

The Future of Undergraduate Technological Higher Education

Short Cycle (Level 6) and First Cycle (Level 7 and Level 8) Qualifications

Discussion paper to inform
THEA Annual Colloquium 2019

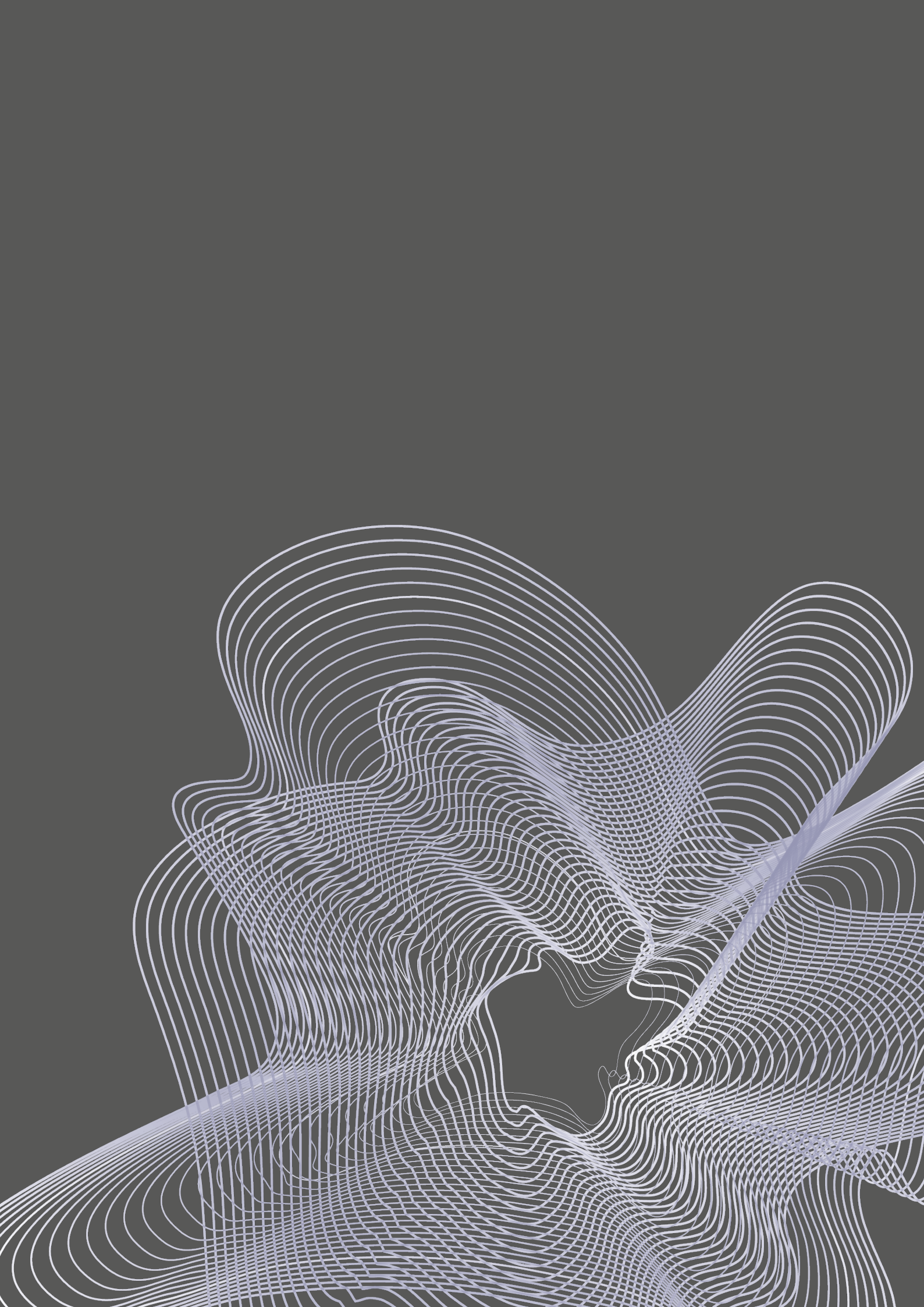


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Executive Summary

This discussion paper has been prepared to inform reflection on undergraduate education within the technological higher education sector. Provision consists of the Short Cycle qualification (Higher Certificate) at Level 6 and of the First Cycle qualifications (Ordinary and Honours Bachelor Degrees) at Levels 7 and 8, together with a range of related minor and special purpose awards. Whilst the increasingly important role of short cycle higher education within the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA or 'Bologna') has recently been endorsed internationally, review of its long-established place within technological higher education in Ireland identifies certain challenges which should be considered by the sector, alongside multiple stakeholders.

The challenges identified and detailed in this paper include:

- Declining demand for programmes at Levels 6 and 7 in favour of Level 8
- Lack of perceived understanding of the 'ladder' system of progression through Levels 6, 7 and 8 with successful exit at multiple points according to the needs, preferences and progress of individuals
- Greater relative increase in number of Level 8 programmes when compared with increases in numbers of Levels 6 and 7 programmes
- Decline in annual rate of conversion from offers to acceptances for Levels 6 and 7 programmes in comparison to that for Level 8 programmes
- Limitations of existing data to explain 'non-completion' rates
- Relationship between Further Education and Higher Education

It is anticipated that this paper will inform an initial discussion at THEA's 2019 Colloquium and contribute thereafter to a wider debate, both within and without the technological higher education sector, on the future of short cycle qualifications within the changing landscape of higher education.

01

Background

The purpose of this paper is to prompt a reflection on the relevance and positioning of short cycle qualifications (Higher Certificates at Level 6) in technological higher education, including a consideration of their relationship with first cycle qualifications (Ordinary and Honours Bachelor Degrees at Levels 7 and 8, respectively). The paper has been prepared as a backdrop to THEA's annual colloquium for 2019, and it is the intent of THEA's member institutions that the paper and the colloquium proceedings will serve to frame an internal and, no doubt, extended discussion on the future of short cycle programmes and qualifications within the changing landscape of higher education in Ireland.

This discussion will, in the first instance, be a matter for technological higher education institutions (THEIs) themselves, whether they be technological universities or institutes of technology; and will necessarily comprehend a series of conversations that will be conducted both within each autonomous institution, and collectively at a national level. That said, THEA's members are also aware that their own reflection on the future of short cycle qualifications will not take place in a vacuum. On the contrary, the need for such a reflection is driven, in part, by broader policy developments and concerns that are led by, or involve the participation of, many external stakeholders. These broader developments and concerns include such areas as the architecture of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) at Level 6, including the relationship of the short cycle award-type to the Further Education and Training (FET) and Professional award-types at the same level; the shifting patterns of demand amongst applicants to higher education through the Central Applications Office (CAO); the projected development of a more integrated approach to tertiary education, led by the Department of Education and Skills; the ongoing alignment of higher education programmes to labour market skills' needs, including skills provision for the future workplace and the establishment of new apprenticeships; the sustainable funding of higher education; the ongoing reform of FET; and the parallel imperatives to improve the completion rates of the student population in higher education, and the progression rates of further education students into higher education.

It is evident from the foregoing list that the views of THEIs on the future of short cycle qualifications cannot be considered in isolation from these related policy developments and concerns, and that the discussion that they are now commencing will necessarily entail extensive engagement with a range of key stakeholders, including government departments, state agencies, the wider education and training

community, and business and enterprise. Bearing in mind, then, that there is a need both for extensive internal and external discussions about the future of short cycle qualifications, and how they relate to the broader qualification offerings in THEIs, THEA members do not intend at this juncture to set out any definitive sectoral positions. Rather, the aim is simply to identify and set out what they perceive to be the most important of the many issues affecting the development, delivery and take-up of short cycle programmes and qualifications. In doing so, it is hoped that the paper and related colloquium will not just facilitate the sector's own discussions on the future of short cycle higher education, but will also contribute to the wider policy debates within which their own internal discussions are necessarily located.



02

Short Cycle higher education in THEIs in context

At their meeting in Paris in May 2018, ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) agreed to include ECTS-based short cycle qualifications 'as a stand-alone qualification within the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA)' (the "Bologna Framework"). The recognition of the short cycle qualification as a distinct type of qualification in the QF-EHEA has been a somewhat protracted process, given that its inclusion was first mooted as long ago as 2005, when the initial incarnation of the overarching qualifications framework was adopted by EHEA ministers in their meeting at Bergen.²

1 | Paris Communiqué, May 2018 available at http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2018_Paris/77/1/EHEAParis2018_Communique_final_952771.pdf

2 | Bergen Communiqué, May 2005, available at http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2005_Bergen/52/0/2005_Bergen_Communique_english_580520.pdf

This reluctance to proceed was due, in part, to the fact that not all national systems of higher education in Europe could easily identify a corresponding qualification with the short cycle, and it has taken some time to convince them that the short cycle, whether considered in relation to its status as an intermediate qualification, or in relation to its occupational focus, was clearly located within European higher education.³

However, the emergence in the interim of a new policy emphasis on aligning labour market skills needs with education and training provision, both at the national and European levels,⁴ has meant that the traditional characteristics of the short cycle are now generally considered to be virtues; and, as evinced in the ministers' communiqué, they now provide the rationale for its inclusion in the QF-EHEA. In May 2018, therefore, the ministers recognised the 'increasingly important role' played by the short cycle 'in preparing students for employment and further studies as well in improving social cohesion by facilitating access for many who would otherwise not have considered higher education'. The ministers also left it to each country to 'decide whether and how to integrate short cycle qualifications within its own national framework'.⁵

In Ireland, the short cycle qualification type has long been considered to be an integral part of higher education provision in Ireland, outside the previously-established universities, and has been included in the Irish NFQ since its inception in 2003.

Formed out of the pre-Framework 'National Certificate', designated a Higher Certificate, and placed at Level 6 in the NFQ, it conforms to the characteristics set out in the QF-EHEA short cycle descriptor. Thus it comprises 120 ECTS credits (i.e. generally two years full-time study) and is awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts;
- have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems;

3 | Magda Kirsch and Yves Beernaert, *Short Cycle Higher Education in Europe Level 5: the Missing Link* (EURASHE, 2011), pp. 25-6.

4 | See especially the European Commission's 2016 Communication *A New Skills Agenda for Europe* available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0381&from=EN>

5 | Paris Communiqué, May 2018, as cited above.

- can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients; and
- have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.⁶

The bulk of short cycle higher education in Ireland is provided through THEIs (one technological university and eleven institutes of technology), along with some independent providers, whose short cycle programmes are validated and awarded by the state's quality assurance agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). In consequence, it features strongly in the strategic planning activities of individual THEIs, and in the system performance framework for higher education, overseen by the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

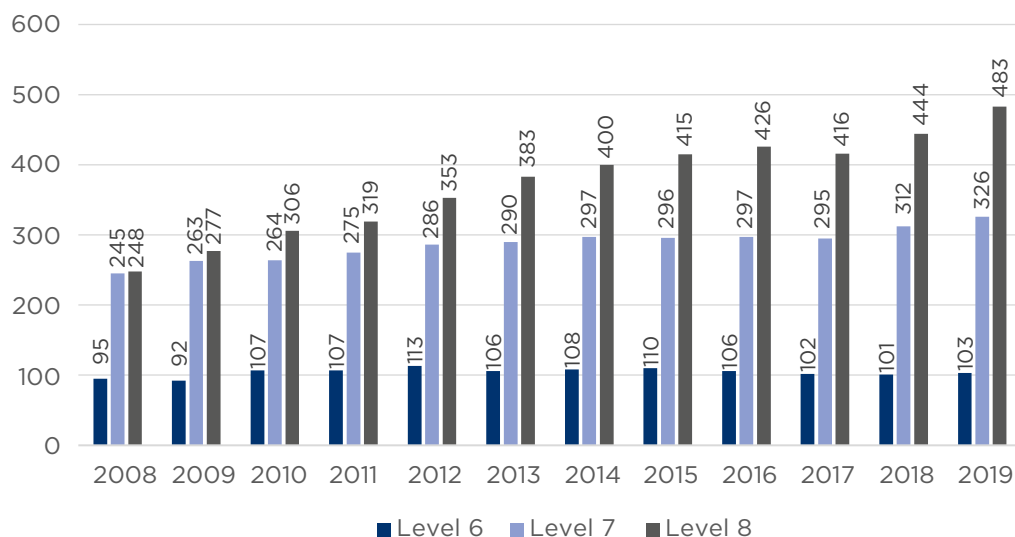
Short cycle programmes in THEIs are provided in a range of disciplinary areas, with the highest concentrations occurring in Business, Administration and Law; Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction; Information and Communication Technologies (ICTS); and Science, Applied Humanities and Services. These programmes are generally classifiable as short professional programmes not linked to previous studies. They can be organised in a flexible manner to meet the needs of learners, either through open and distance learning using ICT, or through blended learning, and may be offered on both a part-time and full-time basis or off-campus in the workplace. The curriculum generally consists of a combination of theory, practice and work placement.

