

This article explores the need to develop the existing QQI level 5 curriculum for Post-Leaving Certificate students seeking to progress to higher education. It assesses the current progression policies and initiatives, and it reviews the latest data, to reconsider the suitability of the *Work Experience* module. It concludes by recommending that a new module be developed.

Introduction

This article explores the need to develop the existing QQI level 5 curriculum for Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) students seeking to progress to higher education (HE). It appraises the progression policies and initiatives currently in place to increase the number of learners progressing to HE, underpinned by a review of the data. It examines the significance of the *Work Experience* module for PLC students entering the workplace by assessing the core curriculum in the programme, outlining a historic timeline of the development of the module and presenting contemporary ideologies in the FET sector for its future development.

This review reconsiders the relevance of the *Work Experience* (WE) module for learners progressing to HE. It explores an alternative WE module, *Personal & Professional Development* (PPD), to examine its effectiveness in preparing students for this trajectory.

Many 'pre-university' courses at colleges of further education offer PPD rather than WE, and this represents what is happening on the ground. The marketing and delivery of such courses – without a supporting and corresponding curriculum grounded in the excellence that Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) strives towards – shows the need to review mandatory modules for learners seeking to progress to HE. The article concludes with recommendations to devise and develop a new module.

Overview of the PLC sector

The number of students enrolled in further education and training (FET) in Ireland is estimated at over 200,000 (SOLAS, 2020b). This figure accounts for all enrolled students in a diverse range of education provisions across levels 1 to 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), including Youthreach, PLC courses, the Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS), apprenticeships, and others. The largest student intake in FET is in PLC provision (McGuinness et

One Size Fits All

Reconsidering the mandatory status of *Work Experience* in QQI level 5 awards for further education students on a trajectory to higher education



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al., 2019), with enrolment figures from 2018 estimated at 28,000 (Guerin and Hegarty, 2020).

A caveat applies to these figures: the most recent data available is at least two years old. SOLAS gathers PLC data in the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), but a real-time database of progression from PLC to HE remains absent. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) recently introduced the Educational Longitudinal Database (ELD), which cross-references data from PLSS with other public sector databases.

Inadequate database systems in British education repeatedly fail to inform strategic planning, student supports, and curriculum delivery (Jameson et al., 2017). This lacuna is replicated in Ireland: a report for SOLAS by Guerin and Hegarty (2020, p. 28) states unobtrusively, in a footnote, that graduation rates for PLC students from HE was 'not available at the time of writing'. McGuinness et al. (2019) note the need for a unified administrative educational database for Ireland, which would collate data from the 'four pillars' of the Irish education system and be modelled on examples of best international practice, such as the Dutch, German, or Australian systems.

Progression initiatives

A number of excellent initiatives to support the progression of FET learners into HE have been used in recent years. The FET2HE network aims to support a goal from the National Access Plan (2015) to increase this progression from 6.6% to 10% by 2020 (Ryan, 2018). FET2HE initially consisted of seven of the sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and four higher education institutions (HEIs), but it is paramount that all educational stakeholders be represented in order to achieve a national and consistent approach that removes unintentional bias to students from the other nine ETBs.

Individual HEIs have also introduced strategic measures to increase the number of FET applicants to degree programmes. Examples include the Higher Education Link Scheme, memoranda of understanding between institutes of technology and colleges of further education, and the introduction of QQI/FETAC student recruitment advisors in Irish universities.

The number of course places reserved for FET learners at NUI Galway recently increased from 60 to over 220 (NUI Galway, 2021). This extraordinary increase shows the considerable value the university places on progression and the widening of participation among learners accessing HE from different educational backgrounds.

Such an investment of resources may also reflect the retention and completion success rates of FET students in degree programmes. Although the claim of strong retention rates for such students has been regarded as hearsay, recent data analysis confirms a high rate of retention (around 70%) in this cohort (Mulvey, 2019; Guerin and Hegarty, 2020; SOLAS, 2020a).

