

# eDeposit Ireland

## Supporting a better transition from second level to higher education : implementation and next steps

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

## Implementation and Next Steps

# MINISTER'S FOREWORD



Ireland's education system serves our children and young people very well indeed. We have highly skilled teachers working in our classrooms. We have improving national and international results in literacy and numeracy. We lead Europe in the proportion of our young workforce with a higher education qualification. And most importantly, we have engaged and innovative students thriving in schools and colleges across the country.

In some areas though, our intentions and ambitions for our young people don't always match with the outcomes that we achieve. The transition from school to higher education is one such area.

The Leaving Certificate is, quite rightly, an important point in the educational continuum. It is appropriate that at this point, young people put in a lot of effort to achieve the best results they possibly can. But for too long, the points system has further increased the pressure at this stage. Not content with encouraging students to reach their potential, the small grade bands that have been in operation since 1992 mean that a student is only ever 2 or 3 marks away from going up or down a grade – we know that this adds unnecessary pressure to young people. The new grade bands now being implemented will ease this pressure.

The proposals for a new progressive points system, an example of which is included in this document, will reward students for aiming higher – for taking the risk and trying the higher level papers, or for succeeding in those papers to a high standard. By changing to such a progressive system, we will also reduce any risk of random selection becoming a common feature of college entry.

The work done by the State Examinations Commission in examining whether problematic predictability in state exams is an issue that needs to be addressed has thrown up some interesting findings. It suggests that exams are nowhere near as predictable as we might have previously thought.

Just as importantly, the moves by the universities towards broader entry to higher education will prevent students from having to decide too early what specialism might suit them later in life. By allowing students to

enter broad-based courses, and to specialise further into their degree, we should reduce the number of people dropping out of college, and further ease the unnecessary pressure on sixth-year students. The universities have reduced the number of courses back to 2011 levels, and committed to a further 20% reduction by 2017 – these are meaningful changes for the first time in a generation.

Getting to this point has taken almost four years. During that time, a group of thoughtful and committed people has worked together to produce a set of changes that will deliver very tangible benefits to our students. The Department of Education and Skills, the State Examinations Commission, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and Quality and Qualifications Ireland have all been centrally involved in this work, as have the Higher Education Authority, the Irish Universities Association and Institutes of Technology Ireland.

The results are a testament to the ability of all of these groups to work together with one ambition in mind – improving the transition from school to higher education for all of our students.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jan O'Sullivan".

Jan O'Sullivan, T.D.  
Minister for Education and Skills  
April 2015

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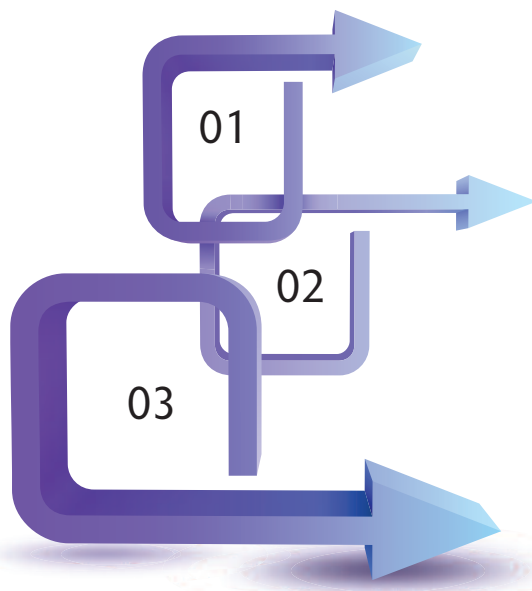
# 1

## INTRODUCTION

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 was 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 was in response to research, debate and public discourse about the impact of the selection of school leavers for higher education, and the role of the Leaving Certificate in that 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.

Building on this initial collaboration, and in keeping with the spirit of a whole-of-education system approach, a number of initiatives aimed at improving this transition have progressed through a collaborative process between the key education partners at second level and higher education. These have been facilitated by the Transition Reform Group, chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Skills and consisting of representatives of: the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), Institute of Technology Ireland (IoTI), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the State Examinations Commission (SEC).

The first phase of this uniquely collaborative effort culminated in the publication by the then Minister for Education and Skills of the interim report on Transition Reform, "*Supporting a better Transition from Second Level to Higher Education: Key Directions and Next Steps*" (the *Directions* report) in March 2013. The report outlined three key commitments by the partners on the Group:



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.