The provision of short cycle programmes by THEIs has, in terms of the number of programmes offered annually through the CAO, remained stable over the past decade. Throughout the period 2008 to 2019, they have ranged between a low of 92 programmes (in 2009) and a high of 113 programmes (2012). Most recently, in the years 2014 to 2019, the annual offering has been in the range of 101 to 110 programmes nationally (Figure 1).

6 | A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Bologna Working Group Report on Qualifications Frameworks (Copenhagen, Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2005), p. 66, available at: http://ecahe.eu/w/images/7/76/A_Framework_for_Qualifications_for_the_European_Higher_Education_Area.pdf

7 | For these and other general characteristics of Irish short cycle higher education, see the overview by Richard Thorn and Mark Glynn (from 2011) in Kirsch and Bennaert, *Short Cycle Higher Education*, pp. 156-9.

Figure 1: Number of level 6, 7, 8 programmes in CAO handbook (Technological HE sector)



The numerical stability of the short cycle offering is only part of the story however. The same decade has also seen a significant expansion in the THEI offering of first-cycle programmes — particularly pronounced at Honours Bachelor Degree Level (Level 8) — and thus short cycle programmes have declined as a proportion of the THEIs' general undergraduate offering. In 2008, the 95 short cycle programmes then on offer accounted for 16 % of the overall undergraduate offering, as against percentages for Ordinary Bachelor Degree and Honours Bachelor Degree programmes of 42% each. In 2019, the 103 programmes listed in the current 2019 CAO handbook account for 11% of the overall offering, as against percentages for Ordinary Bachelor Degree and Honours Bachelor Degree programmes of 36% and 53% respectively (see Figure 1). Clearly, the main expansion in technological higher education has occurred within the Honours Bachelor Degree offering, which accounts for a proportionate rise of 11% in the programmes offered at this level between 2008 and 2019. This has not only led to a proportionate decline of 5% in the short cycle (Level 6) offering, but also to a similar, proportionate decline of 6% in the number of Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes on offer, notwithstanding the fact that there has been a steady increase, almost year by year, in the real number of Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes included in the CAO Handbook, ranging from a low of 245 programmes in 2008 to a high of 326 in the current year. From an institutional perspective, these changes have been dictated by shifting patterns of student demand and are discussed in section 5 below. Before proceeding to examine this issue, however, it is worth exploring in more detail the relationship of the short cycle qualification with the first-cycle degree programmes.

03

Relationship of the Short Cycle and First Cycle qualifications in technological higher education

The link between short cycle qualifications and first-cycle degree qualifications has traditionally been strong in technological higher education. Both in their pre- and post-NFQ forms, they have generally been considered to form a suite or 'ladder' of programmes and qualifications that provide opportunities for students to progress in sequential steps across a number of higher education levels, depending on their aptitudes and ambitions. Prior to the advent of the NFQ in 2003, this movement was expressed in terms of progression from sub-degree level to Honours Bachelor Degree level and beyond. Since the advent of the NFQ, it has been expressed in terms of the movement through three undergraduate levels (Levels 6-8), that comprise the first cycle of higher education in the EHEA, and potentially through two further, national postgraduate levels (Levels 9 and 10), that align with the second and third cycles of the QF-EHEA respectively.

For many THEIs, the 'ladder system' remains an important aspect of how they organise their undergraduate provision, both in terms of the design of their programmes, and the way they present and publicise the available learning opportunities to prospective students.⁸ Expressed in learner input or programme stage terms, the classic version of the 'ladder system' is the 2 + 1 + 1 model, where a student enters on a two year Higher Certificate (Level 6) or short cycle programme and, following successful completion, undertakes one or two 'add-on' years to achieve the learning outcomes necessary for the award of a first cycle degree at Level 7 and/or Level 8 (Ordinary Bachelor Degree or Honours Bachelor Degree respectively). This linear 2 + 1 + 1 model is not, in practice, followed by very many students however. Other increasingly common variants include a 2 + 2 model, where students complete the Higher Certificate and progress directly on to year 3 of the Honours Bachelor Degree programme, and a 3 + 1 model, where students register for an Ordinary Bachelor Degree ab initio, and, following completion, undertake an 'add on' year to complete an Honours Bachelor Degree at Level 8. In addition, many

8 | For representative examples see WIT: <https://www.wit.ie/news/other/how-to-use-level-6-and-level-7-to-progress-your-educational-goals>; and IT Sligo: <https://www.itsligo.ie/study-at-it-sligo/applying/how-to-apply-2/>.

students elect to register for first-cycle degrees, both Level 7 and Level 8, ab initio, and in these instances provision can also be made to award short cycle qualifications to those students that do not wish, or are unable, to complete a full degree programme, but who have met the learning outcomes necessary for the short cycle award.

The 'ladder system' is often understood in terms of the positive and combined effect of the short cycle Higher Certificate at Level 6, and the Ordinary Bachelor Degree at Level 7, which are perceived to work in tandem to enable students to progress to the Honours Bachelor Degree at Level 8. Progression to Honours Bachelor Degree Level 8 is deemed important because it is commonly regarded as a 'gateway' qualification, in that it is a necessary prerequisite to enable unimpeded progression to postgraduate study at Levels 9 and 10, including entry on to research degree programmes.⁹ In this context, and perhaps too because they are not common to the entire public higher education system, the two qualifications are often viewed and treated in unison; that is, as a closely-related pair of qualifications that are distinct from the Honours Bachelor Degree. This is seen, for example, in the listing of the two qualifications in a separate list in the CAO Handbook, or in the presentation of data (sometimes aggregated) in HEA reports relating to the progression and outcomes of Level 6 and 7 students.

9 | On this point see the article 'Climbing the education ladder step by step', on Careersportal.ie (<https://careersportal.ie/careerplanning/story.php?ID=2501202288>)

04

Graduate outcomes for the Short Cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree

A recent report by the HEA has shown that the outcomes for those students who complete Level 6 and 7 programmes in the institutes of technology are very positive. Combining data from the Graduate Outcomes Survey for the class of 2017, and coded data for continuing students, the report reveals that 73% of the combined cohort of 9,602 graduates continued on the 'ladder system' to higher levels of study, while a total of 23% were working or due to start a job as illustrated in Figure 2.¹⁰

Figure 2: Graduate outcomes Level 6 & 7

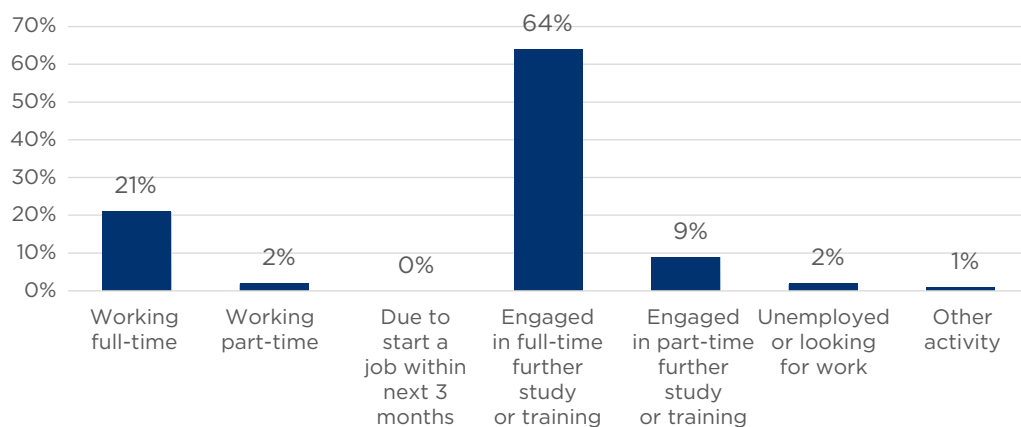


Figure 2: From HEA Graduate Outcomes Survey: Class of 2017

These outcomes are very much in line with the findings of another study carried out by the Central Statistics Office and the HEA in relation to the 2010 graduate

¹⁰ | HEA, Graduate Outcomes Survey. Class of 2017 (2019), pp. 46-9.

cohort. Using linked administrative data, the report reveals that about three quarters of the Level 6 and 7 graduates from 2010 had re-enrolled in education in their first year after graduation. Thereafter, both the Level 6 and Level 7 graduate cohorts moved steadily into substantial employment. Employment-only rates for the Level 6 cohort (based on a captured sample of 1,200 graduates), which began at 17% in the first year after graduation, increased to 48% in the third year, and 66% in the fifth year. The employment-only rates for Level 7 graduates followed a similar pattern (based on a captured sample of 4,140 graduates). In the first year after graduation it was 16%, increasing to 55% and 61% respectively in the third and fifth years after graduation (see Figure 3).¹¹

Data from the CSO quarterly Labour Market Surveys¹² demonstrates that the unemployment rate for holders of “Third level non-honours degree (NFQ 6 (HE) and NFQ 7)” has been between 4.1% and 4.7% in 2018 compared to 5.5% and 8.2% for the entire population and 5.8% and 7.9% for those with “postsecondary non-tertiary attainment (NFQ 5 and 6)”. This data complements that from Graduate Outcomes and Destinations Outcomes to indicate the relative employment value of the short cycle Level 6 and Ordinary Bachelor Degree Level 7 qualifications.

Figure 3: Destination Outcomes by NFQ Level 6 and 7

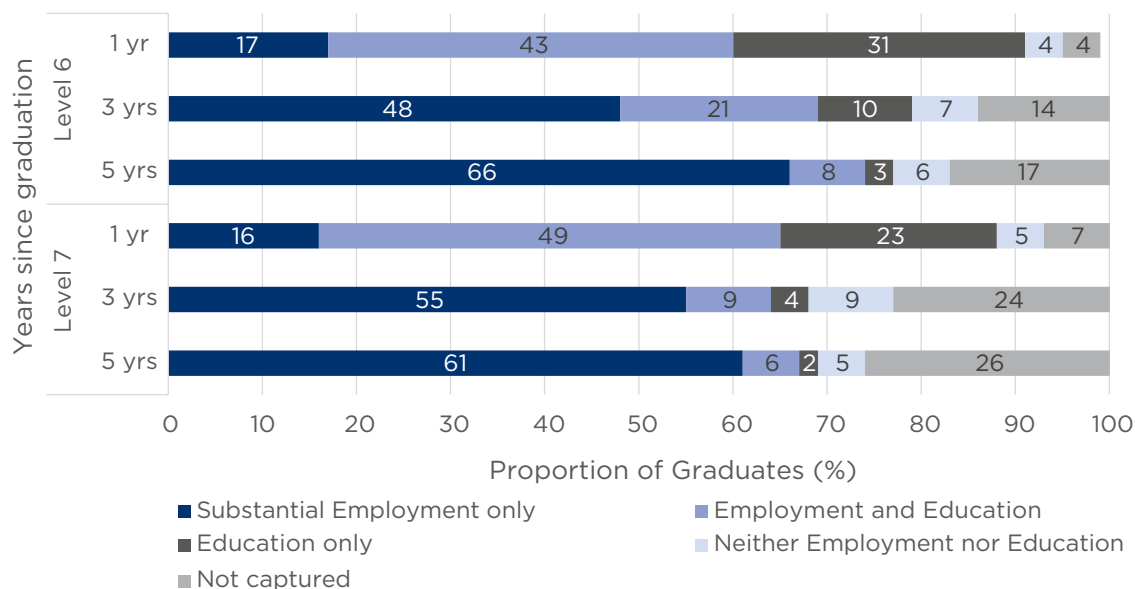


Figure 3: From CSO / HEA: Higher Education Outcomes

11 | CSO and HEA, Higher Education Outcomes Graduation Years 2010-2014. Analysing Graduate Destinations and Earnings using Administrative Data (2018), Chapter 4, especially pp. 30-2, 41

12 | Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter42018/>

These studies, and their underpinning data, suggest very strongly that the 'ladder system', as it operates through Levels 6 and 7, is succeeding in enabling the progression of a sizeable body of students to higher levels of education and ultimately into employment. As far as the short cycle Higher Certificate at Level 6 is concerned, it is certainly meeting the outcomes articulated in the QF-EHEA short cycle descriptor to provide 'an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle'. Further data from the Graduate Outcomes survey support the argument that the short cycle Level 6 qualification and the Ordinary Bachelor Degree at Level 7 are, by certain measures, effectively serving those students who pursue these routes with, for example, 27% of employed graduates in professional occupations and 14% in associate professional and technical occupations.

