

Further Education (FE) to Higher Education (HE) Progression Pathways

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ABSTRACT

Equity of access to higher education (HE) has been a priority for the Irish Government over the last fifteen years. Since 2005, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland has introduced three successive national strategic plans for equity of access, which demonstrates its importance in HE policy. The aim of these initiatives is to improve equity of access, participation and success in HE for disadvantaged students. The findings generated from the third of these strategic plans, indicate that although some progress has been made to support this integration from further education (FE) to HE, challenges remain with an acknowledgement that there is a need to establish transparent supporting structures for building coherent pathways from FE to HE. Higher-level qualifications are now a common expectation among the general population and in industry, reflecting increased ambition, labour market demand for higher-level skills, and the need to continually upskill and/or reskill. The objective of this empirical investigation is to identify the perceived barriers preventing students of FE from progressing to HE in Ireland. Like others who have investigated this topic this investigation adopted an interpretivist approach to enquiry and a case study methodological approach. Primary data was generated from in depth focus groups and qualitative surveys. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The preliminary findings of the first phase of this investigation illustrate that student transition from FE to HE is multidimensional. Findings have supported the development of a draft Transitions Framework, which is currently being piloted with case study students. The ultimate goal is to pursue the effective implementation of the Transitions Framework.

1. Introduction

The Irish Government launched the *National Access Plan (2022-2028)* on 31st August 2022 to drive equality of access to education. The aim of this initiative is to improve equity of access, participation, and success in HE for disadvantaged students. This plan supersedes the previous *National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021* and is the fourth such national strategic plan. The findings generated from the 2021 report indicate that although some progress has been made to support this integration from FE to HE, challenges remain with an

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acknowledgement that there is a need to establish transparent supporting structures for building coherent pathways from FE to HE. This will require working with communities, schools and FE colleges across the country to identify the specific barriers facing underrepresented groups and put in place measures to address these.

The *Technological Universities Act 2018* was introduced in Ireland to provide for the dissolution, in certain circumstances, of institutes of technology and for the establishment of technological universities. Under the legislation, the role of technological universities is to address the social and economic needs of their region and to engage in industry-focused research. Technological universities are more career-oriented in that students generally have a vocational path in mind from the outset, whereas a traditional university often offers a broader process of intellectual development. A technological university is also expected to play a pivotal role in facilitating access and progression particularly through relationships with the FE and training sector. There are currently five such technological universities established in Ireland.

This paper relates to a technological university (the University) located in the remote and rural Northwest of Ireland. It was founded in 1971 and was originally an institute of technology. In 2022, it was granted 'technological university' status. The University provides programmes to over 7,000 students, stimulating and supporting the development of the Northwest region and preparing graduates for the national and international labour markets.

In Ireland, FE is education and training that happens after second-level schooling but is not part of the third-level system. A wide variety of schools, organisations and institutions are involved in the delivery of continuing education and training for young school leavers and adults. Certification in the FE sector is aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications – an awards framework of 10 levels, that is aligned to the European Framework of Qualifications. The University is located in very close proximity to one such FE college. The profile of learners attending the FE sector and new university sector is similar i.e., those from lower socio-economic groups, often first-generation to education, often mature learners (HEA, 2021).

Despite the provision of places in universities for FE students that are not solely based on academic performance, there is a disconnect between the number of places available and the uptake of these places. The objective of this empirical investigation is to bridge this gap and identify the perceived barriers preventing students of FE from progressing to HE in Ireland. The preliminary findings of the first phase of this investigation illustrate that student transition from FE to HE is multidimensional. Findings have supported the development of a draft Transitions Framework, which is currently being piloted with case study students.

2. Literature and Background

During 2021, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland commenced work with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) on the new National Access Plan (NAP) to supersede the current Plan which ran from 2015 to 2021. The HEA launched the public consultation process on the new NAP together with one-to-one stakeholder meetings around specific target groups and issues for the period of the next NAP with five fundamental principles and priorities at the heart of the plan (HEA, 2021).

These principles and priorities include: in the first instance introducing wide consultation using a partnership approach between government, the community and the educational sector; secondly, identifying priority groups, resources available and the barriers in existence

preventing progression from FE to HE; thirdly, shifting the focus from access to full participation eventually where students will complete their HE; fourthly, identifying the importance of flexibility to correspond with people's personal circumstances; and finally to compile quality data to ensure that there is a '*rigorous evidence-informed approach*' in place to achieve the goals of the plan (NAP, 2022-2028).

