

The FET to HE Pathway: A Tale of Two Certifications

Towards equity of competition for year 1 places in higher education



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This article looks at the key issues to be addressed in achieving the strategic goal of simplifying the pathway from further education and training to higher education (HE). In particular, it compares the two State certification systems as the current pathways to HE, and examines the advantageous position of the Leaving Certificate over the QQI system in its historical and contemporary contexts. It concludes by outlining a possible scenario for an integrated and equitable CAO points system.

Introduction

The Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) identifies creating pathways as one of the three strategic priorities for the FET sector in Ireland. One such pathway is that from FET to higher education (HE). As identified in the National Access Plan for Higher Education (DES, 2015), 'holders of further education qualifications' are an under-represented group in HE.

This article will focus on some key issues involved in achieving the strategic goal of simplifying this pathway and making it more equitable. The FET to HE issue is also about removing the systemic, administrative, and procedural barriers to fully opening this pathway. The Consultation Paper on the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (DFHERIS, 2021, p. 2) states:

It is essential that pathways to higher education are available to all those seeking to upskill or further their personal development through higher education.

Two State certification systems provide pathways to HE: the State Examinations Commission (SEC), and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Yet while both are State-owned, the Leaving Certificate (LC) or SEC pathway is more valued and more advantageous than that provided by QQI.

If the ultimate goal is for all students to have an equal chance of a place in HE, then one pathway cannot be seen as more advantageous than another. If the FET route is to be seen as a viable option, and the value of FET is to be improved in Irish society, then the structural barriers causing this inequity must be addressed. Whether these barriers remain in place or are removed is a matter for the key decision-makers in this space.

Regarding the impact of institutional structures, Busemeyer (2015, p. 2) writes:

*... variations in the institutional setup of the education and training systems **do** have enormous consequences for the distribution of skills, income, and wealth in the political economy at large. [emphasis in the original]*

This article will focus on the process of applying for a first-year place in HE from a FET course certified by QQI and compare it to the experience of taking the academic Leaving Cert route. It will identify the main structural barriers and outline a possible way forward. It will begin by outlining the origins of the bias for academic over vocational, with particular reference to Ireland.

Academic vs vocational: History of bias

Over the last 30 years, since the emergence of FET to HE pathways as the subject of debate, the slow progress in accepting vocational qualifications as a legitimate pathway to HE has echoes of Ireland's historical bias towards the academic over the vocational. This differentiation is not unique to Ireland and can be traced back to the time of Aristotle. His distinction is sociological, with academic or liberal knowledge being viewed as more appropriate to the more powerful or wealthy in society:

The system of education ... depends on the way in which rulers and ruled are distinguished from each other. (Aristotle, tr. Barker, 1995, pp. 282–283)

He makes the distinction between subjects who are fit for the freeman and those who are only fit for the slaves. Thus, the valuing of academic knowledge over vocational was based on social class and has no basis in education. Dewey (1916, p. 168) argues that the dichotomy is a fallacy and ultimately damaging:

No one is just an artist and nothing else, and in so far as one approximates that condition, he is so much the less developed human being; he is a monstrosity.

Whitehead (1932) expresses a similar view, arguing that there is no technical education that is not liberal, and no liberal education that is not technical. Deane (2005, p. 289) describes the distinction between education and training as 'artificial'.

Yet the bias in favour of the academic persists. In Ireland, this manifested clearly in the treatment of vocational qualifications as lesser than the Leaving Cert since the foundation of the State. It was evident in Irish government policy with the establishment of the vocational schools under the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) in 1930.

Due to the Catholic Church's strong opposition to the VECs at the time, and with State acquiescence, if not collusion, students attending vocational

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schools were prohibited from sitting the Intermediate or Leaving Cert exams. These exams were seen as the preserve of the religious secondary schools, which were predominantly fee-paying before the advent of free post-primary education in 1967. In other words, the children of more affluent social classes went to the secondary schools, while the children of lower socio-economic groups went to the vocational schools.