It is perhaps ironic, then, that at a time when the short cycle has established itself within the QF-EHEA, and is seen to be delivering positive outcomes for its graduates, its place in technological higher education has come into question. Two reasons account for this questioning. The first is a falling demand amongst prospective students for places on short cycle programmes. The second is a persistent level of non-progression to stage two of these programmes: 28% on average amongst those students that began their studies in the academic years 2010-11 to 2014-15. Both of these trends are also evident in relation to Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes, and will now be considered in sections 5 and 6.

10 | HEA, Graduate Outcomes Survey. Class of 2017 (2019), pp. 46-9.

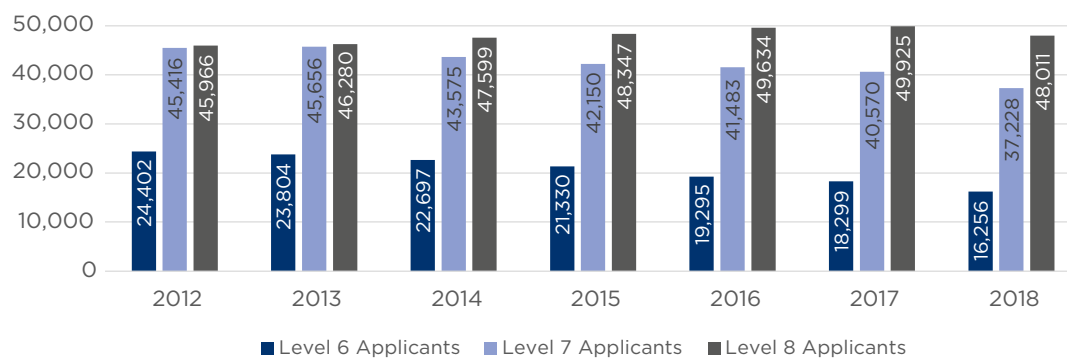
05

Student demand for undergraduate programmes in THEIs

Utilising data provided by the CAO, it is evident that by most measures the demand for short cycle Level 6 programmes in the technological higher education sector has fallen significantly in the past seven years. A less pronounced, though still significant, fall in demand has also occurred in the same period in relation to Ordinary Bachelor Degree Programmes at Level 7, though this is not apparent across all measures.

Section 3 of this paper refers to the fact that data for these programmes is often presented in aggregate form. For example, public data from the CAO is based on the combined list for Level 6 / 7. Discrete statistics relating to Level 6 and to Level 7 have been provided by the CAO to inform this section of the paper.

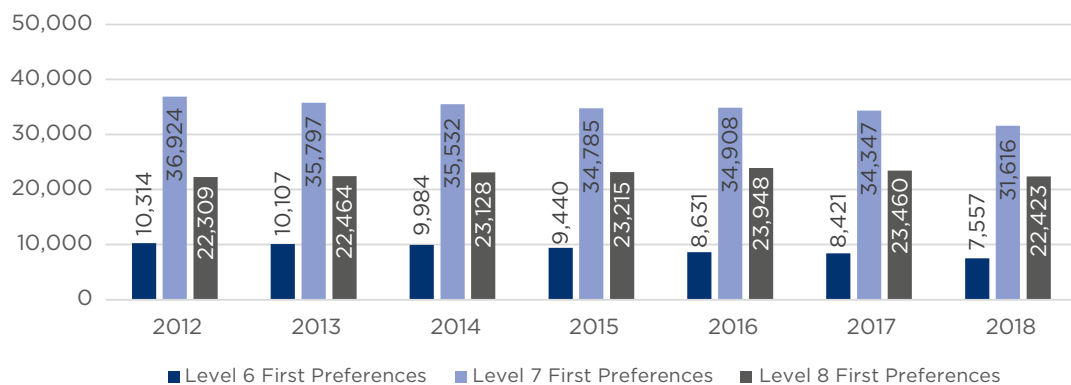
Figure 4: Number of applicants for NFQ 6, 7, 8 within Technological HE sector



The first measure to be considered is the total number of individual applicants to THEI programmes at Level 6, 7 and 8 in the period 2012-2018. As per Figure 4 above, it is clear that the total number of applicants to Level 6 programmes has fallen by 33% between 2012 and 2018. The number of applicants for Level 7 programmes has declined by 18% over the same period. In contrast, though there have been small demand spikes in 2016 and 2017, the total number of applicants for Level 8 programmes has remained constant in this period, averaging c. 48,000, annually.

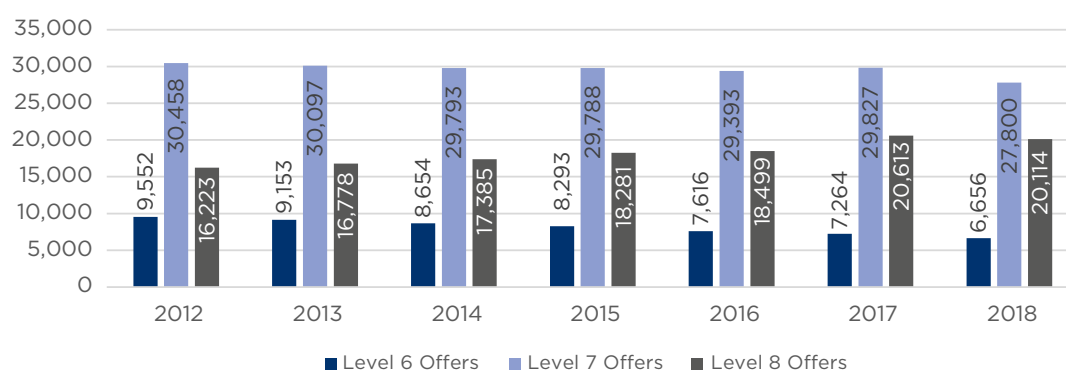
Turning to the preferences expressed by applicants, we find again that there is a persistent decline in the first preference applications to Level 6 programmes in the period 2012 to 2018. Over this period, the decline is 27% from a high of 10,314 first preferences in 2012 to a low of 7,557 in 2018. The same trend does not apply to Level 7 and Level 8 preferences. Despite some annual dips (notably in 2018) and spikes (notably in 2017), which do not yet amount to perceivable trends, the first preferences for Level 7 and 8 have been stable, certainly in comparison to Level 6. The average first preferences for Level 7 over the period has been c. 35, 000, and for Level 8 c. 23,000, annually (Figure 5 below).

Figure 5: Number of first preferences for NFQ 6, 7, 8 within Technological HE sector



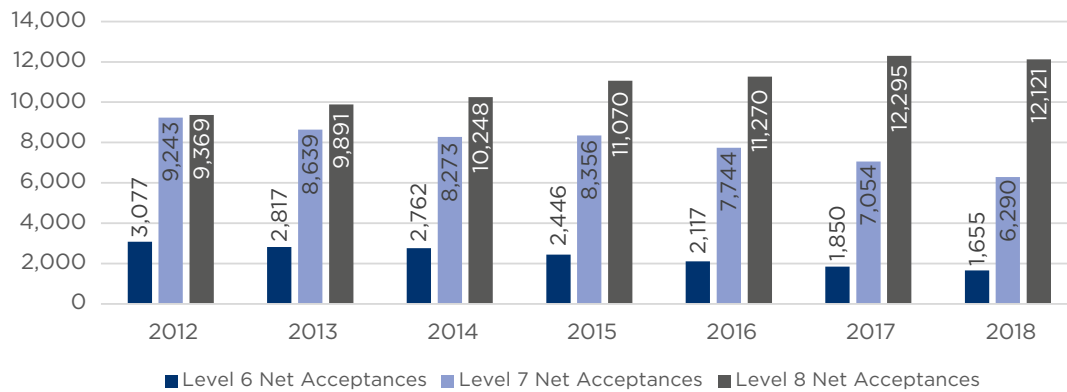
The trend data relating to applications, as set out in Figures 5 and 6, is also reflected in large measure in the numbers of offers made to students in the period 2012 to 2018. The number of offers for Level 6 programmes has declined steadily from a high of 9,552 in 2012 to a low of 6,656 in 2018, representing a 30% drop across the period (Figure 6). This is in line with the percentage falls in the total number of applicants (33%) and the total number of first preferences (27%). Level 7 offers have remained stable in the period, notwithstanding a dip in 2018, averaging c. 29,000 annually. Again, this mirrors the relative stability of the volume of total applications and the total volume of first preferences. In contrast, Level 8 offers have increased steadily between 2012 and 2018. Between 2012 and 2017, the percentage increase in the number of offers made at Level 8 was 27%. Despite a small dip in 2018, which reflected an overall drop in the number of applications across all three levels,¹³ the 2018 offers were 23% higher than those made in 2012 (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Number of offers for NQF 6, 7, 8 within Technological HE sector

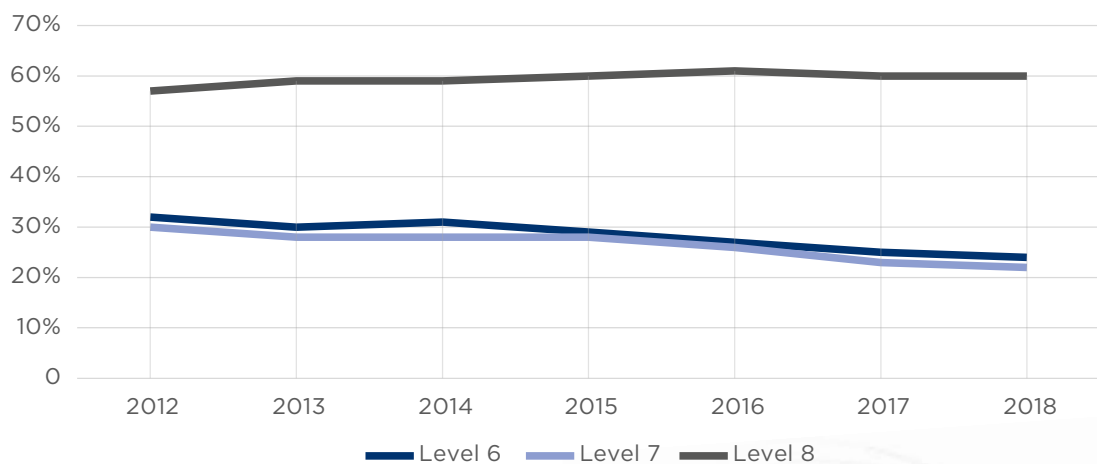


The most telling data relating to the declining demand for short cycle education and its first cousin, the Ordinary Bachelor Degree, is to be found in the CAO net acceptance figures (Figure 7). Between 2012 and 2018, net acceptances have declined by 46% sector wide on Level 6 programmes, and by 32% on Level 7 programmes. In contrast, net acceptances on Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree programmes have increased by 29%.

¹³ | The percentage decrease in total applications across Levels 6-8 between 2017 and 2018 was 6%; the percentage decrease in first preferences was 7%.

