

Higher Education Access/Foundation Courses

A Research Report

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March 2009

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FOREWORD

The last decade has seen a great deal of work undertaken in the field of widening participation in higher education. Targets set by the Action Group on Access in 2001 for increased entry by students from under-represented groups in higher education have been achieved. Ambitious new targets have been set by the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013, including the first national target for the broadening of entry routes into higher education.

The need for this research report was created by a discussion paper circulated by National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education in July 2007 which prompted concern among higher education providers of access/foundation courses. This concern acknowledged there was no coherent data available on the entry, retention and progression of students on access/foundation courses in higher education.

The report provides an overview of access courses offered across the higher education sector in Ireland. It aims to identify good practice and contribute to national policy formulation.

There is no doubt that students who participate in higher education access/foundation courses are very successful in higher education environments and graduate to become active citizens contributing to the social, cultural and economic life of the country. The challenge in the current economic climate is to identify and continue to provide the elements which underpin this success, 'a menu of options' for the provision of access/foundation courses to disadvantaged and under-represented groups, delivered in a variety of settings suitable to their educational needs and which offer them clear progression routes into higher education.

On behalf of the Advisory Group I would like to acknowledge the personnel in higher education institutions who undertook to provide the information required for the review and to thank the Advisory Group for their tireless dedication to the work as it progressed. In particular I would like to extend our grateful appreciation to Dr Phyllis Murphy and to John Fitzgibbons who was responsible for designing the publication.

Ann O'Brien
Chair

Dr Phyllis Murphy.

Phyllis Murphy BSc. MA, PhD, H.Dip in Education, has a long-standing commitment and active involvement in the exploration and advancement of equality and social inclusion in Ireland for vulnerable groups including, young early school leavers, women, older people and ethnic minority groups. She has worked extensively in support and research activities with community development organisations, local development partnerships and statutory agencies and has extensive experience in project and organisation evaluation and review, policy development and strategic planning over the past 20 years.

Her work as co-ordinator of the UCD Equality Studies Centre Outreach programme over the past 13 years has particularly focused on widening participation in higher education through the development and delivery of University Outreach Equality courses for the community, statutory and NGO sector.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review of higher education access/foundation course provision was commissioned by a group representing Higher Education Institutions that deliver access courses, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Institutes of Technology Ireland (IoTI), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Education & Science.

The review was occasioned by concerns among the provider Higher Education (HE) Institutions arising from the differences in funding pertaining in the Further and Higher Education sectors, their award status and lack of official recognition of HE access/foundation courses as key progression routes. Following ongoing discussion in the matter between the institutions, the HEA and the Department, the HEA's National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education developed a discussion paper in May 2007 which raised a wide range of issues for debate around the provision of access/foundation courses (see Appendix 1).

The review is intended to respond to a number of the issues raised in the discussion paper by providing an overview of access courses offered across the HE sector in Ireland. It aims to identify good practice and contribute to national policy formulation.

Terms of Reference for the Research

The research was not expected to be exhaustive. The terms of reference were set out as follows:

(i) Describe and quantify Access Course provision by Higher Education Institutions nationally (profile of participants, activity level, core curricular elements, teaching & learning methodology, credit transfer arrangements, accreditation, level on National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), retention, progression and outcomes, including some level of financial analysis;

(ii) Describe and quantify access, transfer and progression via FETAC level 5 and 6 awards to HE, through analysis of a limited sample of such courses. Analysis to include a profile of participants, activity level, core curricular elements, teaching & learning methodology, credit transfer arrangements, patterns of retention and progression to higher education, as well as some level of financial analysis;

(iii) In the context of achieving the broader national goal of significantly improving access to higher education by under-represented groups, compare the benefits and challenges for learners and providers when Access/Foundation or FETAC level 5 & 6 courses are delivered by higher or further education institutions, either alone or in partnership.

(iv) Provide an overview of policy and provision supporting progression to HE from other comparative (FE & HE) settings internationally (Scotland).

In relation to the research approach, a number of challenges were highlighted.

- Firstly the issue of data availability must be noted. While all institutions involved demonstrated high levels of commitment to providing the necessary data for the research, gaps in data inevitably existed for many courses. Among the reasons suggested for this situation were: the early stages of development of some courses; changes in key personnel in courses running over a number of years; different approaches to record keeping; and lack of a history of tracking of students. In relation to tracking, many respondents noted the particular difficulties involved in trying to track access/foundation course graduates' progression when they moved into institutions other than their own. It was noted that systems are not in place to facilitate this practice and issues related to data protection arise for individual institutions.

- The issue of quantitative data on target group numbers must also be noted. All of the courses indicated their targeting of underrepresented groups in

higher education. However different interpretations of the term 'disadvantage' were evident and the survey replies did not allow for accurate analysis of registrations in terms of particular categories of 'disadvantage'.

- Information on credit transfer arrangements and course recognition was also problematic for some respondents. While many courses have been assigning credits for course management purposes and are informally recognised in their own and other institutions, formal recognition is not yet in place for all awards. Work is currently underway within the University sector to map sub-degree courses to the National Framework of Qualifications and final outcomes of this were not available at time of reporting. The seven IUA member universities have now submitted these awards for inclusion, with up to date lists as of September 2008 providing programme/award title, award-type classification, ECTS credit and NFQ level for approximately 95% of all university higher diplomas, postgraduate diplomas, and minor, special purpose supplemental awards.
- Finally it was not possible to engage in any significant analysis of progression trends from FE courses to higher education. In acknowledgement of the fact that a large-scale review of this issue was outside the brief of this study, it had been intended to carry out a case study focusing on FE courses providing progression routes to higher education in a sample VEC area. It was intended that surveys similar to those used for the higher education access/foundation courses could be completed for sample courses within the City of Cork VEC area. However, this was not possible as only general information, mainly of a qualitative nature could be accessed.

The Research

Reports were provided on a total of 37 courses currently being delivered across 5 Universities, 2 Colleges of Education and 10 Institutes of Technology

- While a diverse range of access/foundation courses has been provided by the Higher Education Institutions over the past years essentially three different models of access course delivery can be identified including:
 - courses delivered by individual HE institutions
 - courses delivered by a partnership of HE institutions
 - courses delivered by the HE institution in partnership with one or more FE partners.

Available evidence points to high levels of success in terms of outcomes for these courses.

Quantitative outcomes from the courses indicate that for those who registered on courses for which complete progression data was available (a total registration of 2,142), 1,704 (80%) completed the courses, 1,337 (62%) progressed to HE, 459 (21%) graduated with a higher education degree and 680 (32%) are still in the system (see Tables 2.11 and 2.12 in Section Two).

From a qualitative perspective the evidence also points to positive impacts for individual students, their communities and for the providing institution.

Furthermore the research suggests that the access programmes make a significant contribution to the National Access Plan in relation to widening access for underrepresented groups in higher education, and also to the stimulation of demand for higher education among new constituencies of learners.

Those consulted also highlighted the fragmented nature that has characterised the activity across the institutions in the earlier years of development, and the lack of linkage between the institutions for transfer of learning and development of

progression routes. Efforts to address these issues have included the mapping of sub-degree programmes to the National Framework of Qualifications and the development of partnerships between educational institutions.

While different levels of experience and different models of operation are evident, a number of particular features may be highlighted in terms of the good practice demonstrated across the courses including: targeting; collaboration within the sector, and with other sectors; innovative approaches and evaluations.

Strong arguments are put forward by the HE personnel involved in this study that the HE sector has a unique role to play in further developing and delivering access/foundation courses. Particularly highlighted are the following:

- specialist knowledge of HE subject areas
- the opportunities HE provision gives for demystifying higher education and facilitating familiarisation with the physical environment of a HE campus and with some HE staff
- introduction to HE teaching styles and assessment approaches
- better progression rates when courses are delivered by the same institution

In looking to the future, challenges are acknowledged by the HE personnel consulted during this research. Those highlighted included:

- development of a coherent national policy on access courses within the HE sector
- ensuring adequate resourcing for programmes and student supports
- establishment of effective recording and tracking systems
- establishment of, and agreement on, clear progression links
- establishment or further development of collaborative working relationships/partnerships between the higher and further education sectors for the purpose of development of new access/foundation courses that will provide a 'menu' of options to suit the different needs of different under-represented

learner groups and also streamline progression routes between the two sectors.

It was not possible for this study to add in any significant way to the existing body of information on access, transfer and progression to higher education via FETAC Level 5 and 6 awards provided within the FE sector. While initial analysis of recent data by the HEA for this report indicates that the number of students progressing to HE via FETAC awards is increasing, the McIver Review (2006) provides the most recent published information on this subject. The review noted that the numbers progressing to higher education through FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 awards are small compared to those from Leaving Certificate. The report also set out some of the issues related to the future of progression from FETAC qualifications including:

- the lack of a consistent understanding of how various attainments in FETAC qualifications function as indicators of likely success in higher education
- the heavy demands of the five distinction requirement for progression from FETAC
- the danger that the strengthening of progression routes may affect the operation of courses leading to FETAC qualifications
- the need for institutions to look more closely at how they allocate places in short supply between different groups
- the treating of FETAC Level 6 less favourably for access to HE than other non-FETAC FE qualifications
- the requirements set for access to specific higher education courses may not in all cases have the necessary 'fit' with the FETAC modules provided.

In relation to local experience of progression from FETAC qualifications within the FE sector, some general information was provided by the City of Cork VEC. This indicated the development of a range of FETAC accredited courses and suggested that a 'significant proportion' of students are progressing from these courses via links established with CIT and UCC as well as some UK institutions.

Further analysis of the operation of these progression routes, the numbers involved, or the outcomes is not possible in the absence of relevant data.

While not underestimating the challenges involved in a partnership approach to access course delivery, City of Cork VEC suggested that the development of a model that promotes and supports progression as a partnership between the VECs and Higher Education institutions has many merits and positive possibilities. For example:

- Learners from under-represented groups and communities are often reluctant to move outside their communities in the first instance. VECs provide opportunities and services in these communities and these are very often delivered by people from the community itself
- The nature of services provided by VECs is flexible because of their links to the communities and learner populations they serve
- There are coordination and management structures in place to support and develop appropriate programmes.

Overall, the above arguments from both sectors point to a general consensus of the provider institutions that there is potential in a partnership approach between the FE and HE sectors in relation to the development of a wider range of access routes to higher education.

However, the importance of acknowledging the diversity of needs of different groups and different geographic regions is also stressed, and a general consensus of the provider institutions that learners' needs will be most effectively catered for by the provision of a 'menu' of options that reflect the unique strengths that each sector can bring in its own right, as well as in a partnership model. The importance is stressed of an over arching policy framework that supports and guides all strands of such a 'package' as a key to ensuring success.

Against the backdrop of the above conclusions, some of the learning emerging from the Scottish system may be noted. Most Scottish access courses for mature

students are offered under the national programme SWAP, funded under the SCF Council. These courses are mainly one year, full-time and delivered at further education colleges.

Recent reviews of progress on the Scottish widening access agenda indicate that progress is being made although it is acknowledged that the pace is slow in relation to widening access for learners from areas traditionally not represented in higher education. They also emphasise the challenges that persist, including:

- weaknesses in data collection and tracking
- the slow pace of impact of the Qualifications framework in terms of securing recognition for equivalences and opening up new pathways for progression
- development of articulation routes
- strengthening of regional partnerships
- mobilising traditionally underrepresented groups to avail of the supports offered to access higher education

A particular area of concern among some academics regarding the progress being made in relation to the widening of access to Scottish HE is the over-concentration of underrepresented groups in higher education courses in the FE sector.

The importance of regional collaboration is particularly stressed within Scottish widening access policy, in view of the concentration of some of the under-participation in particular geographic areas. Furthermore, the need is recognised for tailor made supports that recognise that learners start from different places, learn in different ways, and need to be empowered to access the learning that is right for them.

Finally, the need is stressed to constantly review the resources required for widening access initiatives in the Scottish system. It is also highlighted that it is important to acknowledge that this work may appear to be costly but longer-term savings related to quality of life for individuals and their community should be

factored in as well as the enhanced contribution to national economic performance related to a higher skilled workforce.

Items for Further Consideration

- (i) This research demonstrates that access courses delivered within the HE sector should be recognised as having a unique contribution to make to the national widening access and participation agenda. Besides their positive progression outcomes, they have resulted in valuable insights regarding barriers to access and participation and developed significant experience as to approaches to address these barriers including those involving strategic local and regional partnerships.
- (ii) A further key conclusion is that a package of access options be promoted and supported as national policy, including courses run by higher education institutions and those developed and/or delivered through a partnership between HE and FE institutions. The need for supporting and resourcing the process that will be required for this development should be recognised at national policy level and the work should include the following steps:
 - A cross-sector review of the good practice elements emerging from the HE course models outlined in this study with a view to identifying and documenting good practice guidelines. Key areas of focus should include course development and delivery approaches, consultative needs analysis, partnerships with other institutions (including FE) and other key stakeholders and outreach that demystifies higher education among under-represented communities and also addresses geographical gaps in relation to availability of HE education.
 - Establishment of a task-focused forum for practitioners to explore: the challenges related to the implementation of effective data collection systems for the purpose of transparency, evaluation and development of

access programmes; agreement on best practice, and any training required for the implementation of these practices.

- Establishment of a task-focused forum representing HE and FE practitioners who have experience of development of access routes to HE, to explore and agree on the most effective structure for a collaborative partnership for the purposes of identifying and addressing transition blocks to learners and ensuring that all FE HE access routes involve the models of delivery appropriate to learners needs. In line with the experience of the Scottish system it is crucial that clear lines of formal communication are established and that there is policy level commitment across the sectors for any agreements reached.
- A national awareness raising 'campaign' is needed within HE and FE and other key stakeholder sectors involved in community capacity building to raise educational aspirations and stimulate demand among under represented groups/communities for further/higher education. This awareness raising should also seek to encourage demand for strategically important subject areas including Science and Technology.

Within that context this research notes the following proposals set out within a number of relevant recent national documents:

With reference to the National Access Plan (HEA, 2008):

- (iii) Development of a broader range of entry routes to higher education for learners, including a significant expansion of part/time flexible courses and measures to address the student support implications of lifelong learning.
- (iv) Students should be assisted to access supports that will better address the financial barriers to access and successful participation in higher education

- (v) Development of multi annual access plans by HE institutions as a way of providing clarity on institutional strategies to promote access and also for the exchange of best practice in a transparent environment.
- (vi) Allocation of public funds to higher education institutions should reflect the priority accorded to promoting equality in higher education
- (vii) Promotion of systematic improvements in the evidence-base for higher education policy

With reference to proposals set out by the Irish Universities sector (2008) to the forthcoming NQAI study:

- (viii) Clarity at policy level regarding the definition of an access student and funding for access programmes. There is need for consultation with higher education institutions with longstanding access and foundation programmes, often run in conjunction with local learning support and outreach centres, in order to ensure a sufficiently broad definition.
- (ix) Greater awareness raising among learners of the National Framework of Qualifications and how it can support their progression to higher education
- (x) Caution regarding increased standardisation and over-bureaucratisation of learning and general academic activity in relation to the implementation of the NQAI
- (xi) Clarity is needed as to the respective roles of HEIs and FETAC in relation to ensuring effective operation of progression to higher education
- (xii) The need for the establishment of a higher education forum –bringing together actors from across the HE sector – to discuss a range of matters relating to credit and naming conventions.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION, METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT FOR RESEARCH

1.1 Introduction

The issues surrounding equality of access to higher education (HE) have been discussed in a range of policy and research reports in recent years. Challenges highlighted include: the identification of 'what works' to promote equality of access (HEA Evaluation of Access Programmes, 2006); mapping of access courses to the National Framework of Qualifications (HEA Consultation Paper, 2007); and also how to achieve a more integrated national strategy that will bring about an inclusive, diverse and dynamic learning society without barriers (Educational Disadvantage Committee Report, 2005).

In relation to the access / foundation courses provided by a number of higher education institutions across the country, these challenges are particularly highlighted. Current debates point to the need for clarity and an integrated strategic direction in relation to a number of areas including:

- The diverse landscape of access course provision that is developing across the HE sector nationally
- The different models of practice currently delivered by different HE institutions
- The current policy and funding context within which Access/Foundation courses operate
- The linkage of courses to the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the range of access, transfer and progression opportunities available to learners.

It is against this backdrop that this review of HE Access/Foundation Course provision was commissioned by a group representing higher education institutions that deliver access courses, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Institutes

of Technology Ireland (IoTI), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Education & Science.

The review is intended to provide an overview of access courses offered across the HE sector in Ireland. It aims to identify good practice and contribute to national policy formulation. As such it has the potential to inform current debates and future decisions in this area of work. Furthermore, in the context of the ambitious target set by Government to increase participation in higher education from 55% to 72% by 2020, the review may also provide some indications as to the potential for increasing progression to higher education by under-represented groups through preparatory programmes within the HE or FE (further education) sectors.

1.2 Policy Context

The wider funding context is a major challenge in relation to higher education access courses. As stated in the HEA consultation paper on higher education access courses (2007, p.11):

‘access courses in higher education institutions are not approved for student support schemes such as the higher or further education grants scheme, the free tuition fees initiative, the top-up grant, the student assistance fund or the fund for students with a disability’.

The paper draws attention to the following:

‘In 2003 the Minister for Education and Science stated that the Department of Education had not approved the direct funding of foundation courses through its third level access programmes - in particular its student support programmes and that the Department questioned “the value of putting students from disadvantaged backgrounds through year-long foundation courses”.

The Minister went on to cite the Commission on the Points System who were “*not convinced that such courses were appropriate for third level institutions and suggested they be provided under further education schemes*” and the Action Group on Access who pointed to “*the need for the appropriate validation of such courses*” and considered that “*they should not be a requirement for all access students*”.

(Dáil Questions Ref. 18878/03; 18880/03; 18881/03; 1st July, 2003).

(HEA Consultation Paper 2007, footnote, p.11)

At a wider level, other issues are highlighted. The recently launched National Access Plan (HEA, 2008) highlights the continued differences in participation in higher education between socio-economic groups and some communities and also the weak educational profile of the adult population in Ireland (especially middle to older age adults) by international standards.

In launching the plan, the Minister for Education and Science noted the ‘*unprecedented expansion in educational opportunities*’ over the last four decades, and the achievement of a 55% entry rate to higher education, but emphasised the scale of the challenge of addressing the inequalities that remain. While restating the need to achieve the National Skills Strategy target entry rate to HE of 72% by 2020, he highlighted the challenge of tackling the complex set of social, economic and educational issues that interact to prevent those at greatest disadvantage from benefiting fully from education. The Minister also noted that responding to these challenges will require significant effort and new thinking across all educational sectors. This point is echoed in the HEA’s National Access Plan:

‘Meeting the needs of those who wish to return to education will require integrated, joined up approaches to the multi-dimensional needs of individuals and communities’ (2008 p. 5).

While noting that it is not yet fully understood how to design and deliver education systems which successfully engage the full population to the best of their

individual and collective potential over the course of their lives, the National Access Plan also suggests that:

'Countries which successfully address these challenges will have an advantage into the future in terms of economic competitiveness, social inclusion and civic engagement' (2008, p. 15).

1.2.1 National Development Plan: Strategic Objectives for Enhancing Access to Lifelong Learning

Commitment at national policy level to addressing the challenges involved is set out as a number of strategic objectives within the National Development Plan 2007-2013 (2007). This reflects the influence of the Lisbon Strategy, along with the interrelated Bologna (higher education) and Copenhagen (further education and vocational training) processes which will underpin developments in education and training in the coming years for the EU.

Of particular relevance to this research are the following commitments within the National Plan:

For National Upskilling and Qualifications

- Investment in the National Skills Strategy in order to ensure the achievement of the Expert Skills Group's objectives of increasing the number of people who have educational qualifications at level 5 and higher.
- Driving of a lifelong learning policy by enhancing access to education and training, the development of new skills, the acquisition of recognised qualifications and progression to higher level qualifications.

For Higher Education Access

- Widening access to HE for disadvantaged and under-represented groups and pro-actively catering for a diverse student population.

- Reform and innovation of HE programme delivery by the following measures:
 - support and development of models of part-time programme delivery and modularisation
 - development of innovative models of delivery
 - promotion of access, transfer and progression and incentivising of stronger inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes

For Social Inclusion

- Bringing together the numerous processes in an integrated framework that will provide a more coherent and integrated structure for addressing social inclusion and monitoring outcomes across the wide spectrum of relevant Government activity.
- Avoiding duplication of effort and minimising of administrative costs so that resources can be maximised directly to support the socially excluded.

1.2.2 Achieving the Objectives: The Role of the National Framework of Qualification

A number of facilitating factors are expected to support the achievement of the national objectives on upskilling and lifelong learning. In relation to HE access, the National Framework of Qualifications is expected to play a major role.