The interdependency of the complex set of factors affecting the transition between second level and higher education make it imperative that a whole-of-system approach, which places the needs of the student at its centre, is used to find appropriate solutions.

The three underlying and unifying principles of the approach taken by the partners are:

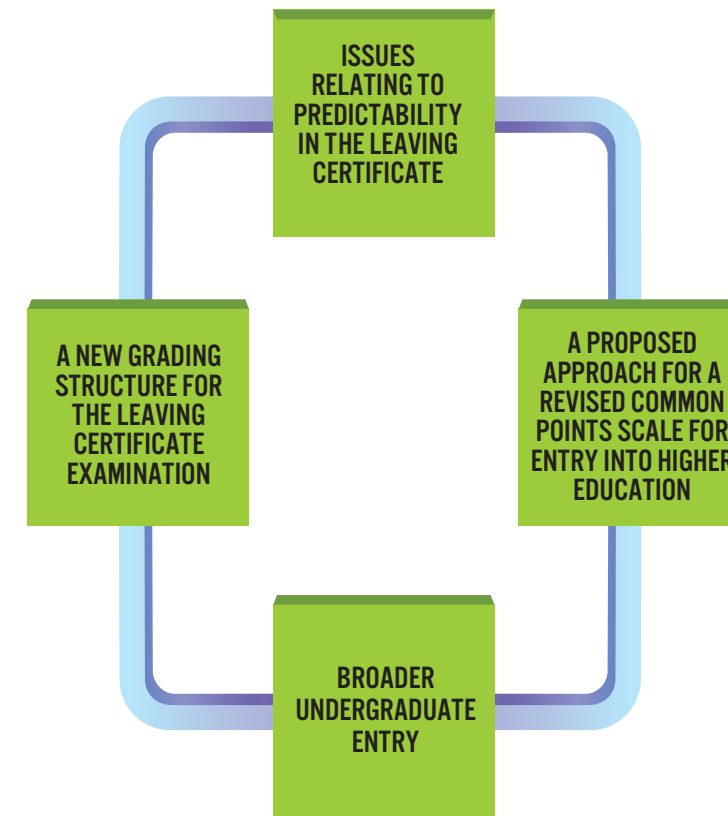
- I. A recognition that good learning outcomes and key competences developed through a high quality student experience at second level provide a firm foundation for successful learning in higher education;
- II. A simplified, coherent and streamlined approach helps to build a bridge for students as they move from one education level to another;
- 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.

Since the publication of the *Directions* report, significant progress towards reform of this transition has been made through a process of intensive deliberation, research and discussion collectively by the Group and within the individual sectors.

Following the interim report's publication, two major consultation events were held in 2013 that sought the views of practitioners and stakeholders in both second level and higher education on the three key directions. An update was published at Easter 2014 by the Group, where a provisional new grading structure for the Leaving Certificate Examination was announced.

The Minister for Education and Skills and the partners on the Transition Reform Group are now collectively announcing a package of measures for implementation for those entering fifth year in September 2015.

There are four main components to this set of changes and these are outlined in this report:



# 2

## THE CONTEXT FOR REFORM

The *Directions* report set out the rationale and context for the reform programme embarked upon by the partners on the Group. It concluded that the so-called “points race” resulted from a complex interaction of factors which are compounded by the use of the Leaving Certificate examination for selection and entry into higher education.

This interaction involves:

- 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 higher education;
- The proliferation of entry routes into higher education (many of them with very small numbers of places); and
- The very high demand for a small number of university courses with a limited number of places.

Research by the ESRI (Smyth, Banks and Calvert 2011) and consultation carried out in the context of Junior Cycle reform and Transition Reform show that the effect of the points race is felt right through second-level education, culminating in a teaching and learning experience in sixth-year that is almost completely dominated by the impact of the impending high stakes exams<sup>1</sup>. The resultant stress levels for senior cycle students and the effect on their learning has been documented by the ESRI and others (Hyland 2011)<sup>2</sup> and emerged very strongly in a consultation with fifth and sixth year students undertaken as part of consultation during the Transition Reform process. (McEvoy 2013)<sup>3</sup>.