Figure 7: Number of acceptances for NFQ 6, 7, 8 within Technological HE sector

These figures are reinforced by the conversion rates of offers to net acceptances (Figure 8 below). In the period under consideration, 2012-2018, the average annual average conversion rate of offers into acceptances has been 28% for Level 6 programmes, and 26% for Level 7 programmes. In marked contrast, the conversion rate for Level 8 programmes has been 59% in the same period. One further observation may be made about the conversion rates of offers to acceptances: in the past four years (2015-2018) they have declined year on year for Level 6 and Level 7 programmes. For Level 6, the rates have been 29% (2015), 27% (2016), 25% (2017), and 24% (2018); and for Level 7 28% (2015), 26% (2016), 23% (2017) and 22% (2018). The Level 8 conversion rate, in contrast, has not dipped below 60% in the same four year period.

Figure 8: Conversion rate of offers to net acceptances (Technological HE only)

Overall, then, what preliminary observations can be made about the demand for short cycle education at Level 6, and indeed for Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes at Level 7, from the available CAO data? Although the outcomes for Level 6 and Level 7 graduates are positive, as evinced in the recent HEA and CSO reports on graduate outcomes, it appears that the aspirations and ambitions of the majority of applicants coming through the CAO are to secure admission to Level 8 programmes, and that it is difficult to draw any conclusion other than that Level 6 and Level 7 programmes are losing their attractiveness. Mindful of this trend, and in order to cater for the demand for Level 8 Degree programmes amongst CAO applicants, THEIs have nearly doubled their Level 8 portfolio over the past decade, which has risen from 248 programmes in 2008 to 483 in 2019 (Figure 1 above). Furthermore, as revealed in Figure 7 above, this has paid some dividends, with the sector seeing a rise of some 29% in acceptances on to Level 8 programmes in the period 2012-2018

The evident shift away from Level 6 and Level 7 programmes to Level 8 programmes begs an important question. Does the short cycle qualification (and perhaps, too, the Ordinary Bachelor Degree) have a future in technological higher education? Certainly, if the current trends continue, and no remedial action is taken, it is not impossible that both qualifications will gradually disappear. Current demographic projections indicate that there will be no shortage of students entering higher education up to 2030, so the problem is not one of a declining third level population in general.¹⁴ Rather, it seems that the desirability of the Level 8 qualification has increased over time, and that the attractiveness of the Level 6 and 7 options has dissipated in consequence.

One factor that is certainly contributing to this shift is the ever increasing demand for higher levels of qualifications emerging from different employment sectors. The recent report by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, *Forecasting the Future Demand for High-Level ICT Skills in Ireland, 2017- 2022*, for example, illustrates the point well. In forecasting potential new job openings across three scenarios for the period 2018-2022, and the level of qualifications required for those taking up these positions, it is evident that the demand for employees with Level 6 and Level 7 qualifications is expected to be significantly lower than for those with Level 8 (or higher) qualifications. In none of the scenarios painted for this period, which range from an economic slow-down ('Shaken by Cold Winds') to an acceleration of current strong levels of economic growth ('Dancing with the Stars'), will the demand for Level 6/7 Computing graduates exceed 13% of the workforce required to fill the predicted new jobs (some 39,660 to 69,950 jobs depending on the scenario), or 20%, in the case of Level 6/7 Electronic and Electrical Engineering graduates (where

14 | Investing in National Ambition. A Strategy For Funding Higher Education. Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education (Department of Education and Skill, 2016), p. 19, available at: www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Investing-in-National-Ambition-A-Strategy-for-Funding-Higher-Education.pdf

the predicted new positions will be in the region of 6,870 to 10,155).¹⁵ Similar patterns are evident in the 2016 report on the *Future Skills Needs of the Biopharma Industry in Ireland*¹⁶ where the indicative labour market inflow of Biopharma-related Science graduates are 320 for Level 6 / 7 graduates and 1,880 for Level 8 graduates.

Clearly, in plotting the future of short cycle and Level 7 qualifications, the technological higher education sector and other stakeholders will need to consider all of the current research on future skills needs and labour market planning, in order to determine the most appropriate approach to their provision, and precisely where Level 6 and Level 7 provision is needed, or not, as the case may be. In doing so, it is likely that the approach adopted will vary depending on the employment sectors (and related disciplines) that particular institutions intend to serve, and the particular education and training profiles that different sectors require, which, of course, can encompass a range of requirements across the lifelong learning spectrum.

It is unlikely that the changing pattern of demand for short cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree qualifications is being driven solely by the labour market. Anecdotal evidence, emerging from school guidance councillors among others, suggests that complex social attitudes may also be at play here. This, of course, is a question that needs to be explored with prospective students and their parents, before any remedial interventions are contemplated and acted upon. With this in mind, THEA has commissioned a qualitative and quantitative research study into public perceptions of technological higher education, which will provide insights into how the THEIs' Level 6, Level 7 and Level 8 offerings are perceived. It is anticipated that some preliminary findings from this study will be available for discussion at the THEA Colloquium.

15 | See especially chapter 4, available at: <http://www.skillsireland.ie/Publications/2019/High-level-ICT-Skills-Demand-Analysis.pdf>

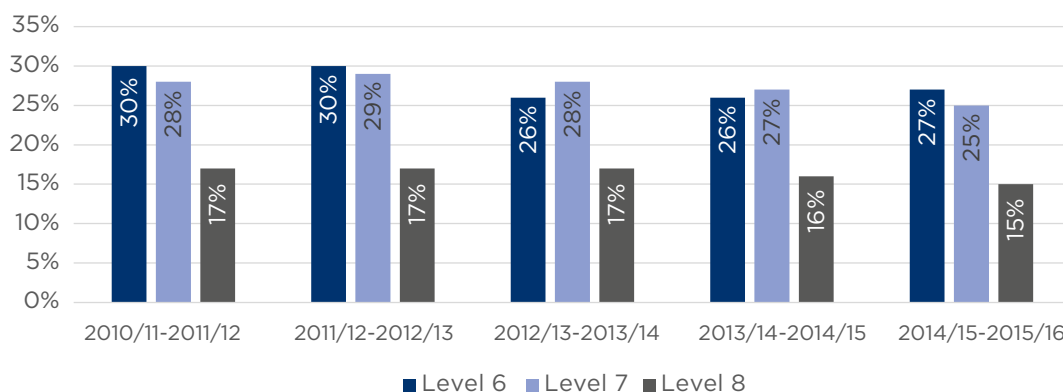
16 | See chapter 6, available at: <http://www.skillsireland.ie/Publications/2016/Biopharma-Skills-Report-FINAL-WEB-VERSION.pdf>

06

Progression and non-completion issues in Short Cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes

An area that is influencing perceptions of Level 6 and Level 7 provision, certainly amongst policy makers and funders and, perhaps, more widely amongst the general public, are the rates of progression and non-completion in short cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes. Statistical analyses of new entrant progression in THEIs, conducted by the HEA and covering the academic years 2010-11 to 2014-15, indicates that the rate of non-progression from stage 1 to stage 2 of short cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes has averaged 28% and 27% respectively over this period. In contrast, non-progression for new entrants on Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree programmes in the same period has averaged 16% (Figure 9).¹⁷

Figure 9: % non-progressed over 5 years in Technological HE



On the face of it, these figures appear very stark and have generated their fair share of negative headlines in the media, as each new HEA annual progression report has been published. Moreover, viewed in unison with the declining patterns of demand for these programmes, they must represent a serious cause for concern for those THEIs that offer them. Inevitably, if both trends persist, and no effort is made to identify their underlying causes and, subsequently, to put in place targeted

17 | Source: HEA, A Study of Progression in Higher Education (2018), chapter 5 (p. 37), available at: <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/05/HEA-Progression-Report-2018-FINAL.pdf>

interventions that might address them, then clearly the future of the short cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes in technological HE sector must be open to question. There is certainly some danger that they may simply fade away.

With regard to progression and non-completion, the initial task in hand is to begin to understand what the statistical data is telling us. The first point worth noting is that the dataset currently used to evaluate progression and non-completion has its limitations, a fact that is generally acknowledged by all stakeholders. Analyses to date are limited to full-time students. The existing, core dataset is purely statistical — census data that records the non-appearance of registered students in March in each academic year. By its very nature, this cannot provide a full insight into the individual student's motivation for enrolling in higher education generally, and his/her particular choice of programme. Nor cannot it reveal why individual students choose to leave the programmes they originally enrolled on, and where they go after leaving.¹⁸ That said, it is critical to have such data, for it provides a baseline figure for evaluating non-progression, and it simply cannot be ignored.

The census data is usually viewed in conjunction with data relating to the prior educational attainment of students, measured in terms of the points allocated to students for grades achieved in the Leaving Certificate. Successive analyses undertaken by the HEA have demonstrated that those with higher prior educational attainment are more likely to progress to the second year of study and beyond, than those with lower educational attainment, when individual and institution-related variables are controlled for in a model. Expressed in its starkest terms, as, for example, in the HEA's recent report, *An Analysis of Completion in Irish Higher Education: 2007/08 Entrants*, the completion rate for students that entered higher education with between 505 and 550 points is 95% compared with 43% for those that enter with between 205 and 250 points.¹⁹ The effect of prior educational attainment as a predictor of non-progression and completion is more marked in Level 6 and 7 programmes, given that the points levels for entry are naturally lower than for those at Level 8. Level 6 and 7 programmes have traditionally existed, amongst other reasons, to afford students who would not normally consider entering higher education an opportunity to do so (whether this be on account of social, economic or cultural disadvantage), and their entry points levels reflect this. The most common entry points levels for both over the period 2012-13 to 2014-15, was 255 to 300 points (see Table 1).²⁰

18 | HEA (2019), p. 14, available from <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/02/HEA-Analysis-of-Completion-in-Irish-Higher-Education-Report-Release.pdf>.

19 | HEA, *An Analysis of Completion in Irish Higher Education* (2019), p. 88.

20 | HEA, *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education 2013/14 to 2014/15, and 2014/2015 to 2015/16* <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/05/HEA-Progression-Report-2018-FINAL.pdf> and <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/A-STUDY-OF-PROGRESSION-IN-IRISH-HIGHER-EDUCATION.pdf>

Table 1: Most Common Points Attained by Sector and NFQ Level 2014/15 to 2011/12

Sector	Level	Most Common Points Attained (2014/15)	Most Common Points Attained (2013/14)	Most Common Points Attained (2012/13)	Most Common Points Attained (2011/12)
Institutes of Technology	Level 6	305 - 350	255 - 300	255 - 300	255 - 300
	Level 7	255 - 300	255 - 300	255 - 300	305 - 350
	Level 8	355 - 400	355 - 400	355 - 400	355 - 400
	All New Entrants	305 - 350	305 - 350	305 - 350	305 - 350
Universities	Level 8	455 - 500	455 - 500	455 - 500	455 - 500
Colleges	Level 8	455 - 500	455 - 500	455 - 500	455 - 500
All institutions	Level 8	405 - 450	405 - 450	405 - 450	406 - 450
All institutions	All New Entrants	355 - 400	355 - 400	355 - 400	356 - 400

The predictor effect carries through into the progression statistics. A sample year, 2015-16, illustrates the point. The non-progression rate for those on the lowest points band (155-200) for both Level 6 and Level 7 in 2015-16, was 45%; for those on 205-250 points it was 44% and 39% respectively. Thereafter it declines steadily, once allowance is made for outliers where the number of students with high points on Level 6 and 7 programmes is proportionately very small (see Table 2 below).²¹

Table 2: Non-progression rates in THEIs, 2015-16, by prior educational attainment

Points Range*	THEI L6 % Non-Progressed	THEI L7 % Non-Progressed	THEI L8 % Non-Progressed	THEI all levels % Non-Progressed
155 to 200	45%	45%	3%	38%
205 to 250	44%	39%	34%	40%
255 to 300	29%	31%	32%	31%
305 to 350	21%	21%	21%	21%
355 to 400	10%	12%	14%	13%
405 to 450	8%	8%	10%	10%
455 to 500	0%^	9%	8%	8%
505 to 550	40%^	13%^	6%	7%
555 to 600	0%^	50%^	8%	11%
Other	27%	24%	15%	20%
Total	27%	25%	15%	21%

Table 2: ^ indicates points range with 25 or fewer students enrolled in year 1

Different commentators draw different conclusions from the link between prior educational attainment and non-progression. The more controversial of these conclusions include the suggestion that THEIs should not recruit students into higher education below a certain points level, albeit that particular points level is not generally specified; and that students below that threshold should progress exclusively into further education programmes. Related to this is the suggestion that THEIs (and presumably all of higher education) should withdraw from Level 6, and, by so doing, make that level an exclusively FET domain. In this scenario, it has been suggested by some that FET providers might work in partnership with higher education providers in offering a 2 + 2 delivery model for Level 8 degrees, where the first two years of a degree (presumably a short cycle qualification) would be offered by an FET provider, and the second two years by a higher education provider.²²

These are radical suggestions and would certainly require an extensive policy discussion if they were to be considered seriously, including a long overdue discussion on the definition of what constitutes further and higher education, following the consolidation of the awarding functions of FETAC and HETAC under QQI. For the purposes of this paper, the key question to ask is whether the evidence relating to prior educational attainment and progression is so compelling that it demands such a radical, and what might be described, justifiably, as a social engineering, approach to higher education entry? It is not evident to THEA members that the evidence does demand such an approach. While the progression rates certainly need to be improved, they are not so damning that particular threshold points levels should be imposed on students, or that higher education should remove itself from Level 6 or Level 7 provision.