Launched in 2003, the National Framework of Qualifications is expected to provide a coherent architecture for access and progression by establishing and developing standards of knowledge, skill and competence; providing a coherent system for co-ordinating and comparing awards; identifying gaps and blockages in transfer and progression routes; and indicating the arrangements required to bridge gaps and remove obstacles. A key objective is to shift the focus of entry arrangements to the identification of factors necessary for a learner's successful participation in education.

The NQAI is undertaking a study in 2008/09 to measure the impact and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) across the education and training sectors, which span the ten levels of the NFQ. The study will assess the initial impact of the framework and the extent of its implementation over the five years of its existence. The study aims to identify progress to date, limitations affecting implementation, and the associated influencing factors, promoting or adversely affecting implementation of the NFQ.

In a submission to the NQAI in relation to this study the IUA notes that the existence of the NFQ is widely welcomed in the university sector and that it has been beneficial to the university sector on a number of counts. Among the benefits noted are the following:

'The Framework has helped provide greater transparency and clarity across the sector, both within and between institutions. Within institutions it has contributed to the impetus for programme coherence and compatibility – allowing for improved student choice, flexibility and outcomes-related learning – while across the sector it has allowed for greater comparability and transparency' (2008, p. 18).

However a number of concerns are also noted by the University sector. These include:

- Increased standardisation and over-bureaucratisation of learning and general academic activity.
- A large majority of students are not aware of many aspects of the NFQ and how it affects them.
- There is a certain amount of incoherence regarding the provision of access/foundation courses for HE, and the respective roles of HEIs and FETAC. Discussions have taken place, at regular intervals, with Department of Education and Science (DES) regarding alignment of student support policies with Framework principles.

- For the universities with longstanding access and foundation programmes, often run in conjunction with local learning support and outreach centres, there are currently major concerns regarding the broader definition of an access student and funding for these programmes.

In relation to the next phase of development, the Universities sector proposes the establishment of a higher education forum –bringing together actors from across the HE sector – to discuss a range of matters including those noted above and those relating to credit and naming conventions.

In its submission to the NQAI for the new study, the Further Education and Training Sector (FET) also indicate their welcome for the National Framework of Qualifications and report that the policies on access, transfer and progression are seen as a hugely important and beneficial development in the FET sector. It is suggested that the Framework has had significant impact for learners and the opportunities offered in the FET sector, both in terms of quality of service and access, transfer and progression. Among the benefits noted are the following:

- The framework has enabled greater understanding of and navigation through the diverse layers of awards and qualifications systems that existed within the State prior to 2003. It has also facilitated greater comparability between national awards and awards from other jurisdictions.
- The positive impacts of the framework in the FET sector are evident through the critically important key features: clarity, coherence, connectivity, and continuous improvement, which have been repeatedly identified by stakeholders.

Among the developments noted as needed for the future are:

- Further work to be undertaken by the relevant bodies including the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the State Examinations Commission (SEC), the universities and

programme providers in order to ensure full implementation and greater integration across the different sectors.

- Adequate resources and supports are required to ensure greater understanding and application of the Framework in order to meet stakeholders needs and national priorities such as the objectives identified in the National Skills Strategy.

1.2.3 Other Facilitating Factors

Other facilitating factors in the achievement of the objectives of the National Access Plan objectives on lifelong learning that are highlighted by the HEA include the following:

- ***The introduction of the Institutes of Technology Act (2006)***

This development allows for a more unified policy and management framework for the higher education sector and developments in administrative data collection systems that will allow for greater understanding of progression between the various levels of the National Framework of Qualifications and also underpin ongoing reform of the public funding framework for Higher Education.

- ***Clear national policy objectives on widening access to HE (understood as including participation and completion)***

The National Plan for Equity of Access (2008) sets out the following policy objectives:

- The priority accorded to promoting equality in higher education will be reflected in the strategic planning and development of the Higher Education Authority and of higher education institutions.
- The lifelong learning agenda will be progressed through the development of a broad range of entry routes and a significant expansion of part-

time/flexible courses and measures to address the student support implications of lifelong learning.

- The priority accorded to promoting equality in higher education will be reflected in the allocation of public funds to higher education institutions.
- Students will be assisted to access supports and those supports will better address the financial barriers to access and successful participation in higher education.
- The higher education participation rates of people with disabilities will be increased through greater opportunities and supports.

- ***Wide-ranging experience to draw from***

In relation to access to HE specifically, a range of access /foundation courses have been delivered over recent years by Universities, Colleges of Education and Institutes of Technology and there is now the potential for building on the significant experience that exists (HEA, 2008). While issues noted include funding supports and lack of clarity as to progression opportunities for many of these courses, the new national access plan commits to work with AMA, the network of higher-education access practitioners and the DES on development. Among the key action points set out within the plan are:

- Development of institutional access plans across the HE sector.
- More strategic engagement with other education providers particularly those in the FE sector and the business sector.
- Review of student supports.
- Development of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH). The key objective of this programme would be to enhance collaborative actions and progression between the different levels of the education system. It is anticipated that the PATH programme will encompass the following actions:
 - development of Progression routes;
 - national policy on higher education;
 - supporting the extension of the HEAR programme;

- provision of supplementary admissions for students with disabilities and
- recognition of prior learning.

1.3 Terms of Reference for the Research

The research is not expected to be exhaustive. The terms of reference were set out as follows:

- (i) Describe and quantify Access Course provision by Higher Education Institutions nationally (profile of participants, activity level, core curricular elements, teaching & learning methodology, credit transfer arrangements, accreditation, level on NFQ, retention, progression and outcomes, including some level of financial analysis;
- (ii) Describe and quantify access, transfer and progression via FETAC level 5 and 6 awards to HE, through analysis of a limited sample of such courses. Analysis to include a profile of participants, activity level, core curricular elements, teaching & learning methodology, credit transfer arrangements, patterns of retention and progression to higher education, as well as some level of financial analysis;
- (iii) In the context of achieving the broader national goal of significantly improving access to higher education by under-represented groups, compare the benefits and challenges for learners and providers when Access/Foundation or FETAC level 5 & 6 courses are delivered by higher or further education institutions, either alone or in partnership.
- (iv) Provide an overview of policy and provision supporting progression to HE from other comparative (FE & HE) settings internationally (Scotland).

1.4 Methodology for the Research

In outlining the methodology of the report, a number of challenges may be highlighted.

- Firstly the issue of data availability must be noted. While all institutions involved demonstrated high levels of commitment to providing the necessary data for the research, gaps in data inevitably existed for many courses. Among the reasons suggested for this situation were: the early stages of development of some courses; changes in key personnel in courses running over a number of years; different approaches to record keeping; and lack of a history of tracking of students. In relation to tracking, many respondents noted the particular difficulties involved in trying to track access/foundation course graduates' progression when they moved into institutions other than their own. It was noted that systems are not in place to facilitate this practice and issues related to data protection arise for individual institutions.
- Another area where data was not easily accessible for the respondents was that required for the purposes of financial analysis.
- The issue of quantitative data on target group numbers must also be noted. All of the courses indicated their targeting of underrepresented groups in higher education. However different interpretations of the term 'disadvantage' were evident and the survey replies did not allow for accurate analysis of registrations in terms of particular categories of 'disadvantage'.
- Information on credit transfer arrangements and course recognition was also problematic for some respondents. While many courses have been assigning credits for course management purposes and are informally recognised in their own and other institutions, formal recognition is not yet in place for all awards. Work is currently underway within the University

sector to map sub-degree courses to the National Framework of Qualifications and final outcomes of this were not available at time of reporting. The seven IUA member universities have now submitted these awards for inclusion, with up to date lists as of September 2008 providing programme/award title, award-type classification, ECTS credit and NFQ level for approximately 95% of all university higher diplomas, postgraduate diplomas, and minor, special purpose supplemental awards.

- Finally it was not possible to engage in any significant analysis of progression trends from FE courses to higher education. In acknowledgement of the fact that a large-scale review of this issue was outside the brief of this study, it had been intended to carry out a case study focusing on FE courses providing progression routes to higher education in a sample VEC area. It was intended that surveys similar to those used for the higher education access/foundation courses could be completed for sample courses within the City of Cork VEC area. However, this was not possible as only general information, mainly of a qualitative nature could be accessed.

The main research tool was a survey of all relevant HE institutions via email.

Prior to the appointment of a consultant to support the research project, AMA, the network of HE access officers, had designed and delivered a survey questionnaire to all HE institutions in Ireland seeking information on access/foundation courses delivered by their institutions. The completed surveys outlined 37 courses delivered by 17 HE institutions and were returned via e-mail. Following her appointment, the research consultant collated the surveys and identified additional information that would support the research.

A second survey requesting this additional information was sent out to the HE institutions. In total 20 of the second surveys were completed and returned. Both surveys are presented in the appendix of this report.

Other key elements of the research methodology were:

- Literature review including:
 - evaluation reports and other relevant documents related to access /foundation courses provided by some of the higher education institutions
 - research documents and reports related to national policy on further and higher education access in Ireland
 - policy documents and programme reports related to higher education access in Scotland.
- Interviews with access officers with responsibility for 3 of the key HE access/foundation programmes reported on.
- Interview with a representative of City of Cork VEC.
- Interviews/consultation / on-going liaison with representatives of the research steering group.
- Write up and circulation of draft research report to identified key stakeholders.
- Presentation of key findings to research steering group.
- Finalisation of report.

1.5 Report Format

It is within this context that this report is presented. The report consists of five sections. Following this introduction, Section Two will present an overview of access/foundation provision within the HE sector based on reports from the institutions involved. This will be followed by a brief overview of the FETAC to higher education route within the further education (FE) sector, including some information on the City of Cork FE system. In Section Four, the report, presents a brief overview of Higher Education access policy and practice in Scotland with a view to identifying common issues, the models implemented and the lessons

emerging that may be of relevance to the Irish system. Finally, Section Five will present conclusions based on the issues identified and the lessons indicated across the systems reviewed.

SECTION TWO: ACCESS/FOUNDATION COURSES DELIVERED WITHIN THE HE SECTOR

2.1 Higher Education Access/Foundation Course Development

A substantial body of good practice has emerged over the last decade in Ireland in relation to diversification of entry routes to higher education (HEA, 2008, p. 43). Access and foundation courses have developed within this sector mainly with the support of the HEA Targeted Initiatives Scheme and more recently the SIF programme. In the absence of national policy on this provision, a diverse landscape of courses has emerged across the institutions. Although many similarities exist between these courses a number of distinctions may also be noted – for example some courses are provided by an individual HE institution while others are provided in partnerships with other HE institutions or FE institutions.

Although it may be noted that the institutions engaged in this research indicated that a range of course types have been offered over recent years, the main courses currently being developed are named as access and foundation courses for which the following broad definitions may be applied:

- Access courses are intended to facilitate learners to commence on a course of continuing education having received recognition for knowledge, skills or competence required.
- Foundation courses are generally intended to give a ‘foundation’ in a subject that enables the learner to go on to further study in that subject area. Some courses provide an academic preparation in a range of disciplines.

As can be seen from Tables 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 below, both these types of courses vary in the extent to which they facilitate entry to particular higher education courses.

In view of the various levels of information available on many of the courses reported on, as noted in the methodology, it was decided not to differentiate between ‘access’ and ‘foundation’ courses as individual models in order to achieve maximum insight on the models of ‘activity’ that are in operation across the institutions.

This section provides an overview of the range and level of activity across the HE institutions involved in this review and the main characteristics of the courses reported on by them including the models being implemented, the activity levels and outcomes for students involved.

2.2 Overview of Courses Reported On

Information was sought on all individual courses delivered over all higher education institutions within the HEA remit. Reports were provided on a total of 37 courses currently being delivered across 5 Universities, 2 Colleges of Education and 10 Institutes of Technology (Table 2.1).

Universities & Colleges of Education	Institutes of Technology
National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) St Angela College , Sligo	Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)
National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM)	Institute of Art Design and Technology Dun Laoghaire (IADT)
University College Dublin (UCD)	Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)
University Of Dublin Trinity College (TCD)	Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)
University of Limerick (UL) Mary Immaculate College	Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB)
	Institute of Technology Tralee (ITT)
	Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT)
	Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT)
	Tipperary Institute (TI)
	Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)

Table 2.1 Higher Education Institutions that Provided Data on Access Courses Delivered by Them

Some institutions reported that they have been running access courses for many years

Commencement	Number and Institutions involved
5 years or more	6 institutions - UL, TI, LYIT, Mary I, St. Angela's, ITB
Over 10 years:	5 institutions – NUIM, NUIG, UCD, TCD & WIT

Table 2.2 **Institutions involved in course delivery for more than 5 years**

For the other institutions and for the collaborative partnerships, the activities have only commenced within the past year or two. This clearly has implications for the level of reporting possible in relation to progression outcomes.

As can be seen from the Tables below, most of the courses cater for a range of socio-economically disadvantaged students including school leavers, young adults and mature students. Some also target students from ethnic minorities, the Traveller community and those with a disability.

Fourteen of the courses are full time and 21 are part time with two courses being delivered as a full time and part time option.

Three distinct types of course delivery model are evident from the information provided and details of these models are presented below.

2.2.1 Delivery Model 1: Courses Delivered by Individual HE Institutions

Twenty-five of the courses reported on are delivered by 11 individual institutions with no other HE or FE partnership involvement. The majority of these courses (21 courses) are delivered on the campus of the relevant institution with 4 being delivered in outreach locations e.g. NUIG has also run their Access Foundation courses for both mature and young people on campus in Galway and outreach in Connamara. The latter course is offered through medium of Irish.

Name of Institution	No. of courses	Courses run	Part-time /Full-time	Course Delivery Location	Target Groups	Provides access to
NUIG	4	School-leavers Access Course	F/T	NUI Galway	SED/Disability/Traveller/Ethnic Min	Direct entry to NUIG
		Mature Access Galway	P/T	Galway	SED, Dis/ Trav. / Ethnic Min	Guaranteed direct entry to NUIG
		Mature Access Carraroe (offered through the medium of Irish)	P/T	Carraroe	SED mature /Dis/Trav/Ethnic Min	Guaranteed direct entry to NUIG
		Access Course	P/T	St Angela's Sligo	Mature Students & School Leavers	Guarantees direct entry to NUIG and St. Angela's
NUIM	2	Return to Learning	P/T	NUIM	Mature students	No guarantee of entry to third level
		NUI Certs in Science, Engineering/ Finance/ Economics & Business; Foundation Year Programmes	F/T	NUIM	Mature, SED Mature, Dis, ethnic min	Guaranteed entry on to the first year of a related degree programme at NUIM
TCD	2	Foundation Course for Higher Education; Mature Students	F/T	TCD	SED Mature	Eligible to compete within 15% TCD access quota and mature student applications
		Foundation Course for Higher Education Young Adults	F/T	TCD	SED Young Adults	Eligible to compete within 15% TCD access quota through HEAR scheme
UCD	8	Access to Arts & Human Sciences	P/T	Old Bawn Community Sch. Tallaght. D 24	Mature, SED Mature, Disability	Guaranteed a place on UCD BA or B Soc Sc under certain conditions
		Access to Arts & Human Sciences	P/T	Ballymun Comprehensive School, D. 11	Mature, SED Mature, Disability	Guaranteed a place on UCD BA or B Soc Sc under certain conditions
		Access to Arts & Human Sciences	P/T	Belfield	Mature, SED Mature, Disability	Guaranteed a place on UCD BA or B Soc Sc under certain conditions
		Access to Arts & Human Sciences	P/T	Wicklow FEC	Mature, SED Mature, Disability	Guaranteed a place on UCD BA or B Soc Sc under certain conditions
		Access to Arts & Human Sciences	P/T	Pobailscoil Neasan, Baldoyle	Mature, SED Mature, Disability	Guaranteed a place on UCD BA or B Soc Sc under certain conditions
		Access to Arts & Human Sciences	P/T	Blackrock/Mount Merrion Stillorgan/Belfield	Mature, SED Mature, Disability	Guaranteed a place on UCD BA or B Soc Sc under certain conditions

		Access to Commerce (P/T)	P/T	Belfield	Mature, SED Mature, Disability	Progress to either the Diploma in Foundation Business or B.Comm degree programme at UCD
		Access to Science & engineering	P/T	Belfield	Mature, SED Mature, Disability	Places on certificate/diploma or degree courses in Agriculture, Engineering/Architecture, Health and Safety at Work, or Science
UL	3	Access Studies in Higher Education	F/T	UL	SED students	Guarantees entry to a full-time degree programme in UL
		Mature Student Access Course	F/T	UL	Mature/SED mature/disability/ Trav/ Ethnic Min	Guarantees automatic entry to number of degree programmes at UL and eligible for direct entry to others
		Foundation Cert in Higher Ed. Adult Learners	P/T	Mary I	Mature/Trav/ Ethnic minority	Direct access to MIC BA in Liberal Arts for those who attain a merit
Dun Laoghaire IADT	1	Cert in General Studies (Formerly Foundation Cert)	F/T	Dun Laoghaire Institute	Mature/ SED Mature/ Disability	Foundation for progression to level 6,7 or 8 in Higher Education
IT Blanchardstown	1	Certificate in General Studies	F/T	ITB campus	Mature/ SED Mature/ Trav	Foundation for progression to level 6,7 or 8 in Higher Education
Letterkenny IT	1	Certificate in Introductory Studies	F/T P/T	Letterkenny	Mature/SED Mature/SED Dis/Trav/ Ethnic Min	Allows progression to higher education at college of their choice, may get exemptions in first year of degree programme
Tipperary Institute	2	The Highway Programme	F/T	Thurles & Clonmel	Mature/ SED Mature/ Trav	Fulfils a minimum entry requirement for application to certificate/National Diploma and degree courses in HE education
Waterford IT	1	Certificate in Foundation Studies	F/T P/T	WIT	Mature/ SED Mature/ ethnic Minorities	It does not automatically guarantee the student a place on a full-time Third Level course.

Table 2-3 Information on Courses in Model 1

2.2.2 Delivery Model 2: Courses Delivered by a Partnership of HE Institutions, One of which Acts as Lead Institution

A second model reported on was that of courses delivered by a partnership of HE institutions with one of them taking on the role of lead institution of the partnership group. Three such partnerships were reported on.

- **BMW Outreach Access Centre Partnership – Lead Institution: NUI Galway**

This model was established to enhance access and to promote new lifelong learning opportunities across the Border, Midlands and Western Region and Co. Clare, responding, in particular, to the region-dispersed rural population. The project has recently been renamed Access 21. Seven institutions comprise this partnership. With support of SIF funding, the partner institutions have collaborated in the planning and outreach delivery of both access and third level programmes – 10 courses in 3 geographic regions, located at a distance from the existing third level institutions: Border (Cavan – Donegal – Louth) Midlands (Portlaoise – Tullamore) and Co. Clare (Ennis – Shannon). All the courses are considered by all partner institutions for direct entry to general degrees.

- **NUIG/GMIT Partnership – Lead Institution: NUI Galway**

This partnership targets mature students with an interest in studying Business or Science subjects with a view to increasing take up of these subjects in either of the institutions and as a contribution to addressing the skills shortages in these areas in the BMW region. The course is delivered at both campuses and provides the opportunity for progression to either institution.

- **Shannon Consortium – Lead Institution: UL**

The Shannon Consortium is a co-operative arrangement between higher education institutions working together in the South West of Ireland. The Consortium is a working partnership of Limerick Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Tralee, Mary Immaculate College and the University of Limerick. With

support of SIF funding, the members have set a target that they would develop and deliver cross-institutional programmes to include a mutually recognised foundation programme. Each of the members were already offering some form of a foundation programme, which on successful completion facilitates access by the student onto level 6,7 and 8 programmes within each establishment. Some of the consortium members also offer reserved places on specific courses to those who successfully complete the foundation programme. IT Tralee was offering a FETAC Level 5 programme in Business and Community Studies and this has now been adapted for delivery by the consortium members.

Project Name and Year of origin	Lead Institution	Course Run	Collaborating Institution	Part-Time /Full-Time	Course delivery location	Target Group	Provides Access to
BMW Outreach/ Access Centres	NUIG	Access Course For Mature Students and School Leavers (Midwest)	Galway Mayo IT (GMIT)	P/T	Ennis	Mature/SED /Dis/ Traveller/Ethnic min	Considered by all partner institutions for direct entry to general degrees.
	NUIG	Access Course For Mature Students and School Leavers (Border)	Dundalk IT (DKIT); Letterkenny IT (LYIT); St. Angela's College, Sligo	P/T	Drogheda	Mature/SED /Dis/ Traveller/Ethnic min	Considered by all partner institutions for direct entry to general degrees.
	NUIG	Access Course For Mature Students and School Leavers (Border)	LYIT; (DKIT); St. Angela's College, Sligo	P/T	Ballyshannon	Mature/SED /Dis/ Traveller/Ethnic min	Considered by all partner institutions for direct entry to general degrees.
	NUIG	Access Course For Mature Students and School Leavers (Border)	LYIT; Dundalk IT (DKIT); St. Angela's College, Sligo	P/T	Dungloe	Mature/SED /Dis/ Traveller/Ethnic min	Considered by all partner institutions for direct entry to general degrees.
	NUIG	Access Course For Mature Students and School Leavers (Border)	LYIT; DKIT; St. Angela's College, Sligo	P/T	Cavan	Mature/SED /Dis/ Traveller/Ethnic min	Considered by all partner institutions for direct entry to general degrees.