Progression statistics

Over the last two decades, the increase in FET applications to the CAO for HE courses reflects a seismic change in the destination of these students

to HE rather than entering the workplace. Figure 1 shows the rise of CAO applications from students with an FET FETAC/QQI award, from just under 3,000 in 2001 to over 14,000 in 2018.

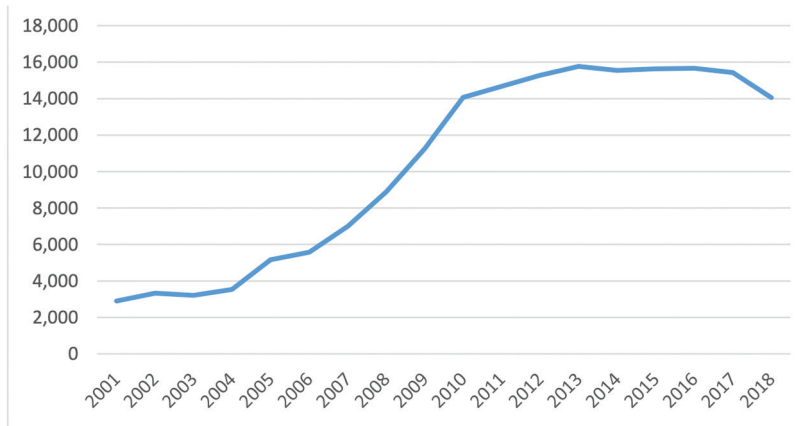


Figure 1: CAO applications from the FET sector for HE courses (DES, 2020, p. 15)

The new access and entry measures for FET learners applying to HE through the CAO, as outlined in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's Statement of Strategy 2021–2023 (DFHERIS, 2021), is the latest initiative to provide FET learners with new pathways to HE. The strategy also introduces an application process to FE courses at levels 5 and 6 for those applying with Leaving Certificate results, which aims to alert these applicants to the vast range of FE and apprenticeship options as well as HE (O'Connor, 2021).

Supporting progression in the curriculum

The emphasis and importance placed on preparing PLC students to enter the workplace can be traced back to the formation of the NCVA level 2 awards, which was retained by FETAC and is now under QQI's remit (Mulvey, 2019). The original NCVA *Work Experience* module remains remarkably recognisable from its initial conception to the programme delivered currently, and it continues to function as a core mandatory module in the QQI level 5 awards.

The recent SOLAS document *Future FET: Transforming Learning* (2020a) and an article by O'Sullivan (2020) re-evaluate the WE module and propose giving it further prominence by increasing the credit level from 12.5% to 30%. For FET learners en route to the workplace, the delivery on key skills in the work arena can only be regarded as a positive step. For FET learners en route to HE, however, there is no equivalent 'destination' module or increased credit level reflecting their chosen path. This results in unintended bias in the course structure towards PLC learners pursuing a course to gain immediate employment upon completion.

McGuinness et al. (2019) write that around 70% of PLC learners did work experience during their studies, but they do not offer a narrative as to why. They report that 40% of learners said their main objective in completing a PLC course was to progress to HE, and it is plausible that some of them

completed an alternative module for WE, which is arguably more beneficial to students considering HE.

The PPD module is an approved alternative to WE and can be found in most QQI levels 5 and 6 major awards. The module is well written and comprises seven learning outcomes, the fourth of which is the most salient here: ‘Use research skills to gather a range of relevant information and materials for entry to and support within further or higher education or training provision, or within a particular career path’.

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While the module recommends that the learner engage with primary research, such as interviews and visits with HE, an assessment structure similar to the WE supervisor’s report may benefit the learner more. The references to workplace learning in this module dilute the key focus of progression to HE and point to an urgent need to write new mandatory modules with progression at the heart of their design and content.