The recent completion study for the class of 2007 has shown that 53% of all students that entered on the lowest points band (155-200) completed their programmes. Indeed, this progression rate was higher than those that entered on the next highest band, 205-250 (43%), and compares favourably with the progression rates for those on the 255-300 and 305-350 points bands, at 44% and 34% respectively. While, in the round, higher prior educational attainment is certainly a predictor of success, it is not an absolute predictor, and does not present itself as an obvious reason for excluding students from the opportunity to progress to higher education, when the outcomes for those students that do complete their programmes are generally positive, and when all existing policies, including the traditional role of THEIs in facilitating student mobility, are insistent on higher education being more open and inclusive.

22 | The suggestion was openly touted at the recent National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals Symposium 'Towards the FET College of the Future' (Clontarf Castle, 2 April 2019).

It is essential, then, that we broaden the data set to ensure that we have a more comprehensive understanding of why students do not progress. We need to discover more about the individual stories behind the non-progression and non-completion statistics by tracking students longitudinally, and finding out precisely why some students with lower prior educational attainment progress, and why some of their peers do not. Pointers in this direction are the studies undertaken by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL), entitled *Why Students Leave: Findings from Qualitative Research in Student Non-Completion* (2015)²³ and *Reaching Out: Why Students Leave* (2016).²⁴ Based on a survey (and some interviews) of 161 students who left their programmes of study before completion in 2014-15, and 170 that left in 2015-16, the NFETL found that the students' decisions for leaving were many and various. These ranged from unexpected course content and high workloads to stress, financial difficulties and difficulties making friends. In making their decisions, it is interesting that most of the students revealed that they did not avail of institutional supports, or those available in the students' union, in some instances because they were unaware that such supports existed or because they did not believe they would be helpful.²⁵

On foot of these findings, the NFETL recommended that 'systematic and standardised qualitative data should be gathered as a matter of course by all higher education institutions from students who withdraw from their course'. In addition, it was also recommended that 'for the student population in general, and particularly in regard to first year students, consideration should be given as to how the results of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) might be used to explore some of the issues that contribute to withdrawal'.²⁶ To this end, the ISSE has introduced a new, optional question in 2019, which will explore whether students, at the time of completing ISSE, had seriously considered withdrawing from their programme. The response options are designed to identify the range of particular reasons why students might have considered withdrawing, and span financial, personal, family, health, and employment reasons, as well as the desire to transfer to another institution. Nine of the twelve THEIs piloted the question during fieldwork 2019, and the initial results will be available to those institutions in May 2019 as part of their ISSE data. In line with usual practice, optional questions are not published in the ISSE National Report, but it is anticipated that a sectoral analysis of this data will be published in due course. While such data will not fully capture the reasons for students withdrawing from their studies (as a survey of those still present in February/March), it will offer a valuable additional data set to inform the discourse.

23 | Available at: www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/NF-2015-Why-Students-Leave-Findings-from-Qualitative-Research-into-Student-Non-Completion-in-Higher-Education

24 | Available at: www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/NF-2016-Reaching-Out-Why-Students-Leave.pdf

25 | NFETL, *Reaching Out: Why Students Leave*, pp. 5-12.

26 | NFETL, *Why Students Leave: Findings from Qualitative Research in Student Non-Completion* (2015), pp. 61-8.

07

Further exploration of student success

One of the key challenges facing THEIs in seeking to address the complex issues surrounding the progression of Level 6 and Level 7 students is to integrate and build upon the research and insights that have emerged from the key national initiatives outlined in the previous section, especially ISSE and the work of the NFETL. The challenge is not only to keep abreast of these developments, but to find ways in which they can be used to enhance the many local initiatives undertaken by individual institutions in this arena, in the context of a higher education environment where there are many competing demands on the institutions' attentions, and the funding regime remains challenging. ISSE, for example, has been collecting data on student experiences on an annual basis since its pilot in 2013. National reports have consistently demonstrated some differences in the self-reported experiences of students attending different institution-types.²⁷ Using datasets lodged with the Irish Social Sciences Data Archive,²⁸ multi-year results generated from the current version of the ISSE questionnaire have been explored to identify potential differences in the experiences of students enrolled on programmes at Levels 6, 7 and 8 within technological higher education.

Figure 10 presents an overview of ISSE indicators for all first year respondents enrolled on Level 6 (n=3657), Level 7 (n=7732) and Level 8 (n=11941) programmes in technological higher education. It illustrates a complex picture in which first year students on Level 6 programmes report more frequent use of specific Learning Strategies and report more Effective Teaching Practices, but also less opportunities for Collaborative Learning, than their peers following programmes at Levels 7 or 8. Examination of data from respondents in the final year of their programme shows, in general, higher indicator scores for students pursuing Level 7 and Level 8 studies respectively. These final years' responses would appear to broadly match expectations of increasing complexity of programmes leading to awards at different levels and are not included in this paper.

27 | <http://studentsurvey.ie/survey-results/>

28 | <https://www.ucd.ie/issda/data/isse/>

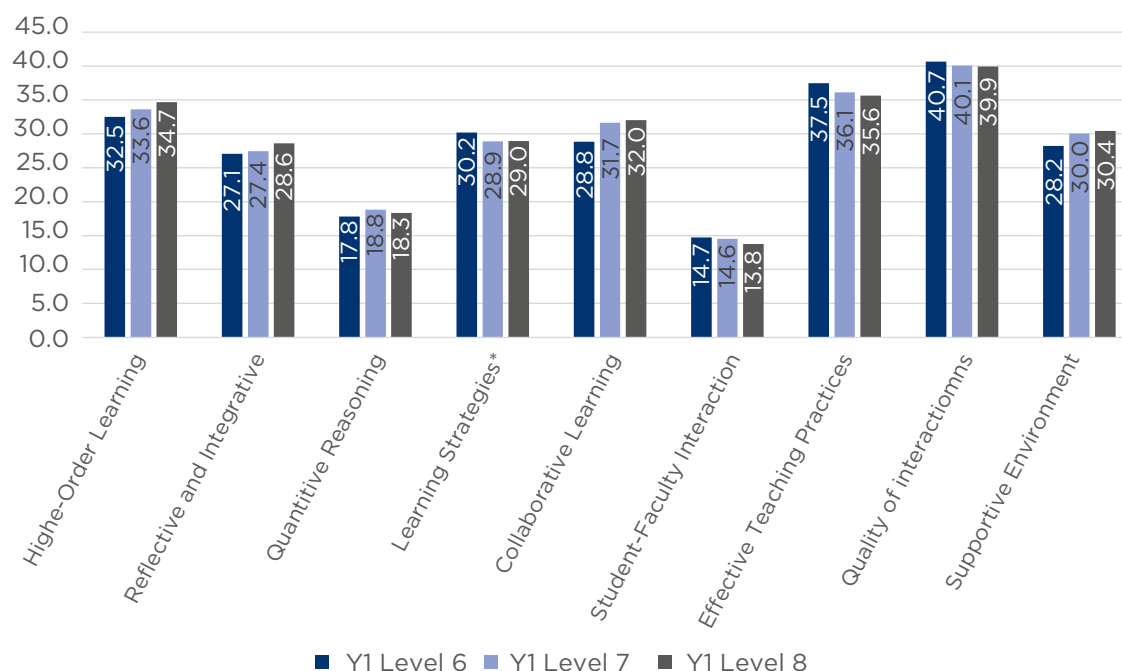
Figure 10: ISSE indicators within Technological HE

Figure 10: * The difference in indicator scores for Learning Strategies for Level 7 and Level 8 respondents is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). All indicator scores are calculated on a scale of 0 to 60 from responses to related questions.

As is usual practice with ISSE data, it is useful to examine the individual questions that contribute to those indicators which are of particular interest. Table 3 provides an overview of questions from each of the indicators which present greatest difference for first year Level 6 respondents relative to first year respondents on Level 7 or 8 programmes, i.e. Learning Strategies, Effective Teaching Practices, and Collaborative Learning. The table presents the percentage of respondents who chose positive response options to the questions presented, i.e. 'often' or 'very often' for Learning Strategies and for Collaborative Learning, and 'quite a bit' or 'very much' for Effective Teaching Practices.

Table 3: Percentage positive responses to selected ISSE questions (first years)			
Learning Strategies question stem: During the current academic year, about how often have you:	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
• Reviewed your notes after class	54%	48%*	47%*
• Identified key information from selected reading materials	42%*	39%	41%*
• Summarised what you have learned in class or from course materials	48%	45%*	45%*
Effective Teaching Practices question stem: During the current academic year, to what extent have lecturers / teaching staff:			
• Provided feedback on a draft or work in progress	55%	54%	52%
• Provided prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments	58%	53%	50%
• Clearly explained course goals and requirements	73%	69%*	69%*
• Taught in an organised way	72%	69%	69%
Collaborative Learning question stem: During the current academic year, about how often have you:			
• Asked another student to help you to understand course material	36%	46%*	47%*
• Explained course material to one of more students	44%	48%	50%
• Worked with other students on projects or assignments	53%	61%	63%
• Prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students	42%	47%*	47%*

Table 3: * indicates that these differences are not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Responses to two of the questions in Table 3 appear to be of particular note. When asked how often they reviewed their notes after class, 6% more Level 6 respondents answered positively compared to their contemporaries on Level 7 or 8 programmes (54% Level 6, 48% Level 7, 47% Level 8). When asked how often they asked other students to help them to understand course material, only 36% of Level 6 respondents responded positively compared to 46% of Level 7 and 47% of Level 8 students. While further analysis would be required to confirm the validity of these findings, or not as the case may be, it appears that the experience of first year students on Level 6 programmes is subtly different to that of other first year students. Understanding such differences will be an essential underpinning for the establishment and implementation of effective student success strategies in the future.

The details of Level 6 curricula and how these curricula are delivered are beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that students enrolled on Level 6, 7, and 8 programmes experience some shared, timetabled sessions for specific curriculum elements and that, for example, first year students enrolled on certain programmes attend some lectures alongside peers enrolled on different (but, presumably, related) programmes. While there may be a myriad of influencing factors to prompt such common timetable components, the financial pressures imposed by the funding environment over recent years is, undoubtedly, one key factor. The practical and logistical implications of maintaining flexible multiple curriculum offers, and varying pathways through these, also encourages identification of appropriate common elements. Table 4 provides a THE sector overview of the number of individual course codes with specified numbers of students according to 2018 institutional data returns to the HEA Student Record System. When examining the data for programmes leading to the Higher Certificate, for example, the only economically viable way to operate — for 74 different course codes with 5 or fewer students per year group — is to timetable at least some common elements.