It took the State 17 years, after the formation of the vocational schools, to implement a State certification system for vocational education. The Day Vocational Certificate, or Group Certificate as it was more commonly known, was established in 1947. It was, in effect, an educational cul-de-sac, with no progression route to further study permitted upon completion.

Thus began the official recognition by the State, and consequently Irish society, of the State's vocational system as lesser than the Church-owned secondary school system. The Group Cert's cul-de-sac status continued until the early 1960s, when it was accepted for entry into apprenticeship. Contemporary discussion of the FET-to-HE pathway must be placed in the historical context of this long-standing bias, both societal and structural, for academic certification over vocational.

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Since the 1960s, the distinction between the academic and vocational, or education and training, has become less clear, particularly with the emergence of human capital theory. In a previous work (O'Sullivan, 2018a) I identify clear patterns of convergence between education and training in Irish national policy over this period, in response to the policy trajectories of supranational bodies such as the OECD and European Economic Community (EEC), later the European Union (EU). I show how education and training, in the context of economic development and skills policy documents, were increasingly referred to as a single entity.

In 1985, the European Court of Justice, in the landmark Gravier judgment, concluded that in European Law:

... any form of education which prepares for a qualification for a particular profession, trade or employment or which provides the necessary training and skills for such a profession, trade or employment is vocational training, whatever the age and the level of training of the pupils or students, and even if the training programme includes an element of general education. (Case 293/83, paragraph 30)

Therefore, in order to work in any of the professions, such as medicine, accountancy, engineering, or law, students follow a course of vocational training. In the mid-1990s in Europe, the distinction between the academic and vocational was entirely removed with the emergence of lifelong learning policies.

The FET-to-HE debate in Ireland

In Ireland, the debate about the design of a new qualification system in general, and the FET-to-HE pathway in particular, began in earnest in the early 1990s. It coincided with the emergence internationally of qualifications

frameworks, and how such frameworks could provide the infrastructure for access, transfer, and progression, namely pathways.

In 1991, the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established as the first State certification body for the nascent further education sector. By 1992, City of Dublin VEC (CDVEC) and Dublin Institute of Technology piloted the Points Enhancement Scheme. This involved the NCVA grades achieved by students on individual modules on CDVEC post-Leaving Cert courses attracting additional CAO points – in other words, a Leaving-Cert-result-plus-NCVA-result approach.

In 1998, NCVA established the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs), which facilitated the development of a national FET to HE pathway between the FE schools and colleges and primarily the institutes of technology (IoTs). The universities became involved some years later. The HELs scheme was based on the NCVA-result-only approach. This saw pathways developed with some IoT and university courses, but not all.

The debate in the 1990s culminated in the passing of a landmark piece of legislation, the 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act. It established for the first time in Ireland a national qualifications system consisting of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education and Training Council (HETAC), and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). It also led to the launch in 2003 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in Ireland, a milestone in the pathways debate.

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Based on the principle of all learning being equally valued, this 10-level framework placed FET qualifications alongside HE qualifications using the same language of learning outcomes. A core value of the NFQ is that it must contribute to building an inclusive society that ‘offers equal opportunities throughout life to all people for access to quality learning opportunities’ (NQAI, 2003, p. 11).

The 2012, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act established Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) following the amalgamation of NQAI, HETAC, FETAC, and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). This Act (section 2(5)(a)) defines access to a programme as:

Access by learners to programmes of education and training, including recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired.

By this definition, all learning is of equal value. However, for admission to higher education through the CAO, the Leaving Cert, from one State certification system, is more valued in this process by higher education institutions (HEIs) than the QQI awards, from the other system. In many HEIs, QQI awards are not valued at all, with no FET pathway from many courses listed on the CAO.

This situation is improving: currently over 88% of HE courses on the CAO have a QQI link through the HELs (www.careersportal.ie), compared to 100% for the Leaving Cert. But in terms of the existence of pathways, the

LC remains the more advantageous route for students seeking admission to HE. Rather than history repeating itself, history has continued.