Underpinning the collaborative approach across second level and higher education partners is a recognition that in a coherent system no phase of education should be seen to be designed solely to serve the needs of the next. Nevertheless, if learning and learners are to be supported at this critical stage of their lives, the potential for a much greater realignment of senior cycle education and the undergraduate experience must be realised, consistent with the shared learning objectives across this critical transition in Irish education. These objectives include discouraging an overly instrumentalist approach to learning and encouraging and rewarding critical, reflective and independent thinking.

A critical feature of the work of the Transition Reform Group is the strong acknowledgement that robust research and analysis of the available evidence should inform every aspect of the partners' deliberations. This is of particular importance given the high stakes and sensitivity of this transition.

<sup>1</sup> E. Smyth, J. Banks and E. Calvert, *From Leaving Certificate to Leaving School: A Longitudinal Study of Sixth Year Students* (ESRI, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> A. Hyland, *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century: Discussion Paper for the NCCA / HEA Seminar to be held on 21st September 2011*.

<sup>3</sup> O. McEvoy, *Report on the Consultation with 5th and 6th Year Students on the Reform of the Transition from 2nd to 3rd Level Education* (Cnagar an Doras - Consultancy & LifeCoaching, 2013).

# PROBLEMATIC PREDICTABILITY IN THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

## 3

### 3.1 EXTERNAL EVALUATION BY OXFORD UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

One of the three key directions set out by the Minister in the *Directions* report was: A commitment to address any problematic predictability identified in an analysis of predictability in the Leaving Certificate examination.

The extent to which the Leaving Certificate examination papers are perceived to be predictable can dominate exam preparation by students and teachers as they approach the Leaving Certificate. This issue also pervades public discourse. Predictability can be perceived as positive (in the sense that the presence of too many surprises on an examination is viewed internationally as being unfair to candidates) or negative (frequently being cited as leading to inappropriate rote learning).

The centrality of this issue in public debate around the Leaving Certificate led to a commitment by the Minister to a robust independent assessment as to the existence, the location or the extent of predictability in the examination system, before identifying any necessary corrective action.

### 3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS

The SEC commissioned 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, and in collaboration with Queens University, Belfast. The study comprehensively answers the following research questions.

- 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 Leaving Certificate 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 examination?
- 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 was conducted in three phases: a literature review and analysis of media commentary on the Leaving Certificate examinations; extensive analysis and research on examination materials in six subjects; teachers and learners research including surveys of more than 1,000 Leaving Certificate candidates in 2013 and fieldwork conducted in 17 representative schools across Ireland.

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Concerns about the predictability of the Leaving Certificate examination question content were not sustained by the findings of this research overall. None of the examinations was found to be very problematically predictable in these terms. The researchers noted that it is important for the currency of the Leaving Certificate that it is a trusted assessment and they recommended that action be taken specifically to address the portrayal of the examinations in the public sphere in order to maintain trust in these important national examinations.

Nonetheless, moving beyond the narrow issue of predictability of question content to the broader issue of the kinds of learning that students engage in, the researchers did identify certain aspects of the examinations that could beneficially be addressed. These aspects include further increasing the emphasis on the assessment of higher order thinking skills in the examinations. The researchers noted that this is a common concern internationally in relation to examinations, and that moving further in this direction as subjects are reviewed would be in keeping with international trends in assessment.

Arising from these findings, the report identifies a number of issues for consideration by the Irish authorities. While some of these can be addressed in the short term, a longer term plan will have to be put in place to assess and address others. The conclusions of and the main issues arising from the research are attached at Appendix 1.

### 3.3 PUBLICATION AND NEXT STEPS

The SEC will shortly publish the report and the four associated working papers. The Group hopes that the publication of this report will stimulate debate and provide a welcome evidence base for students, teachers and the wider public to inform their perspective on the Leaving Certificate examinations.

It should also be noted that predictability and teaching to the test are fundamental concerns about high stakes examinations in many countries internationally. As there is very little empirical evidence worldwide on the issue of predictability, the report notes that the research undertaken on the Irish system, being the first study of this breadth and depth on this issue, will be of interest to assessment organisations and researchers internationally.

The Department of Education and Skills has now formally requested the advice of the State Examinations Commission on how the issues identified in the independent research report should be addressed. Any changes will be managed carefully to ensure fairness to candidates.