Table 4: Number of enrolments per course code (2018)

	< 5	5+ to 10	11+ to 20	>20
Higher Cert (by course year)	74	52	71	81
Ordinary Degree (by course year)	151	176	242	376
Honours Degree (by course year)	239	281	460	845

Consideration of such data prompts a number of further questions. These include the need to undertake further research into the experiences offered to students, with a view to determining whether the specific learning needs of particular cohorts (for example, those with lower prior educational attainment than peers in the same lecture/class) are being adequately addressed in the current context, and what viable enhancement opportunities might exist. The exploration of such questions in the future will be aided by the important insights gleaned by the NFETL, both through the 2013-15 enhancement theme Teaching for Transitions,²⁹ and its ongoing work on Learning Analytics, a methodology that applies the principles of data analytics to student learning, and which aims ‘to provide accurate and actionable insights into the learning process through the exploration, modelling and aggregation of relevant data sources’, and to furnish ‘an evidence base for optimising the conditions in which learning can flourish’.³⁰ In addition, THEA, through its data analysis function, and in collaboration with its members, is planning to institute a longitudinal study of progression, which will include the capture of qualitative data at the pre-exit and post-exit stages in the student life cycle. It is anticipated that the ongoing aggregation and analysis of existing and new data sets over time will enhance student success strategies in the technological higher education sector, especially at Levels 6 and 7.

29 | www.teachingandlearning.ie/resource-hub/student-success/teaching-for-transitions/

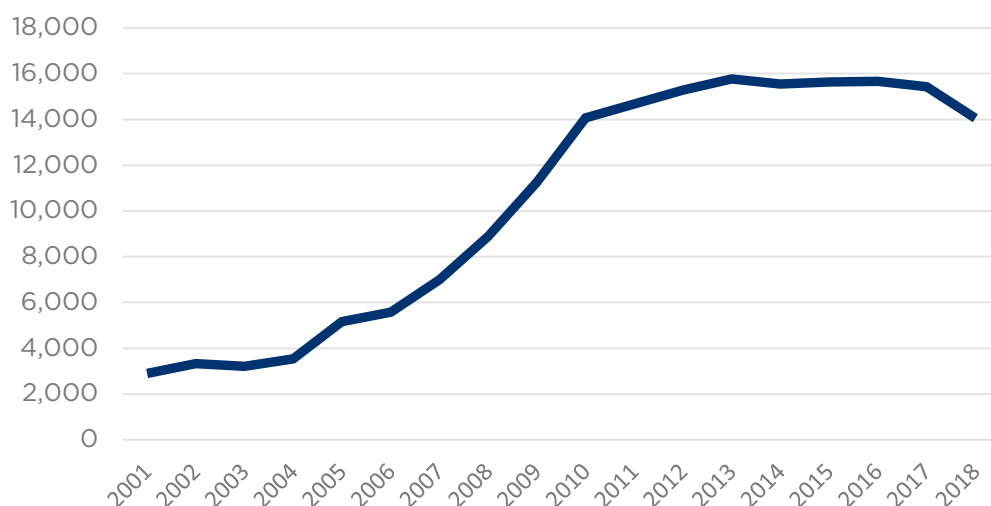
30 | <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/resource-hub/student-success/online-resource-for-learning-analytics-orla/#!/About-LA>

08

Short Cycle higher education and the enabling of entry and progression opportunities for learners

One key educational transition that is particularly germane to discussions on the future of undergraduate provision in technological higher education and, in particular, short cycle education, is the progression of further education and training graduates into higher education. Beginning in the early 2000s, with the introduction of the NFQ, successive policy approaches and instruments have been utilised by the State to increase the number of pathways from FET to higher education, and the numbers of students availing of them.³¹ Recent work by a sub-group of the National Transitions Reform Steering Group has explored progress to date, and has found that current levels of progression from FET to higher education are significant, and higher than originally thought.³²

Figure 11: Trends in Demand for Higher Education places from Applicants with FET Awards



31 | For example, *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (HEA, 2030), pp 48-9, 54-5, 77; *The Further Education Strategy 2014-2019* (SOLAS, 2014), pp 106-8; *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-19* (HEA, 2015), p. 30.

32 | This section of the paper is heavily indebted to the work of the sub-group, which is a collaborative endeavour between the Department of Education and Skills, SOLAS, the HEA, QQI, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and THEA. Thanks are extended to the chair of the sub-group, Andrew Brownlee of SOLAS, for permission to utilise some of the data and findings from the sub-group ahead of publication.

Stimulated, in large measure, by the launch of the NFQ in 2003, this development is visible in a number of distinct data sets, including the rising demand from FET students to access higher education programmes, recorded in CAO applications data. In the period 2001-2018, the number of applicants to higher education with further education awards has increased from under 3,000 in 2001 to over 14,000 by 2018, and actually exceeded that number for each year between 2011 and 2017 (Figure 11).

The FET to HE Transitions sub-group has also explored the conversion rate of FET award-holder applications into acceptances based on data from the CAO 2017 and 2018 seasons. Its findings are set out in Table 5 below, and they reveal that the net acceptance rate of FET applicants was 54.3% and 54.8% respectively, which was below the total net CAO acceptance rate of over 59% in both years.

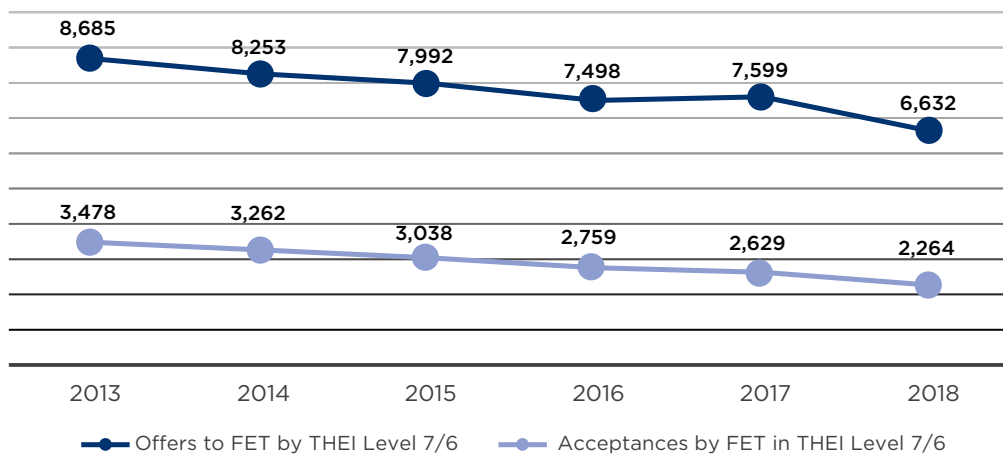
Table 5: CAO Offers and Acceptances relating to Applicants with FET QQI Awards				
Category	2017		2018	
Total Number of CAO Candidates	81,091	-	77,785	
Total Net CAO Acceptances	47,997	59.2%	46,624	59.9%
Total Number of QQI FET Candidates (CAO Applicants who mention QQI/FET)	15,435	-	14,059	
Total NET QQI FET Candidate Acceptances	8,382	54.3%	7,707	54.8%
Level 8 offers to QQI FET population	9,184	-	8,677	-
Level 8 net acceptances by QQI FET population	5,629	61.3%	5,322	61.3%
Level 7/6 offers to QQI FET population	8,124	-	7,108	-
Level 7/6 net acceptances by QQI FET population	2,753	33.9%	2,385	33.6%
Candidates with QQI FET and were offered a course on the basis of QQI FET score	5,343	-	5,160	-
Acceptances based on QQI FET Scores	3,517	-	3,457	-
Applicants with Both QQI FET and Leaving Cert	11,999	-	11,513	-
Applicants with QQI FET Result who are Mature (over 23)	5,274	-	4,870	-
Applicants with QQI FET Result and Leaving Cert who are Mature (over 23)	3,216	-	3,020	-

The 2017 and 2018 data reveals a number of interesting and not generally known features about progression from FET to higher education. Firstly, in both years, the FET applicants were less likely on average to take up the higher education opportunities on offer than those applicants applying without an FET award, a finding that does not support the argument sometimes advanced that the supply of pathways and places in higher education for FET students is insufficient. It is also evident that

FET applicants are more likely to accept Level 8 offers than Level 6/7 offers, though it is important to note that some individual candidates received multiple CAO offers. Notwithstanding this, the acceptance rate of Level 8 offers to combined Level 6 and Level 7 offers was nearly two to one in favour of Level 8 in both years examined by the Transitions Reform sub-group, and suggests that FET applicants, when offered the choice, will normally accept an offer on to Level 8 programmes. Indeed, it is possible to extend the argument further. The choices being made by FET applicants reflect the more general shift in demand away from short cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes to Honours Bachelor Degree programmes discussed above in Section 5. THEA has examined CAO offers and acceptances data relating to FET applicants to THEIs for a more extended period (2013 to 2018) than the sample years covered in Table 5 on previous page.

The data demonstrates that both the offer and acceptance rates to the FET applicant cohort for Level 6 and Level 7 programmes has declined steadily in this period, with offers falling by 24% and acceptances falling by 35% over the period (Figure 12 below).

Figure 12: Level 6/7 offers & acceptances FET 2013-2018



The work of the Transitions sub-group is also drawing attention to the fact that progression from FET into higher education is a complex business, and that certain policy assumptions that have been made hitherto may not be entirely valid. Progression rates can be calculated in a variety of ways, given that some FET award holders are accepted on the basis of an FET score alone, while others are accepted on the basis of mature entry or previous Leaving Certificate results. The National Access Plan target — of having 10% of new entrants to higher education coming from the further education sector by 2019 — is calculated on the basis of entry by the FET score alone.³³

33 | *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-19*, p. 30.

As per the statistics set out in Table 5 above, this means that this target was not met in 2017 (7.3%) and 2018 (7.4%), because the FET-score-alone acceptances in these years, 3,517 and 3,457, are considered as proportions of the overall CAO acceptances, which were 47,997 and 46,624 respectively in 2017 and 2018. The national target for FET to HE progression also omits FET graduates gaining advanced entry into HE degree programmes and, overall, does not reflect the real levels of FET to HE progression, especially within THEIs. It remains unclear to what extent candidates that are admitted to higher education on the basis of an FET score alone represent target access cohorts, and where and why precisely those FET award holders that are accepted on the basis of other criteria do not.

The Transitions sub-group has also examined actual progression from FET to higher education, by linking data from the SOLAS/ETB FET learner database (PLSS) with the HEA enrolments database. As a first step, this analysis has been confined to FET Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) graduates, who represent the principal cohort availing of FET to HE progression; and to the year 2017, which is the first full year that offers a full record of PLC learners within PLSS.

Across the overall population of 33,017 2017 PLC learners, it was found that 5,296 progressed immediately to higher education, which represents 10.9% of the overall undergraduate entry into higher education and exceeds the National Access Plan target. However, this only tells part of the story. The majority of PLC progression takes place within the technological sector. Of the 5,296 PLC graduates that entered public higher education in 2017, 3,809 or 72% entered higher education through a technological higher education institution. Table 6 below lists the numbers of PLC graduates that entered THEIs in 2017, and the overall percentage they represented within the institution's undergraduate entry for that year. On average, 20% of all undergraduate entrants in the technological higher education sector were PLC graduates in 2017.

Table 6: PLC Progression to THEIs 2017			
THEI	From PLC	UG Entry	%
AIT	257	1043	24.6%
CIT	377	2072	18.2%
DIT (now TU Dublin)	434	3557	12.2%
IADT	194	553	35.1%
DKIT	279	1194	23.4%
GMIT	328	1616	20.3%
ITB (now TU Dublin)	184	727	25.3%
IT Carlow	293	1181	24.8%
IT Sligo	233	1041	22.4%
IT Tallaght (now TU Dublin)	224	829	27.0%
IT Tralee	179	725	24.7%
LYIT	106	932	11.4%
LIT	369	1529	24.1%
WIT	352	1976	17.8%
TOTAL	3,809	18,972	20%

Overall, then, certainly in relation to the question of progression from FET to higher education, there is a generally positive narrative to be told about the relationship between the FET system and the technological higher education sector. The bulk of FET to higher education progression continues to take place within THEIs, notwithstanding the fact that the pattern of progression is changing. Increasingly, it operates within the context of a widespread and, apparently, still growing societal aspiration to achieve the 'gateway' Level 8 qualification, a feature of the system that is reflected in the fact that Level 6/7 offers and acceptances by FET graduates have declined between 2013 and 2018 (Figure 12). Yet, despite this, 2,735 and 2,385 students still entered Level 6 and Level 7 programmes in THEIs in 2017 and 2018 respectively. Given the patterns evident in this data, the emerging call for THEIs to exit short cycle education seem premature, as the effects that such a withdrawal might entail for the overall progression rates from FET into HE are not entirely predictable. It is possible that the overall numbers progressing would be reduced, as it cannot be assumed that the current FET cohort on Level 6 and Level 7 programmes would automatically progress to higher education if those routes were taken away and replaced by an exclusive FET presence at Level 6.