The plan was devised through collaboration between, not alone the HEA and DFHERIS, but also students, representatives of priority groups identified, higher education institutions (HEIs) and other government agencies and departments. While the current NAP is in its infancy, the future is looking very positive for its' implementation due to this collaboration. While the previous plan was successful to a large extent through the launch of the HEA managed Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) with its three initial strands: including broader access to teacher education, the 1916 Bursary Fund (financial award funded by DFHERIS which aims to encourage participation and success by students who are most socio-economically disadvantaged and from groups most underrepresented in HE) and building partnerships between HEIs and the community, it is widely recognised that challenges remain for students from the Irish Traveller Community, disadvantaged areas and first time mature students, as only 10% of students currently in HE come from disadvantaged areas in Ireland. As a result, our current student population does not represent Irish Society as a whole.

It is important also, at this point, to acknowledge the Further Education and Training (FET) Progression to Higher Education (HE) *Transitions Reform Working Paper* from June 2020 whereby a subgroup of representatives from FET and HE providers (from Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and Education Training Board Ireland (ETBI), the HEA and SOLAS (the higher education – equity of access and further education section of the Department of Education and Skills) came together to map existing transitions to HE, develop proposals for recognition of FET qualifications in HE and to consider the points for entry from FET to HE, while also identifying specific issues/barriers to progression for this cohort of students. From this report it is very interesting to note that retention rates amongst graduates from HE with a background in FET exceeded those of comparable students who entered HE programmes with points in the region of 155 – 250 in their Leaving Certificate. Further Education and Training is the term used to describe the education and training options open to anyone over the age of 16, that are not part of the university or Institution of Technology/Technological University sector in Ireland.

The challenges surrounding transition of students from FE to HE can be addressed at the outset by embedding approaches to support this transition through direct involvement of academic staff in HEIs to develop and provide support. The necessity to formalise the informal, in job role descriptions, so that staff can be adequately remunerated for their work to facilitate a more sustainable framework for the smooth transition of students from FE to HE into the future has been acknowledged (Breeze et al, 2020).

As part of Breeze's project, workshops and a small induction took place with provision of programme specific support and information using two stages; firstly, a self-diagnostic welcome quiz and secondly, tailored workshops running throughout the semester of first year in HE. The sustainability of this type of project in the longer term is called into question as to how staff will be able to continue with the project unless there is funding available into the future. The research team is hopeful that with the development of a sustainable national framework this may be possible in Ireland under the NAP, not alone to improve equity of access, participation, and success in Higher Education (HE) for disadvantaged students but

also to assist with retention. Hopefully funding and resources will be made available into the future to implement a national framework for this purpose.

When moving from FE to HE this experience can be extremely daunting for students coming from a lower socio-economic background where they may be juggling increased academic demands with home, family life and employment to fund themselves while in HE (Cree et al, 2009). Lack of support from families and partners in addition to financial pressures and travel constraints are shown as major factors for consideration by working class students who are more likely to apply to universities closer to home (Reay et al, 2001; Bartley, 2004). This is more prevalent than ever as a reality for Irish students with the current housing crisis and the lack of available accommodation.

It is not unusual that students in this cohort fall into several different categories/groups: first member of the family to enter HE; mature students and/or have caring responsibilities; students from ethnic minorities; lower socio-economic backgrounds; and people with disabilities (Meharg et al, 2017). The research team has established that these categories/groups are synonymous with students progressing from FE to HE in the Northwest of Ireland also. Identifying the profile of students who are hoping to progress from FE to HE is fundamental in implementing a framework that will reach out to all students and their individual needs. The University has recently implemented a new policy on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) that will be instrumental for student progression and retention going forward. The University's goal is to create an environment that is diverse and where everyone on campus is treated with respect and dignity regardless of their race, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender, disability, family status, civil status, ethnic origin or membership of the travelling community.

Interestingly, older student groups generally display a richer understanding of the relevance of what they are learning as they balance study, domestic responsibilities and paid work to fund their education while younger students engaged more in social opportunities by moving away from home to study and to focus on this change for their personal development. Mature students expressed the significance of their studies for their careers and wider lives and are more likely to engage actively with their studies (McCune et al, 2010). Peer support has also been identified as being crucial during the transition period assisting this transition where informal study groups and Individual Learning Plans allow for preparation to overcome anticipated academic barriers in the hope that students will have the academic ability to meet the intellectual challenge of an Honours degree programme (Cree et al, 2009).