PLC course names

Irish principals ‘view different courses in the college as serving different purposes’ (McGuinness, 2019, p. 574), and this is reinforced by the fashionable marketing by colleges of further education for ‘pre-university’ courses whose titles suggest a predetermined route. Figure 2 shows a sample of pre-university courses advertised by numerous FE centres across Ireland.

While this branding may be considered a strong marketing tool to recruit students who seek an alternative pathway to HE, there is no guarantee of a university place upon completion of the course. None of the FET stakeholders regulate or approve course names, and there is a long-standing practice to change a course title from what is printed on the certificate, for example an ‘Art Portfolio Preparation Course’ where the award named on the QQI certificate states ‘Graphic Design 5M1995’. The disparity is ambiguous.

Examples of adding a prefix such as *pre-* to a subject area can be found in the historical marketing of PLC courses. An article in the *Irish Times* (Byrne, 1996) states, ‘most PLCs prepare students for work while others offer pretraining such as pre nursing or pre apprenticeship courses’. It is an open question whether this can reasonably be interpreted as false advertising, since colleges cannot guarantee a place even upon completion of the FET course with the highest results possible.

A review of pre-university courses should question if the curriculum imparts the skills needed to progress to HE and if learners have achieved the desired outcomes in order to proceed to HE courses. The large number of pre-university courses indicates the needs of different learners to avail of alternative routes to HE, but these courses are operating without a considered curriculum focused on the skills that the learners require to fulfil their academic ambitions.

New curriculum proposal

The writing and validation of a new module, to complement the existing progression initiatives outlined above, is under the remit of QQI. This independent state agency regulates the qualification systems within the NFQ and aims to support the distinctive pathways of PLC learners after course completion, focusing ‘both on facilitating progression to higher education and on direct generation of employment outcomes’ (QQI, 2020, p. 41).

A fundamental differentiation between learners’ final destinations is clearly outlined, but the corresponding programme content remains aspirational and unfulfilled. Many QQI award descriptors include references to progression (ibid., p. 50), but the development of a new module that fully embraces QQI’s policies for progression must be addressed.

The design and specification of a new module with progression as its *raison d’être* requires consultation with all stakeholders. Engagement with HEIs to elucidate the key skills that would benefit students before beginning a degree programme is a fundamental starting point. The knowledge base of subject-matter experts in FET to develop the content and apply suitable QA assessment instruments, with particular reference to the success of pre-university programmes, is an invaluable resource to be fully exploited in the process.

A dialogue with, or survey of, FET students who have completed level 5 awards and are pursuing HE could offer unique and helpful insights. An understanding of the skills they developed as part of their PLC studies that they have used in their undergraduate studies, as well as others that they developed in HE, could also shed new light.

A structured engagement of FET learners with HE, similar to the supervisor’s report in WE, might realise benchmark 7 of the Gatsby Foundation principles, which advocates ‘encounters with further and higher education’ to widen participation of FET students progressing to HE (Avery, 2020). It is important to evaluate assessment duplication from other mandatory modules, such as *Communications* and *Team Leadership*, while still promoting cross-curricular assessment between vocational and mandatory modules. Key literary and research skills found in *Communications*, such as writing a structured report and critical reading tasks, are timely and should be included in the new module.

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Conclusion

The current curriculum in QQI level 5 courses retains a historical bias, which sought to impart skills to FE learners entering the workplace. This article has challenged the myopic perspective that work-related modules should be incorporated into all FET courses and instead advocates reform of the QQI mandatory modules. The alternative module PPD, as outlined above, offers a perfunctory gesture for FE learners on a trajectory to HE. A new mandatory module that focuses exclusively on progression is essential to provide equal educational opportunities to learners on different pathways.

The actions and initiatives taken by SOLAS, the ETBs, FET2HE, and HEIs to promote progression pathways for FET learners are commendable, but it is now time for the curriculum to mirror these advancements. In order for this to be effective, the planning and development of any new curriculum must involve all stakeholders.

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