

Transformation through Tertiary

Facilitating student transition and promoting educational equity in a unified tertiary system

The tertiary tenet

The creation of a unified tertiary system has been a key priority of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science. A central component of this vision was the establishment of the National Tertiary Office (NTO) in 2022. The NTO is tasked with ensuring that a strategic and cohesive approach underpins the development of joint further and higher education or tertiary degree programmes that result in the learner having the best opportunity to avail of pathways that are clearly defined and easily accessed. The first tranche of unified tertiary degree courses opened for student application in July 2023 and commenced in September.

Underpinning the ambition of the tertiary degree is a commitment to the universal design approach, in which we proactively design, develop, and deliver our tertiary degree programmes with the broad palette of human diversity as a central theme. Students of the tertiary degree route will be enabled to bring more of themselves into their various learning environments. The learner-centric focus of the tertiary degree route gives students the opportunity to pursue a degree and a career that they want, through an alternative route to the CAO.

Tertiary degree programmes are to be strategically developed across disciplines and specialisms focused on meeting skill needs, collaboratively designed and delivered in shared spaces providing a seamless student experience and transition from further education to higher education. Thus, they guarantee not only seamless progression and transition but also access for students to the full range of supports and services from the Education and Training Board (ETB) and higher education institution



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Director, National Tertiary Office

The introduction of the new tertiary degree route from further education and training to higher education was a historic reform by the Minister and his department. The purpose was to provide another route to degree-level education that is not dependent on Leaving Cert results, points, or lottery access based on QQI results. Tertiary degrees offer students seamless transition from further to higher education, underpinned by collaborative programme design and teaching collaboration in shared spaces and shared student experiences.

(HEI), including academic, health and wellbeing supports, libraries, and sports facilities.

Tertiary degrees include a structured step-back/embedded award process so that students withdrawing from a programme, for any reason, can be supported to transition into further education and training (FET) to continue their studies. This will help ensure that the student is appropriately scaffolded through their learning journey to achieve key outcomes, rather than focusing solely on entry.

Additionally, students on a tertiary degree will not have a tuition fee or student contribution fee applied for the duration of their tertiary tuition with the ETB. The Free Fees Initiative and student contribution arrangements apply to the duration of the tuition delivered by the HEI on the tertiary programme.

Progressing pathways

It is time to challenge old habits and beliefs about the relationship between FET and Higher Education.

The claim that a range of routes and pathways already exists between FET and higher education is not unfounded. The links scheme has supported this transition for many students. But the nature of these linkages is varied, limited, outdated, imbalanced, and often dependent on local arrangements and relationships. So it was long past time that these pathways were rewired and reframed.

It is time to challenge old habits and beliefs about the relationship between FET and higher education. The introduction of the tertiary degree route matters. It matters because without it, access to higher education and careers can continue to be unequally distributed. Factors such as poverty, location, gender, language, disability, ethnicity, religion, migration, and displacement status can continue to dictate and limit educational opportunities. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that the human right to access quality education throughout life is achieved.

In the joint tertiary degree model, the five regional partnerships* agree to pursue cooperation under the terms and conditions identified in data-sharing agreements and a memorandum of agreement. The memorandum is based on the principles of equality and reciprocal benefit, and sets out broad cooperative arrangements and specific areas of academic cooperation to support a more unified tertiary system. Such arrangements may include structures to support the delivery of new joint FET and higher education programmes, the enhancement of recognition of FET credits in higher education, the adaptation or realignment of existing programmes, and joint programme delivery models.

The NTO provides a structured approach to addressing matters that may arise during local partnership discussions. It also supports the tertiary coordinators

in their role with joint programme development proposals, validation and approval processes, their engagement with all FET and higher-education partners in the broader tertiary landscape, and stakeholder engagement as part of joint tertiary degree development.

Achieving ambitions

As the ambitions of a more unified tertiary system are advanced through this initiative, with joint tertiary degrees co-developed, co-designed, and co-delivered by the partnerships, it is anticipated that this process may also yield the following sectoral benefits:

- » strengthened local and regional relationships between HEIs and ETBs which will enhance the provision available to students and communities
- » increased diversity of the higher-education population, which in turn will impact on the expectations of young children from a diversity of communities and backgrounds
- » encouragement of innovative approaches that support the co-development, co-design, and co-delivery of tertiary programmes that will increase access and support successful participation and retention in higher education by the target groups
- » prioritisation of the development of tertiary courses that address identified future skills needs for the geographical area served by the partnership and meet local economic and social requirements.

The NTO commissioned the first phase of evaluation of the pilot or proof-of-concept stage that will inform and shape future iterations of the joint tertiary degree offerings. This review focuses on the engagement of each partnership and on tertiary programme design, development, implementation, and management, in order to identify:

- » examples of good practice and transformative tertiary initiatives
- » potential new areas for tertiary degree expansion
- » feasibility of delivering tertiary degrees
- » extent to which the initiative has contributed to the key objectives of achieving a unified tertiary system.

As we consider the outcomes of the pilot stage, we will also examine the impact of this approach to collaboration in the advancement of a unified tertiary system that champions a strength-based approach to education focused on overcoming barriers to progression.

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FOOTNOTES

* The five regional partnerships are:

1. Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT), Kildare Wicklow ETB (KWETB), and City of Dublin ETB (CDETB).
2. South East Technological University (SETU) and Laois and Offaly ETB (LOETB).
3. Limerick and Clare ETB (LCETB) and Technological University of the Shannon (TUS): Midlands Midwest.
4. Atlantic Technological University (ATU), Galway Roscommon ETB (GRETB), Mayo Sligo Leitrim ETB (MSLETB), and Donegal ETB.
5. Cork ETB (CETB), Kerry ETB (KETB), University College Cork (UCC), and Munster Technological University (MTU).



Pat O'Doherty, Chair of the National Apprenticeship Alliance (NAO), pictured with Dr Mary Liz Trant, NAO Director, and Hazel Johnson, MAMF Apprentice at Du Puy Synthes and winner of the 2023 Apprentice of the Year Award.