The other argument advanced for such a withdrawal on the part of THEIs relates to the non-completion rates of students entering Level 6 and Level 7 programmes with a low prior educational attainment. The argument runs that such students would be better served entering FET programmes before embarking on short cycle or Level 7 study in higher education, or, indeed — in a vacated short cycle space subsequently occupied by the FET system — those same FET programmes might also serve as an alternative terminal point for particular cohorts of students. THEA members consider that these arguments are somewhat specious, and that the binary choices that they would present to learners are both unrealistic and undesirable. The maintenance of flexible and multiple routes into technological higher education has been at the heart of the growth of the progression of FET graduates into higher education, and the abandonment of Level 6 or Level 7 programmes by technological higher education would severely undermine flexible and multiple-route provision. In addition, any withdrawal from Level 6 on the part of THEIs, would disrupt the entire structure of provision and potentially damage the overall capacity of the higher education system to respond flexibly to future education and training needs, including the ongoing demand for progression opportunities from FET graduates. In reality, both the FET system and the technological higher education system have a symbiotic relationship, which is ultimately designed to benefit the learner.

THEIs fully acknowledge that many students benefit greatly from undertaking FET before availing of the opportunities in higher education. Anecdotal evidence that their chances of success in higher education are enhanced by their FET experience is beginning to be validated by the work of the Transitions Reform sub-group, which has found that the average retention rates for PLC graduates (2013 and 2014 cohorts) in technological higher education was 81% in Year 2 and 64% in Year 3. In addition, collaboration between THEIs and FET providers in the Level 6 space, including co-design and delivery of programmes that facilitate progression, is already well embedded in different parts of the country, and there is considerable potential to develop these collaborations further in the context of a more integrated tertiary education sector. Building upon the current flexibilities and existing collaborations, then, rather than curtailing them, seems the most sensible way to proceed. However, enhancing collaboration between FET and THE does not necessarily mean that THEIs would abandon the short cycle qualification, for not only is it linked structurally to the sector's Level 7 and Level 8 provision but, in its own right, the short cycle qualification remains an important part of the armoury of THEIs in delivering professional, skills-based education, and in fulfilling their missions to support the country at the national and regional levels in meeting current and future skills needs (see below Section 7).

In relation to the non-completion issue more specifically, it has already been observed that lower prior educational attainment is not an absolute predictor of student success and that the setting of prior educational attainment thresholds for entry into higher education would be against the spirit of equity and opportunity inherent in

much recent education and training policy, and potentially damaging to the country's social cohesion. Furthermore, there is also a need to benchmark the progression and completion data across FET and higher education, before either one of the systems can lay claim to providing panaceas for the difficulties experienced by the other. In relation to FET progression and completion data, work comparable to that undertaken by the HEA for the higher education system has only recently commenced in the FET system. However, it is gathering pace and the fruits of it are beginning to appear. An important example is the SOLAS-commissioned *Evaluation of PLC Programme Provision*, which was published by the ESRI in January 2018.³⁴ It was noted that, at least at the time of the report, 'there were no comprehensive measures of key variables that track participants over time, such as enrolments, completion rates, levels of accreditation and progression', and that the research methods thus employed included surveys of PLC learners and of Principals of providers. Using these interim methods, ahead of the development of the FET Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), the report brought forward a number of observations and findings that are of interest in the context of this discussion paper.

Interesting points of comparison with higher education were that 62% of PLC leavers have between 200 – 400 CAO points. It also noted that 39% of PLC respondents reported that their main objective was to gain employment, while a similar percentage reported that their main objective was to secure a place in higher education. Furthermore, according to the Principals' survey, the average percentage reported (completion rate) for PLC students undertaking one-year courses was 76%, with an average of 65% of these students reported to have obtained a major award. The corresponding figures for students undertaking two-year courses was 70%, for both completions and major award attainment.

The apparent distinction between those learners who completed the course and those learners who achieved a major award highlights a significant feature of much current data pertaining to FET. The vast majority of data in the public domain, including that gathered by QQI as the awarding body, captures learners at the point of certification and does not, per se, facilitate analysis of progression or retention within a given programme, as has become the accepted norm for higher education provision. This will change in due course, but until such time as it does, it is important that caution is exercised in relation to any proposals that might emerge concerning the reshaping of the tertiary education landscape, including Level 6 and Level 7 provision in technological higher education.

34 | http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/PLC/ESRI_PLC_evaluation.pdf

09

Short Cycle and Level 7 programmes and their place in skills provision

The most compelling reason for maintaining short cycle provision in technological higher education is that it underpins, as part of an integrated suite of offerings, the THEIs' mission to provide education and training programmes relevant to the needs of employers. This core mission requires constant innovation and adaptability on the part of THEIs, including continuous institutional evolution; and is reflected in the fact that they have been the subject of three major pieces of legislation within the past thirty years: the Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992; the Institutes of Technology Act 2006; and the Technological Universities Act 2018. While the statutory expression of this core mission has become more expansive and sophisticated over time, institutes of technology, and now technological universities, remain committed to providing programmes that 'reflect the needs of individuals, business, enterprise, the professions, the community, local interests and other stakeholders' in their regions; and to promoting the involvement of those same stakeholders 'in the design and delivery' of their programmes (Technological Universities Act, 2018, section 9).

The provision of programmes leading to short cycle awards at Level 6 and Ordinary Bachelor Degrees at Level 7 remains an important part of this endeavour. While Level 6 and Level 7 programmes have certainly suffered a loss in attractiveness to the general school-leaving and FET cohorts over the past seven years, they continue to retain a certain vitality as programmes that are attuned to the particular needs of the labour market. Some of these programmes, though not all, lie outside the regular CAO full-time entry mechanisms and, compared to the regular CAO full-time offerings, are not as easily captured in the conventional data sets used to report on the performance of the higher education system. What distinguishes these programmes from more general Level 6 and Level 7 programmes — that is, from Level 6 and Level 7 programmes offered in generic areas such as Business and ICT, and which articulate directly to, or are embedded in, full-time Level 8 programmes in the same fields — is that they have a very strong occupational focus, and are designed purposely either to prepare students to progress directly into the work place, or, for those already employed, to undergo upskilling or other forms of CPD. They fall under various categories, including new apprenticeships; part-time off-the-job CPD provision; in-company training; and CAO programmes at Levels 6 and 7 with a pronounced occupational focus, e.g. in areas as diverse as Dental Nursing, Veterinary Nursing and Agricultural Mechanisation. These latter programmes, although in some cases they would have tighter limits on the number of places available, and would engender more competition to gain entry than their more generic equivalents, are attractive to prospective students, and are bucking the trend in relation to declining Level 6 and Level 7 demand generally.

The importance of the THEIs' Level 6 and Level 7 provision in delivering employer-focussed education and training is illustrated by their role in the development of new apprenticeships. As of 7 March 2019, twelve new apprenticeships offered by higher education institutions are up and running. Ten of these new apprenticeships are led by THEI coordinating providers, of which eight are Higher Certificate and Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes at Level 6 and 7, and include apprenticeships in the areas of Biopharma (led by TU Dublin Tallaght Campus); Industrial Electrical Engineering (led by LIT); Manufacturing Engineering and Manufacturing Technology (led by GMIT); Polymer Processing Engineering (led by AIT); Chef de Partie (IT Tralee) and Logistics Associate (TU Dublin City Campus). Other THEI-led apprenticeships in development at these levels include Engineering Services Management (CIT); Geo-Driller (IT Carlow); Manufacturing Data Integration Engineering (LIT); Telecommunications Field Technician (TU Dublin Tallaght Campus); and Precision Machinist and Quality Control (LIT).³⁵ The crucial point here is that the availability of the short cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree structures enable THEIs to be flexible and innovative in developing programmes that meet employers' needs, in a way that would not be possible if THEIs' core provision was centred exclusively on the four year Honours Bachelor Degree provision at Level 8.

Apart from new apprenticeships, short cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree provision in the THEIs also play a key part in supporting the Springboard+ programme, primarily through utilising sub-components of these programmes, which are offered as special purpose or minor awards. Since the Springboard+ initiative was launched in 2011, its primary focus has shifted from providing free upskilling and reskilling opportunities to those who had lost their jobs in the recession, towards including all those in employment who wished to upskill or reskill to meet identified skills needs in the economy. The vast majority of programmes have been one-year or less in duration and part-time. In 2018, Springboard+ offered 8,088 places across 245 programmes. Of these, 3,855 places or 48% of the total were offered by THEIs on 142 programmes. 59 programmes were offered at Level 6 and Level 7 accounting for 1,658 places or 43% of the THEIs' total offering.³⁶

A full evaluation of the Springboard+ programme is due to be published by the HEA in the near future, which will add significantly to the available data on Level 6 and Level 7 provision generally. However, we do know that between 2011 and 2016, the average number of places made available annually on Springboard+ programmes across all providers was some 6,766. On average in this period, 39.7% of places (2,683) went to learners on Level 6 and Level 7 programmes across all providers; and it not expected that the additional data for 2017 and 2018 in the upcoming evaluation will signal a significant departure from this pattern.³⁷ As with other graduating cohorts of Level 6 and Level 7 learners, the outcomes for the Springboard+ Level 6 and 7 cohorts are generally positive.

35 | <http://www.apprenticeship.ie/en/news/Pages/List%20of%20Apprenticeships%20in%20Ireland%20-%20Generation%20Apprenticeship%207th%20March.pdf>

36 | <https://Springboardcourses.ie/>

37 | See *Developing Talent, Changing Lives An Evaluation of Springboard++, 2011-16* (HEA, 2016), p. 10, available at :<https://Springboardcourses.ie/pdfs/An-Evaluation-of-Springboard++-2011-16.pdf>

Between 2011, the first year of the programme, when employment opportunities were generally depressed during the recession, and 2014, the employment rates for Level 6 Springboard+ graduates (across all providers) rose steadily from 21% to 58%. For Level 7, a similarly steady rise has been reported, from 35% in 2011 to 60% in 2014 (Table 7).³⁸ It is anticipated, ahead of the latest evaluation of Springboard+, that these rises have been maintained in the subsequent years.

Table 7: Reported employment rates by NFQ level 3- 6 months after graduation from 2011 to 2014

NFQ Level	SB 2011	SB 2012	SB 2013	SB 2014
Level 6	21%	33%	45%	58%
Level 7	35%	47%	56%	60%
Level 8	49%	49%	49%	62%
Level 9	39%	60%	58%	61%
Total	721 (37%)	1,096 (47%)	1,206 (52%)	1,532 (61%)

The 2016 evaluation of Springboard+ also noted that high percentages of graduates at Levels 6 and 7 progressed to further study (Table 8). Not surprisingly, as the recession receded and employment prospects improved, the numbers progressing to further study declined commensurately.³⁹

Table 8: Progression to further study by NFQ level for Level 6 and 7 graduates 3 – 6 months after graduation

NFQ Level	All initiatives	SB 2011	SB 2012	SB 2013	SB 2014
Level 6	616 (33%)	220 (44%)	167 (37%)	129 (27%)	100 (23%)
Level 7	522 (35%)	155 (29%)	148 (28%)	111 (20%)	108 (18%)

The final area in which short cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes contribute to skills provision is in the area of CPD and upskilling. By their very nature, CPD and upskilling programmes are designed to fill particular niches, and do not readily fit into analyses based on large, system level data sets. They are nonetheless mission critical for technological higher education institutions, whether that mission is considered in a national or regional context, and are best illustrated by particular examples. One example, from WIT's portfolio, is the Higher

³⁸ | Source as in note 33 above, p. 22.

