

From Counting to Cultivating Successful Participation

A Review of the Landscape of
Practice Supporting Access
Transfer and Progression in
Irish Education and Training

QQI INSIGHTS.



Dearbhú Cáilíochta
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
Quality and
Qualifications Ireland

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Quality in Irish Higher Education Institutions

This report was commissioned by QQI to gather evidence on practice supporting access, transfer and progression in further and higher education and training in Ireland. It was produced by a project team led by Dr Cathy Peck and Dr Deirdre Stritch, supported by Mr David Treacy, Dr Annie Doona and Mr Matthew Hurley.

INTRODUCTION

This review was commissioned by QQI as Ireland marks the 20th anniversary of the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the national access, transfer and progression policy (ATP) that informs how learners and education providers engage with the framework.

ATP has been fundamental to enabling learners to engage with the NFQ and benefit from it, providing an essential architecture of specified entry arrangements, transfer and progression routes; the accumulation of credits; information for learners; and the recognition of prior learning.

The review is timely and occurs at a moment when a number of relevant national strategies, including DFHERIS's [Funding the Future Investing in knowledge and skills: Ireland's competitive advantage](#) and SOLAS's [Future FET: Transforming Learning The National Further Education and Training \(FET\) Strategy](#) are in progress. It facilitates a retrospective view of the significant development of ATP practice in Ireland over the past two decades and coincides with progress toward a unified tertiary¹ education and training system. The discussion and findings are pertinent to the vision set out in the Government's *Funding the Future* strategy, which aims to build a system of diverse opportunities, with a focus on lifelong learning, supporting part-time and blended provision and micro-credentials (strand 2), more inclusive learning environments (strand 3), and clear and extensive pathways (strand 4) (DFHERIS, 2022a).

The review report reflects that ATP practice is inherently complex. It directly involves policy makers, regulators, education and training providers, practitioners and learners. It interacts with, and is impacted by, adjacent social policies, administrative structures, funding mechanisms and institutional systems. To be successful, it must account for, and respond to, diverse and dynamic socio-cultural realities. The sheer breadth of ATP practice in Ireland has therefore presented a substantive, albeit rich, challenge for the project team to traverse. The result is a landscape document presented in four parts. In each part, the project team has adopted a distinct lens through which to highlight both challenges to, and opportunities for, enhanced ATP practice.

REPORT STRUCTURE

The review report commences with a summary section. This outlines the context of the review and the methodology used. It sets out key findings and recommendations. Following this, the project team approaches the multidimensional nature of ATP by structuring this report around four distinct but interdependent perspectives on ATP practice.

- In Chapter 1, the project team traces the development of ATP practice in Ireland adopting the lens of the *legal, policy and regulatory framework in place*, considering how this has enabled and supported practice and what immediate or future developments may be warranted to meet our current challenges.
- In Chapter 2, the project team adopts the lens of *learner pathways*, presenting eleven broad pathway types that are discernible across a complex landscape. In this chapter, the project

¹ The term 'tertiary education system' is used here as defined in QQI's 2020 Green Paper on the Qualifications System (p. 7)

team questions whether the current ‘upwards only’ construct of progression in the system is fit for purpose in an era of lifelong learning.

- In Chapter 3, the project team adopts the lens of *ATP in practice*, overviewing a rich landscape of interdependent ATP activities. We consider how the systems, structures and practices on the ground have enabled ATP to date, and the ongoing challenges and opportunities that exist in this space. In the process, we spotlight numerous examples of local initiatives and sector-wide projects that are furthering ATP in particular contexts.
- In Chapter 4, the project team explores ATP through the lens of the *learner experience*, considering what is known (quantitatively and qualitatively) about the nature of learners’ educational journeys. In this chapter, we spotlight the voices of cohorts of learners that are underrepresented within tertiary education and training. The learner voice is reproduced from direct submissions to the review and from published research. These testimonies provide an important window on the lived experiences of learners.

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The review was commissioned primarily as secondary research into ATP practice in Ireland. The project team, facilitated by QQI, was tasked with synthesising plentiful, but fragmented, information, including policy documents, project outputs and research reports that contribute to our understanding of ATP and related practice. This has offered the project team an insight into the dedicated and informed work of practitioners, learners and researchers across the tertiary landscape, both past and present.

However, this approach has also had limitations. Gaps in the information and data available are acknowledged throughout the report. Moreover, although an open call for submissions was made on behalf of the project team by QQI, it is possible that the relatively short timeline for the review has precluded some stakeholders from making a contribution. The project team emphasises that where omissions may have occurred, these are inadvertent rather than intentional.