	NUIG	Access Course For Mature Students and School Leavers (Midlands)	NUI, Maynooth (NUIM); IT Athlone (AIT)	P/T	Tullamore and Portlaoise	Mature	Considered by all partner institutions for direct entry to general degrees.
NUIG /GMIT Partnership	NUIG	Foundation Course Business and Commerce	GMIT	P/T	NUI Galway	Mature	Guaranteed entry to NUIG and GMIY p/t and f/t Business degree programmes
	NUIG	Foundation Course Science, Engineering & Technology	GMIT	P/T	NUI Galway	Mature	Guaranteed entry to both institutions
Shannon Consortium	UL	Certificate in General Studies	LIT, IT Tralee Mary I	F/T	Downtown Centre Limerick	Mature/SED Mature/Dis/Trav/Ethnic Min	Guaranteed direct entry to designated undergraduate programmes in each of the partner institutions
		Cert in Business Studies	LIT, IT Tralee Mary I)	F/T	IT Tralee	Mature/ SED	Allows progression to Higher Certificates in ITT and LIT and to certain degrees at UL

*Both GMIT and NUIM offer their own separate Access/Foundation courses independent of the SIF BMW project with NUIG.

Table 2-4 Information on Courses in Model 2

2.2.3 Delivery Model 3: Courses Delivered by the HE Institution in Partnership with One or More FE Partners

A third category is that of the courses delivered by a HE institution in partnership with one or more FE partners. Such courses are delivered by Trinity College in collaboration with Liberties College and Pearse/Plunket Colleges and are described below.

Project Name	Lead Institution	Course Run	Collaborating Institution	Part-Time /Full-Time	Course delivery location	Target Group	Provides Access to
Trinity Access Programme (TAP)	TCD	FETAC Level 5: Liberal Arts	CDVEC (FE)	F/T	Liberties College, D8 & TCD	SED Young Adults	Eligible to compete within 15% access quota in Trinity and for FETAC entry into other higher education institutions
		FETAC Level 5: Liberal Arts	CDVEC (FE)	F/T	Pearse /Plunket Colleges & TCD	SED Mature Students	

Table 2-5 Information on Courses in Model 3

- **Trinity College and CDVEC Partnership Foundation Courses**

Since 1997, Trinity College has been providing Foundation Courses for Higher Education for mature students, and since 1999 for young adults from areas where there is little or no transfer to higher education. Building on these courses, in 2004, TAP began a partnership initiative with three City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee Colleges (CDVEC Colleges). These are Plunket College, Dublin 9, Pearse College, Dublin 12, and Liberties College, Dublin 8. The courses in Pearse College and Plunket College are for mature students and although they are run separately in the FE Colleges, the two are combined as one taster course delivered on campus by TCD. The Liberties College course is for young adults. The FETAC accredited Liberal Arts courses cater for up to 75 mature students and young adults. The curriculum is delivered in the CDVEC Colleges. The ‘taster’ activities in TCD throughout the year include: induction days; library workshops; attendance at broad curriculum lectures; student shadowing days; educational guidance and study skills workshops; family days; and parents’ days. Students on the partnership courses can compete for entry into the faculties of arts, humanities and social sciences.

There are two main elements to this partnership: the participation of students in taster activities; and the collaboration between tutors on the two courses in order

to incorporate elements of the teaching and learning methodologies used in the university onto the CDVEC access courses.

Young adult students are recruited collaboratively for the partnership course in Liberties College course and also for the on campus course; similarly mature students are recruited collaboratively for the partnership courses in Pearse and Plunket Colleges and for the on campus course (as included in Table 2.2). There are fundamental differences between the on campus and partnership courses, for example Science subjects are only offered on the TAP Foundation course; and only students on the CDVEC College courses receive a FETAC award. Furthermore, those students who are from the most socially, economically and educationally excluded groups are admitted to the TAP course, where they can avail of an extensive array of supports and be immersed in the university environment. This form of preparation is perceived as essential if they are to progress to, and succeed within, higher education.

2.3 Overview of Rationale for Access /Foundation Course Delivery

The overarching rationale stated by the institutions involved in the research, for their engagement in access course development and delivery is to create alternative routes into higher education for young and older people from under-represented groups and to promote greater participation from these groups. As set out below different emphases were evident across the respondent institutions.

2.3.1 Recognition of Barriers to Higher Education for Some Students

Responses typically demonstrated the institutions' understanding of the barriers facing some students. For example in relation to the TAP Foundation Course for Young Adults, Trinity College's response noted that the course targets students who have demonstrated strong academic ability in at least one subject in the Leaving Certificate but may not have achieved the necessary points to progress

directly onto a degree course. In highlighting the level of disadvantage often involved, TAP notes:

'The Foundation Course is part of Trinity's contribution to tackling social exclusion, by increasing participation in, and progression within, third level for some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged young people in the greater Dublin area. ... in the academic year 2007/08, 8% of students on the course are in the care of the HSE and 65% students on the course have parents who are in receipt of social welfare payments'.

It is noted that different levels of disadvantage exist in relation to students on the different access programmes into Trinity College. The HEAR scheme has 58% of applicants whose parents are in receipt of social welfare allowances whereas the TAP access course has 65% and the Liberties/TCD course has 46%. Furthermore 8% of students on the TAP access course are in the care of the HSE, as are 4% of those on the Liberties/TCD course, while there are none on the HEAR programme.

Echoing this and many other similar responses, Tipperary Institute set their rationale in the response that higher education institutions have an obligation to have regard to social inclusion in all its activities. In relation to its Foundation course, the Institute notes:

'The provision of the programme was to provide a first step to third-level education for those from marginalised and socially disadvantaged groups particularly those not in a position to access programmes at a distance due to family and other commitments. a Foundation Certificate run in a HEI provides an opportunity to break a psychological barrier that programmes delivered in other contexts don't.'

2.3.2 Institutional Strategic Direction

Many of the institutions noted that commitment to promoting greater participation has underpinned their institutional strategic direction for a number of years. For example an external evaluation of the NUI Galway access programme notes:

'The need to promote greater participation at undergraduate level led to the creation of a dedicated access programme within the university. The NUI Galway Access programme, established in 1997, facilitates the promotion of initiatives that encourages access to NUI Galway amongst school leavers and mature students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds'. (2004, p.22)

The commitment of the institution to national and EU policy was also noted as a rationale for some courses. For example, in setting out its commitment to supporting access for mature students, UCD stated:

'The level of participation of mature students in Ireland is less than 5%. ...Consistent with both national and European policy initiatives to promote access to education, the UCD Adult Education Centre provides access routes for mature students as part of an overall mission to encourage adult learners to engage in lifelong learning.'

2.3.3 Widening Participation in Non-Traditional Subject Areas

In setting out the rationale for their access/foundation activities some institutions also noted their commitment to encouraging wider participation in less traditional subjects where mature and second chance students are underrepresented. For example:

'An important recommendation stated in the NUI Maynooth Strategic Plan 2000-2005, was to seek wider distribution of mature students

among faculties and departments. While the University was reaching targets of ensuring that 15% of its intake was mature students, the vast majority of those students were opting for the more traditional programmes in the Arts/Humanities/Social Sciences.'

In line with this plan, the NUI Maynooth Access/Foundation Programme was established in 2002 and courses are provided to reintroduce adults to study and learning and to give them the background they would need to embark on degrees in Science, Engineering, Finance, Economics and Business. Successful completion of a Certificate guarantees each student entry on to the first year of a related degree programme at NUI Maynooth.

Of the 37 courses reported on, 14 of them had a foundation focus on one academic discipline. These were Science/ Engineering (4 courses); Commerce/Business (4 courses) and Arts & Human Sciences (6).

2.3.4 Supporting Local Development Priorities in Catchment Area

A commitment to supporting relevant local development priorities was also evident for some of the respondent institutions. Awareness was indicated, by a number of the institutions, of the need for responses to local development issues, including long-term unemployment. For example Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire (IADT) reported that in 2000 the IADT Department of Humanities developed a FETAC (Level 5) Foundation Certificate in response to research carried out in disadvantaged areas of South Dublin and North Wicklow (1999). The IADT research indicated a strong need for an access education programme to provide a progression route to higher education.

'The one year Foundation Certificate, run by the School of Business & Humanities, was developed in response to this identified need. This existing Foundation programme which was specifically aimed at attracting adults in disadvantaged areas in South Dublin provides the

student with exposure to a number of different disciplines in a third level environment.'

IT Tralee reported how their access course had originated as an Equality for Women Measure programme;

'The course content reflects the needs of the community regarding access to education and employment, participation in decision-making fora, women in business and senior posts, awareness and capacity building within the public and private sector vis-à-vis supporting employees from disadvantaged communities'.

In relation to its current activity, IT Tralee notes that, with rising unemployment in Co Kerry over the past twelve months, the programme in 2007-08 now targets both women and men.

Other local development collaborations include the Letterkenny IT access course. In its recent application to the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Institute set out its rationale for developing this Level 6 minor HETAC award course as follows;

'In 2002/03, Letterkenny IT embarked on a collaborative project with the Department of Social and Family Affairs which aimed at targeting social welfare participants who had left school early for one reason or another. The rationale for the project drew on the demographic profile of the county'.

Other institutions also referred to access difficulties related to geographic location and stated their commitment to ensuring outreach opportunities to support access. For example an external evaluation of NUIG's outreach access programme notes that the origins of the NUI, Galway Access Programme stems from the university's commitment to advancing the social, economic, educational and cultural needs of the western region, including counties Donegal and Clare. Restating the first NUIG

plan of 1997, the 2003-2008 Plan states the university's leadership role in relation to regional development and commits it to *'provid(ing) and renew(ing) that leadership by expanding its distance learning, educational outreach and access programmes and other developmental activity'* (NUI Galway, 2003, p. 15).

The rationale given for the development of consortium courses across a number of the respondent institutions reflects the desire to build on this commitment and to further expand the access and progression opportunities, and location choices available, for students in areas at a distance from higher education institutions. For example completion of any of the NUI Galway BMW outreach access courses facilitates a wide range of 3rd level access and progression opportunities at Dundalk Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, NUIG, St. Angela's College and NUIM. Similarly participation in any of the access courses run by the Shannon Consortium, guarantees direct entry to designated undergraduate programmes in each of the partner institutions - Limerick Institute of Technology, the University of Limerick, Mary Immaculate College and the Institute of Technology Tralee.

2.4 Overview of Stated Aims and Objectives

Reflecting the range of statements of the rationale for their activities, differing levels of emphasis were also evident in relation to the statements of aims/objectives cited by the respondent institutions. The main aims and objectives stated are grouped thematically below.

- **Preparation for Progression to Higher Education**
 - To equip students with the necessary confidence, learning skills, academic skills and knowledge required to progress to, participate in, and succeed in higher education.
 - To provide potential access students with the social skills and attitudes to enable them to succeed at higher education.
 - To prepare students to compete for entry to third level.

- To demystify higher education, habituate participants to a higher education environment and develop their familiarity to lecturing styles and academic and structures.
- To build relationships with academic tutors in the college.
- **Preparation for Other Progression Opportunities**
 - To provide participants with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to undertake not alone further study in higher education but also other learning/employment pathways.
 - To provide skills and competences for the development and growth of knowledge workers.
 - To equip the students with the necessary skills for accessing employment in the private or public sector.
 - To provide skills for the process of becoming self-employed.
 - To provide employers with the opportunity for engagement with the course.
- **Supporting Informed Choices About Further Study**
 - To assist the students to identify and choose the third level courses that best suit their abilities and interests.
 - To expose students to a range of different subjects in addition to personal development and career planning, which would enable them to make an informed choice regarding the course they wish to pursue at third level.
 - To provide a foundation in subjects that the student may wish to pursue at a higher level institution.
- **Provision of Progression Routes to Higher Education**
 - To provide a direct access route to selected higher education courses.
 - To provide an access route for students who wish to take subjects such as science, engineering or finance/business at higher education level when their secondary education did not offer the necessary subjects.
 - To ensure wider distribution of mature students among the less traditional areas of Science/Engineering/Finance and Business at higher education level

- To promote, support and extend the participant's opportunities for admission to higher education.
- To provide an alternative to the Leaving Certificate as a route to third level for mature students.
- To award graduates with a nationally accredited qualification that will support their progress to HE.

- **Institutional Commitment to Widening Access**
 - To increase the numbers of socio-economically disadvantaged mature students at the higher education institution.
 - To make the institution more accessible to second chance students.
 - To respond to the demand from the immediate community for a phased route into HE.

- **Community Development**
 - To target students who are under-represented at third level for a variety of socio-economic reasons/ mature students who may not have the formal qualifications required for entry to university
 - To assist in the empowerment of each of the disadvantaged communities through the skills sets acquired by the participants.
 - To disseminate findings of the programme and make recommendations on best practice to relevant stakeholders.
 - To harness, promote and facilitate active citizenship within disadvantaged communities.
 - To provide a positive experience to students which will have a knock-on effect within their families and wider circles.

- **Creating An Awareness of The Value /Personal Satisfaction of Learning**
 - To provide the students with an opportunity to experience the satisfaction that can be gained from learning in an academic environment.
 - To encourage the joy of learning.

2.5 Course Promotion, Recruitment and Selection

Respondents were asked how information is provided to the target groups for whom their access/foundation course is intended. A pro-active approach to promotion of the courses was evident across the courses reported on, and Table 2.6 provides a collation of the various mechanisms used by respondents:

Website	Local Community Centre	Targeted Information Sessions	Linked Schools	Local Newspaper	National Newspaper	Partners/ Network	Other
20	12	17	7	13	7	14	13

Table 2-6 Mechanisms Used for Course Promotion

Among the responses under the category 'other' the following were provided:

- through mature student's officer links with adult education officers, VECs, VTOS centres etc,
- mail shot, information leaflets sent to libraries, FAS centres, Local Employment Service centres
- college open days, visits to groups, educational fairs organised by community bodies
- past students, word of mouth and local community radio interviews
- referrals by VEC Adult Education & Guidance services teachers
- through personal contacts, Church notices, Access Outreach programme brochures to stakeholders
- collaborative steering group of local representatives of the HE institution/s, local Adult Education representatives,
- applicants can request meeting with Co-ordinator
- shadowing days available for interested group/individual.

In relation to recruitment and selection for the course, processes used by some individual institutions include:

- state examination results
- application forms
- interviews
- recommendations (including those from linked schools, partners)
- referees
- written essay/questionnaire demonstrating suitability for the course
- assessment test
- criteria for assessment of application is initially based on present or past socio-economic disadvantage criteria
- in relation to two courses it was noted that no applicant is refused entry if they are of suitable age.

2.6 Core Curricular Elements

A high degree of uniformity was evident in relation to the core curricular elements for access and foundation courses. 'Access' or 'Return to Learning' courses were reported to typically include a mix of subject areas focused on learning skills, confidence building and personal and motivational development. Additional elements focusing on providing an introduction to specific third level subject areas were reported to be either offered as extensions of basic access preparation or as a whole foundation level course.

2.6.1 Sample Access Course Curriculum

A typical example is that described for the Dundalk IT Drogheda Access Course as part of the generic BMW consortium model. This course consists of 7 modules outlined as follows:

The Core Modules:

- **Study Skills Course:** helps the students to develop the organisational and study skills needed to succeed at third level.

- **Applied Writing Course:** enables the students to develop the habit of writing regularly and in the different styles required for third level study.
- **Information Technology:** gives students the basic skills required to use Information Technology resources effectively for the purpose of their study.
- **Educational Guidance:** helps students to identify their goals and aspirations and guides them towards making suitable choices at third level.

Academic Modules:

The aim of these modules is to provide students with introductory third level courses as a prelude to continuing their studies to a higher level at DKIT, LYIT, NUI, Galway NUI, Maynooth or St. Angela's College, Sligo.

Three introductory modules may be selected from such subject groups* as:

- Philosophy, Sociology, History, Irish, English, Mathematics, Legal Science and a modern language, Arts/Law/Celtic Studies
- Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology; Science/Engineering
- Economics, Mathematics, Commerce

*depending on tutor availability and student interest. (DKIT)

The DKIT course and other courses offered by the consortium are organised as a part-time course running over the academic year, on two/three evenings a week with a number of Saturdays. While most of the lectures are in Drogheda, some take place on the DKIT campus.

Other courses are organised on the basis of one morning/evening a week over the full academic year.

2.6.2 FETAC Accredited Consortium Access Course Curriculum

The Shannon Consortium offer a 60 credit FETAC Level 5 Foundation Certificate which consists of four core mandatory modules delivered across all of the consortia members: IT Tralee, Limerick Institute of Technology, Mary Immaculate

College and UL as well as specialist mandatory modules delivered in different institutions within the consortium. The programme incorporates one half day work placement.

NO.	TITLE OF EXAMINATION MODULE	MODULE STATUS
1	Communications & Personal Effectiveness	Core Mandatory
2	Business Information and Text Processing	Core Mandatory
3	Community and Enterprise Studies	Core Mandatory
4	Work placement	Core Mandatory
5	Office Administration	Specialist Mandatory
6	Business Management	Specialist Mandatory
7	English Language and Literature	Specialist Mandatory
8	Local History and Theology.	Specialist Mandatory
9	Foundation Biology	Specialist Mandatory
10	Foundation Chemistry	Specialist Mandatory
11	Foundation Mathematics 1 & 2	Specialist Mandatory
12	Introduction to Industrial Biochemistry	Specialist Mandatory

Table 2-7 Shannon Consortium Course Schedule

- *Modules 1-4 are core modules and will be offered across all of the consortia members.*
- *Modules 5-6 will be offered by Institute of Technology, Tralee*
- *Modules 7-8 will be offered by Mary Immaculate College*
- *Modules 9-10 will be offered by the Institute of Technology Limerick*
- *Modules 11-12 will be offered by the University of Limerick*

Students must complete 6 modules. Incorporating Modules 1-4, and 2 remaining modules depending on the Partner institute attended/registered with.

2.6.3 HETAC Accredited Access and Foundation Course

The Certificate in Introductory Studies for Higher Education was developed by Letterkenny IT to enable excluded adult learners to return to third level education. The course concept was initiated in 2002/3 when Letterkenny IT embarked on a collaborative project with the Department of Social and Family Affairs which aimed at targeting social welfare recipients who had left school early for one reason or another. All departments in the Letterkenny IT developed a syllabus for the certificate resulting in a programme most suitable for people that have been out of education for a long time (Table 2.8).

Subject	Total Hours
Mathematics (Core subject)	140
Information Technology (Core subject)	105
Communications (Core subject)	140
Study Skills (Core subject)	105
Introduction to Business Studies	105
Introduction to Design	105
Introduction to Engineering	105
Introduction to Nursing	95
Introduction to Science	105
Introduction to Computing	105

Table 2-8 Letterkenny IT Course Outline

In 2006 this programme was awarded a Level 6 minor award from HETAC (Higher Education Training Awards Council) the first, and still the only one of its kind in the country. The award itself differs from awards such as those available within VEC programmes in that the learner progresses after one year and can get some exemptions in first year of their degree programme. The programme is also designed to focus on what will be needed to succeed at Third Level, and finally, the tutors delivering the programme are provided with training on the needs of students who are typically on the programme.

2.7 Teaching & Learning Methodology

A range of adult education teaching methodologies are reported to be utilised throughout the courses including lectures, group work, case studies, audio visual presentations, individual research and class discussions. A number of respondents particularly emphasised that course tutors use teaching and assessment methodologies that are closely aligned with those used in third level education.

Among the characteristics highlighted in relation to the teaching and learning methodologies used are the following:

- Small class teaching (max in class 15),
- Mixture of lectures and tutorials included for academic options
- Highly participatory classes
- Tutors are academics from HE Institutions or post graduate/post doctoral tutors who have completed teacher training with the college staff training body
- Courses are reviewed at end of each term and at the end of year with tutors and students so changes are ongoing based on formative and summative evaluations.
- Some courses are used as an opportunity for the development of new teaching methods,

For courses in practical subject areas such as Science & Engineering, practical /laboratory sessions are also provided. For example one report states that the six Saturday laboratory sessions over the year, are core to the part-time intensive introductory course in Physics, Chemistry and Biology and aim to foster confidence and enthusiasm for each subject in the students, while classroom based learning introduces conceptual frameworks and the language of each subject. Other specific practical elements noted include IT and fieldtrips.