Learner pathways: Towards an equal chance of success for all

If the two qualifications are analysed through the lens of ‘will prepare the student for third-level study’, both the Leaving Cert and the QQI level 5 award have many positives. Indeed, recent data published by SOLAS (2020) shows that students in the lower CAO points bracket are 17% more likely to complete a HE course if they chose the FET route rather than progressing to HE directly.

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Much of the difficulty in progressing this issue has been based on a lack of information and, to some extent, the persistence of historical perceptions of vocational education. The higher value afforded to the Leaving Cert over the QQI as the predominant pathway to HE is so ingrained as to be accepted as an unchallenged truth. It is this fundamental assumption that must be challenged before true equity of access to HE can be achieved.

President John F. Kennedy, in seeking to challenge such assumptions and modernise the US approach to public policy, said in his commencement address at Yale University in June 1962:

Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

In essence, what is required is a shift in the value that society places on different types of learning. A prerequisite of this cultural change is structural change. If we are seeking to ‘better facilitate access, progression and success for a wider and more diverse learner population at all levels’ (DFHERIS, 2021, p. 11), and aiming to increase the number of school leavers choosing FET options, then the advantage of the Leaving Cert over QQI in access to HE must be removed.

The ultimate goal must be that, regardless of which State certification system is availed of, all applicants should have an equal chance of receiving an offer from the CAO.

Current FET pathways to higher education

Currently, the HELS scheme has two primary FET-to-HE pathways: a quota-based system for universities, and a points-based system for technological universities and IoTs, with a maximum of 390 out of 600 CAO points applying (see Figure 1). Processing of applications for HE has two stages, administrative and competitive, described below.

Processing applications: Administrative and competitive phases

Administrative phase

The first phase of the application, regardless of pathway, is to ensure that the applicant has the required academic standard and subjects. For applicants from the Leaving Cert pathway, the academic standard across virtually all HEIs is a pass in six subjects, including at least two H5 grades (www.nui.ie). A few courses require specific subjects.

For applicants from the QQI pathway, the administrative phase is far less straightforward. As we have seen, not all courses on the CAO pathway have a QQI pathway. For those with a pathway, the academic standard required by HEIs varies between three and five distinction grades. But the range of subject requirements (which varies between HEIs) and different courses is extensive. For there to be equity of access to HE, there must first be a QQI pathway into every course in the CAO, and consistency in the requirements in the administrative phase of admissions.

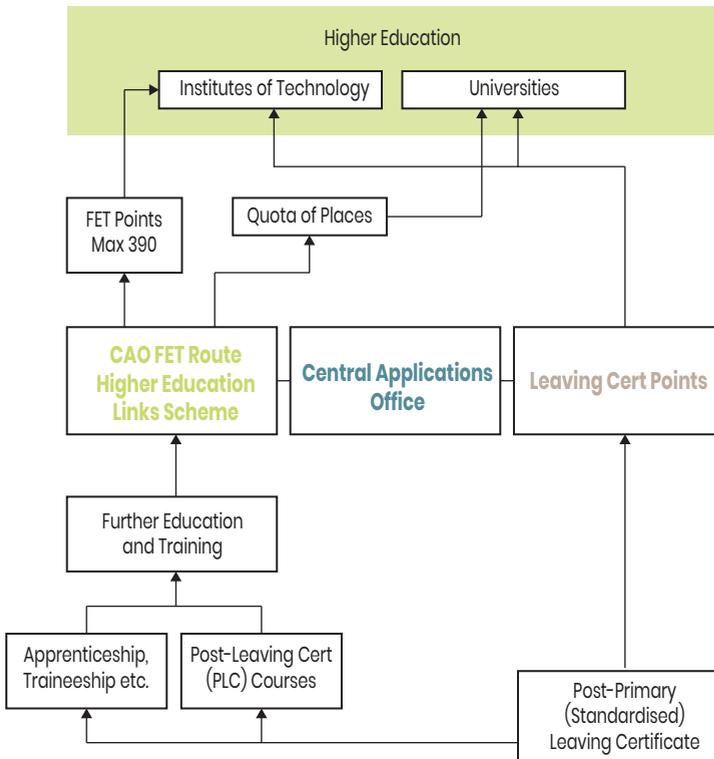


Figure 1: Progression to higher education (year 1) – current system (FETCI, 2021, p. 27)

HEAR and DARE

A particular distinction between the two pathways is with the access schemes HEAR and DARE. These are currently available only for students from the Leaving Cert pathway. However, many students with disability or special education needs choose FET after completing the Leaving Cert. If they aspire to progress to HE from FET, which may be the most educationally appropriate pathway for some, they cannot avail of supports equivalent to the DARE scheme.