The findings presented within the report are therefore derived from a comprehensive analysis of secondary documentation. This includes reports produced by institutions themselves, such as annual quality reports and self-evaluation reports, as well as the quality assurance review reports conducted by QQI of providers. This evidence was supplemented by a range of national and international reports examining various aspects of access transfer and progression in Ireland. A full list of contributors and the documentation reviewed is contained in the bibliography and appendices.

It is important to emphasise that the study did not entail primary research or collect first-hand accounts of interacting with the education and training system. The findings, therefore, apply only to what is currently known about those learners who have made it into the qualifications system. The number and types of learners who access the education and training system has expanded since 2003, but those who are not yet accessing the pathways described in this report are not accounted for here. We know less about this group and this report is not able to explore, in the depth that these authors might like, the multitude of factors which may be prohibiting potential learners from becoming learners in practice.

SUMMARY OF REVIEW FINDINGS

ATP practices are value laden, and as such they are implemented in sometimes contested arenas. The findings of this review indicate that the principles of equity and social inclusion that underpin ATP, as articulated in the original vision for ATP in 2003, are translated into practice in numerous initiatives by dedicated professionals. However, at times, the impact of such initiatives are undermined by systems that do not adequately integrate; for example, the ongoing existence of two credit systems in the tertiary sector; the different treatment of FET and school Level 5 awards for progression to HET; different funding streams in FET, priorities that do not adequately align (for example, widening and increasing access generally, whilst meetings skills needs in very particular areas) and the unintended consequences of well-intentioned interventions (for example, scholarships which waive fees for refugees, but fail to address the basic financial requirements for food on campus or travel expenses etc).

The project team identified a number of key findings in relation to current ATP practice, the implementation of ATP procedures by providers and the national policy and funding infrastructure which enables and incentivises providers in this task.

- Significantly, all providers offering programmes leading to awards in the NFQ have policies and procedures for ATP in place and utilise the building blocks of the NFQ. These include stated learning outcomes, FET or ECTS credits and provision of specified information to learners to support ATP implementation.
- It is clear from the submissions made to the project that there are a wide range of initiatives, projects and supports in place to enable successful access, transfer and progression by particular groups of learners. The project team reviewed a breadth of examples of good practice, many of which are highlighted in Chapters 3 and 4 of this report.
- QQI validation processes have due regard for ensuring that providers have adequately specified the ATP arrangements in place for new programmes.
- At a national level, there is an increased focus on, and incentivisation of, providers to expand ATP pathways (for example, within the SOLAS FET Strategy; through HEA funding arrangements; via the remit of the new National Tertiary Office, and through the expansion of apprenticeship as a mode of learning to encompass new models, NFQ levels and occupations to name a few examples discussed throughout this report).

However, despite the enormous strides made towards realising national ambitions for ATP, there remain gaps and vulnerabilities which prevent a fuller realisation at this juncture. These include:

- The need for a fuller articulation of a national vision and objectives for ATP, which adequately encompass the basic requirements for successful participation.
- The sheer number of pathways and discrete sources of information (and gaps in same) on these pathways for learners (described in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively). This adds to the complexity and opacity of the qualifications system rather than aiding its navigation by learners. The [Qualifax](#) database, which QQI is currently redeveloping, could be explored as a vehicle to address some of these issues.
- The absence of a finalised national policy and approach to RPL, which may be contributing to inconsistent practice and undermining confidence in the RPL process.

- The emphasis across a range of policy and funding areas on *enabling entry* to programmes in the absence of concomitant efforts and supports to ensure *successful participation* across all aspects of the learner journey and the *achievement of awards*.
- The focus on particular categories of learners in national approaches to access. This focus, whilst laudable and necessary in some areas, may, if undertaken in isolation, be somewhat reductive and obscure wider efforts to universally enable ATP for all learners.
- The gaps in data, both quantitative and qualitative, which undermine efforts to comprehensively evaluate the impact of ATP and related measures.

DISCUSSION

VISION FOR ATP

The original vision and objectives for ATP were published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQA) in 2003. Much has changed in the education and training landscape since that time, as summarised in Chapter 1. It is timely, therefore, for QQI to articulate a new, ambitious vision and related objectives for ATP, inclusive of measures to ensure successful participation by learners. This vision, and actions derived from it, could become an important element in addressing the current challenges, vulnerabilities and barriers hindering learner engagement with the qualifications system, and the necessary permeability of that system (QQI, 2020, p. 10).