Programme assessment is typically based on written assignments, practical work, presentations and attendance.

A number of respondents also noted the involvement of senior management from the institution in course management and highlighted the importance of this arrangement, both in terms of supporting course development, and ensuring that access and participation supports are embedded within the wider institution.

2.8 Student Supports

A range of supports are reported to be made available to students on the HE access courses. These are summarised in Table 2.9 below.

Pre-course guidance	Academic support during course	Financial support	Post course guidance
12	19	6	9

Table 2-9 Supports made available to students on the course

Most respondents highlighted how crucial these supports are to the students. Access course evaluations from across the institutions highlighted the emphasis that students put on study skills, group work and the general approach to course delivery as key factors that enabled their participation and achievement. As the WIT evaluation report (Deane et al, 2002) noted, the approach used:

'... took the fear out of third level, removed an image of an alien and inhospitable place and replaced it with a reality of academic support and respect heretofore not experienced by this group.'

In relation to financial supports, a number of institutions also highlighted how vital bursaries and grants are to many of the students from their course target groups. The need to address grant aid for part-time students, childcare costs and, in some areas, travel costs was particularly stressed.

2.9 Assignment of Credits to Courses

Although the data available was incomplete, an indicative overview of the credit assignment and recognition status for the courses is presented in Table 2.10 below. This shows that credits are assigned for approximately 17 courses. Official credit transfer systems and arrangements that would facilitate formal recognition by other institutions have not yet been put in place for the majority of the courses, although many courses are informally recognised in other institutions.

Currently 8 courses are recognised at FETAC Level 5 and 1 at HETAC Level 6. Some institutions noted that the assignment of their credits was for course management purposes and they have not been mapped to the National Framework of Qualifications. This work is underway in most institutions. From the available information 7 courses are seeking HETAC Level 7 status, 17 courses are seeking HETAC 6 status (one of these currently has FETAC Level 5 status but is seeking a revision to HETAC Level 6) and 1 FETAC Level 5 status.

In relation to the mapping of the access/foundation courses generally, a number of comments were made, a typical one being the following:

'Access /Foundation courses are now an integral part of the provision of access initiatives in most third-level institutions. Incorporation into the National Framework of Qualifications would provide recognition at national level and allow for greater flexibility in progression.'

In relation to the mapping of those courses not yet mapped, eight respondents said that their courses should be mapped to level 6 on the Framework. As one respondent noted:

'I believe it is wrong to ask students to undertake such a course without offering credits that are mapped to the NQF. I believe it is a MUST that

credits are assigned. I believe that to map the course at level 6 would bring added value to the course'

Name of Institution Or Consortium	Courses run	Credits Assigned	Credit Transfer arrangements in Place	Credits Recognised in Own Institution	Credits Recognised in other Institution	Level On NQF now	Level Proposed on NQF
NUIG	School-leavers Access Course	No					6
	Mature Access Galway	No					6
	Mature Access Carraroe	No					6
	Access Course	No					6
NUIM	Return to Learning	No					6
	NUI Certs in Science, Engineering/ Finance/ Economics & Business; Foundation Year Programmes	No					6
TCD	Foundation Course for Higher Education; Mature Students	Yes	No	No	No		6
	Foundation Course for Higher Education (Young Adults)	Yes	No	No	No		6
UCD	Access to Arts & Human Sciences (6 courses)	Yes					7
	Access to Commerce (P/T)	Yes					7
	Access to Science & Engineering	Yes					
UL	Access Studies in Higher Education	No					
	Mature Student Access Course	No					
	Foundation Cert in Higher Ed. Adult Learners	No					

Dun Laoghaire IADT	Cert in General Studies	Yes				5	6
IT Blanchardstown	Certificate in General Studies	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	5	
Letterkenny IT	Certificate in Introductory Studies	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	6	
Tipperary Institute	The Highway Programme	Yes				5	
Waterford IT	Certificate in Foundation Studies	Yes				5	
	Access 21 (6 Courses)	No					6
BMW Outreach/ Access Lead NUIG)	Foundation Course Business and Commerce	No					6
NUIG /GMIT Partnership (Lead NUIG)	Foundation Course Science, Engineering & Technology	No					6
Shannon Consortium (Lead UL)	Certificate in General Studies	Yes				5	
	Cert in Business Studies	Yes				5	
Trinity Access Programme (TAP)	Certificate in Liberal Arts (2 courses)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	5	

Table 2-10 Credit and Course Recognition Arrangements

2.10 Completion and Progression

As noted in the methodology, information on completion and progression of courses was not possible for all courses for a number of reasons, including the fact that some had only started in the previous year or two, while others were not in a position to access records on older courses due to staff turnover or variations in approaches to monitoring and tracking on earlier courses. A number of institutions also highlighted the difficulty of obtaining information regarding progression of students from their access courses to further study in other

institutions. Some respondents suggested that there are data protection issues involved.

In relation to the targeting of courses, all of the courses indicated their targeting of underrepresented groups in higher education. However different interpretations of the term 'disadvantage' were evident and the survey replies did not allow for accurate analysis of registrations in terms of particular categories of 'disadvantage'.

The survey of the higher education institutions provided data on the following: registration numbers for 33 courses; access course completion numbers for 32 courses; progression numbers for 28 courses; and graduation numbers for 12 courses. This data is shown below.

- **Access/Foundation Course Registration**

Registration data was available on 33 courses. The data shows that a cumulative figure of 4,624 students was registered on these courses (since course inception with varying start dates).

- **Access/Foundation Course Completion**

Access/foundation course completion data was available on 32 courses. The registered number of students on these courses was 4,584 of whom 3,455 (75%) students completed the access course.

- **Access/Foundation Course Progression**

Access/foundation course progression data was available for 28 courses. The registered number of students on these courses was 3,799 of whom 2,940 (77%) completed the access course and 2,160 (57%) progressed to higher education courses (1,951 in the provider's own or linked institution and 209 in other institutions).

2.10.1 Quantitative Outcomes for Courses for which Complete Data was Available

In relation to the complete progression cycle from registration on an access/foundation course to graduation from a higher education course, data was available for 12 courses with a total registration of 2,142. Of this number: 1,704 (80%) completed the courses; 1,337 (62%) progressed to HE; 459 (21%) graduated with a higher education degree; and 680 (32%) are still in the system.

In view of the limited number of access/foundation courses for which complete data was provided and the lack of specific information on the definition and numbers in relation to different target groups, it is not possible for in-depth comparative analysis to be carried out on different course arrangements. However Tables 2.11 and 2.12 below set out data based on full-time and part-time course modes.

Name of institution	Year Course first delivered	Course	Target Group	Cumulative No. of students who registered	No. (%) of students who completed	No (%) of registered students who progressed	No (%) of students who graduated with a degree	No. (%) of students who registered and are still in system
NUIG	1997	School leavers Access Course	SED Disability Traveller Ethnic	229	218 (95%)	211 (92%)	87 (38%)	91 (40%)
TCD	1997	Foundation Course for HE Mature Students	Mature	243	197 (81%)	170 (70%)	* 60 (25%)	70 (29%)
TCD	1999	Foundation Course for HE Young Adults	SED	199	182 (91%)	168 (84%)	44 (22%)	90 (45%)
UL	2000	Mature Student Access Course	Mature, SED, Disability, Traveller, Ethnic	158	140 (89%)	120 (76%)	29 (18%)	70 (44%)
IADT	2000	Certificate in General Studies	Mature, SED, Mature	86	69 (80%)	38 (44%)	7 (8%)	22 (26%)
NUIM	2002	NUI Cert in Science Eng /Finance /Econ and Bus Foundation Year Programme	Mature, SED, Mature, Ethnic	90	55 (61%)	46 (51%)	5 (6%)	34 (38%)
ITB	2002	Certificate in General Studies	Mature, SED, Mature, Traveller	96	34 (35%)	4 (4%)	1 (1%)	3 (3%)
TOTAL				1101	895 (81%)	757 (68%)	233 (21%)	380 (34%)

* This figure refers to graduation from TCD and other HEIs

Table 2.11 Progression of students who registered on full-time access /foundation courses for which complete information was provided

Name of institution	Year Course first delivered	Course	Target Group	Cumulative No. of students who registered	No. (%) of students who completed	No (%) of registered students who progressed	No (%) of students who graduated with a degree	No. (%) of students who registered and are still in system
NUIG, GMIT	1998	Foundation Course, Science Engineering and Technology	Mature	400	240 (60%)	135 (34%)	76 (19%)	48 (12%)
NUIG	1998	Mature Access Galway	Mature SED, Traveller, Disability Ethnic	184	178 (97%)	170 (92%)	72 (39%)	75 (41%)
NUIG	1998	Mature Access Carraroe	SED Mature	119	104 (87%)	100 (84%)	43 (36%)	30 (25%)
NUIG	2002	Access Course St. Angela's College, Sligo	Mature, SED, Disability, Traveller, Ethnic	117	106 (91%)	85 (73%)	20 (18%)	56 (48%)
UL	2001	Foundation Studies in Higher Education Adult Learners	Mature, Traveller Ethnic	221	181 (82%)	90 (41%)	15 (7%)	91 (41%)
TOTAL				1041	809 (78%)	580 (56%)	226 (22%)	300 (29%)

Table 2.12 Progression of students who registered on part-time access /foundation courses for which complete information was provided

Drawing from the data on the above tables the average rates for completion, progression and graduation for each mode are set out below.

- **For full-time access/foundation courses**

In relation to the students who registered on the courses, an average completion rate of 81% with 68% progressing to HE, 21% graduating with a degree and 34% remaining in the system at time of reporting, some of whom are likely to graduate at a later stage. (Table 2.11)

- **For part-time access/foundation courses**

In relation to the students who registered on the courses, an average completion rate of 78% with 56% progressing to HE, 22% graduating with a degree and 29% remaining in the system at time of reporting, some of whom are likely to graduate at a later stage (Table 2.12)

It may be noted that there are some significant differences in the figures reported, with some completion figures as high as 97%, some progression figures as high as 92% and some graduation figures as high as 39%. As already noted in this report, a number of factors may impact on outcomes reported. These include the difficulties in tracking students' progress longitudinally particularly when they continue their studies in other institutions. A further issue is that some courses have only been offered in recent years and students may take time to engage in further study and so complete progression outcomes are not currently evident.

2.10.2 Qualitative Outcomes of Access/Foundation Courses

In addition to the quantitative data provided by the institutions, a range of qualitative outcomes were also set out. These are summarised below.

For Students

- Students are well equipped and enabled to successfully participate at undergraduate level and progress to graduate and post graduate study and into the workplace. For example, comparing entrants accessing through the traditional route and those entering through access routes, one response notes that: *'Both students and faculty report that students who complete this course are better prepared for progression to an undergraduate programme'*.
- For most courses, successful completion of the access course provides an opportunity for direct entry to the institution or, in the case of foundation courses, to stipulated courses in that subject area.
- Students are provided with opportunities to engage in the study of Science/Engineering, Business/Finance at third level. It is suggested that by undertaking a module from their prospective undergraduate programme, students have the opportunity to confirm that they are making the right programme choice which substantially reduces the chances of a student

discovering they are in the wrong course when they progress into their undergraduate programme.

- Students are supported to make informed choices about further study in different areas and those who have progressed to undergraduate level are encouraged to consider fourth level studies to realise their full academic potential and to maximise job opportunities.
- Enhanced opportunities for pre-access courses are provided for students living in rural areas. The challenges of providing access in rural areas was, however, highlighted in the feedback on outcomes by Tipperary Institute. The Institute noted:

'The programme was partially successful in facilitating access to Higher Education and did help others to pursue further education. However, while the principal purpose of the programme was to facilitate the more marginalised groups this was not always reflected in the range of participants. Given the location of the Institute in two smaller rural towns (Thurles, Clonmel) most applicants were accepted on the programme'.

For communities

- Promotion of value of higher education community-wide.
- Demystification of higher level education and confidence building through successful role models.
- Empowerment of disadvantaged communities through raising of knowledge and skills levels.

At Institutional Level

- Access is kept on the agenda for senior management in the institution and the institution is supported in working to achieve Government targets for increased participation of adult learners among categories of students currently underrepresented in third level in Ireland, i.e. those from a

background of socio-economic disadvantage and those from ethnic minorities.

- Contributing to the body of knowledge on the needs of under-represented groups and building capacity within the institutions to promote and support access for under-represented groups and a diverse student population. It is noted that for some courses, lecturers and teaching assistants who teach on the courses welcome the course as a forum in which to try out innovative teaching and assessment methodologies.
- Promotion of higher education through outreach and partnership activities.
- Increase in numbers of socio-economically disadvantaged and mature students into non traditional subject areas and identification of needs of diverse student groups in relation to these subject areas.
- The maintaining of high student retention rate through student and tutor systematic course evaluation, involvement of academic staff in the course and provision of necessary academic, personal and financial support.

At National Policy Level

- Facilitating the achievement of Government targets on widening access and improving knowledge and skills.

2.11 Costs and Funding

A breakdown of the cost per student to run the course was generally not available to the respondents although most made an attempt to provide an indicative figure. These figures were provided for 12 courses with 7 of them being €3,000 or less; 5 being between €3,000 and €5,000.

In relation to funding for courses the following was indicated from information provided:

- The majority of courses do not charge fees to students and even those that charge fees (including NUIM, UCD, IT Blanchardstown) offer reductions or waivers to students who can't afford them.

- For those courses developed previous to 2004, funding was mainly provided through the HEA Targeted Initiatives Scheme, along with core institutional funding and where available, private funding.
- Other sources mentioned included funding provided through specific local development projects including the EU Women's Equality Measure.
- In the case of TAP, the CDVEC covers course delivery costs. TAP has received some funding from the HEA but the main funding source for this initiative is, and has been, private funding since 2003.
- Funding through the Department of Social and Family Affairs supports the Letterkenny IT course.
- More recently funding through the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) has supported the development of new consortia-based courses. These are the 6 BMW Access 21 Outreach courses led by NUIG and 2 Shannon Consortium courses. This three-year funding, along with some investment from the partner institutions, supports the development of the programmes. This also enables the courses to be offered on a no fee basis in order to specifically target students who are socio-economically disadvantaged. In relation to this funding support some concerns are noted in relation to the sustainability of the courses at the end of the three years when they will be obliged to consider fee charges similar to those charged for other access courses.

The main funding support available for mature students on access courses is the Back to Education Allowance. NIMSO (Network of Irish Mature Student Officers) met with the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) Head Office in Carrick-on-Shannon earlier this year. The position regarding BTEA and Access/Foundation Courses was clarified as follows: All full-time students on campus Access Courses are eligible for BTEA, i.e. students who satisfy certain qualifying conditions can qualify for the BTEA while on these courses. This means that students can retain Social Welfare payments plus secondary benefits (e.g. Rent Allowance) for the duration of the course. Social Welfare payments include;

- Jobseeker's Allowance or Benefit

- Farm Assist
- One-Parent Family Payment
- Widow's or Widower's Contributory or Non-Contributory Pension
- Carer's Allowance (having ceased caring responsibilities on a permanent or temporary basis).

Access/Foundation (full time) courses are considered 'Second Level' for BTEA purposes. This principally relates to the qualifying period for eligibility - students must be in receipt of their Social Welfare payment for just 6 months prior to commencement of the course. (The qualifying period for Third Level is 12months). In addition, students receive an 'Additional Cost of Education Allowance' of €500.

2.12 Students Views on Access/ Foundation Courses

The review provides evidence of delivery of a wide range of access/foundation course provision within the higher education sector in Ireland and suggests that the courses are having a significant impact in relation to widening access and participation to higher education.

However perhaps the most relevant and valuable indicators of the success and value of the courses are the views of the students involved. The positive nature of their feedback adds weight to the evidence presented as is evident from the selection of comments drawn from some course evaluation documents and presented below.

'I was given plenty of advice from (the access officer) who also encouraged us to meet with people in the departments. This made me aware of everything I needed to know so I am positive I chose the right course'.

(NUIG Outreach Mature Access Course Student – Geraghty, 2004, p. 70)

'The lecturers were wonderful and entertaining...The refreshing thing about the Foundation Course and also being in college was that the lecturers really want you to pass. They really want you to get through and do well.'

(Trinity TAP Foundation Course Student - Guildea, 2007) ,

'Getting to know the campus ahead was what I liked the place is so big

(UL access course student - O'Byrne, 2006,p. 22)

'It made me feel as if I'm as smart as anybody – you need to feel that if you are going to go on and study'

(WIT Foundation Course for Mature Adults student - Deane et al. 2002)

SECTION THREE: ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FROM FETAC AWARDS

3.1 The FETAC Route to Higher Education

FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 certificates are the main alternative qualifications accepted for entry to higher education in Ireland. Certificates, formerly awarded by organisations such as FAS and the National Tourism Board are excluded. Progression into the IT sector from FETAC Level 5 (formerly NCVA level 2) under the Higher Education Links Scheme dates back to the latter half of the 1990s. However the first initiative to open up links with the university sector was taken by UCC in 2002/03. A majority of the other universities have now followed UCC's model and opened up links of their own. Currently the total number of participating institutions including universities is 40. This has grown from 21 in 2002 (FETAC, 2008).

While noting that the Leaving Certificate continues to be the main pathway to university level education, the IUA acknowledges the potential for development of alternative pathways based on FETAC awards. This commitment is reflected in such documents as that produced by the IUA in 2005. In this, it was stated that the National Framework of Qualifications represents an 'important step in the process of ensuring a seamless spectrum of educational opportunity in Ireland' (IUA, preface, 2005).

In overviewing transfer and progression routes into undergraduate programmes leading to university awards, McIver (2006) notes that:

'The acceptance of FETAC qualifications for entry to Universities and the arrangements within the IT sector whereby FETAC (NCVA) Level 5 graduates now apply for the same pool of places as Leaving Certificate applicants are the biggest developments currently taking place in progression to the HE sector.' (p. 36).

The key features of the approach used by higher education institutions regarding applications from those with FETAC qualifications are set out by Mclver. These include the following:

- The decision, as to whether progression from a FETAC qualification is allowed, is made by the institution on a course by course basis. The number of courses involved has expanded in UCC and UCD but it is not expected to include all courses.
- A quota of places for progression is established. In the case of over-subscription, a points system is set up for allocation
- A link is established between the course and one or more specific FETAC awards
- Academics in the relevant higher education institutions review modules and decide criteria for entry
- Application is mainly through CAO for FETAC level 5 applicants, and in a small number of cases where links exist level 6 applicants apply directly to the institution
- Admission is into 1st year of a course

In setting out the approach, Mclver notes that the HE institutions set criteria for access but do not dictate curriculum content in recognition that the majority of students on further education courses will take other routes. This means that not all students qualify for HE admission as the options needed by a student to satisfy entry requirements may not be available to them. Furthermore module content may not 'fit' with the course specific requirements of particular HE institutions.

Mclver also notes that in addition to having the option of applying to progress through formal links mechanisms, many of those who obtain FETAC qualifications are old enough to qualify for entry on mature grounds. Assessments of mature grounds applications give considerable weight to education, such as an FE course, undertaken in the recent past.

3.1.1 Progression Outcomes

The National Qualifications Authority notes that there are few available indicators of the impact of access, transfer and progression policies and few system-wide statistics on key issues such as;

- a) non-Leaving Certificate entry routes of learners
- b) progression by holders of qualifications to other qualifications/levels
- c) pathways into higher education and training (which largely operate on an institutional basis); and
- d) achievement record of learners on programmes leading to different qualifications.

(NQAI, 2008, p. 56)

Citing research commissioned by NQAI, the IUA and HEA, NQAI noted that the numbers transferring from non-school leaver backgrounds (having FETAC or HETAC awards) to HE degree programmes are very low in comparison to those progressing on the basis of Leaving Certificate. Based on available figures, the following picture emerges:

- 554 students progressing or transferring from further education and similar backgrounds in 2004/05 (approx 4%)
- 630 students transferring or progressing from HETAC and similar backgrounds in 2004/05 (less than 4%).

(McIver, 2006)

In commenting on the progression figures from FETAC awards to the university sector, the McIver report notes that its interview evidence suggested that interest among students in using FETAC qualification for progression had increased and although the universities had expanded places, the demand was exceeding the quotas in some cases (e.g. nursing).

McIver (2006) also cites evidence suggesting that progression from FETAC qualifications works well in the sense that students admitted under this mechanism generally performed in line with those admitted on the basis of their Leaving Certificate – *'better than average in some cases'* (p 70).