O'Donnell, Smith and McGuigan (2018) identify a dual FE/HE university experience highlighting 'transitions', plural, including physical, emotional and cognitive adjustments exploring the process of the dissonance and displacement between two positionalities; one in the past and the other emerging and advancing in response to a new educational setting which are all part of the 'journey'. This has been characterised by Gale and Parker (2014) as 'the capability to navigate change'. Thus, for O'Donnell et al, (2018) there was a strong perception from students that the lecturers teaching HE were more meticulous in terms of adhering to course rules such as referencing, assessment guidance/deadlines than their FE counterparts. More analytical thinking, independent learning and increased reading are expectations among this cohort of students having moved from FE to HE. Maunder et al (2013) refer to different dynamics regarding place and time, individuality and interaction with others including peers, support staff and teachers as influential factors in the transition from FE to HE. Dominant enablers to transition include creating a space to demystify barriers through use of Programme Academic Tutors (PATs) and more collaborative learning through peer support and pastoral care to demystify challenges surrounding time management, essay

writing, critical thinking and analytical skills.

The research team is excited about carrying out further investigations in this area to uncover new ideas, theories and concepts to help develop a framework that will encompass all student profiles and assist in overcoming the perceived barriers identified. It is important to acknowledge that changing trends in society and education will bring about new challenges as society evolves over time.

3. Methodology

3.1. Mixed Methods Approach

The researchers chose a mixed method research approach. This involves both the use of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques and analysis methods either at the same time or one after another.

Mixed methods may be defined as ‘research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study’ (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007). When using mixed data sets this can give the researcher a greater understanding of the issue and can result in more wide-reaching data - the researcher gains both depth and breadth. According to Jogulu and Pansiri, (2011) amalgamating statistics with thematic approaches can help avoid over-reliance on the former and can also capture "soft-core views and experiences"

According to Greene et al (1989) there are several rationales for choosing to carry out a mixed methods approach to data collection. These would include:

- The validation of results by choosing a number of methods
- The results you obtain from one method are used to augment, enrich or perhaps make clear data obtained using another method.
- The use of various techniques may unearth new insights which could encourage or motivate new research questions.
- Results gathered from quantitative methods may shape qualitative methods or vice versa.
- When using a mixed methods approach you can expand depth and width of the research by employing different methods for different lines of questions.

Bryman (2006) identified sixteen reasons for choosing to use a mixed methods approach. Many of Bryman’s (2006) rationales are closely aligned to those identified by Greene et al. (1989).

3.2. Research Tool – Quantitative Survey and Focus Groups

Initially the research team carried out a survey to capture early quantitative data and then the team used in-depth focus groups. The data collected in the survey informed the deeper investigation in the focus group. According to Krueger & Casey (2000) “focus groups work particularly well to explore perceptions feelings and thinking about issues”. Powell et al (1996) define a focus group as a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research.

Focus groups are a type of group interview, but it's important to distinguish between the two. In group interviews, multiple people are interviewed at the same time, with an emphasis on

question-and-answer sessions between researchers and participants. Focus groups, however, are based on conversations within groups based on topics provided by researchers (Morgan, 1997). Therefore, insights and data generated through interaction between participants are key distinguishing features of focus groups.

The main purpose of focus groups is to capture the feelings, experiences, and beliefs of respondents in ways that cannot be ascertained by other methods such as surveys, interviews, and observations. Compared to individual interviews and observation, in which feelings, experiences and beliefs can be obtained, focus groups elicit a variety of views and emotional processes within a group context.

One of the fundamental advantages of focus groups is that they have the ability to generate insights and provide rich qualitative data. Focus groups allow researchers to address issues, emotions, and experiences that are difficult to capture with other techniques such as surveys. Participants are encouraged to articulate their opinions, feelings, and perspectives in their own words, providing nuanced details that researchers and decision-makers find invaluable in fully understanding the issue.

Another advantage is that it allows the researcher a good degree of adaptability and flexibility, allowing discussion to address specific research objectives or adapt to emerging themes and ideas. This is one of the most important features of a focus group as it allows the research team to delve deeper into areas they need to and allows them to collect their data as easily as possible. Focus groups have many distinct advantages, but one major drawback must be pointed out. Focus groups typically have a small number of participants, in our case 40 so the insights and opinions collected may not be representative of the majority of the population. This can limit the results and make it difficult to draw meaningful and valid conclusions. The focus group approach was designed to gather more in-depth qualitative data about participants' experiences, feelings and opinions to further explore the barriers to HE students and how universities can support FE student transitions.