Similarly, students who could have availed of the HEAR scheme from the Leaving Cert pathway have no equivalent supports available in the QQI pathway. This situation is inconsistent with equity of access to higher education.

Competitive phase

The second phase of the admissions process is the competitive phase.

This is required when the number of applications that have successfully completed the administrative phase exceeds the number of places available. Which students are offered a place?

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For the Leaving Cert pathway, the CAO points calculation applies. For the QQI pathway, the competitive phase involves two further processes. For the universities, a quota system applies, with each university deciding how many places are to be ring-fenced for FET graduates. Since this is decided each year, the number can increase or decrease.

So the actual number of places available is largely unknown, which presents an information deficit for students on the QQI pathway.

The availability of quotas guarantees that places are ring-fenced for certain under-represented groups and is a common tool in the widening participating agenda. But if participation levels reach a stage where the presence of a quota is restricting rather than widening participation, its continuation must be reviewed. In other words, at what level of participation does an under-represented group no longer need special designation? Could quotas be considered an important but short-term tool in the initial stages of opening pathways?

The technological higher education sector (THES) uses a points system with a maximum of 390 points. Below is an explanation of this calculation from the QQI website (www.qqi.ie):

Each level 5 and level 6 component is scored:

- 3.25 for a Distinction
- 2.16 for a Merit
- 1.08 for a Pass

This number is then multiplied by the individual component credit value to a maximum of 120 credits (a total of 390 points).

It may be easiest to multiply the individual component credit value by 3 for Distinction, 2 for Merit, and 1 for Pass, multiplying by 13 and dividing by 12.

Clearly, a system that resorts to two decimal places compares less favourably to the Leaving Cert points calculation. With this calculation, two level 5 qualifications on the NFQ, the Leaving Cert, and the QQI level 5 award for a FET course are valued differently by over 200 CAO points!

As providers of QQI certification, the THES has placed a lower numerical value on the QQI pathway than on the Leaving Cert pathway. The rationale for this is unclear. This is inconsistent with equity of access to HE. Indeed, the grade inflation that occurred following the 2020 and 2021 Leaving Cert results led to a corresponding increase in the CAO points requirement for many courses.

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For FET graduates, many courses in the THES sector that they would normally have expected to progress experienced an increase in the CAO points requirement above the 390 ceiling. This resulted in a double inequity for FET graduates. In 2021, for the THES, while 928 of the 967 courses had QQI links, only 797 required 390 points and below (www.careersportal.ie). Assuming that a QQI-linked course would normally be in the 390-points-and-below range, the grade – and subsequent points inflation – excluded 131 courses because the points required went above 390. This represents over 14% of the courses with a QQI pathway. This, too, is clearly not consistent with equity of access to HE.

Towards equitable pathways from FET to HE

The current system is complex and lacking in transparency. FET professionals find it difficult to navigate. What must it be like for students? The Transitions Working Paper on FET to HE progression (DES, 2020) made recommendations on this issue, including the consideration of ‘a holistic and integrated FET recognition system within the mainstream CAO application system’ (p. 25). This recommendation, and how the two systems might be benchmarked, was reiterated in the FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020).

Figure 2 shows a representation of such an integrated system. The following discussion outlines a possible scenario for a ‘holistic and integrated CAO application system’.

