

‘Mind the gap!’ Unified Tertiary Degrees as a Holistic Approach to Progression from Further to Higher Education

Introduction

Further education and training (FET) students continue to report obstacles to pursuing higher education (HE), including structural, institutional, and social barriers, together with the financial challenges of juggling work, family, and care responsibilities (Sartori & Bloom, 2023). In order to ‘mind the gap’ in terms of who gets to go to university and who doesn’t, we need to continue to review and adapt how we do things.

The primary aim of unified tertiary degree provision, where students start a degree in their local FET college and complete it in a HE institution, is to develop clear and additional pathways, while addressing many of the barriers by providing direct, local access without fees. Tertiary degree programmes aim to guarantee not only seamless progression and transition but also access for students to the full range of supports and services from both the Education and Training Board (ETB) and the HE institution (Maloney, 2023).

This article considers what we mean by progression, while presenting from the position that unified tertiary degrees have the potential to provide a holistic approach to educational transition, through paying particular attention to the student experience and post-graduation destination. This, Fleming et al. (2017) would say, enables students as agents of equality.

It is just over a year since Simon Harris launched the initiative in summer 2023. This article offers insights from research carried out with students on one of the first unified tertiary degrees, between South East Technological University (SETU) and Laois and Offaly



Dr Sarah Sartori

Higher Education Strategic Project Lead,
South East Technological University

Further education and training (FET) students continue to report a range of obstacles to pursuing higher education. This article tackles the myth of linear progression and argues that tertiary degrees can provide a more holistic approach to progression from FET to higher education, through paying particular attention to the student experience and post-graduation destination.

Education and Training Board (LOETB), to see if we are making a difference and minding the gap.

The myth of linear progression

I did first and second year [in university], so I was really caught, and I thought I'd never get back, so this was like, yeah! (SETU-LOETB tertiary student research participant)

Maria Montessori told us in 1946 that progress is not linear, yet we still get surprised by findings that show large groups of learners in FET moving both up and down the National Framework of Qualifications availing of learning, upskilling, and re-skilling opportunities (DES, 2020, p.23). The conceptualisation of learner progression as exclusively upwards is legacy thinking – but rooted in legal definition and policy, with implications for the student, as SUSI grant eligibility requires upwards-only progression (Peck & Stritch, 2023).

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been described as fragmented and difficult to navigate for learners and staff in an Irish context (Edge & Mernagh, 2023). It is even more so for students from other countries, who are sometimes caught in the double bind of not having their degree recognised but also being unable to avail of free fees by virtue of having a degree.

Because I come from another country, and I have a degree from my country. So like, for me, I was applying to CAO and I was like, my grades aren't going to match. But this programme was way more straightforward. (SETU-LOETB tertiary student research participant)

An evaluation of tertiary student intake on SETU and LOETB programmes for 2023 found that 31% had previous experience of higher education. As highlighted by the quotes above, for some of these students, a tertiary education programme made the difference in enabling them to continue their education, by filling in some of the potholes on the pathway.

'A good job'

Unified tertiary programmes provide a scaffolded pathway to higher education, whereby students begin their degree in the smaller and more intimate setting of an FET college and, through campus visits, dual registration, and contact with lecturers and staff, are simultaneously initiated into the university.

I've done university before and how it can be so big and everything. The fact that like this is such a smaller group it just feels very nice because you do talk to everybody. (SETU-LOETB tertiary student research participant)

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We have our own thing here. Yeah. And obviously, we'll be integrated in third year. (SETU-LOETB tertiary student research participant)

However, the number one reason students chose to do a unified tertiary degree programme with SETU and LOETB was to get 'a good job'. The National Tertiary Office is tasked with leading the strategic development of these programmes across disciplines and specialisms focused on meeting skill needs (Maloney, 2023); to date, this development has largely been between ETBs and technological universities (TUs).

The career-related approaches that prepare students for the workplace, coupled with close industry ties, do make TUs stand out in terms of bridging the gap between classroom and career (Gleeson, 2024). But in terms of bridging the gap between FE and HE, so too do the strong and established links to further education and post-Leaving Cert (PLC) provision.

Conclusion

The FET Strategy 2020–2024 committed to ensuring that 'people will move seamlessly between FET and HE with clear transition criteria in large numbers' by 2024 (SOLAS, 2020). But a skewing of emphasis on entry into HE and access targets, rather than on student experience and post-graduation destination, can have a conveyor-belt quality to it that creates perversities in the labour market, and ironically does not produce the diverse workforce necessary for the balanced and productive society for which it was designed and on which it relies (Conover, 2016). Added to this is the uncomfortable truth that the value of a degree is considerably lessened in a vastly credentialled world (Sartori & Bloom, 2023), but within that, the university experience still needs to fulfil students' expectations and develop their capacity to achieve their objectives.

Unified tertiary degree provision ambitiously aims to draw the best of what FET and HE have to offer through a learner-centric approach to degree provision outside the CAO. Student voices in this proof-of-concept or pilot phase indicate that taking a more holistic approach to progression between FET and HE is indeed minding the gap. Tertiary student intake into SETU for 2024 has tripled, though relatively speaking these numbers are still small, and stitching the FET and HE sectors together seamlessly is no small feat. All indications suggest that unified tertiary provision is on the threshold of something bigger, though how we measure its success may also require a more holistic approach and, as Verna Myers (2015) reminds us, a move beyond counting to cultivating.

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University of Galway celebrates 175 years of welcoming students



Pictured here is the family of Alexander Anderson, Irish physicist and President of Queen's College Galway (1899-1934), including Emily Anderson, the German Professor and celebrated code-breaker, one of the University of Galway's most renowned graduates.

Photo taken in 1904 at the front door of the President's residence at the University.

From the College Photographs Collection at the University of Galway Library.

"Today's students, including the 3,368 who registered to commence their first year of undergraduate study with us this year, are carrying on that long tradition of courage, hope and desire. Our Legacy of Learning anniversary celebrates those intentions and the pursuit of excellence in teaching, learning and research."

The University of Galway was established by the Colleges (Ireland) Act in 1845. The University was first known as Queen's College Galway, along with its sister colleges in Cork and Belfast. It was established to provide a non-denominational university education to Ireland's emerging middle class.

A LEGACY OF LEARNING

commemorates the first enrolments in 1849, four years after the establishment of the University

On Wednesday, October 30, 2024, University of Galway announced a series of creative efforts to mark a milestone anniversary - 175 years of educating students.

At midday on October 30, 1849, the first students walked through the historic Archway into the Quadrangle to begin studying and learning, four years after the University was established as Queen's College Galway (1845).

In 1849, 68 students passed their matriculation exams. They progressed to studies in 21 subjects ranging from Greek Language to Logic and Metaphysics in the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Law, and the Schools of Civil Engineering and Agriculture.

To mark the anniversary, University of Galway launched several celebrations under the banner "A Legacy of Learning: 1849-2024".

Professor Peter McHugh, Interim President of the University of Galway, said:

"At the height of the Great Irish Famine, a moment of profound social and ecological crisis, 68 students began their education at our University with the courage to hope for a better life and the desire to play their part in improving the world.