3.3. Sample Selection

Sample selection in research refers to the selection of the group from which a researcher intends to collect data. It allows for the testing of a hypothesis on a population sample that is representative of that population. According to Adebayo & Ackers, (2021), to a large extent, sampling determines the validity of research while also having the potential of delivering insightful research results if conducted properly. Furthermore, sampling is useful in limiting research bias by ensuring that theoretically relevant groups are selected. In this study, the researchers used non-probability sampling as the study was being based on specific characteristics of the population, (students attending an FE college). The research team focused on a number of FE students from a range of courses including sports with Business, Legal Studies and Business Administration. These programmes were chosen as they presented a natural progression pathway aligning with courses available at the university. Our sample size was 40 students.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data collected from the focus groups was analysed using a thematic approach. The researchers categorised the various responses of the students into thematically organised patterns that emerged from the respondents. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline the advantages of thematic analysis as including accessible results to the educated general public which was important given the nature of the study. They also outline that thematic analysis can highlight

similarities and differences across the dataset and can generate unanticipated insights.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a six-stage framework for conducting thematic analysis and suggest the following process should be carried out:

1. Familiarise yourself with the data. This could mean transcribing the data, reading the data multiple times and writing down your initial ideas and thoughts.
2. Compile your initial codes: systematically code interesting features of the data across the dataset and collect the data associated with each code.
3. Explore the data for themes. - Compile codes on potential themes and collect all data related to each potential themes.
4. Check themes - Validate that the theme works in relation to coded extracts (level 1) and the entire dataset (level 2) to create a theme 'map' of the analysis.
5. Define and name your themes. Continuous analysis refines the details of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells will generate clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Report creation: this is the last chance for analysis. Selection of clear and persuasive extracts, final analysis of the selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to research questions and literature, preparation of a report on the analysis.

It is important to note that the process we used was not a linear one but rather you move back and forth between the stages to ensure that the data is valid and comprehensive.

The team used the six-stage approach outlined above and after many reiterations a number of key themes emerged from the data. Through continuous analysis of the data the team were able to generate clear names for each theme such as monetary considerations, accommodation issues, lack of knowledge of progression pathways, fear of lack of academic ability, lack of confidence, fear of commitment to years of study, and lack of family support.

4. Preliminary Findings and Conclusion

As the study of the cohort of students from the neighbouring FE college is a longitudinal study, data collection and analysis are at the early stages. Having engaged with students from various disciplines it has become very transparent from an early stage that many of the barriers to progression identified could be overcome through intervention of academic and support staff of the University in transitioning students from FE to HE. While the research team has been successful in engaging students through use of an initial survey and focus groups this paper sets out initial findings rather than the overall outcome from engagement with the students. The outcome of this initial engagement will become more apparent with further quantitative and qualitative research through use of further surveys and interviews, and furthermore, through monitoring the intake of students from the neighbouring college in the coming academic years through engaging further with them.

The research team is very keen to share our initial findings as widely as possible to create awareness of the barriers identified with a view to developing a framework for progression for all students in education to build bridges to overcome, what are at this stage, 'perceived' barriers to HE. This will hopefully align with the National Access Plan currently in place. The most cited barriers identified at this stage include the following; monetary considerations (68%), accommodation (lack of availability and cost) (59%), lack of knowledge of progression pathways (47%), fear of lack of academic ability (32%), lack of confidence (23%), fear of commitment to years of study (18%) and lack of family support (9%).

While financial considerations, accommodation issues and lack of family support may be

outside the direct control of academic staff, information and awareness of options and alternatives may provide students with the confidence to pursue HE and encourage family support as a result. The remaining perceived barriers may be addressed in the framework for progression if time and resources are allocated to academic staff in assisting students with their proposed academic pursuits.

During this research, the research team liaised with students from the neighbouring college using surveys and focus groups and hosted a 'Taster Event' on the University campus where students from the neighbouring college were invited to participate in an event organised by the research team to assist with the barriers identified through the survey and focus groups. This Taster Event allowed students from the FE college to experience university life, meet lecturers and support staff to discover the supports available. By carrying out these events, the research team was given the opportunity to listen to all the issues that FE students are currently experiencing that prevent them from progressing to HE in addition to the primary barriers cited above. The research team feels that many of these barriers may be broken down quickly if proper time and resources are allocated to staff to work with students.

Other 'perceived' drawbacks experienced by FE students include fear of ability to balance work and study; onerous assignments and assessments, finding a suitable place to study; overcoming the stigma attached to FE compared with the social status surrounding HE; additional costs associated with HE that have not been taken into account including transport, food and utility bills; fear of bigger class sizes and anonymity within the HE group. The research group received incredibly positive feedback from FE students and, having collaborated closely with the group have already, managed to break down some of the 'perceived' barriers and are optimistic that some of the students will pursue a HE programme next semester. Hopefully with the intervention of the HEA, DFHERIS, and the introduction of the current National Access Plan (NAP 2022-2028), the actual barriers will be overcome, but not without the assistance of educators, students, representatives of priority groups identified, HEIs and other government agencies and departments.

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