Significant challenges are however noted within the report regarding the future of progression from FETAC qualifications. These include the following:

- There is no consistent understanding of how various attainments in FETAC qualifications function as indicators of likely success in university sector institutions. (By contrast there is a longstanding understanding of how Leaving Certificate grades predict success at university).
- The five distinction requirement for progression from a FETAC qualification may be too demanding.
- Strengthening of progression routes may affect the operation of courses leading to FETAC qualifications.
- There is a need for institutions to look more closely at how they allocate places in short supply between different groups, and an improved understanding of the performance of students from different backgrounds could be useful in this.
- FETAC Level 6 is treated less favourably for access to the university sector institutions than other qualifications gained in the further education sector after a similar duration of study.
- Developments in further education and training aspects of the National Framework of Qualifications are likely to provide an impetus for change in FETAC progression mechanisms.

Other issues noted by the NQAI (2008) are those contributing to 'blockages' in the system, in particular:

- Progression routes have typically been based on programme to programme articulation routes and inter-institutional arrangements rather than on prior qualifications achieved. While the NQAI paper found that traditional

arrangements are gradually evolving to take account of the Framework, it is too early to predict how new routes will operate.

- The possible negative impact of different kinds of State funding for providers and of State supports for learners on the development and implementation of progression routes.
- The need to promote wider awareness amongst learners of existing progression routes.

3.1.2 HEA Additional Analysis 2008

The HEA provided an initial analysis for this research, of the number of FETAC award holders accepting places in higher education and this analysis is reproduced below.

In all, this group have grown from 3% of all CAO acceptances in 2005 to over 10% in 2008

FETAC Award Holders CAO Acceptances		
Year	Number	% of All Acceptances
2005	1,041	2.7%
2006	2,964	7.4%
2007	3,828	9.9%
2008	4,309	10.2%

Table 3.1 FETAC Award Holders who accepted CAO place offers in 2008

To place this in context, in 2007 over 20,000 FETAC major awards at level 5 and 6, were conferred. In the same year, there were over 7,000 applicants to the CAO presenting a FETAC major award as part of their application, the majority of whom gained their award in 2007. Over 55% of this group (3,900 students) ultimately accepted a third level place.

An analysis of the 2007 annual data returns of twenty-seven institutions to the HEA student record system provides an indication of broad trends amongst this group of entrants. Overall, applicants with FETAC awards represented 9% of all entrants to those institutions, 7% (2,200) to the institutes of technology and 2% (720) to the universities.

Slightly more students from this group (52%) entered level 8 programmes than entered level 6 and 7. By far the largest proportion (45%) entered programmes in the arts, humanities and social sciences, followed by 23% to health and welfare disciplines, particularly in the university sector. However 20% also entered the fields of science, technology and engineering.

The 2007 data also indicates that further education sector is supporting the progression of a significant number of mature learners into higher education. 33% of the FETAC group of entrants were 23 years or older, compared to 11% of all entrants. Interestingly 18% were over 30 years of age compared to only 5% of all entrants. There are overlaps between the wider group of mature entrants and the FETAC group. Of the 3,530 or so entrants that were over 23 years of age, almost 1,000 (or 28%) presented a FETAC major award as part of their CAO application. Many entrants would also present minor FETAC awards as part of an application on the grounds of mature years.

(HEA 2008, data provided for this research)

3.2 Further Education

Further education in Ireland is provided by a wide range of organisations and through a myriad of courses and programmes. In FETAC's quantitative analysis of the sector in 2005, it is noted that further education centres encompass a broad span of course providers, including Vocational Educational Committees (VECs), secondary schools, comprehensive schools and community schools and colleges, and a variety of adult learning and community education centres.

“Further education and training is a vibrant, rapidly growing part of education and training in IrelandThere is currently a lack of clarity on what comprises the Further Education and Training (FET) field in Ireland

(FETAC, 2005, p. 5)

In 2006, over 700 centres from the further education sector registered almost 5,000 programmes with FETAC, 2,000 of which lead to a major award and 2,800 to one or more minor awards (FETAC, 2008).

It is currently estimated that there are 300,000 learners per annum in the further education and training sector; on average, approximately 130,000 of these are receiving FETAC awards annually. Recent FETAC data (2008, p.20) show that 14,071 Level 5 and 7,001 Level 6 were awarded in 2006.

In relation to enrolments within further education centres, in 2003 Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) education and training was recorded as accounting for 38% of all enrolments (FETAC, 2005).

3.2.1 Post Leaving Certificate Course (PLC) Provision

In a review of the PLC sector, commissioned by the Department of Education and Science in 2003, Mclver notes that the vast majority of the FETAC qualifications that satisfy higher education access criteria are attained through study at further education/PLC colleges. The report also suggests that PLC courses are seen as ‘an attractive option for many potential mature students’ particularly in view of the small classes, the high level of personal attention, local access and the progression opportunities provided (Mclver, 2004).

More recently a multivariate analysis of educational and employment options of the PLC sector was reported on by the ESRI. (Watson et al, 2006). The report provides an overview of the development of the PLC sector noting its establishment in 1985 as a Vocational Preparation and Training Programme that

has subsequently developed a dual role, including that of a route to continuing education.

A number of key features of the PLC sector are highlighted in the ESRI report and reproduced in summary form below:

- Courses are offered in both second-level schools and more specialised further education 'centres' providing predominantly PLC courses. There are approximately 225 schools/centres providing PLC courses and those with at least 150 students (37 largely 'specialised' centres) account for 73% of the overall PLC enrolment.
- There is no central application/entry point. Students join the programme by contacting their nearest provider.
- Participants are eligible to apply for financial assistance under the PLC Maintenance Grants Scheme (introduced in 1998).
- The majority of PLC provision is certified as further education by FETAC. Most courses fall into the Level 5 category.
- DES figures for 2003/04 show that there were 30,000 participants in PLC programmes and that levels of participation had virtually doubled since 1991, from 15,000 in 1991/92 to over 28,000 in 2003/04. Female over-representation remained virtually constant with males representing 27-32%. The age profile of PLC participants has changed over time. Since the early 1990s there has been a steady increase in older participants (over 21) indicating that courses are now serving to bring people back into education. By 2003/2004 PLC participants were about equally divided between the 'traditional' school leaver cohort and participants who are older. In fact the number of 'younger' participants has remained relatively stable, at around 15,000, since the late 1990s. In terms of family background, older and female PLC leavers tend to come from less advantaged backgrounds than young and male PLC leavers. PLC leavers tend to be concentrated in the middle range in terms of educational achievement, compared to leavers generally, with older PLC leavers more likely to have left second level with no qualifications (17-18%).

- PLC courses have developed into a wide range of disciplines, largely with the aim of supporting industry and community needs and as such appear to be well placed to identify and fill new and emerging education and training needs in the economy. This factor was noted in previous studies (Hannan et al. 2003 and 1998), in which arguments for the expansion of the PLC sector were its ability to respond to local/regional labour market needs.
- Besides progression opportunities from PLCs, the Hannan et al report also highlights key issues that remain prominent. These include the status of the sector in view of its continued operation and control within the second-level system, and the extent to which it receives adequate recognition for its provision to a large and diverse portion of education participants.
- A significant proportion of PLC leavers (40%) went on to further education and training in the 12 to 18 months after PLC course with most of them (33%) going on to full-time education. Over three quarters of the PLC leavers in further education were taking a Third Level course (78%). 38% expected to attain a Bachelor's or Higher degree with 21% aiming for a Diploma and 17% for a Certificate. These qualifications are somewhat lower than for those who went on to third level directly after the Leaving Certificate; about three quarters of the latter are studying for a Bachelor's degree or higher qualification.
- There is a clear lack of data on the extent and nature of the progression opportunities for PLC 'graduates'. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are limited opportunities for PLC 'graduates' to progress to higher education courses. Although some PLC colleges have developed links with UK higher education institutions and there has been significant expansion of opportunities through the HEAR programme, there is a dearth of evidence as to the extent of progress that is actually occurring.

Conclusions of a number of reports on the PLC sector point to its potential in relation to its role in higher education access. Watson et al (2006) conclude that their evidence points to the emerging role of the PLC sector as a provider of a 'second chance' education route for older students but that for younger students PLCs appear to be functioning as an alternative, rather than a route to further

education. McIver (2003), however argues that policy on access to higher education should recognise the PLC sector's leading role in providing access to post-second level education for groups not well represented at third level and in facilitating access to third level for those same groups. The report notes:

'As FE provision is particularly accessed by groups targeted by policy on access to third level education and as 22.6% of students were found to progress to third level in a recent survey of graduates, the key role of the sector in this area should be acknowledged. While the involvement of third level institutions in planning access programmes is important, some direct interventions of third level institutions are seen in FE colleges as unnecessarily duplicating work already done in the FE sector.' (p. 66).

3.2.2 Strengthening the FE / HE Interface: Future Policy Direction

In setting out its policy direction on access to HE, the National Plan for Equity of Access (2008) notes the need for a stronger focus on the role of the FE sector – in particular the importance of strengthening the interface between the FE and HE sectors in order to build on the capacity of the FE sector as an effective 'gateway to higher education' (p. 44). It is recognised that this will involve a focus on the promotion of learning opportunities for students from disadvantaged groups and for adult learners engaging in upskilling (up to NFQ level 8). The potential to build on existing models of collaboration between further and higher education, in the joint development and delivery of accredited access courses and modules supporting transfer and progression, is noted as 'considerable'. Among the future developments that are indicated by the HEA are the following:

- Working for greater connectivity and coherence between different levels of education.
- Working with FE 'to strengthen the interface between FE and HE by actively facilitating the development of access and progression routes, including

innovative bridging arrangements and credit transfer between FE and HE institutions.

- Building on the National Framework of Qualifications to explore expansion of non-standard entry routes.
- Working with a range of educational agencies to explore the feasibility of developing a 'Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH). The key objective of PATH would be to enhance collaborative actions and progression between the different levels of the education system.
- Development of national policy on access.
- Strengthening the student support system while ensuring that duplication is avoided and administration costs are kept to a minimum.

3.3 Access from Further Education to Higher Education in a Selected Area

It is beyond the brief of this report to provide a national overview of the courses provided within the national FE system from which students' access higher education courses. As noted by FETAC in its quantitative analysis of the sector in 2005:

'Comprehensive data related to further education and training are extremely limited, particularly in terms of the 'flow' or numbers enrolled in FET.' (2005, p. 5).

However by focusing on one VEC area - the City of Cork VEC - and drawing on their experience of FE provision that has the potential to provide progression to higher education – it is possible to provide some insights on the operation of the FE/HE access route and also some indicators as to outcomes, issues arising and potential for further development.

3.3.1 Further Education Provision in Cork City

Further education is one of the key service areas provided by the City of Cork VEC (CCVEC) throughout the Cork City urban area. The CCVEC website states that the City of Cork VEC provides ‘a comprehensive range of education services’ and encompasses Second Level Schools, colleges, Adult and Community Education, Literacy Support and Youth Support Services. It also notes that:

‘working in partnership with the community and other agencies, national and local, the CCVEC’s vision is that of ‘one service’ which supports, encourages and assists individuals and groups to reach their full potential.’

In this context CCVEC has strong links with both UCC and CIT through its further education provision. Neither University College Cork nor Cork Institute of Technology deliver access courses to higher education. However both institutions have been active in recent years in developing strong links to further education colleges in order to encourage and open up opportunities for students who may not have the requirements necessary for access through the traditional Leaving Certificate route.

3.3.2 City of Cork VEC Further Education FETAC Provision: Some Key Features

The City of Cork VEC is one of the largest providers of PLC courses in the country, providing for almost 4,500 PLC students in its three further education colleges – the College of Commerce, St John’s Central College and Coláiste Stiofáin Naofa – and two further education centres attached to post primary schools. For the past number of years the number of places allocated to VECs nationally for PLC provision has been capped at around 30,000.

The full information on its PLC course provision provided by CCVEC is presented in appendix 1 to this report. Table 3.2 provides a summary of this information. It shows that a total of 157 FETAC courses are currently provided by CCVEC's PLC sector, of which:

- 98 are 1-year courses at FETAC Level 5
- 19 are 2-year courses at FETAC Level 5
- 30 are 1-year courses at FETAC Level 6
- 10 are 2-year courses at FETAC Level 6

Non-FETAC accredited courses and also some FETAC modules accredited by other awarding bodies including City and Guilds, ECDL, CACHE are also delivered.

In terms of subject areas, a wide variety is evident with a number being of a vocational nature including childcare, hairdressing, security studies, nail technician and beauty studies. Among the non-vocational subject areas may be included business studies, applied science, community and health services, legal studies, animal science, performing arts and theatre production.

Name of School	No. of FETAC Level 5 Awards offered		No of FETAC Level 6 Awards offered		No. of courses by other awarding bodies
	1 year duration	2 year duration	1 year duration	2 year duration	
Cork College of Commerce	30	2	8	4	18
St. John's Central College Cork	33	1	19	2	1
Colaiste Stiofan Naofa, Cork	20	16	3	4	
Terence MacSwiney Community College, Cork	13				
Nagle Community College	2				
Total	98	19	30	10	19

Table 3.2 FETAC CCVEC PLC Provision

An overview document (City of Cork VEC, 2008) provided for this study, sets out some key features of CCVEC PLC provision within the area and these are reproduced below.

- The student cohort comprises an approximate 50/50 mix between students who have just completed post primary education, and adult learners who are returning to education. Approximately 35% of the returning adult learners would have been unemployed for varying periods of time prior to registering as a student on one of the courses provided. Learners access programmes through a number of routes:
 - Direct from Leaving Certificate.
 - Progression from Community Education Programmes (delivered by VECs in collaboration with community groups, usually at levels 3 & 4 on the NFQ).
 - Mature learners returning to education, who have not achieved formal certification at post primary level.

- As is the case nationally, CCVEC colleges and centres are responsible for planning, developing and marketing their own PLC provision, within specified DES requirements. Approximately 2000 PLC courses are recognised by the Department of Education and Science nationally and the City of Cork VEC offers almost 200 courses across a wide range of disciplines and fields of learning. Most of these courses are at Levels 5 (full award requires 5 vocational modules, including compulsory and elective modules, 2 general studies modules, one of which must be communications, and 1 work experience module) and Level 6 (full award varies from 6-10 modules) on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). A small number of courses are certified by bodies other than FETAC, for example CIDESCO, CIBTAC, BTech/HND, IMI, etc. A

requirement of the Department of Education and Science is that all PLC courses must offer FETAC certification where available by 2009/2010.

- A smaller number of the PLC courses currently available in further education colleges are offered at levels above level 6 on the NFQ, usually in partnership with a higher education provider. For example Montessori Education is provided at Level 7 at Cork College of Commerce in association with St Nicholas College, Dun Laoghaire. The Department of Education and Science require that any current HETAC certified programmes be phased out.
- PLC courses are full-time programmes, usually offered on the basis of a one-year Level 5 programme followed by a one year Level 6 programme. In a small number of instances approval has been received for two-year programmes.
- Programmes follow what is essentially a post-primary academic year, with teaching staff currently considered by the DES as post-primary teachers, albeit with some modifications to qualifications requirements because of the nature of the programmes.
- Courses are developed in response to locally identified needs and requirements, with the structure of courses being such that they are easily modified and adapted to meet changing needs, both of students and prospective employers. In more recent years many programmes have been modified to align themselves with programmes in higher education institutions that students may wish to progress to.
- Tuition costs and capitation for PLC/VPTP programmes are provided by the Department of Education and Science. There are no fees for students on these programmes but most programmes have a “student services” charge which reflects the materials and other costs associated with the programme. This is generally in the area of €200.

- Students on PLC/VPTP courses are able to apply for grant aid under the PLC grant scheme. This is similar in operation and scope to the Higher Education Grant Scheme and has similar eligibility requirements. Some students apply for the Back to Education Allowance. Operated by the Department of Social Welfare, this provides some enhanced social welfare payments for eligible candidates. Students with disabilities can apply for support under the HEA support scheme for disabilities, which provides payments for assistive technologies, learning support and aids.

3.3.3 Progression from PLC Courses Provided by CCVEC

In relation to progression, many of CCVEC's PLC programmes are aligned with courses in Cork Institute of Technology and University College Cork, as well as with Universities in the United Kingdom and a formal agreement is in place with CIT to manage, promote and develop progression opportunities for learners.

CCVEC reports that the level of progression varies considerably across programmes, for example a significant proportion of students on Multimedia PLC course progress to the Honours Degree programme at CIT, similarly with Auctioneering with students progressing to an Honours Degree programme in the UK.

The value of the progression opportunities provided through these PLC programmes is emphasised by CCVEC. It is reported that many students use them as a "*stepping-stone*" to Higher Education, either because they are unsure as regarding the course they intend to take or because of a failure to achieve the required points in the Leaving Certificate for direct entry. In terms of outcomes, it is noted that there are indications that students accessing higher education institutions after completing PLC courses are better prepared and less likely to drop out than students who enter directly. As noted in the CCVEC report:

'Given the mixed student profile attending further education colleges and the relatively small class numbers, it would appear that further education students are provided with the opportunities to develop skills and confidence before moving on to Higher Education.' (2008, p. 4.)

In relation to development of FE to HE progression routes generally, the CCVEC report also draws attention to a key issue of concern.

'Principally there would be a cohort where arrangements are developed to assist a leaver to progress after their level 5 year into a HE programme. The issue is that the college is losing students from its own Level 6 programmes. This is particularly true when students who have completed a Level 6 programme are only exempt from the first year of a Level 7 or Level 8 HE programme.' (2008, p.4)

3.4 The Views of the National Qualification Authority of Ireland (NQAI)

The NQAI provided the following statement for this research report.

In relation to the provision of access/foundation courses, the NQAI's main concerns relate to the accurate positioning of access awards in the National Framework of Qualifications and the need to develop deeper and effective collaborations between higher education and further education providers and awarding bodies. The Authority emphasises the importance of ensuring that qualifications are included in the Framework at the most appropriate level and considers generally that an award at level 5 in the Framework should be an effective means of preparation for accessing higher education. It is therefore obliged to raise questions around the inclusion of some access/foundation programmes, which are delivered by higher education institutions and have been included in the Framework at level 6. The Authority would also encourage increased access to higher education for FETAC major

awards at level 5. The Authority executive considers that the existing higher education links scheme and current models of collaboration between further and higher education institutions should be built upon within the broader context of the development of national policy and funding arrangements.

3.5 The Views of the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science

The Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science provided the following statement for this research report.

In relation to access/foundation courses, the Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science endorsed the views of the NQAI and considered that it would be consistent with the basic principles of access, transfer and progression on the Framework, that the Further Education sector should be to the forefront in providing ways and means for learners to access or transfer to all further learning, including Higher Education. It acknowledged that, while there was no reason why access courses could not be developed with FETAC and provided in the Further Education sector, it was probably unrealistic to expect that PLC learners generally would be progressing directly to honours courses in third level institutions. The more obvious progression would be to an ordinary bachelor degree and from there to an honours bachelor degree course. The Further Education Section felt that the partnership between TCD and CDVEC was a good example of collaboration in this area of provision and pointed out that other VECs have informal collaborative arrangements with their local IoTs for progression from PLC courses.

SECTION FOUR: ACCESS/ FOUNDATION COURSES IN SCOTLAND

4.1 Scottish Higher Education Provision

An overview of Scottish higher education provision is presented in a base line review carried out by the Scottish Higher and Further Education Funding Councils, (SHEFC/SFEFC) (2004). Among the key features noted are the following:

- Scotland has a diverse network of higher education providers that comprises 21 higher education institutions (HEIs) and 46 further education colleges (FECs).
- HEIs range from institutions established in the 15th century to those designated in the 21st century. Degree provision is mainly provided in HEIs and this includes undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Diploma (HND) qualifications and other qualifications at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 7 and above.
- FE colleges differ greatly in size and in relation to the amount and type of provision they offer. Some are community-based colleges offering a wide range of provision to their local area, others specialise in particular areas of provision. FE colleges have traditionally delivered non-advanced vocational education and training and usually provide vocational qualifications below level 7.
- Reviews indicate that an increasing proportion of higher education is delivered in Scotland's further education colleges with approximately 75% of students studying for HE qualifications in HEIs and 25% at HE level courses in the FECs (2001-02 stats). HE students in FECs tend to be older, but the balance is shifting towards younger students.

Responsibility for funding the extensive range of provision in the diverse institutions now lies with the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding

Council (SFC), which emerged from the merging in 2005 of the previously distinct Scottish Higher and Further Education Funding Councils.

4.2 Widening Access to Higher Education in Scotland

As in Irish, and other EU higher education systems, widening access to post compulsory education and training has become a central theme in life long learning policy in Scotland. National Policy documents on higher education in Scotland note that the Scottish Executive have expectations that the HE system will have a key role in contributing to their vision of a 'Smart, Successful Scotland', through its support for many aspects of Scottish policy, including economic and personal development, social inclusion and culture' (SHEFC/SFEFC), 2004).

The Learning for All Report (SHEFC/SFEFC, 2005) remains the key document underpinning the Funding Council's widening access and participation strategy in Scotland. (See HEFCE Issues Paper (2006) for a review of access courses supported by the HEFCE Council).

Among the main points noted in the Learning for All Report in relation to the Scottish context for widening access are the following:

- Educational participation and achievement is highly skewed in Scotland, particularly by socio-economic background, geography and gender.
- There is a persistence of systemic barriers including, learner support arrangements, the coherence of Scotland's qualification systems, recruitment, and also personal barriers such as confidence, aspiration and awareness of available options.
- There are significant differences in the rates at which people from particular groups participate in HE and in the types of institutions that they attend when they do.

- Students from deprived areas are particularly unlikely to attend some of the most highly sought after courses at HEIs (some of which tend to be concentrated in the 'old' universities (perceived as the most prestigious)).
- Students from the most deprived areas are more likely to study at non-advanced level at FE colleges.
- Retention rates are lower for people from the most deprived areas in both HEIs and FE colleges – the figures indicate that the additional funding for students from the most deprived areas has not yet led to equal outcomes for students – though the disparity may be worse had that funding not been present.

4.3 Policy Responses

Among the key policy developments underway that are intended to support a widening of access to Scottish HEIs are:

- the development of regional collaboration led by four Wider Access Forums
- the strengthening of the operation of the National Framework of Qualifications and
- strengthening of articulation routes from FE to HE

4.3.1 The Wider Access Forums

Regional collaborations are perceived to be core to the implementation of widening access and participation. Four Scottish wider access regional forums – North Forum, West Forum, Fife and Tayside Regional Forum and South East Forum were established by the Scottish Higher and Further Education Funding Councils in 1998. They were to act as a network of regionally based forums to assist institutions to develop complementary and collaborative widening participation strategies for higher education. With SHEFC/SFEFC funding they were expanded to include FE colleges in 2000. Since 2004 the forums have been funded at a higher level (about £2.5 million in 2004-05) so that they can take on a

more strategic role and fund projects – including some projects previously funded directly by SHEFC/SFEFC.

In addition to the forums, two national posts are funded by the Funding Council to support the widening access agenda: a national co-ordinator for widening access (since 2000), and a social inclusion policy and research officer for Universities Scotland (since 2002).

The Widening Access Forums play a key role in supporting widening access and participation actions across further and higher education in Scotland, particularly in relation to promoting and supporting delivery of SWAP access courses which are described below. The Forums are dedicated to; promoting the development of an 'integrated learning landscape' that enables learners to achieve their personal goals; supporting local practitioners to develop cross-sectoral opportunities; and creating possibilities for sharing best practice regionally and nationally. The Forums engage in a wide range of projects and activities including:

- pre-access and community-based support projects e.g. short taster courses in local communities
- awareness raising on the application of the Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework and the opportunities it provides to all stakeholders
- working with SQA to develop national accreditation for SWAP access courses
- Guidance Plus aims to enhance the number of successful applications to higher education programmes at colleges and other institutions by building clear links with appropriate courses and by offering enhanced opportunities for students to engage with, and visit, the institutions linked to their course of study. This includes peer mentoring by students on higher level courses, enhanced career guidance activities for individuals and groups who are currently under-represented on HE courses and detailed tracking of student destinations.
- disseminating information on the Scottish Funding Council's Bridging Project and distributing the bridging packs which have been developed to

prepare students through effective learning for entry by advanced standing to a business related degree programme from an HN qualification. Bridging packs are available for the subject specific areas of Business Environment, Economics, Marketing, Business Culture and Strategy, and Numeracy, where “problem” gaps were identified.

- supporting the sharing of good practice
- supporting education-focused partnerships in local communities and innovation among partners including curricular network meetings.

A key area of the Forums’ work is supporting the development of access courses that provide alternative routes to higher education for under-represented groups.

4.4 Alternative Access Routes into Higher Education in Scotland

While the majority of students, accessing a HE institute continue to present with Highers or another traditional School qualification, higher education institutes in Scotland accept a wide range of qualifications for entry to a degree programme. There have been strong partnerships developed between higher education institutes and further education colleges in order to develop pathways for progression within the Scottish higher education system.

A range of courses leading to Higher National Certificates and Diplomas are provided by further education colleges in Scotland and many of them provide access to higher education at an advanced level.

4.4.1 Access through HNC or HND

The Higher National Certificate (HNC) is an advanced qualification that is similar to the first year at university in Scotland. The programmes are divided into units that are certified in their own right. To achieve a Higher National Certificate the candidate must achieve 12 credits. Most units are valued at one credit (= 40 hours of timetabled learning). HNC’s are at the level 7 of the SCQF. Most colleges offer

a wide range of HNC's in many different vocational areas. They are designed to deepen understanding of the skills and technical knowledge of the area of work. With a HNC,(120 credits at level 7), a student may be eligible to apply for Year 2 of a degree if the certificate is in the same discipline as the proposed degree, or Year 1 if it a different discipline.

The Higher National Diploma (HND) is an advanced level qualification consisting of 30 credits. HND's are at level 8 of the SCQF. Most students undertaking an HND will have previously completed a HNC, with the credits counting towards the HND qualification. HND's involve broad and detailed study of subject matter of an academic or technical nature. Most universities accept students holding a relevant HND (120 credits at level 8) onto Year 2 or 3 of a degree programme.

On completion of a HNC or HND, learners are often given the option of applying to study for their degree on the University Campus or continuing to study for their degree at their further education college. Many further education colleges (eg. Adam Smith College) have developed partnerships with the University in their region (University of Abertay) in order to facilitate learners study for a degree from the University of Abertay while continuing to be based in the further education college. The University makes its library and some other student services available to those who register with the further education college to complete a degree.

4.4.2 SWAP Access Courses

The Scottish Widening Access Programme (SWAP) is a key programme for the improvement of access and retention of mature learners in the HE sector in Scotland. SWAP was established in 1987 and is currently supported by the Scottish Funding Council through the Scottish Wider Access Forums. SWAP works in partnership with the colleges and universities of Scotland to promote access to Higher Education for mature students throughout Scotland and provide a route into higher education for adults with few or no qualifications or out of date qualifications. Successful completion of a SWAP Access Programme can lead to a

guaranteed place on a HND/HND course or a degree course at college or university.

The SWAP programme is open to mature students who have been out of full-time education for at least three years. SWAP courses are designed to build confidence and to develop core and study skills. They have three component parts: academic content; preparation for higher education; and a student profile. They offer flexible modes of assessment and are accessible to those with no or few formal qualifications. They provide multi-exit routes to HNC, HND or degree studies, and guarantee progression to higher education, on successful completion.

Designed with SQA Units at Intermediate and Higher level, SWAP Access Programmes run mainly at further education colleges and usually last one year, full-time. Some of the programmes are also available part-time. There are broad access programmes such as Access to Humanities/Arts & Social Sciences or Access to Science, as well as specialist programmes such as Access to Nursing, Access to IT/Digital Media or Access to Languages, and many more. The programmes provide entry to a wide range of HN or degree courses and open up new employment prospects.

SWAP's website, www.scottishwideraccess.org contains details of all SWAP Access programmes available at each college, what students can study after a SWAP programme, a student guide to finance and case studies of successful SWAP students. It also provides web links to all partner colleges and universities together with links to other useful websites. The SWAP website gives details of 25 higher education Institutes and 38 further education colleges involved with SWAP.

4.4.3 Access Courses Delivered by Universities

Access courses are also offered by some universities, although most of these are non-accredited e.g. the University of Abertay offers a programme called 'Access to Higher Education at Abertay Dundee' or 'AHEAD'. Learners apply directly to the University rather than through UCAS. The course is seventeen weeks in duration

(October to March). It is a part time evening programme (2 evenings per week, 3 hours each evening) designed to support individual efforts no matter what prior qualifications are held. It takes place in the University of Abertay. There are no entry requirements and the course is free. It provides guided personal study and on successful completion will enable entry to a number of degree courses at the University.

Learners study two core modules:

- People need numbers
- An Introduction to the PC

and one option from:

- Business and its environment
- Scotland needs its science and scientists
- Personal lives and social worlds

Access Modules delivered by Universities

Some universities also offer an access module. The University of Glasgow accepts students successfully completing a HNC in Social Care to their BA (Hons) Social Work. However students must also complete additional access modules which can be delivered by the University of Glasgow locally.

4.4.4 Other Alternative Access Routes

There are a number of other routes to HE for those who do not have previous qualifications. These include the following:

- The Open University is a distance learning institution with no formal entry requirements. The Open University's Openings courses are designed for adults who have no educational qualifications or who have not studied for a long time.
- Summer schools have been and continue to be a popular access routes to higher education in Scotland since the 1980s. They are intensive

preparatory courses in one or more subjects, are in generic academic skills, and are run over a short period of time, usually several weeks during the summer.

4.5 The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

It is expected that the SCQF has the potential to make a real difference to learners access to education at all levels. Formally launched in December 2001, this is acknowledged to be a long-term project which will take time to have its full influence. The general aims of the SCQF are to:

- assist people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential
- enable employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to each other and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce.

The SCQF is also intended to provide a national vocabulary for describing learning opportunities and will:

- make the relationships between qualifications clearer
- clarify entry and exit points, and routes for progression
- maximise the opportunities for credit transfer
- assist learners to plan their progress and learning.

Compared with other comprehensive frameworks, the SCQF is distinguished by the leading role the university sector has played in its development.

4.6 Articulation Routes

According to the Learning for All Review (SHEFC/SFEFC, 2005), there are a large number of articulation and other routes giving access to Scottish HEIs for people from a wide range of backgrounds in Scotland. The review notes that there are currently about 2,000 articulation routes between FE colleges and HEIs, and about 3,700 students (about 10% of entrants) use one to enter year two or three of a degree at a Scottish HEI.

The development of more effective articulation routes between FE colleges and HEIs is supported through funding from the Council and is expected to be a particular area of focus for the work of the Wider Access Forums.

4.7 Evaluation: Assessing Progress on the Widening Access Agenda

In relation to progress on widening access, the most recent Scottish Funding Council Review (2008) restates the conclusion of one of its previous reviews that:

'Much has been done by the further and higher education sectors to widen accessHowever progress in relation to the patterns of participation remains slow. Participation and achievement of people from the most deprived areas remains low, there is a widening educational gap between men and women ...'

(Scottish Participation in Further and Higher Education, 2001-02 to 2005-06, SFC, 2008, p. 3).

While noting that there are limits to any certainty as to whether or not actions have led to change, the report suggests that there is evidence that many of the initiatives delivered in the further and higher education sectors are beginning to bear fruit though some have been less effective than others.

4.7.1 Quantitative Data on Progress

National data on progress on outcomes within the Scottish system suggests that more people from all parts of society are accessing further and higher education and participation at HE level by people from the most deprived areas has grown. Progress is, however, slow and people from the most deprived areas are particularly unlikely to attend HEIs. In FECs a big issue is uneven participation by geographic area. For both sectors there is a major issue of under-participation by men (SFC, 2008).

People who live in deprived areas continue to be more likely to participate at college level than those from more affluent areas who are more likely to participate in the university sector, though there are some regional variations in this. (Learning for All, Second Update Report, SFC, March 2008, p5)

The number of students articulating from HNC/Ds into first degrees in HEIs has varied over the past few years. However articulation continues to apply only to a relatively small number of students – in 2006-07 some 3,087 Scottish-domiciled students entered full-time, first degree, second or third year with advanced standing: 12% of all Scottish-domiciled entrants to full-time first degree.

Reports of the Regional Forums provide insight into progress at regional level. SWAP West Annual Report (2008) shows that 774 students were enrolled on access programmes. Data remains incomplete from colleges, but to date 283 (37%) students completed and were intending to progress to university, 43 (6%) completed and progressed onto HN programmes, and 21 (3%) completed but had not stated a destination.

SWAP East Annual Report (2008) states that 28 SWAP Access Programmes ran in seven South East colleges with progression pathways involving all the regional HEIs. Of 503 adult returners who enrolled on SWAP programmes, 77% completed and 15% came from the most disadvantaged areas. The report states that early

retention of students starting at the University of Stirling has increased by 6% between 2006/7 and 2007/08.

4.8 Learning Emerging

The Learning for All review (SFC, 2005) notes that there has been some very effective work to improve practices regarding widening access to higher education. The funding provided for projects by the SFC has enabled pilot project work, some of which has been delivered on a collaborative basis, and following positive evaluations has become embedded as approaches to widening access. Nationally supported project activity has also facilitated specific improvements in teaching and learning practice, and also the production of valuable materials, models and toolkits.

The appointments of a national co-ordinator for widening access (since 2000), and a social inclusion policy and research officer for Universities (since 2002) are also viewed as important developments. It is noted that these posts have proved useful in influencing institutions' approaches, raising awareness of policies and issues, developing and sharing good practice and undertaking some important research projects.

4.8.1 Work of Wider Access Forums

In relation to the work of the Wider Access Forums, the Review notes that they have not been universally successful. *'They have operated in different ways. Some have been better at providing a focus for useful region-wide or collaborative activity than others. They have varied in the extent to which they have engaged senior staff in their institutions.'* (SFC, 2005, p.27).

Commenting on new roles and arrangements introduced in 2003, to make them work more strategically and to give clearer directions to their work on second chance routes to HE, the review notes that, although early signs are positive, it is

too soon to say whether the new arrangements are producing real benefits across Scotland. Emphasising the need for sufficient second chance provision in each part of the country, the Review recommends that the Wider Access Regional Forums should be asked to look collectively at, and disseminate good practice in relation to:

- the design of access courses
- the scope for innovative FE/HE collaborations to support transitions and
- the coordination of provision in their areas that meet learners' needs.

The review also recommends that the Council should consider making non-credit bearing provision in HEIs eligible for funding where it contributes to the regional agenda and demonstrably contributes to widening participation and success for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

4.8.2 Development of Articulation Routes

The Learning for All Review notes that Articulation routes and the people using these routes are highly concentrated in the post-1992 universities and the Open University. However, it is not yet possible to measure whether these routes lead to good retention and achievement rates. The Review states that a HN qualification should not automatically entitle a learner to advanced standing on a particular degree level course and that there are sometimes good reasons why one course will not 'fit' with another. Furthermore, the Review notes that:

'We think that we need to do more to 'join up' qualifications by adapting the content of qualifications and courses (or provide bridging courses) so that it is easier for learners to articulate from one level to another, and to minimise the time it takes learners to achieve their goals. Joining up the learning system should be done systematically, but along the routes learners are most likely to take. We think that all colleges and HEIs should contribute to the widening participation agenda, and that the Council should continue to encourage and support them to do so.'

(SFC, 2005, page 21).

A number of challenges are noted in relation to the development and operation of articulation routes. For example the Learning for All Review (2005) notes that articulation into year two or three of a degree course partly depends on institutions having places for learners and there is some evidence that as institutions improve their retention rates in the early years of courses, they may become more reluctant to offer advanced standing.

In relation to the challenges of developing articulation routes, Knox and Massie (2007) set out the successes and challenges in a Scottish Funding Council report analysing progression routes from Higher National Qualifications delivered in Scotland's colleges to degree studies in higher education institutions. Based on research activities in 2006, the key issues noted by them include the following:

- **Institutional Issues**

The study revealed significant differences between the college and university sectors in terms of organisational structure, governance, institutional ethos, different learning regimes and pedagogical approaches, and different communication routes, within and between, individual institutions that have a bearing on the student experience of transition.

The need to move to Formal Articulation Arrangements is noted in order to address the tendency to depend on potentially 'fragile' personal relationships between college and university staff.

Other issues noted relate to an over-reliance on project funding and short-term contracts, staff development and the need for greater involvement of senior managers in cross-sectoral discussions

- **Subject Specific Issues**

Principally subject specific issues relate to curriculum matching, course content and levels and the recognition that there is a need to bridge these curricular gaps.

It was suggested that a detailed process of curricular matching is needed and that this can only happen through dialogue between appropriate staff of both sectors

Bridging from HNC to degree is not without its difficulties both for the candidates, and for receiving institutions, as even if the level of study is comparable, and if content is well matched, there can be a short fall in the amount of credit accrued.

There can be difficulties in relation to capacity to move from broad based HNQ into a subject specific degree. Also in some subjects (e.g. hairdressing) there cannot be articulation into degree level study as it is limited to HNC.

- **Student Issues**

An over-arching consideration and one that lies at the core of articulation relates to why students choose FE college rather than direct entry to university, even when they are in possession of required entry qualification.

Tracking students between FE college and university needs attention. Institutions adopt different stances and there is an urgent need to find solutions to the ethical, administrative and legal issues which prevent robust data being made available in the public domain.

The report notes that there are numerous examples of good practice in preparing FE college students to make the transition to degree level study. The On Track programme (run by the West Forum) for example is subject specific and delivered to students while still in college – a programme of study skills tuition delivered in the final year of the HNQ. All tuition sessions are designed to promote

independent learning and to provide students with the essential skills they require for successful university study including: critical thinking; essay writing; and referencing. The programme is delivered to HNQ subject groups and includes extensive use of student mentors who themselves made the college to university transition, hence can draw on personal experience and empathise with new, potential students. In Healthcare also, a bespoke induction programme has been devised to support students in transition from college to university.

In general it is suggested that bridging provision can address curricular gaps and expose students to university campus. The existence of many examples of good practice is suggested e.g. HELM approach to maths support at University of Aberdeen.

4.8.3 Impact of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

In considering the question of how the SCQF has impacted on the widening access agenda, a study commissioned by the Scottish Executive (2005) gathered views from a range of stakeholders, interest groups and practitioners.

Among the conclusions made in the study were the following:

- There is evidence that SCQF has already had a considerable impact, particularly within the HE sector. However this has largely been as an enabling tool, facilitating curriculum development and quality enhancement within the HEIs. It was noted that with respect to the development of articulation and credit transfer arrangements between FE colleges and HEIs, there was little evidence that SCQF had contributed much beyond providing a language and tools to underpin arrangements that would have usually been introduced in the absence of the SCQF.
- Knowledge and understanding regarding SCQF varied considerably within the institutions and organisations included in this study. In general it was good among those who were involved with the framework and its implementation.

- Concern was expressed by some stakeholders that publicity, and particularly some of the earlier statements, about the Framework had encouraged unrealistic expectations regarding the potential for the Framework to introduce change.

In general, respondents' perceptions of the Framework were positive, and a number expressed high expectations in terms of securing recognition of equivalences in qualifications, and opening up new pathways. However, some also expressed concern that expectations regarding credit transfer would not be met, and there was a perception among many respondents that progress was slow.

4.9 Concluding Points

In general it is noted that much of the debate surrounding the use of the SCQF for credit recognition and transfer has focused on the interface between further and higher education (FE/ HE). A distinctive tradition of higher education has developed in the FE colleges in Scotland. This has been built up around Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) rather than franchised degrees and now over 20% of all full-time undergraduate level students study in FE colleges (Sharp and Gallacher, 1996; Gallacher, 2003). It has also been established that FE colleges have considerable success in attracting students from areas of social and economic deprivation and the proportions of students from these areas are far higher in the FE colleges than in universities (Raab and Small, 2003). There is evidence that many students now progress from HNC/Ds to degrees, and there are strong links between the further education colleges (FECs) and HEIs, and the recent Mapping Tracking and Bridging Project has shown the extent of the links between the FECs and HEIs. However despite an increasing policy interest in strengthening the links between the two sectors (Scottish Parliament, 2002; Scottish Executive, 2003a), these developments have been largely unplanned, their impact continues to be uneven (Gallacher, 2002), and a number of barriers have continued to make progression difficult for students (Maclennan et al, 2000). As a result some critics have described these

developments as creating an academic ghetto, in which opportunities for disadvantaged 'non traditional' students continue to be limited (Osborne et al. 2000; Field, 2004). As Morgan-Klein notes:

'Over half of Scottish higher education entrants in 2000/01 began their studies in further education. This reflects the growing diversity of higher education in Scotland as a result of institutional change and trends in policy and practice. While these changes have been constructed positively as contributing to the accessibility of Scottish higher education, clear differences between HE provision in the two sectors and sectoral differentiation in patterns of participation have given rise to two relatively disconnected systems of higher education. The emergence of parallel systems may conceal new patterns of inequality, giving rise to a new learning divide.'

(Morgan-Klein, 2003, p. 4).

SECTION FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Key Conclusions

The following conclusions are now presented in line with the terms of reference set for this report.

(i) Access/Foundation Course Provision by Higher Education Institutions in Ireland

A diverse range of access/foundation courses has been provided by higher education institutions in Ireland over the past years and a significant bank of experience has been developed within the institutions involved. While issues may be noted in relation to operational aspects such as recording and tracking of students on some of these programmes, the available evidence points to high levels of success in terms of outcomes.

Based on data available, outcomes from the courses indicate that for those who registered on courses for which complete progression data was available (a total registration of 2,142), 1,704 (80%) completed the courses, 1,337 (62%) progressed to HE, 459 (21%) graduated with a higher education degree and 680 (32%) are still in the system (see Tables 2.11 and 2.12 in Section Two).

From a qualitative perspective the evidence points to positive impacts for individual students, their communities and for the providing institution.

For underrepresented student groups:

- the provision of the range of supports needed to address the different layers of barriers identified (cultural, psychological, academic) is highlighted

- it is suggested that it is likely that most of the students involved would not have gone on to higher education without the targeted supports provided by the courses.

At community level:

- links developed with higher level institutions that have the potential to build the capacity of the local education system
- students having 'tasters' of higher education act as 'ambassadors' for higher level education within their communities.

For the providing higher education institution and national access policy:

- fulfilment of social inclusion objectives and targets
- achievement of diversity among the HE student body
- promotion of the value of higher education within local communities that do not have a tradition of higher education access
- enhancement of teaching and learning methodologies and development of innovative approaches to widening access
- strengthening of awareness regarding socio-economic barriers to higher education access
- widening access to subjects not traditionally accessed by under-represented groups.

Based on this evidence, it can be suggested that these courses are making a significant contribution to the National Access Plan in relation to widening access for underrepresented groups in higher education, and stimulating demand for higher education among new constituencies of learners. In this way they are playing a valuable role in the national efforts to increase participation in higher education in Ireland.

A critical issue of note is the lack of official recognition of the HE access/foundation courses as key progression routes for underrepresented groups

in higher education, in relation to award status. Many of the HE institutions are currently engaged in planning for the mapping of their sub-degree courses and the outcomes of this work will, it is hoped, provide some clarity on this issue.

The issue of funding is one for further examination. Currently the situation as clarified for this report by the HEA is that:

'..the core teaching grant allocated by the HEA funds courses from level 6 upwards in the IoTs. However in general only courses from level 8 upwards are funded in the universities. While numbers are gathered on sub-level 8 courses provided by the universities that lead to exemptions at level 8, these are not currently included in the recurrent grant allocation model (RGAM). Nor will they be included until additional funding is available to support the additional student numbers involved. University management are aware of this from previous communications from HEA'

A further issue is the fragmented nature that has characterised the activity across the institutions in the earlier years of development. This has led to a lack of linkage between the institutions for transfer of learning, and the development of progression routes. In recent years, this situation has changed with the emergence of partnerships between higher education institutions, and also between higher education institutions and local community groups and further education providers in their areas. As a result, progress is now being made in relation to development of a wider range of local/regional progression options for access students in any one institution, shared knowledge in relation to course development, and teaching and collaborative outreach provision to address geographical barriers to higher level educational access. Innovations are also taking place in relation to collaboration with other social inclusion measures in order to gain maximum outcome from relevant strands of funding available for local community capacity building, such as that through the National Development Plan.

While different levels of experience and different models of operation are evident, a number of particular features may be highlighted in terms of the good practice demonstrated across the courses:

- targeting of selected disadvantaged groups
- attention to quality by providing staff training and engaging in evaluation and reviews
- application of academic skills and knowledge in developing and delivering curricula and methodologies that support the transition to, and participation in, higher education courses, and build students' capacity to negotiate a higher education/academic environment. In particular, the engagement of senior management in course management is both strengthening the programme and helping to embed access and participation supports within the wider institution.
- collaboration between other educational providers in the HE and FE sectors and engagement in sharing of information, learning and models of course delivery
- commitment to innovation and sectoral development through networking and collaboration on development and delivery of new initiatives for widening access
- development of partnerships/ links with local partners who have an interest in educational access, progression and outcomes for disadvantaged communities.

(ii) Access, Transfer and Progression via FETAC Level 5 and 6 Awards Delivered by the FE Sector

It was not possible for this study to add in any significant way to the existing body of information on access, transfer and progression to higher education via FETAC Level 5 and 6 awards provided within the FE sector. While the HEA provided an initial analysis for this research, of the number of FETAC award holders accepting

places in higher education (see section 3.1.2), the McIver Review (2006) provides the most up to date information published on this subject.

In this context, it is worthwhile restating some of the key conclusions of that report. Firstly it is noted that the numbers progressing to higher education through FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 awards are small compared to those from Leaving Certificate.

The report also sets out some of the issues related to the future of progression from FETAC qualifications including:

- the lack of a consistent understanding of how various attainments in FETAC qualifications function as indicators of likely success in higher education
- the heavy demands of the five distinctions requirement for progression from FETAC
- the danger that the strengthening of progression routes may affect the operation of courses leading to FETAC qualifications;
- the need for institutions to look more closely at how they allocate places in short supply between different groups
- the treating of FETAC Level 6 less favourably for access to HE than other non-FETAC FE qualifications
- the requirements set for access to specific higher education courses may not in all cases have the necessary 'fit' with the FETAC modules provided.

In relation to local experience of progression from FETAC qualifications within the FE sector, some general information was provided by the City of Cork VEC. This indicated the development of a range of FETAC accredited courses (a total of 157 PLC courses at Level 5 or 6), and suggested that a 'significant proportion' of students are progressing from these courses via links established with CIT and UCC as well as some UK institutions. Further analysis of the operation of these progression routes, the numbers involved, or the outcomes is not possible in the absence of relevant data.

(iii) Benefits and challenges when access/foundation courses are delivered within the higher education sector

The views put forward by the HE personnel involved in this study that the HE sector has a unique role to play in further developing and delivering access/foundation courses. Particularly highlighted are the following:

- their specialist knowledge of HE subject areas
- the opportunities HE provision gives for demystifying higher education and facilitating familiarisation with the physical environment of a HE campus and with some HE staff
- introduction to HE teaching styles and assessment approaches.

An NUIG report (2004) highlights the importance of the university's access/foundation courses and argues that there are better progression rates when they are delivered by the same institution. The pivotal importance of the strategic link between the access courses and NUI Galway is highlighted by the access programme Steering Group who argued that:

' a key thing is students being within the university, with a simple qualification for university being insufficient. Guaranteed entry is the real value, being part of the university from the outset. If it was run (by other providers) it would lose its perceived value and particular attraction. Other providers would still need resources which wouldn't yield the same outcome. Perception is very important. The fact that direct entry minimizes technical difficulties is also key'. (p. 87)

In an evaluation of TAP Foundation Course for Young Adults (McMahon, 2002) the author makes some observations regarding a comparison of the TAP course with a PLC course route while cautioning the difficulty involved in attempting such comparisons. He notes:

'A possible and very tentative generalization is that, in contrast to the Foundation Course, PLCs do not generally cover Science or Arts and Humanities subjects. Nor, it seems do they directly address the issues of disadvantage, individual empowerment, critical thinking skills and the culture of the university campus in the highly focused way employed by the Foundation Course.'

In looking to the future, challenges are acknowledged by the HE personnel consulted during this research which require further debate and analysis. Those highlighted included:

- development of a coherent national policy on access courses within the HE sector
- ensuring adequate resourcing for programmes and student supports
- establishment of effective recording and tracking systems
- establishment of, and agreement on, clear progression links
- establishment or further development of collaborative working relationships/ partnerships between the higher and further education sectors for the purpose of development of new access/foundation courses that will provide a 'menu' of options to suit the different needs of different under-represented learner groups and also streamline progression routes between the two sectors.

(iv) Benefits and challenges when access/foundation courses are delivered within the further education sector

In considering the best ways in which access to higher education might be improved for underrepresented groups, CCVEC also highlights the potential of a partnership approach to widening access between the FE and HE sectors. The value of drawing from the learning that has emerged from the model of partnership already developing between VECs and many higher education providers is pointed to.

Among the advantages noted include the links that VECs have into the communities that many of the target groups live in, links that have been developed through their Community Education and the Adult Basic Education (Literacy) services. Furthermore it is noted that VECs are engaged with a variety of community groups and organisations, (96 community groups are supported or involved in Community Education delivery in the context of the City of Cork VEC), providing educational opportunities at levels 1 to 6.

Among the challenges that CCVEC highlight in relation to development of a national model of higher education access support are:

- The need to develop and expand the current levels and structures of provision, in order to engage in the first instance with learners from the marginalised sectors of society.
- The need to enhance the opportunities for progression when learners are at an appropriate stage of readiness.
- How to provide, and achieve progression, for learners who enter programmes at any level on the National Framework.

While not underestimating these challenges, CCVEC suggests that the development of a model that promotes and supports progression as a partnership between the VECs and higher education institutions has many merits and positive possibilities. For example:

- Learners from under-represented groups and communities are often reluctant to move outside their communities in their first instance. VECs provide opportunities and services in these communities, very often delivered by people from the community itself, thereby creating trust and confidence in learners in an environment that is familiar to them.
- The nature of services provided by VECs is flexible because of their links to the communities and learner populations they serve. The development and adaptation of programmes to suit needs and requirements can be accomplished in a relatively short space of time.

- There are coordination and management structures in place to support and develop appropriate programmes.

The CCVEC report proposes the following strategy for development of HE/FE partnership model:

- a development of links between the further education colleges delivering FETAC level 5 and 6 programmes and the higher education institutions
- a “mapping” between the two sectors to determine and identify programmes at each level which are “linked” and provide scope for their collaborative development in order to provide improved progression opportunities
- a joint development phase whereby identified programmes at Further and Higher Education levels would be evaluated to identify the gaps in provision or content at each level that create problems for students wishing to progress, with a view to restructuring these programmes to remove such gaps. For example the CCVEC proposal notes *‘Broadly, following redevelopment of the programmes, a student completing a FETAC Level 6 programme in a further education college should be able to progress to the third year of a HETAC level 7 or 8 programme in a Higher Education Institution’*
- VECs could review with higher education providers how they are delivering programmes at a community level, particularly in those communities that are under-represented at higher education. The development and mapping of the progression route through VEC services to clearly identify the consequent higher education possibilities for learners must be explored
- VEC’s and higher education providers collaborate in the development of higher education programmes that are delivered fully or in part in the targeted communities. It is noted that this would obviously require careful planning and structuring in order to maintain the validity and quality of the higher education award.
- It is noted that *‘Bringing the Institution to the people has been quite successful in many instances where it has been undertaken. It is much easier for many people from these communities to take the first steps in a*

place that they are familiar with, that they retain the confidence that they have in familiar surroundings to embark on a journey which is very much a new experience for them’.

Finally, CCVEC highlights the importance of targeted interventions and supports in relation to increasing participation from learners from under-represented groups. *‘The types of support required for learners coming from these target groups have been clearly identified in several reports or strategy papers on improving participation rates at higher education. Without an adequate provision of supports, learners will neither remain nor succeed in education’.*

(v) Potential of Partnership Approach

Overall, the above arguments from both sectors point to a general consensus that there is potential in a partnership approach between the HE and FE sectors in relation to the development of a wider range of access routes to higher education. However, a unique and useful insight into the issues that arise in relation to this model of access course delivery is provided by the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) which has been engaged in delivery of this model since 2004. Comparative figures provided for the different models delivered by TAP show higher completion rates for the on-campus courses. For the mature student courses a rate of 81% completion is recorded for the on-campus course compared with 54% for the course delivered in the FE Colleges. For the young adult course, the figures are 94% and 44% respectively.

Personnel involved in the TAP programme note that the HE/FE model is *‘far from perfect’* or being *‘ready for national roll out as a model for access courses’*. In particular concern is expressed that the school based model of delivery used in FETAC is not appropriate for the purpose of facilitating HE progression, particularly for mature students.

It was suggested that:

'Asking them to attend classes from 9 to 4 is too great a commitment and fails to leave the student with adequate time for the independent study required on an arts/humanities degree'

Furthermore it is noted that the FETAC courses may be slightly cheaper to run but per head of student completing, progressing and graduating, they are actually less efficient in terms of cost because of the lower completion rates.

However the value of establishing a structured framework for the development of collaboration is agreed. The importance of acknowledging the diversity of needs of different groups and different geographic regions is also stressed and a general consensus is that learners' needs will be most effectively catered for by the provision of a 'menu' of options that reflect the unique strengths that each sector can bring in its own right as well as in a partnership model. This menu should provide access into all disciplines including medicine, pharmacy, engineering and science. The importance is stressed of an over arching policy framework that supports and guides all strands of such a 'package' as a key to ensuring success.

(vi) Widening Access to Higher Education in the Scottish System

Against the backdrop of the above conclusions, some of the learning emerging from the Scottish system may be noted.

Most access courses for mature students are offered as full-time courses within FE Colleges under the national programme SWAP, funded under the SCF Council. A diverse range of access courses is delivered across the FE and HE sectors and the majority of the activity is set within a structured policy framework that has clearly identified areas of focus for this work including: regional collaborations; development of articulation routes; and maximum use of the SQF to enhance progression for learners.

Recent reviews of progress on the Scottish widening access agenda indicate that progress is being made although it is acknowledged that the pace is slow in

relation to widening access for learners from areas traditionally not represented in higher education. They also emphasise the challenges that persist, including:

- weaknesses in data collection and tracking
- the slow pace of impact of the Qualifications framework in terms of securing recognition for equivalences and opening up new pathways for progression
- development of articulation routes
- strengthening of regional partnerships
- mobilising traditionally underrepresented groups to avail of the supports offered to access higher education.

A particular area of concern among some academics regarding the progress being made in relation to the widening of access to Scottish HE is the over-concentration of underrepresented groups in higher education courses in the FE sector. Concern is expressed that 'a dual system is emerging whereby there has been no improvement in relation to barriers to higher education institutions for some groups, and a new learning divide is emerging (Morgan-Klein, 2003).

The importance of regional collaboration is particularly stressed within Scottish widening access policy, in view of the concentration of some of the under-participation in particular geographic areas. It is also felt that many issues are best tackled by the HEIs, colleges and schools working together locally on aspiration raising, on transitions, on access courses. It is noted that patterns of uneven educational participation and achievement are established early on in people's lives and are linked to the environment they grow up in and their exposure to role models for their learning. Because of the power of reinforcing cycles at work, it is a slow process that needs to be a sustained and consistent effort. Furthermore the efforts of a range of key stakeholders need to be aligned.

The need is recognised for tailor made supports that recognise that learners start from different places and learn in different ways and need to be empowered to access the learning that is right for them. The Learning for All Review (2005) notes, *'We should expect to see a diverse range of institutions delivering different*

programmes to different segments of the market, this means that colleges and universities will contribute in different ways.'

At policy level it is recommended that best practice is spread widely and regional collaboration is also used to assist in a more effective targeting of resources and of building demand alongside any expansion of provision.

Finally, the need is stressed to constantly review the resources required for widening access initiatives in the Scottish system. It is also highlighted that it is important to acknowledge that this work may appear to be costly, but longer-term savings related to quality of life for individuals and their community should be factored in, as well as the enhanced contribution to national economic performance related to a higher skilled workforce.

5.2 Items for Further Consideration

- (i) This research demonstrates that access courses delivered within the HE sector should be recognised as having a unique contribution to make to the national widening access and participation agenda. Besides their positive progression outcomes, they have resulted in valuable insights regarding barriers to access and participation and developed significant experience as to approaches to address these barriers including those involving strategic local and regional partnerships.
- (ii) A further key conclusion is that a package of access options be promoted and supported as national policy, including courses run by higher education institutions and those developed and/or delivered through a partnership between HE and FE institutions. The need for supporting and resourcing the process that will be required for this development should be recognised at national policy level and the work should include the following steps:
 - A cross-sector review of the good practice elements emerging from the HE course models outlined in this study with a view to identifying and

documenting good practice guidelines. Key areas of focus should include course development and delivery approaches, consultative needs analysis, partnerships with other institutions (including FE) and other key stakeholders and outreach that demystifies higher education among under-represented communities and also addresses geographical gaps in relation to availability of HE education.

- Establishment of a task-focused forum for practitioners to explore: the challenges related to the implementation of effective data collection systems for the purpose of transparency, evaluation and development of access programmes; agreement on best practice, and any training required for the implementation of these practices.
- Establishment of a task-focused forum representing HE and FE practitioners who have experience of development of access routes to HE, to explore and agree on the most effective structure for a collaborative partnership for the purposes of identifying and addressing transition blocks to learners and ensuring that all FE HE access routes involve the models of delivery appropriate to learners needs. In line with the experience of the Scottish system it is crucial that clear lines of formal communication are established and that there is policy level commitment across the sectors for any agreements reached.
- A national awareness raising 'campaign' is needed within HE and FE and other key stakeholder sectors involved in community capacity building to raise educational aspirations and stimulate demand among underrepresented groups/communities for further/higher education. This awareness raising should also seek to encourage demand for strategically important subject areas including Science and Technology.

Within that context this research notes the following proposals set out within a number of relevant recent national documents:

With reference to the National Access Plan (HEA, 2008):

- (iii) Development of a broader range of entry routes to higher education for learners, including a significant expansion of part/time flexible courses and measures to address the student support implications of lifelong learning.
- (iv) Students should be assisted to access supports that will better address the financial barriers to access and successful participation in higher education
- (v) Development of multi annual access plans by HE institutions as a way of providing clarity on institutional strategies to promote access and also for the exchange of best practice in a transparent environment.
- (vi) Allocation of public funds to higher education institutions should reflect the priority accorded to promoting equality in higher education
- (vii) Promotion of systematic improvements in the evidence-base for higher education policy

With reference to proposals set out by the Irish Universities sector (2008) to the forthcoming NQAI study:

- (viii) Clarity at policy level regarding the definition of an access student and funding for access programmes. There is need for consultation with higher education institutions with longstanding access and foundation programmes, often run in conjunction with local learning support and outreach centres, in order to ensure a sufficiently broad definition.
- (ix) Greater awareness raising among learners of the National Framework of Qualifications and how it can support their progression to higher education

- (x) Caution regarding increased standardisation and over-bureaucratisation of learning and general academic activity in relation to the implementation of the NQAI
- (xi) Clarity is needed as to the respective roles of HEIs and FETAC in relation to ensuring effective operation of progression to higher education
- (xii) The need for the establishment of a higher education forum –bringing together actors from across the HE sector – to discuss a range of matters relating to credit and naming conventions.

APPENDIX 1

Consultation paper July 2007-

Towards a new policy approach to higher education access courses

Why is there a need for a new policy approach to access courses?

In the past decade or so, a number of higher education institutions in Ireland have developed “access” or “foundation” courses as part of their strategy to increase access for people from under-represented groups¹. These courses have come about in the context of national policy on increasing access to higher education, and they are regarded by the institutions as an effective way of putting policy into action. In designing the courses, the institutions have focussed on identifying and meeting the needs of specific target groups, including in particular mature students and young people who experience socio-economic disadvantage.

In the light of recent developments including the introduction of the national framework of qualifications and the establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, it is now timely to review policy for the provision and funding of access courses. With advice from the National Access Office, the Department of Education and Science is considering development of a new policy approach. As a first step this consultation paper is being circulated to the main partners. A consultative forum will then be convened to discuss the issues and recommendations in the paper.

This paper has three sections:

- Section 1 outlines the rationale for higher education access courses
- Section 2 maps the current provision of access courses in Ireland
- Section 3 outlines some of the questions that need to be considered in developing national policy on access courses.

¹ To avoid ambiguity, the term “access courses” is used in the remainder of this paper.

1 The rationale for higher education access courses

Since 2000, there has been a growing coherence in Irish public policy on access to higher education. The reports of Osborne and Leith (2000), Skilbeck (2000), and the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (2001) informed the policy decision to set up the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education.

The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education in its Action Plan for 2005-2007 expresses a vision that

Collaborative work and investment of resources over the next three years will bring about significant progress in achieving equity of access to higher education for learners of all backgrounds, identities and abilities, at all stages in their lives. There will be significant strides towards a future in which more diverse learner groups will avail of learning opportunities in higher education, in which systems are in place to adequately support the participation of all learners, and in which teaching and learning practices in higher education have developed to meet their needs.

At national policy level, there is a recognition of the need for 'joined-up' strategies to achieve educational inclusion, as expressed for example in the recent development of the DEIS Action Plan (DES, 2005). The outgoing national Educational Disadvantage Committee, in its final report to the Minister for Education and Science (EDC, 2005), proposes an integrated national strategy to achieve educational equality, "which will result in an inclusive, diverse and dynamic learning society without barriers".

The national framework of qualifications facilitates access, transfer and progression for learners

The national framework of qualifications is designed to provide access, transfer and progression for learners from one level of learning to another. The establishment of a national framework is helping to achieve the national policy goals of creating a knowledge society and a system in which lifelong learning is a reality. It is also promoting social cohesion and inclusion by making qualifications accessible to those who were previously marginalised. The framework makes it possible for people to gain credit for their learning wherever and whenever they achieve it, and to progress to learning programmes and qualifications at a higher level.