PATHWAYS

These challenges include the existence of a suite of discrete progression pathways with their own entry criteria and information (as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this report). This array of pathways and information networks may add to rather than alleviate the complexity of the system for learners and practitioners alike. Currently, there are a number of well-intentioned, but piecemeal, policies and initiatives in place to support learner access, transfer and progression through the qualifications system. These have arisen in response to localised, industry/employer demand and/or particular learner needs. In consequence, access often operates in a manner akin to a lottery system, in which access and progression opportunities are determined by the type and nature of local arrangements in place. A more sustainable long-term approach might look at how to increase and expand the routes by which programmes can be accessed by any individual learner, regardless of how they might be categorised or classified.

Collating all information on programmes leading to awards in the NFQ and how they may be accessed, number of places available to different types of entrants and what funding or supports are available to participants would be a significant first step to reducing the current complexity and confusion.

RPL

The project team found that there has been significant progress over the last two decades in relation to the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Ireland, but there is still room for improvement. A DFHERIS public consultation on a unified tertiary education and training system received calls to enhance, expand, and streamline RPL across both FET and HET sectors. Additionally, it was suggested that a national policy approach be developed for RPL (DFHERIS, 2022). The OECD has also explicitly recommended the establishment of national guidelines to outline RPL procedures and processes (OECD, 2023, Accessed Online). The project team is aware that QQI has commenced work in this area and welcomes this important step towards bringing greater clarity and consistency to RPL practice in Ireland.

Strengthening linkages and adopting a more cohesive approach to professional guidance services could also further benefit RPL practice in Ireland, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this report. European RPL guidelines emphasise the importance of connecting guidance services with RPL practice to optimise resource utilisation, reduce procedural costs, and reach disadvantaged groups who may otherwise be unaware of available education and training opportunities (Cedefop, 2023).

EXPANDING UNDERSTANDINGS OF ATP

It is evident from this review of practice that ATP tends to be understood and defined narrowly, in relation to expanding entry to the system for particular groups of disadvantaged or non-traditional learners. Whilst there are merits to this approach and it has contributed to increased participation by individuals from these categories, it comes with limitations. Whilst the authors are not suggesting that dedicated targets, schemes/activities and funding should be abandoned, it is noted that not all learners can be so easily categorised. Learners may fall across multiple categories or move between categories at different points in time. Indeed, the OECD's recent assessment of Ireland's skills strategies suggests that work should be undertaken to facilitate better insight into the characteristics of potential adult learners, acknowledging that obstacles to

participation may need to be addressed more holistically, and employ more targeted and tailored supports.

To better understand who these learners are, learner profiles could be developed that provide a more granular picture of the different types of adult learners or potential learners... Ireland could also improve holistic support for parents and carers to address the time-related obstacles to participation (e.g. with information, additional financial support and on-site service) and increase support for vulnerable groups by providing targeted guidance and financial supplements to address the indirect costs of learning. (OECD, 2023, Accessed Online).

In turn, the current emphasis placed on entry to programmes has the effect of narrowing the focus to the patchwork system of pathways and solutions that have been put in place to support student mobility. This often occurs in the absence of related efforts to create inclusive learning environments and ensure successful participation by learners and the achievement of an award. The latter reflects the actual achievement of education ambitions; further work is required to better understand the challenges and solutions in that regard.

In the current QQI Core QA Guidelines, ATP is artificially separated from the necessary elements for its success, for example, student supports, teaching, learning and assessment, information for learners and so on. This may reflect a loss of sight of the original vision for ATP as relating not simply to entry to a programme, but to its successful completion and attainment of an award by a learner. To that end, the project team strongly recommends that QQI ensures that ATP is appropriately integrated into and re-positioned within and across the Core QA Guidelines and other relevant policies, guidelines and criteria.

This finding aligns closely with the direction taken in the government's funding and reform framework for higher education, *Funding the Future*, which expands the focus beyond enabling learners to cross the threshold and addresses ATP more holistically:

A broader focus beyond access will be taken to include successful participation and outcomes, across all programmes and all levels of higher education. The Department, in collaboration with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, will promote universal design for learning and student success (DFHERIS, 2022a, p. 14).

The project team takes the view that a focus on entry has somewhat overshadowed the need to embed accessibility and inclusion across our institutions, and to create universal opportunities for lifelong learning, which could be better communicated and supported. Government consultation on progressing a unified tertiary system in Ireland reflects that there is wide support for this expanded focus from across the sector.