³⁹ | Source as in note 33 above, p. 23.

Certificate in Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) and Technology, which aims to provide a nationally accredited programme for people who are employed in the BioPharmaChem and MedTech sectors. Learners on the programme do not typically have a formal third level qualification, though some would have a Level 8 qualification in Business or Engineering and wish to up-skill or broaden their knowledge of GMP and compliance. A majority of learners on the programme are supported, in terms of the payment of fees, by their employers, in some instances as a formal part of their professional development. The programme is delivered over four semesters in 24 months, with six contact hours per week. Laboratory sessions in year 1 take place over two Saturdays per semester. Information on student registrations and completion is set out in Table 9 below.⁴⁰ This example can be regarded as typical of the flexible CPD and upskilling provision available within technological higher education.

Table 9: Higher Certificate in GMP and Technology (WIT)		
Year	No. of students registered	No. of students completed
Sept 2009	11	10
Sept 2010	6	6
Sept 2011	11	11
Sept 2012	6	4
Sept 2014	12	11
Sept 2015	14	10
Sept 2016	15	12
Sept 2017	18	Expect 15 to graduate 2019
Sept 2018	13	Expect 13 to graduate 2020

Overall, then, Level 6 and 7 provision in technological higher education is making a significant contribution to employment-focussed education and training nationally. While more precision is needed in the data, particularly in relation to the proportions of Levels 6, 7 and 8 programmes that constitute it, and in terms of how it is defined, it can generally be stated that large parts of it are located in the sector's part-time and remote provision. In 2017-18, for example, there were 24, 476 enrolments in part-time technological higher education, which accounted for some 56% of the total part-time enrolment in higher education. In the same year, there were 3,899 remote enrolments, which accounted for some 49% of the total remote enrolments in higher education.⁴¹ This gives some indication of the scale of employment-focussed

40 | Data supplied by WIT.

41 | HEA Statistics at <http://hea.ie/statistics-archive/>

education, albeit the preceding caveats need to be borne in mind, as well as the fact that it does not capture the volume of employment-focussed education in the regular full-time CAO offering.

The volume of employment-focussed offerings is likely to increase as policy instruments and initiatives are developed and expanded to address the challenges of meeting the future skills needs of the Irish economy in the short to medium terms, including the recently announced Human Capital Initiative, which is to be established within the National Training Fund, and which will allocate €300 million in the period 2020-24 to provide additional investment at Levels 6-8 in higher education.⁴² In this context, it is critical that short cycle and Ordinary Bachelor Degree provision is not only preserved in technological higher education, but that the sector itself and the wider stakeholder community examine ways in which it can be revived so that it is positioned to make a renewed contribution to meeting the skills needs required in a radically changing, digitally driven workplace. The final section of this paper will give some initial thought to how that renewal may be pursued.

42 | *Main Features of Budget 2019: Education & Skills* (Department of Education and Skills, 2018), pp. 8-9, available at: www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Financial-Reports/Estimates/2019-budget-main-features.pdf

10

Renewal of Short Cycle and Level 7 provision

10.1 Nomenclature

It was stated at the outset of this discussion document that THEA members did not wish to state any definitive positions on how short cycle education might be strengthened and how the difficulties associated with declining demand, and non-completion, might be addressed. The sector considers that such positions are best developed in consultation with fellow education and training stakeholders, and that consensus on prospective change should be sought before any particular positions are advocated for. However, feelings in the sector are strong on one particular aspect of the short cycle's future, which many believe is contributing to the declining demand. This is the absence of a strong identity for the short cycle award in the Irish NFQ. The term 'Higher Certificate' is seen by many as an inadequate, or even bland, way of defining the qualification as a short cycle award in higher education, whether in a domestic or an international context. It does not speak to prospective national or international students. It does not speak to their parents and their teachers and, arguably, it does not speak to employers either. It is barely distinguishable from the other award placed at Level 6 in the NFQ, the QQI-FET 'Advanced Certificate', notwithstanding the fact that the two qualifications are quite distinct in terms of their profiles and their relationship with Level 7 and Level 8 qualifications in the NFQ.

At the time the NFQ was developed, the IoTs and other stakeholders proposed that the short cycle award should be called an 'Associate Degree', a term which had some international recognition outside Europe (e.g. in the USA, Hong Kong and Australia). This was contentious and did not command the support of key stakeholders. However, time has moved on and some European countries have now adopted the title of 'Associate Degree', or comparable titles, such as Foundation Degree, notably the Netherlands⁴³ and the UK, which more firmly locate the short cycle in higher education. Following the formal inclusion of the short cycle in the QF-EHEA in Paris last year, THEA believes it is now timely to look at this issue again, and to consider endowing the Irish short cycle qualification with a more attractive and meaningful title than it currently possesses.

43 | See www.studyinholland.nl/why-holland/degrees/associate

10.2 Branding in the CAO

Not unrelated to the issue of nomenclature, is the matter of how the short cycle qualification and, indeed, the Ordinary Bachelor Degree, are presented to prospective students in the CAO handbook. They are presented in a separate list distinct from the Level 8 list. Students are given the option of entering ten course choices on both the Level 6/7 and Level 8 lists, and offers can be made to the same students from courses on both lists. For those offered courses from both lists, the general tendency is to accept an offer from the Level 8 list over the Level 6/7 list. As a result, the potentially twenty choices entered by any individual student in a CAO application are not generally made on the basis of a coherent or considered approach to potential study in higher education, but on the basis of a perceived hierarchy which is enshrined in the double list system. Again, it appears timely to THEA members that the rationale of the current arrangements should be examined, and consideration given to whether they genuinely support students in making informed course choices, or sufficiently recognise the value of the Level 6/7 offering.

10.3 Repurposing of Level 6 and 7 provision

It is indicated in the discussion paper that Level 6 and Level 7 programmes can exist as generic programmes firmly linked to Level 8 programmes in the same disciplinary area, and also as more occupationally focussed programmes that lead directly into employment. There may be a need to examine the Level 6 and 7 portfolio to determine the validity of this analysis and whether it would be possible to repurpose the generic programmes, so that they were more skills oriented during the first two years of delivery, and more clearly linked to occupations. This, potentially, could be a big task and will require a detailed and in-depth analysis of the labour market intelligence and research produced by, among others, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, and an alignment with the work of the National Skills Council and Regional Skills Fora. A distinct, but related, exercise could be undertaken with a key objective to clearly communicate progression pathways to all stakeholders and, particularly, to prospective students and the labour market. Such an exercise could unambiguously identify those programmes with a priority focus on employment (i.e. those programmes with a particularly strong occupational focus, but with identified progression routes); as well as a suite of programmes which offer enhanced employment opportunities, but with increased focus on progression opportunities to related but distinct programmes at Levels 7 and 8, respectively. If successful, such an exercise could go some way towards convincing prospective learners to avail of the “ladder” system inherent in the NFQ whilst explicitly keeping their options open.

10.4 Revisiting the funding of Level 6 and 7 provision

There have been multiple examinations of, and reflections on, funding of higher education in recent years. Significant examples include the report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education, *Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education*⁴⁴ which elicited notable discussion when published in March 2016; the *Review of the Allocation Model for Funding for Higher Education Institutions*,⁴⁵ HEA, 2017; and *Understanding the Funding Needs in Higher Education*,⁴⁶ DPER 2018. It is beyond the scope of this paper to revisit the many issues relating to overall funding of higher education. However, the THEA submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills⁴⁷ in November 2016 presents a useful foundation for revisiting the funding for short cycle higher education provision and, potentially, the offering at Level 7. The submission makes a case, in the context of the report of the expert group for future funding, for provision of free undergraduate education to all who seek it at Levels 6 and 7. Following consideration of this discussion paper, it may be regarded as timely to revisit the issues raised in the submission to the Oireachtas given the critical part played by these programmes in contributing to upskilling and reskilling. This is in addition to the access opportunities afforded to many learners who would have limited alternative options. As illustrated throughout this discussion paper, provision at Levels 6 and 7 is often treated as a distinct and related entity. Some precedent for differential funding already exists. When allocating institutional funding, an adjustment is applied by the HEA to remove the (existing) financial disincentive to expand and develop Level 6 and Level 7 programmes, due to their lower fee levels. A top slice is calculated using student numbers enrolled on Level 6 and 7 programmes from the preceding academic year and by calculating the difference between the fees for these programmes compared to the higher fees for Level 8 programmes.

44 | <https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/investing-in-national-ambition-a-strategy-for-funding-higher-education.pdf>

45 | <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/01/HEA-RFAM-Final-Report-for-Publication.pdf>

46 | <http://www.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/7.-Understanding-the-funding-needs-of-Higher-Education.pdf>

47 | http://www.thea.ie/contentfiles/THEA_Cassells_Wednesday_02nov2016.pdf

11

Conclusion

This paper, which has been prepared by the Technological Higher Education Association, is an attempt to frame a discussion on the relevance of short cycle education in the technological higher education sector. It is intended to stimulate discussion, in the first instance, among THEA's members, but is also mindful that the sector's reflections cannot take place in a vacuum. The future of the short cycle, and its relationship with other provision in the first cycle of higher education (Level 7 and 8 Degrees), touch upon many policy areas that are of concern to government departments, state agencies, the wider education and training community and business and enterprise. The technological higher education sector's discussion, therefore, must necessarily entail engagement and conversation with these key stakeholders. It is hoped that the paper and related colloquium will contribute to wider policy debates in areas such as the architecture of the NFQ at Level 6; transitions reform; the projected development of an integrated tertiary education sector; the alignment of higher education programmes to labour market skills' needs and the sustainable funding of higher education.

12

Discussion points arising from the paper

12.1 Short Cycle

- Is the conception of the short cycle qualification presented in this paper — a 120 ECTS credit, higher education award that conforms to the QF-EHEA (Bologna Framework) descriptor — still generally accepted by stakeholders?
- Is current thinking on the short cycle in Ireland consistent with recent European developments?
- What are the ideal relationships between the short cycle qualification and first cycle qualifications (Ordinary Bachelor Degree and Honours Bachelor Degree)?
- What are the ideal relationships between the short cycle qualifications and FET qualifications in the Irish NFQ?
- Is the current designation of the short cycle qualification as a 'Higher Certificate' an appropriate way of describing and distinguishing it?

12.2 Shifting patterns of demand for Level 6/7 qualifications

- Does the analysis of declining demand for Level 6 and 7 qualifications presented in this paper match experiences “on the ground”?
- Is there a need to undertake further comparative analysis on patterns of demand for generic/access type Level 6 and Level 7 qualifications, and those that are more firmly occupationally focussed?
- How do we account for the falling demand for Level 6/7 qualifications over the past seven years?
- How can Business/Enterprise and THEIs collaborate better to ensure provision is matched to skills needs at the appropriate levels? How big a factor is this in determining demand?

12.3 Student success and non-completion

- What are the key influencing factors for student success at Level 6 and Level 7? How do they differ from factors for student success at Level 8?
- How can the datasets for analysing non-completion of Level 6 and of Level 7 students be improved?
- How can effective practice be shared amongst THEIs and the wider education and training community?

12.4 Progression from FET

- Is the notion of progression from FET into higher education now fixed inexorably on the Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree, rather than on Level 6 and Level 7 qualifications?
- What are the relative merits of the 2 + 1 + 1, 2 + 2 and 3 + 1 models of progression through the first cycle of higher education?
- In a more integrated tertiary education system, how should these models of progression be distributed ideally?

12.5 Value and currency of Short Cycle and Level 7 qualifications

- Can the value and currency of Level 6 and Level 7 qualifications be restored? Should they be?
- How might any restoration be addressed?
- What role does funding have in supporting appropriate provision at Levels 6 and 7?
- Do Level 6 qualifications need to be repurposed in THE? Should they have a stronger employment/occupational focus?
- Is the Honours Bachelor Degree the 'gateway' qualification to employment in most sectors? How can this be accurately assessed?

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