# A NEW GRADING SCALE FOR THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

## 4

### 4.1 A NEW GRADING SCALE FOR THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

A second direction set out by the Minister in the *Directions* report was a commitment to reduce the number of grading bands used in the Leaving Certificate examination. This was in response to concerns as to whether the 14 grade points (at each of two levels) in the Leaving Certificate examination might, over time, have had unintended consequences for the nature of the examination, and for the student experience of senior cycle education. More specifically, the use of narrow grade bands may put pressure on students to achieve marginal gains in examination performance and as a consequence focus excessive attention on the detail of the assessment process rather than the achievement of broader learning objectives.

Ireland's use of such a high number of grade bands (28 grade bands over Ordinary and Higher Level) is unique internationally and was introduced in 1992 at the request of higher education institutions amid concerns about the increasing use of random selection for third level places. Scotland operates five grade points, England, Wales and Northern Ireland (A levels) use six, Finland has seven, the International Baccalaureate uses seven and New Zealand has four. The Netherlands has ten grade points but the very high and very low bands are rarely awarded with most of the grading around the middle six points.

Discussions have taken place as part of the broader collaborative reform process by partners on the Transition Reform Group and more focussed discussion has occurred in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the State Examinations Commission. Several models were considered in detail at a themed workshop as part of the second Transitions Conference held in Maynooth University in June 2013 and at a consultation with second level students in October 2013. Following these consultations and discussions, a new eight point grading scale based on 10% grading bands has been agreed. The new grading scale and a sample of how the Leaving Certificate *Statement of Results* will look are shown at *Fig 2* and *Fig 3*.

**FIG. 2: NEW GRADING SCALE**

Existing (14-point) Scale	% Awarded	New Scale	% Awarded
A1	90-100	H1 / O1	90-100
A2	85<90	H2 / O2	80<90
B1	80<85		
B2	75<80	H3 / O3	70<80
B3	70<75		
C1	65<70	H4 / O4	60<70
C2	60<65		
C3	55<65	H5 / O5	50<60
D1	50<55		
D2	45<50	H6 / O6	40<50
D3	40<45		
E	25<40	H7 / O7	30<40
F	10<25	H8 / O8	0<30

**FIG. 3: SAMPLE LEAVING CERTIFICATE STATEMENT OF RESULTS**

Ábhair / Subjects	Leibhéal / Level	Grád/Grade
Gaeilge Irish	Árd Higher	3
Béarla English	Gnáth Ordinary	1
Matamaitic Mathematics	Bonn Foundation	1
Iodáilis Italian	Árd Higher	7
Ceimic Chemistry	Gnáth Ordinary	7
Eacnamaíocht Bhaile – Eolaíoch agus Sóisialta Home Economics – Scientific and Social	Árd Higher	6
Tireolaíocht Geography	Gnáth Ordinary	5

1 = 90 – 100% 2 = 80 < 90% 3 = 70 < 80% 4 = 60 < 70%  
5 = 50 < 60% 6 = 40 < 50% 7 = 30 < 40% 8 = 0 < 30%

# A REVISED COMMON POINTS SCALE

5

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the new grading scale for the Leaving Certificate examinations requires that the common points scale be revised. The universities and the institutes of technology have been working together to adapt the common points scale to the new grading system with its fewer, broader grade bands. It is important that the new scale is a valid and fair measure of scholastic achievement and of the potential to succeed in higher education. The Task Groups established by IUA and IOTI have developed a set of proposals which have the support of the wider education stakeholders and will be put to the Academic Councils of the higher education institutions for discussion. Full information on the revised points scale will be available to students entering senior cycle in September 2015. The work of the IUA and IOTI Task Groups has been informed by a joint research group, chaired by the HEA, which has been modelling the outcomes for various options using Leaving Certificate examination data obtained by the Education Research Centre from the State Examinations Commission.

## 5.2 PROPOSALS

These proposals, which are provisional and subject to review by Academic Councils, recommend that the following principles should apply to the revised common points scale.

The points scale should:

- Preserve the relative value of achievement at Ordinary level in relation to achievement at Higher level that applies in the current common points scale;
- Minimise the use of random selection that may result from too many students achieving the same points score, particularly at Higher level;
- Encourage the take-up of Higher level subjects at Leaving Certificate by awarding points to the new H7 grade;
- Continue to award bonus points for Higher level mathematics in a manner similar to the present scheme.