Responses to the consultation survey were strongly in favour of the objective to develop more inclusive cultures in a consistent way right across the tertiary system to welcome and promote diversity and to provide learning for all by facilitating access, progression and success, ensuring equality and championing inclusion (DFHERIS, 2022b, p.34)

DATA

A recurrent theme throughout the report is the lack of comprehensive and/or comparable data on the impact of ATP measures. Notable exceptions at institutional and national level notwithstanding, in general the available and reported data is often not sufficient to provide a clear view of the dynamics of ATP on the ground. Throughout the report, the project team highlights instances where national data is not readily available or sufficiently granular to inform definitive statements about ATP activity.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR QQI

Whilst QQI has a very particular legal responsibility towards ATP, as set out in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012, it is not the only national regulatory body with significant responsibilities in this area. Others with an important role in enabling and supporting successful implementation of ATP include the HEA (which now has a legal obligation to support the implementation of ATP procedures by designated awarding bodies under Section 47(2) of the Higher Education Authority Act 2022), SOLAS, DFHERIS and a range of other government departments and agencies. The full and effective implementation of ATP and realisation of national ambitions around access are dependent on sustained, fruitful cooperation and coordinated efforts by these stakeholders.

The recommendations set out in this report are directed specifically at QQI as the commissioning authority for the review; however, issues are identified throughout the report that are relevant to the range of other national stakeholders identified above.

1. Following consultation with key stakeholders, QQI should restate the original vision or articulate an updated vision and set of objectives for ATP that emphasises enabling successful participation as a core principle;
2. In order to ensure coherence of approach and support successful implementation of ATP in practice, QQI should seek to ensure that ATP is appropriately integrated into all relevant QQI QA Guidelines, policies, procedures and criteria. For example, ensuring that inclusive practice considerations and universal design are brought to the fore in general, and are a particular emphasis within guidelines pertaining to programme development and approval, staff development, teaching and learning, assessment, information and supports for learners.
3. In its role as custodian of the National Framework of Qualifications, QQI should take all necessary steps to ensure parity of treatment of NFQ Levels 5 and 6 major awards for progression purposes.
4. QQI should evaluate the continued benefits of maintaining two national credit systems and whether having two credit systems acts as an enabler or a barrier to successful access, transfer and progression of learners through the qualifications system.
5. QQI is encouraged to continue the progress towards the development of a national policy approach to RPL to support consistency of practice across the tertiary education sector.
6. QQI is encouraged to initiate and lead discussion with other awarding bodies in the State and education and training providers to consider the current notions of part-time and full-time study with a view to bringing clarity and consistency to definitions and practice and enabling flexible

learning opportunities that meet the needs of learners.

7. In its review of its current monitoring policy and approach, QQI is strongly encouraged to give consideration to how routine monitoring of ATP can be facilitated and enhanced.
8. QQI is strongly encouraged to continue its work with relevant Government Departments and State agencies, as well as other relevant stakeholders, to ensure appropriate ATP data (quantitative and qualitative) is collated and available to:
 - a. Confirm the impact of access initiatives and interventions made to date
 - b. Identify gaps and vulnerabilities in current ATP practice, including lack of capacity to meet learner demand for places
 - c. Inform future policy, strategy and funding decisions related to ATP
9. QQI is encouraged to take steps to ensure that, to the extent possible, evidence-informed ATP considerations are presented and considered at national-level discussions on the further development, regulations and funding of the qualifications system.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As noted at the outset, this has been a timely juncture to explore how ATP practice has unfolded *on the ground* in Ireland. The twentieth anniversary of the introduction of the national ATP policy is an opportune moment to evaluate our progress, highlight areas of strength and to identify gaps and vulnerabilities. Highlighting successes and innovative practices enables us to extend, share and build upon learning from across the sector. Similarly, reflecting on the ongoing and emerging challenges experienced by learners and other stakeholders in the implementation of ATP is essential. This will enable future activities to be informed by the rich insights of practitioners, researchers and the evidence-base accumulated over the past two decades.

Research into the experiences of students underrepresented in tertiary education and training in Ireland suggests there is work to be done to extend the focus of the access agenda beyond supporting entry to the system. The published literature offering insights into the experiences of learners post-entry, and direct contributions to the review, suggest that placing greater emphasis on the adaptations and supports required to facilitate student success is warranted, particularly in HET. The collaborative development of a national universal design charter highlighted in Chapter 3 is a positive step in this direction. Notably, such adaptations and supports will better facilitate *all* students, not only those identified as underrepresented in the system.