For the considerable proportion of people (about 45 per cent)² who do not enter higher education immediately after they leave school, the national framework of qualifications provides a means to gain credit for learning achieved in the workplace, or in further education and training programmes. They then have access to higher education, where institutions are increasingly recognising qualifications at levels 5 and 6 of the national framework as meeting the entry requirements for courses at higher levels. There are still some issues in this area to be resolved.

It is worth noting that, for more than a decade before the national framework of qualifications was implemented, the further education sector showed a high level of commitment to promoting new routes of access to higher education for learners. In the 1990s many further education colleges forged direct links with higher education institutions that allowed holders of specific further education qualifications to progress to higher education courses in related disciplines. Some

² O'Connell et al *Who Went to College in 2004?* (HEA 2006)

of these courses were in Irish higher education institutions, but the vast majority of the links were with colleges in the UK, because at the time the demand for higher education places in Ireland far exceeded supply and the institutions may not have seen the need to offer alternative entry routes. With the advent of the national framework of qualifications, further education colleges have fully embraced the range of possibilities that the framework offers to learners, and many colleges are working to develop new partnerships with higher education institutions and new courses at Level 5 (see section 2 below).

Easing the transition to higher education for learners

The general objective of access courses is to provide participants with access to third level. While only a small proportion of higher education students enter by routes other than the Leaving Certificate (Table 1), the available evidence suggests that access course participants benefit from their preparation for higher education³. Relationships developed with higher education staff, the support of other learners on the course and the opportunity to become familiar with a third-level environment (both academic and physical), to develop learning skills and become familiar with curriculum content in their chosen academic field all help to ease the transition, particularly for adults returning to learning following a gap of a number of years.

Table 1 – Entry routes to higher education among Irish students by full/part-time status

Route of entry	Full-time HE Course %	Part-time HE Course %
Leaving Certificate	80.1	52.2
Mature Years	5.1	23.5
FETAC/NCVA	2.4	4.1
Access/Foundation Programme	1.0	2.2
Other	11.4	18.0
Total	100	100

Source: Euro student Survey 2003/2004, p. 24 (HEA, 2005)

³ Towards a National Strategy - Initial Review of HEA Targeted Initiatives to Widen Access to Higher Education (HEA, October 2004) p.12 and p.18.

An evaluation of access programmes in Irish higher education by the HEA found that “mature learners...consider preparatory courses in further education or outreach by higher education institutions to be very helpful in supporting their return to learning”⁴. A recent review of access courses in the UK has also found that one in four first-time mature entrants to full-time degree programme enters via an access course⁵. Such courses are usually in further education.

The current national policy position on access courses is that they should be part of the formal further education sector. Therefore they are not approved as higher education courses and there is no funding available either for students on these courses or for the institutions that run them. On the other hand maintenance grants are available to learners on PLC level 5 and 6 programmes. It is now recognised that there is a need to promote more effective routes of access, transfer and progression for significantly larger numbers of learners through the structure provided by the national framework of qualifications. This will optimise the benefits for learners of having an accessible and user-friendly ladder of qualifications that allows people to progress to higher levels of qualifications at a time, place and pace that suits their personal needs and life circumstances. It will help to achieve the national economic and social development goals by increasing the skill levels of the workforce⁶.

Higher education institutions are beginning to use the qualifications framework to increase access opportunities

The recent HEA evaluation of access programmes in higher education institutions found that institutions are beginning to use the national framework of qualifications to increase access opportunities for learners from under-represented groups (HEA, 2006). In their self-evaluation reports, institutions gave examples of

⁴ Towards the Best Education for All – An Evaluation of Access Programmes in Higher Education in Ireland (HEA, September, 2006), p.25

⁵ Pathways to Higher Education – Access Courses (HEFCE, Issues paper, May 2006) pp.3-12

⁶ Expert Group on Future Skills Needs *Tomorrow's Skills. Towards a National Skills Strategy 2007*.

partnerships with further education providers, while a focus group of second-level teachers commented that “the ladder of qualifications makes higher education a more attractive and accessible option for some learners”. Mature learners reported that they found preparatory courses in further education very helpful in supporting their return to learning, especially when the courses provided direct experience of the higher education campus. This was usually organised by the further education college in collaboration with a nearby higher education institution - for example some modules on the access course were taught on the higher education campus or by staff from the higher education institution on an outreach basis.

The HEA evaluation report recommends that all higher education institutions should implement the qualifications framework to provide effective access, transfer and progression routes for all learners to the college of their choice. It also recommends that institutions should provide a teaching and learning and physical environment that suits diverse learners’ needs.

There are good examples of international practice in promoting seamless transition to higher education for learners

International research and practice emphasise the need for strategies to ease the transition into higher education and create a sense of ‘belonging’ to what otherwise may be an alien cultural and education environment for people from under-represented groups⁷. In many countries, there are formal links between further and higher education as a model of ‘long term and effective collaboration between the different stages of progression’⁸. In the United States for example, there are links between community colleges and higher education institutions. In Australia, as well as in some European countries (including Finland, Germany,

⁷ Thomas, L. and Quinn J., “International Insights into Widening Participation” (Staffordshire University, 2003) p.112

⁸ Hoyler, Hexter and Casey, 2002, in Thomas, L., Cooper, M. and Quinn J. (eds) “Collaboration to Widen Participation in Higher Education” (Trentham Books, 2002), p. 178

Norway and Sweden) access to higher education is supported by strong systems of collaboration and clear routes of progression between further and higher education⁹. The international trend towards comprehensive national frameworks of qualifications has greatly facilitated seamless transition for learners from one stage of education and training to the next.

In the UK, a national policy framework for this area of provision was developed in 1989. A recent HEFCE review of access courses in the UK has noted that “the majority (94%) of access students are registered in a further education college”. The final qualification of an access course is a nationally validated or recognised “Access to Higher Education Certificate”. As the access course itself is a further education qualification, “both the student support available and funding of the provision is at FE level”¹⁰. There are a number of examples of such approaches in the UK, including intensive summer courses and initiatives where higher and further education providers and community organisations collaborate to deliver flexible certificate courses that provide access to higher education¹¹.

2 Mapping the current provision of access courses in Ireland

In this section of the paper, there is a brief overview of the access courses that are currently provided by higher education institutions in Ireland, with an outline of the target groups, mode of delivery and location of these courses. It is important to note that these courses represent one element within a much broader programme of access activities in the institutions.

⁹ Skilbeck, M., “Access and Equity to Higher Education: An International Perspective on Issues and Strategies” (HEA, 2000), pp. 58-62

¹⁰ Pathways to Higher Education – Access Courses (HEFCE, Issues paper, May 2006) pp.3-12

¹¹ “Making a Difference: The Impact of Aim Higher” (2005) pp. 6-8

Getting a picture of current provision

Because data on higher education access courses are not systematically collected either at national or institutional levels, it is difficult to establish a comprehensive picture of the exact number of courses, course participants and subsequent patterns of progression to higher education. The figures in Table 2 have been drawn from a range of sources (HEA, DES and institutional) but they do not necessarily constitute an exhaustive list of provision in this area.

On the basis of the data available there are at least twenty access courses being provided directly by twelve higher education institutions. Three of these courses target about eighty school-leavers or young adults, while the remaining nineteen aim to prepare over six hundred mature learners for entry to higher education. Courses are both full-time and part-time, and two courses are offered on either a full-time or part-time basis. Most are located on a higher education campus, while some are provided in outreach settings. The data show that only a very small number of students enter higher education through access courses at present: around seven hundred students out of a total of 38,000 entrants (less than two per cent).

Table 2

ACCESS COURSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS <i>(more data needed in some fields)</i>								
Institution and course	Target group		Mode		Location		Links	Award
	School leavers	Mature learners	Full time	Part time	On campus	Outreach		
UCD								
Return to Learning		• 75		•				
Access to Science and Engineering		• 26		•				
Access to Commerce		• 18		•				
NUIG								
Access course	• 38		•					
Foundation Course in Eng, Sci, IT		• 40					GMIT	
Foundation Course in Business		• 30					GMIT	
NUIM								
Foundation Certificate in Science/Engineering		• 11	•					
TCD								
Foundation course for young adults	• 25		•					
Foundation course for mature students		• 26	•					
UL								
Foundation course	• 20		•					
Mature student access course		• 32	•					

Institution and course	Target group		Mode		Location		Links	Award
	School leavers	Mature learners	Full time	Part time	On campus	Outreach		
MIC								
Foundation Course		• 45		•				
IADT								
Foundation Certificate		• 30	•					FETAC
AIT								
Foundation Cert International		• 37	•					
Foundation Cert Technology		• 38	•					
GMIT								
Castlebar Campus - Foundation Certificate			•					FETAC
Galway Campus - Foundation Certificate			•	•				FETAC
LYIT								
Foundation Certificate		• 49	•	•				FETAC
WIT								
Foundation Studies Certificate		• 50	•					
Tipperary Institute								
Foundation Cert (Return to work for Adults)		• 13		•				
TOTAL	83	635						

Main issues arising in current provision

A number of issues arise from the current provision of access courses by higher education institutions. Many courses are not formally linked to the national framework of qualifications so there is a lack of clarity about access, transfer and progression opportunities that are available to learners. Since participation on an access course is usually linked to entry to one higher education institution, learners may not be able to progress to other institutions and courses. This lack of mobility impedes the goals of the qualifications framework. In the case of school-leavers, the HEA evaluation of access programmes noted that access courses offer a limited route of entry, as only a very small number of students participate and the extra year of study after the Leaving Certificate acts as a barrier to some people¹².

¹² Towards the Best Education for All (HEA, 2006), p.25

Another significant issue with the current model of provision is that access courses in higher education institutions are not approved for student support schemes such as the higher or further education grants scheme, the free tuition fees initiative, the top-up grant, the student assistance fund or the fund for students with a disability¹³. Approved courses in higher education are full-time undergraduate courses of not less than two years duration, while to be eligible for the further education scheme a course must be provided by an approved further education institution. It is important to note that it is the courses that are not approved, rather than the students, who would be eligible for support if they were enrolled in approved higher or further education courses (e.g. PLC, level 5 and 6 programmes).

While there is no detailed analysis of the average costs per student on access courses, the unit cost of access courses appears to be high compared to other higher education courses. The average annual cost for an undergraduate student is €3,200, while figures from some institutions indicate the cost of access courses to be in the region of €9,000-€11,000 per student per annum. As the students on access courses are not counted for core funding to higher education institutions, the costs of providing access courses have been met from other funding sources, such as the HEA Strategic Initiatives Scheme.

An emerging model of practice: courses that involve collaboration between further and higher education

In addition to the courses provided directly by the higher education institutions, there are also a number of courses that involve close collaboration with the further

¹³ In 2003 the Minister for Education and Science stated that the Department of Education had not approved the direct funding of foundation courses through its third level access programmes - in particular its student support programmes and that the Department questioned “*the value of putting students from disadvantaged backgrounds through year-long foundation courses*”. The Minister went on to cite the Commission on the Points System who were “*not convinced that such courses were appropriate for third level institutions and suggested they be provided under further education schemes*” and the Action group on Access who pointed to “*the need for the appropriate validation of such courses and considered that “they should not be a requirement for all access students”*”. (Dail Questions Ref. 18878/03; 18880/03; 18881/03; 1st July, 2003). The Department has advised that this continues to be current policy (July 2006, Higher Education Technology and Training section).

education sector. There are currently two higher education institutions and five further education institutions collaborating in providing access courses for twelve young adult and seventy mature participants. In these courses the students are enrolled in a further education college but as part of the course undertake some modules of the course in a higher education institution (see Table 3).

Table 3

Courses in Collaboration with Further Education			
	Mode F/T	School Leavers	Mature learners
TCD			
Liberal Arts (FETAC) Plunkett FE College	~		20
Liberal Arts (FETAC) Liberties FE College	~	12	
Liberal Arts (FETAC) Pearse FE College	~		20
DCU			
Foundation Certificate (FETAC) – Whitehall FE College	~		15
Foundation Certificate (FETAC) – Dun Laoghaire FE College	~		15
TOTAL		12	70

In 2005, in co-operation with three City of Dublin VEC colleges, TCD developed three full-time Liberal Arts courses at FETAC Level 5 for over fifty young adults and mature students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Graduates of these courses are eligible for places within Trinity College's 15 per cent quota for alternative entry and are also advised on progression opportunities from the award to other higher education institutions.

In 2005 a FETAC Level 5 Certificate in Education and Training was developed in conjunction with two Colleges of Further Education (Whitehall and Dun Laoghaire) and the School of Education Studies in DCU. The objectives of the course are to provide a nationally accredited award, targeting thirty socio-economically disadvantaged mature students and young adults for the purposes of third level access. The qualification serves as a route of access to the DCU BSc in Education and Training, as well as a route of general entry to higher education. It is also a

further education award in its own right, which meets the training needs of classroom assistants or the needs of adult and continuing professional education trainers. Students are enrolled in one of the two colleges of further education and are required to complete eight FETAC modules as well as two modules from the first year full-time Degree in Education and Training programme. They are then exempt from these modules when they progress to the first year of the BSc. course.

Formal links between further and higher education

There has already been some success in developing formal links between the higher and further education sector as a route of access to higher education, particularly for under-represented groups of learners. Since 1995 there has been a route of entry from FETAC Level 5 and 6 (NCVA Levels 2 and 3) courses to the Institutes of Technology (the 'higher education links scheme'). In 2001 the National University of Ireland formally recognised FETAC awards for matriculation purposes. University College Cork subsequently developed an entry route for students with FETAC Level 5 and 6 awards. Since 2005, UCD, NUIM and NCAD have also developed routes of entry to some faculties for applicants with FETAC qualifications and NUIG is piloting a similar approach. In 2004 FETAC level 5 and 6 awards were recognised for entry to a number of faculties in DCU.

However, while these links have been in place for some time, it is very difficult to determine the numbers of learners who progress to higher education through the further education access route. Data are scarce, some commentators believe that the numbers are quite small and that there are still some barriers to access for those taking the FETAC level 5 and 6 routes.

Advantages of promoting progression links from further to higher education

There is a clear value in building on the formal links already established between the higher and further education sector as a route of access to higher education, particularly for under-represented groups of learners. Recent studies indicate that up to half of the participants in the further education sector entered as mature students (over 23 years of age), compared to less than one-tenth of entrants to

higher education. A high proportion of further education participants also come from the lower socio-economic groups that are under-represented in higher education. For example, almost 20 per cent of students in further education are from non-manual worker backgrounds, while only 9 per cent of students in higher education are from similar backgrounds¹⁴. From the available evidence, it appears that further education institutions also have a higher representation of students with a disability and members of cultural and ethnic minority groups. It then follows that if higher education institutions are to reach out and attract more people from these target groups, they will find them in further education centres around the country. The main questions for the future concern how best to frame policies that encourage better linkage between further and higher education so that learners can move easily through the different levels of learning and be supported in their participation and progress up the framework of qualifications.

3 Issues to be considered in developing a new policy on access courses

Developing policy: the HEA context

The HEA has announced that it proposes to take a series of steps over the next two years to implement the recommendations of the recent evaluation of access programmes. Some of these steps are of particular relevance for access courses. Firstly, a three-year access plan will be sought from each institution. Each institution's plan will include targets for the next three years as well as a means to measure progress each year. It is also proposed to make material from the self-evaluation reports available on the web as a developmental resource, with the co-operation of institutions. Secondly, the level of core funding and strategic funding for access will be monitored in regular budget meetings with institutions. Thirdly, a

¹⁴ The Post-Leaving Certificate Sector in Ireland: A Multivariate Analysis of Educational and Employment Outcomes (ESRI, 2006); Who Went to College in 2004? (HEA, 2006).

new national system will be used to collect data on access to higher education and new national targets will be developed to build upon those set in 2001. Fourthly, it is envisaged that progress will be made in provision and support for part-time higher education, in collaboration with the Department of Education and Science. The National Access Office will continue to advise and work with the Department and partners at primary, second level and in further education to ensure effective links within and across the education system, including bridging or preparatory access courses for higher education.

Issues for discussion during the consultative process

Following initial consideration and discussion, the HEA and the DES are committed to collaborating with a wider group of partners in making and implementing policy on access courses, and the following questions are suggested as a starting point for discussions during the consultative process.

How best can we work within the national framework of qualifications to provide effective routes of access transfer and progression to higher education for all learners?

1. Is it generally considered that an award at level 5 in the national framework is an effective means of preparation/route of access to higher education?
2. Should we build on the existing higher education links scheme and on current models of collaboration between further and higher education institutions, so that all access courses will in future lead to an award at level 5 in the National Framework of Qualifications?
3. How can further and higher education institutions collaborate with FETAC in setting the standards for this award? What role can the Standard Development Groups play?
4. Should the award include modules that meet requirements for entry to specific higher education courses?
5. Should it be possible to adapt any FETAC award at Level 5 for progression to higher education?

6. If this happens, will all FETAC level 5 awards provide a clear route of access to all higher education institutions in Ireland?
7. How can the non-degree awards made in universities be mapped on to the national qualifications to provide additional routes of progression for learners?

How best can we promote collaborative and flexible models of delivery?

1. How can access courses leading to the level 5 award be delivered by further education providers in collaboration with higher education institutions?
2. What conditions need to be in place to make this happen (e.g. new transparent models of funding, increased numbers of students in FE, data on participation and progression)?
3. If this happens, can level 5 access courses be approved for the purposes of Department and Education Science (DES) funding for further education provision and student support?
4. How can the DES support flexible models of delivery (including part-time, summer and modular courses) as part of developing a national approach for the support of part-time provision and study?
5. What national guidelines on programme validation and funding (student and institutional) of approved access courses can be agreed by the DES, HEA and NQAI/FETAC in consultation with further and higher education institutions?

What steps need to be taken if we are to adopt a phased approach to implementing the new policy?

1. What support can be given to institutions that are already providing access courses if it is necessary to re-organise their courses accordance with the new policy when it is agreed?
2. How can this be linked with the preparation of a three-year access plan by institutions?

3. Can we agree targets for progression from Level 5 to higher education that could be achieved as a result of a more coherent and proactive policy on access courses?
4. How can we capture adequate data to show the level of progression from further to higher education, so that progress can be measured against the targets set? Could sources include the School Leavers Survey and the ESRI special report on PLC leavers?

APPENDIX 2

Access /Foundation Courses Research Advisory Group

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Higher Education Authority	Peter Brown Muiris O'Connor Orla Christle
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APPENDIX 3

List of Abbreviations

AHEAD	Access to Higher Education at Abertay Dundee
AIT	Athlone Institute of Technology
AMA	Access Made Accessible
BMW	Border, Midlands and Western Region
BTEA	Back to Education Allowance
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CAO	Central Applications Office
CCVEC	City of Cork Vocational Education Committee
CDVEC	City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee
CIT	Cork Institute of Technology
DES	Department of Education & Science
DIT	Dublin Institution of Technology
DKIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology
ECDL	European Computer Driving Licence
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GMIT	Galway Mayo Institute of Technology
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
HN	Higher National
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
HSE	Health Services Executive
IADT	Institute of Art Design and Technology Dun Laoghaire
IoTI	Institutions of Technology
ITB	Institute of Technology Blanchardstown
ITT	Institute of Technology Tralee
IUA	Irish Universities Association
LIT	Limerick Institute of Technology
LYIT	Letterkenny Institute of Technology
NDP	National Development Plan

NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NUIG	National University of Ireland Galway
NUIM	National University of Ireland Maynooth
PATH	Programme for Access to Higher Education
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SED	Socio-Economic Disadvantaged
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SFEFC	Scottish Further Education Funding Council
SHEFC	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
SIF	Strategic Innovation Fund
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SWAP	Scottish Wider Access Programme
TAP	Trinity Access Programme
TCD	University of Dublin Trinity College
TI	Tipperary Institute
UCAS	Universities & Colleges Admissions Service
UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
UL	University of Limerick
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VPTP	Vocational Preparation and Training Programme
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
WIT	Waterford Institute of Technology

APPENDIX 4

Non-Major Awards included in the National Framework of Qualifications

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Programme/ Award Title	Named Award	Award-Type Classification	NFQ Level
NUI Certificate In Returning To Learning	Certificate	Special Purpose	5
NUI Certificate in Economics, Finance & Venture Management	Certificate	Special Purpose	5
NUI Certificate in Science	Certificate	Special Purpose	5
NUI Certificate in Economics and Finance	Certificate	Special Purpose	5

University of Limerick

Programme/ Award Title	Named Award	Award-Type Classification	NFQ Level
Mature Student Access Cert	Certificate	Special Purpose	5
ACE Certificate – Foundation Studies in Science & Technology	Certificate	Special Purpose	5

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NUI MAYNOOTH

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