## 5.3 RATIONALE

These proposals are advanced with a clear educational rationale.

### 5.3.1 Preserving the relationship between points awarded for results at Higher and Ordinary level

A significant number of students present a mix of Higher and Ordinary level subjects for admission to higher education. It is important that students are free to select Higher or Ordinary level papers according to their ability and educational goals. The points awarded for Higher level and Ordinary level grades should fairly reflect the level of academic achievement and potential that those grades represent, and engagement with Higher level curricula and assessment should be appropriately incentivised for those students capable of benefiting from such engagement. There is good reason to maintain the current alignment between the points awarded for achievement at Higher level and the points awarded for achievement at Ordinary level.

In support of this proposal, the Department of Education and Skills has decided to adopt the current linkage of Higher and Ordinary level grades as policy for ongoing implementation

by the NCCA and the SEC. In addition strong evidence has emerged in detailed statistical analysis to support the existing relativity and shows that Ordinary level A grades do represent a similar level of achievement to the Higher level C grades as do Ordinary level B grades to Higher level D grades.

In practice, maintaining this alignment means that the points for grade 1 at Ordinary level will equate to grade 5 at Higher level, and the points for grade 2 at Ordinary level will equal those for grade 6 at Higher level.

### 5.3.2 Minimising random selection

It is very important to design a scale that reduces the probability of students achieving the same points score so that the allocation of places in Higher education by random selection is minimised as much as possible. The current scale has largely equal increases in points with each step-up in grade (5 points)<sup>4</sup> and this consistency significantly increases the chances of many students achieving the same points score. This can lead to random selection, in particular where courses have a small number of places. That risk would be further increased given the fewer, wider grade bands used in the new grading scale for the Leaving Certificate.

It is therefore proposed that the number of points awarded with each step-up in grade may vary by different amounts. This will mean that fewer students will achieve the same points score and the likelihood of random selection is reduced.

### 5.3.3 Encouraging take-up of Higher level subjects by awarding points to the new H7 grade

The universities and institutes of technology are considering how to further encourage the take-up of subjects at Higher level for the Leaving Certificate, which is in line with broader national education policy. The motivation for this specific proposal is to reduce for a student, the risk of taking Higher level examinations. Under the current system, a student who risks taking a Higher level paper and who achieves an E grade will receive no points at all. However, if that student takes the Ordinary level paper, the same student is likely to achieve a grade at Ordinary level where points will be received. The award of points for the new H7 grade would therefore significantly reduce the risk for a student who opts for the Higher level examination. Furthermore, given the nature of curriculum based exams, it is hard to justify awarding 60 points for a score of 56% on a Higher level paper, 50 points for a score of 46% on a Higher level paper and then zero points for a score of 36% at Higher level.

<sup>4</sup> There is one exception: the reward for achieving A1 (90-100%) over A2 (85-90%) is 10 extra points

#### 5.4 A WORKED EXAMPLE

Fig 4 shows an example of a common points scale based on the principles outlined in this paper, to illustrate how the proposals might be implemented. However, the format of the new scale is still under consideration and some complex design issues remain to be resolved, so this is definitively **not** the proposed new scale. Other issues which have to be finalised include the incorporation of QQI further education and training awards, link modules (LCVP) and Foundation Maths into the common points scale. Further work will be undertaken during the summer months to finalise every aspect of the new common points scale and full details of the new scale will be published in September 2015.

**FIG. 4: SAMPLE COMMON POINTS SCALE**

Higher Level Grade %	Sample CAO points	Ordinary Level Grade %
H1 (90-100)	120	
H2 (80<90)	106	
H3 (70<80)	93	
H4 (60<70)	81	
H5 (50<60)	70	73
H6 (40<50)	60	60
		47
H7 (30<40)	45	
		34
		21
		8
H8 (0<30)		

# BROADER UNDERGRADUATE ENTRY

## 6.1 UNIVERSITY SECTOR

In 2013, the universities agreed to work together to reduce the number of undergraduate entry routes, while maintaining the number of student places, to the minimum number necessary for academically appropriate and efficient allocation of places to applicants. This had been signalled not only as a means to reduce the complexity of choice for second-level students and the level of competitiveness driving the system (Hyland 2011), but also as an opportunity to offer a much broader experience for undergraduates with specialisation to follow later in their degree. These developments align with the modernisation of undergraduate curricula and assessment that is underway in institutions across the higher education system.

The universities agreed a set of principles to guide this work which were outlined in full in the *Directions* report<sup>5</sup>.

*"In principle all universities agreed that 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.*

<sup>5</sup> Section 2.3.2, Part Two, *Directions*, "Supporting a Better Transition from 2<sup>nd</sup> level into higher education: Key Directions and Next Steps", March 2013

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*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."*

Guided by these principles, the universities are now engaged in a collaborative process to revise their portfolio of entry routes. The initial target to reduce the number of entry routes in the 2015 CAO Handbook back to 2011 levels has been achieved<sup>6</sup>. Further reductions for 2017 are now planned by all universities with an estimated additional 20% reduction across the sector by 2017 and beyond. Some of the universities are undertaking very radical restructuring of and a new curricular approach to their undergraduate programmes to achieve a much broader experience for their students in their early undergraduate years. This is also contributing to the reduction in entry routes. In implementing these principles, the universities are aware of the continued need to facilitate diverse cohorts of domestic and international students and to minimise barriers for applicants.

## 6.2 TECHNOLOGICAL SECTOR

In the *Directions* report the institutes of technology committed themselves to reviewing their programmes to ensure a mixed portfolio of programmes with denominated and generic/common entry and this commitment is being met. In the past year, all fourteen institutes of technology have commenced these reviews, which are taking place through a variety of mechanisms, and a diversity of outcomes may be expected. In response to the Transition Reform process, a number of the IoTs have moved to introduce common entry programmes at Level 8.

The reviews of programme portfolios that all institutes of technology have been undertaking in the past year are also examining the extent to which there are programmes with an overly narrow base of entry in the sector, particularly where there are complementary programmes which could be offered under one CAO code.

The merger process ongoing as part of the restructuring reforms in the technological sector, as well as the development of regional clusters, will provide a further opportunity to promote more coherent academic planning across the higher education system as a whole.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2011 there were 603 entry routes into Level 8 programmes in the seven universities. In 2015, this number stands at 599.

# FURTHER WORK AND RELATED ENTRY MATTERS

## 7

Following the finalisation of the new common points scale in September 2015, the package of measures for implementation commencing with those students sitting their Leaving Certificate in 2017 will be complete.

A further stage of work will then begin to examine other matters of selection and entry into higher education, including consideration by the universities and institutes of technology of their respective matriculation requirements. A new set of entry requirements for those applying to universities in Ireland with A-levels has been agreed by the universities and will be published shortly.

Also relevant is the recent U.K. University and Colleges Application System (UCAS) revision of their tariff for Irish students seeking to enter UK/Northern Irish programmes. A draft tariff has now been provisionally agreed between UCAS and the Department of Education and Skills and will be confirmed and communicated in May 2015 for those seeking to enter UK higher education institutions in 2017. The tariff is designed to broadly retain the current equivalence between the A-level and the Irish Leaving Certificate.

# RESEARCH AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

8

A framework for research and for the evaluation of the Transition Reform process is being developed to put in place a strong evidence-base for the monitoring and implementation of the various elements of the programme of change on a systematic basis and for assessing impact.

# NEXT STEPS

9

Implementation of the first phase of the reforms in this report will affect students entering fifth year in September 2015 and sitting their Leaving Certificate in 2017.

Finalisation of all aspects of the new common points scale will be published in September 2015.

The OUCEA research on the Irish Leaving Certificate will be published shortly by the State Examinations Commission. All materials referred to in this report will be available to the public on [www.transition.ie](http://www.transition.ie)

## GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAO	Central Applications Office
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ESRI	Education and Social Research Institute
HEA	Higher Education Authority
IUA	Irish Universities Association
IOTI	Institutes of Technology Ireland
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OUCEA	Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SEC	The State Examinations Commission;

## APPENDIX 1 CONCLUSIONS OF PREDICTABILITY RESEARCH (OUCEA) AND ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION<sup>7</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

- i. Concerns about the predictability of the Leaving Certificate examination question content were not sustained by the findings of this research overall. None of the examinations was found to be very problematically predictable in these terms.
- ii. It follows that media concerns about the predictability of the examinations were not supported by this research. As the media influences stakeholders' views of the examinations, it is important for the currency of the Leaving Certificate that it is a trusted assessment. We therefore recommend that action be taken specifically to address the media portrayal of the examinations to maintain trust in these important national examinations.
- iii. The predictability of examinations is a more subtle issue than question content alone, however. Concerns often relate to the effect of the examinations upon the kinds of learning that students engage in. Areas that could beneficially be addressed were noted in all six subjects investigated.
- iv. In Economics, French and DCG, subject specialist reviewers considered that the examinations were quite (not very) predictable overall.
- v. Consideration should be given to placing more emphasis upon the assessment of higher order thinking skills in the examinations, in keeping with international trends in assessment.
- vi. A more regular programme of revision of syllabuses is needed for the Leaving Certificate examinations to remain current. This is important for keeping up with improvements in assessment design (such as assessing more higher order thinking skills), as well as syllabus content.
- vii. Marking schemes were thought to be lacking in transparency by the subject specialist reviewers, although not by the teachers and students. Any changes to the marking schemes to make them more transparent could have implications for the manageability of fixed grade boundaries (cut-scores) in the Irish Leaving Certificate. Thus, there are decisions to be taken about whether marking schemes can be changed in this way whilst maintaining the current standard-setting system. The feasibility of this could be investigated in pilot studies.
- viii. This research has added to the international research literature by providing a broader programme of research on the predictability of a national examination than was previously available. New scales for measuring student perceptions of the predictability of examinations were devised and the relationships between them and scores on the examination were investigated. To tackle wider issues of test preparation, the research took into account teachers' and students' views of the Leaving Certificate examinations and of preparing for them.

<sup>7</sup> E.J. Baird, T.N. Hopfenbeck, J. Elwood, D. Caro, and A. Ahmed, 'Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate', Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment and Queen's University Belfast, p.27.

## ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION IN AN IRISH CONTEXT<sup>8</sup>

A number of issues that warrant consideration in an Irish context arise from this research. Some issues may be amenable to being addressed in the short term, but others may need a more fulsome consideration due to the culturally embedded nature of assessment systems. The possibility of unintended consequences needs to be considered and it may be that some changes need a longer term plan.

1. Consider how best to address the media narrative about predictability in the Leaving Certificate examinations, which has little basis in fact. The Leaving Certificate examinations are important life events for young people and have a great deal of pressure associated with them. Undermining the value of the Leaving Certificate with claims that the content of examination questions is overly predictable is unwarranted.
2. Contemplate monitoring the frequency with which questions focus upon particular topics and compare this with syllabus intentions.
3. Discourage drilling of students with pre-prepared examination answers that they do not fully understand. Although a minor issue in the findings of this research programme, this is a matter of concern where it arises. Understanding of examination formats is necessary, but teachers and students should be dissuaded from taking this too far as it will not prepare students for the future. High-stakes assessments encourage highly strategic (even if only in the short term) behaviours by students and teachers who want to get the best results. The DES, NCCA, SEC or even teachers are not fully in control of this issue. The best that can be done is to send the right signals.

4. Consider revising syllabuses more frequently and move towards the assessment of more higher order skills in the next round of revisions. Ensure that changes are reflected in the marking schemes as well as the syllabuses and question papers. Consider the ways in which students could narrow the intended curriculum and design the assessments so that this is not rewarded.
5. Maintain the transparency of the Leaving Certificate examination process, as students need to know what will be expected of them in the examination. To withdraw this would undermine the validity of the examinations. In no way do we mean this to imply that students should only be assessed on things they have already practised. Authentic learning and assessment involves being presented with novel questions and applications to some extent.
6. Consideration should be given to examining the strengths and weaknesses of the current and possible alternative approaches to standard setting. Unavoidable fluctuations in difficulty that arise in all public examinations from year to year need to be addressed through such a standard setting system and the question is whether handling this in the current manner is the most effective approach for the Leaving Certificate.

<sup>8</sup>J. Baird, T.N. Hopfenbeck, J. Elwood, D. Caro, and A. Ahmed, 'Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate', Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment and Queen's University Belfast, p.28.



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