transparent and equitable system of selection into higher education.

It should be noted that no decisions have been reached on any of these additional issues. They have just been flagged for further analysis. For any proposed intervention, the possible impacts are complex with many proposals having the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. These will be fully considered in the course of the further and future work being undertaken.

The potential measures being considered can be grouped into four main areas:

1. The use of Leaving Certificate results and their translation into points and entry requirements for admission into Higher Education;
2. Partial decoupling of higher education admission from Leaving Certificate results;
3. Entry into healthcare professional programmes;
4. Improving the undergraduate experience.

### ■ 3.1.1 The use of Leaving Certificate results and their translation into points and entry requirements for admission into Higher Education

Issues under consideration include:

1. Possible simplification and standardisation of matriculation and minimum entry requirements.
2. A re-examination of the current points scale and the manner in which points are calculated, including:
  - the points awarded for different grades at higher and ordinary level;
  - the implications of particular subject combinations, e.g. cognate disciplines;
  - bonus points for students in particular subjects;
  - the compulsory calculation of points for Maths and English or Irish (depending on the medium of study of the higher education programme).

### ■ 3.1.2 Partial decoupling of Higher Education admission from Leaving Certificate results

Having due regard to concerns in regard to the potential validity, objectivity and integrity of any potential measures, the possibility of using other forms of assessment or contextual information to complement the use of the Leaving Certificate in selecting students for higher education is being considered including:

- Complementary assessments, including aptitude tests and specific assessments designed to test higher order intellectual skills;
- Student contextual information, including personal statements, student portfolios, school reports and school references;
- School contextual information, including relative performance ranking within schools;
- Interviews;

### ■ 3.1.3 Entry into healthcare professional programmes

The following issues are being considered:

1. Specific recommendations on the future use of HPAT for admission to undergraduate programmes;
2. A consideration of whether or not very high demand courses in the health professions should only be available as graduate-entry programmes.

### ■ 3.1.4 Improving the undergraduate student experience

The following areas will be further developed and considered:

1. The First Year Experience and Foundation Skills;
2. Access and the Transition experience;
3. The role of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in higher education;
4. Greater clarity on course content and learning outcomes of higher education programmes;
5. Greater coherence and alignment of learning outcomes across different levels of education.

# Part Four – Next Steps

## ■ 4. Next steps

The further work outlined above is now being undertaken in order to adopt a comprehensive approach to this complex area.

At the end of June, the Minister for Education and Skills will host a conference to discuss the issues arising from this ongoing work with stakeholders.

The intention is to reach overall conclusions on the issues in this report before end 2013 and to develop an overall implementation plan. This plan will also include further details on the implementation of the three key directions set out in this report.

A framework for research, monitoring and evaluation of the Transition reform process will be developed as part of the overall implementation plan to closely monitor the impact of the change process to ensure that it meets the objectives which have been set.

## **Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations**

CAO	Central Applications Office
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: The Action Plan for Educational Inclusion
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ESRI	Education and Social Research Institute
HEA	The Higher Education Authority
IUA	The Irish University Association
IOTI	Institutes of Technology Ireland
NCCA	The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OUCEA	Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment
SEC	The State Examinations Commission;

# SUPPORTING A BETTER TRANSITION FROM SECOND LEVEL TO HIGHER EDUCATION:

## Key Directions and Next Steps



State Examinations Commission  
Coimisiún Na Scrúduithe Stáit



NCCA  
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curraicil agus Measúnachta  
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment



DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION  
AGIS SCLÉANNA | AND SKILLS



IRISH  
UNIVERSITIES  
ASSOCIATION



Institutes of Technology Ireland



HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY  
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS