

TRANSITION REFORM STEERING GROUP

KEY DIRECTIONS UPDATE - EASTER 2014

1. INTRODUCTION

The Minister for Education and Skills published 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. Since its publication, significant progress towards reform of this transition has been made through a process of intensive deliberation and discussion collectively by the Group and within the separate sectors.

The partners on the Transition Reform Group, the Department of Education and Skills; the Higher Education Authority; the State Examinations Commission; the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; Quality and Qualifications Ireland; the Institutes of Technology Ireland and the Irish Universities Association are now working towards agreeing the scope and timeframes for implementation of the three Key Directions made in Part Two of the *Directions* report, conducting further research where necessary as well as focussing further on the areas of other work set out in Part Three of the report. Two major consultation events were also held in 2013 that sought the views of practitioners and stakeholders in both second level and higher education on the three Key Directions, which received broad support across all sectors.

This update sets out the progress to date in relation to the three interconnected Key Directions which are:



The update also indicates where further research is being carried out and the broad areas of change which are emerging from the work of the Transition Reform Group and the work of the individual partners.

2. PROBLEMATIC PREDICTABILITY IN THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

2.1 EXTERNAL EVALUATION BY OXFORD UNIVERSITY CENTRE EDUCATIONAL ASSESMENT

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 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 evaluation was conducted in three phases: a literature review and analysis of media commentary on the Leaving Certificate examinations; research on examination materials in six subjects; Teachers and Learners research including surveys of Leaving certificate candidates in 2013 and fieldwork conducted in 17 representative schools across Ireland.

2.2 REPORTING AND NEXT STEPS

The research will be reported on in five documents – there will be an overall report, which will be supplemented by four working papers.

The four working papers are complete and are being prepared for publication. The overall report is being finalised and is expected shortly. At that juncture, the SEC and NCCA will, as outlined in the joint HEA/NCCA report on *Transitions or Transactions*, develop proposals to address the issues identified through the research. A paper based on the deliberations of the SEC's internal working group on predictability, *Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination – An Exploration of Issues*, will also be published at the same time as the external research report.

While predictability in the Leaving Certificate examination is not emerging as a major issue of concern to the researchers, some elements of problematic predictability were identified. However, the research indicates that no subject was considered to be very problematically predictable overall by the subject specialists, the teachers or the students.

Measures to address any problematic predictability identified will be carefully managed by the State Examinations Commission to ensure fairness to candidates in partnership with the Department of Education and Skills and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

3. GRADING BANDS

3.1 A NEW GRADING SCALE FOR THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

In the *Directions report*, a commitment was made to reduce the number of Grading Bands used in the Leaving Certificate examination in response to concerns that the use of narrow grade bands puts pressure on students to achieve marginal gains in examination performance and as a consequence

focuses 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.

Discussions have been ongoing as part of the broader collaborative reform process by partners on the Transitions Reform Steering Group and more focussed discussion has occurred in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the State Examinations Commission. Several models were discussed in detail at a themed workshop as part of the second Transitions Conference held in NUI Maynooth in June 2013 and at a consultation with second level students in October 2013.

The emerging model within these discussions and in wider consultation with practitioners and second level students would see a move towards an eight point grading scale based on 10% grading bands.

4. BROADER UNDERGRADUATE ENTRY

4.1 UNIVERSITY SECTOR

In 2013, the universities agreed to work together to reduce the number of undergraduate entry routes, while maintaining the number of programmes, to the minimum number necessary for academically appropriate and efficient allocation of places to applicants. The universities also agreed a set of principles to guide this work which were outlined in full in the *Directions* report¹.

Guided by these principles, the universities are now engaged in a collaborative process to revise their portfolio of entry routes. A commitment has been made to ensure that the number of entry routes offered in 2015 is brought back to the number available in 2011. Planning is currently underway for full implementation of these principles by 2017, resulting in a further phased reduction in the number of entry routes offered. 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.

4.2 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. In the past year, all 14 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 Transitions reform process, a number of the IoTs have moved to introduce common entry programmes at Level 8. Some of these are already on stream in the 2014 CAO Handbook; while others will follow in 2015 and the succeeding years.

¹ Section 2.3.2, Part Two, *Directions*, "Supporting a Better Transition from 2nd level into higher education: Key Directions and Next Steps", March 2013

The reviews of programmes 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.

5. OTHER WORK AND RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

In addition to the Key Directions made by the partners in the Transition Reform process, the broader suite of measures outlined in Part 3 of the *Directions* Report are being researched and considered by Task Groups set up by the universities and the institutes of technology. These include the consideration of matters of selection and entry into higher education including matriculation requirements and the use of supplementary contextual assessments. A key component of this additional work is the consideration of the translation of Leaving Certificate Examination results into points for entry.

6. RESEARCH AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

A framework for research, monitoring and evaluation of the Transition reform process is being developed and will form part of the overall implementation plan to ensure that the objectives of reform are being met.

7. NEXT STEPS

The Directions report envisaged that implementation would begin in September of this year. As consideration of the key issues progressed within the Group and within sectors, it became apparent that the complexity and inter-connectedness of the main issues coupled with the necessity of developing an evidence base sufficient to allow appropriate decision-making and agreement in such a high stakes and sensitive area would result in a more extended timeframe for the commencement of implementation.

A full implementation plan will be agreed by the partners by the end of 2014. Phased implementation of the changes agreed will begin for students entering fifth year in September 2015. Full details of the timing of implementation will form part of the announcement of the full set of new arrangements.