In this scenario, the first step towards an integrated system would be to align the grading structures of the two certification systems. The LC grading is based on bands of 10%: H1 = 90–100%, H2 = 80 < 90%, etc. In the QQI grading, Distinction = 80–100%, Merit = 65–79%, and Pass = 50–64%. One possible adjustment would be to revise the QQI grading into 10% bands:

Distinction 1 (D1):	90 – 100%
Distinction 2 (D2):	80 < 90%
Merit 1 (M1):	70 < 80%
Merit 2 (M2):	60 < 70%
Pass (P):	50 < 60%

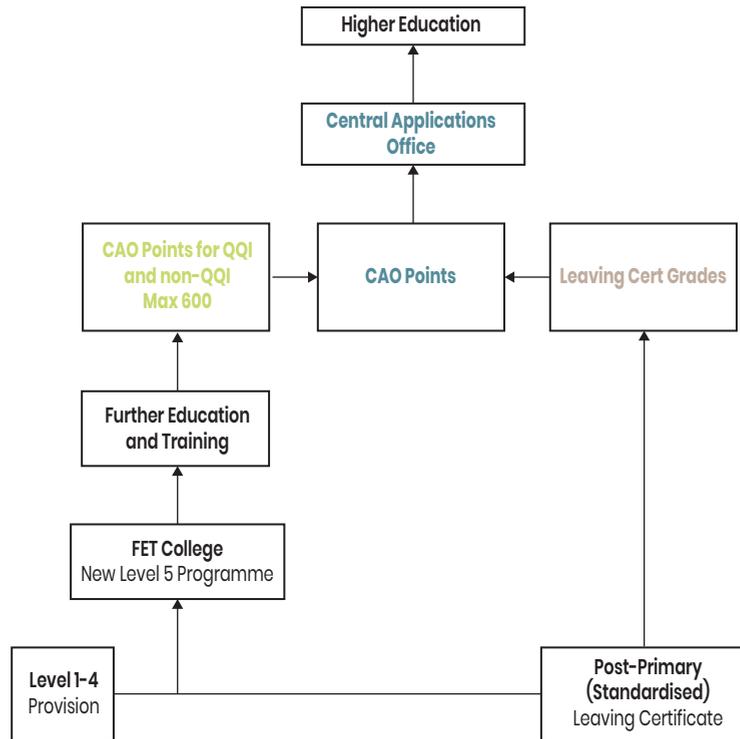


Figure 2: Progression to higher education (year 1) – future system (FETCI, 2021, p. 28)

Having aligned the grading structures, the next task would be to assign CAO points. Currently, not including any bonus points, for the SEC pathway, CAO points are based on the best six LC grades to a maximum of 600 points. That is, each H1 grade is assigned 100 points. H2 is assigned 88 points (or 88% of the H1 points), H3 is assigned 77 points (or 77% of the H1 points), and so on.

With the QQI pathway, to achieve a full level 5 award requires passing eight modules. A complicating factor is that, while most QQI modules attract 15 credits, some attract a different number. For the purpose of this exercise, we'll assume that all QQI modules have 15 credits.

In an equitable system, the full level 5 award would attract 600 points, the same maximum as the LC. Thus, each of the eight modules would attract a maximum of 75 CAO points. In other words, a D1 would be assigned 75 points. In line with the proportional differences in LC points, a D2 would attract 66 points; an M1, 58 points, and so on. Table 1 outlines this integrated points system.

Leaving Cert higher level grade	Points	QQI level grade	Points
H1 (90–100%)	100	D1 (90–100%)	75
H2 (80 < 90%)	88	D2 (80 < 90%)	66
H3 (70 < 80%)	77	M1 (70 < 80%)	58
H4 (60 < 70%)	66	M2 (60 < 70%)	50
H5 (50 < 60%)	56	P (50 < 60%)	42
H6 (40 < 50%)	46	U (0 < 50%)	0
H7 (30 < 40%)	37		
H8 (0 < 30%)	0		

Table 1: Possible integrated CAO points system (O’Sullivan, 2018b)

This simpler and more streamlined system would be a significant move towards equity of access to higher education. It would also reduce administrative costs. The current complex HELS system is administratively cumbersome and therefore more expensive. If the system is designed to be equitable, or universally designed, then the corresponding cost of administering it is also reduced.

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