Data that would indicate what percentage of students in the system are concurrently socio-economically disadvantaged, mature, disabled or identify as a member of another minority group is not currently available or collected in all instances.² Therefore, whether an access student who experiences multiple and compounding forms of disadvantage is counted within one or multiple categories remains unclear to the project team. Anecdotal contributions to the review also suggest that both further and higher education institutions may operate different systems for counting and classifying students. Further, a comprehensive assessment of the impact of ATP policy requires access to data such as the Education Longitudinal Database (ELD) that measures

² Such data could be collected, for example from private providers by QQI as part of monitoring activity.

not only entry (participation) from minority groups, but tracks student retention, progression and achievement, as well as graduate destinations and outcomes. The project team acknowledges that the collection and interpretation of such data is inherently complex, engendering privacy concerns. However, the contribution that interagency cooperation and facilitation by the CSO can make to informing practice is well illustrated in the FET Learner Outcomes report by SOLAS highlighted in Chapter 3.

Finally, it must also be remembered that inclusion is “not about counting, it’s about cultivating” (Myers, 2015). In this respect, qualitative work that amplifies the voices and experiences of access students within our institutions and illuminates the personal narratives and lived experiences of minorities in the tertiary sector is a powerful tool for informing practice and prompting reflection on the efficacy of national and institutional policies across the sector.



CHAPTER 1.

CHAPTER 1: LEGAL AND REGULATORY CONTEXT OF ATP

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) first established the legal basis for the introduction of a national framework for qualifications (NFQ) and national policies for access, transfer and progression (ATP) in Ireland. This legislation introduced three new statutory bodies: the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and two awards councils: the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). These councils were responsible for implementing procedures for access, transfer and progression established by NQAI (NQAI, 2003, pp. 6-7).

Prior to the introduction of the 1999 Act, various bodies were responsible for recognizing educational achievements in Ireland. There was also a general training and employment agency, FÁS, which served as the national authority overseeing training and employment initiatives, including apprenticeships. Prior to 2001, each of these entities had established distinct systems for acknowledging and validating acquired knowledge and skills, and were coordinated through the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The overall result was a fragmented system which made it difficult to compare qualifications (NQAI, 2002). Additionally, this system focused, if not exclusively, predominantly on the needs of school leavers:

Most of the elements that make up the education and training systems in Ireland are focused on the needs of young learners, those engaged in their initial pre-occupational learning experience. The qualifications system has mirrored this focus, which reflected national concerns with meeting the needs of a large youth cohort in the population over many years. This situation has changed, and demographic trends towards a smaller youth population enable increasing emphasis on the lifelong learning agenda generally (OECD, 2003, p. 17).

The new NFQ was explicitly designed to address these issues by bringing transparency and coherence to the qualifications system and, in conjunction with the new ATP policies, support lifelong learning “from preschool to post-retirement” (NQAI, 2003b, p.10).

1.1 ARCHITECTURE OF ATP

The 1999 Act defined ATP as follows:

- **access:** “... the process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence acquired”;
- **progression:** “... the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme where each programme *is of a higher level than the preceding programme*”; and
- **transfer:** “...the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence acquired” (Section 2: 1).

Building on these definitions, in 2003, the NQAI published *Policies, actions and procedures for the promotion of access, transfer and progression*. In this policy, the NQAI set out its vision, operational principles and objectives for ATP in addition to actions and procedures for itself, HETAC, FETAC and providers (QQI, 2015, p. 3). The 2003 policy articulates a vision for learner mobility:

... the learner should be able to enter and successfully participate in a programme, or series of programmes leading to an award, or series of awards, in pursuit of their learning objectives; the National Framework of Qualifications and associated programme provision should be structured to facilitate learner entry and to promote transfer and progression; thus, learners can be encouraged to participate in the learning process to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities (NQAI, 2003a).

This vision was informed by an understanding of access as encompassing, in particular, disadvantaged and underrepresented learners and the completion of programmes and attainment of awards, as opposed to simply entry to a programme:

It is considered that the concept of “access” should apply to all learners, but particularly to the participation of under-represented learner cohorts such as those with special education needs, learners from disadvantaged communities, learners in the workplace and adult learners generally. A more appropriate definition of access for these groups needs to include programme adaptation, or the provision of in-process supports, or even the provision of new variants or formats of programmes (e.g., part-time or modular formats). For all learners, it is more productive to focus the access concept on completion (the achievement of the award) rather than on entry: access to a programme of education and training is not a worthwhile aim if the learner is then unable to achieve his/her objective of obtaining an award (2003a, p. 4).

The NQAI devised its ATP policy around four key areas: credit; entry arrangements; transfer and progression routes; and information provision.

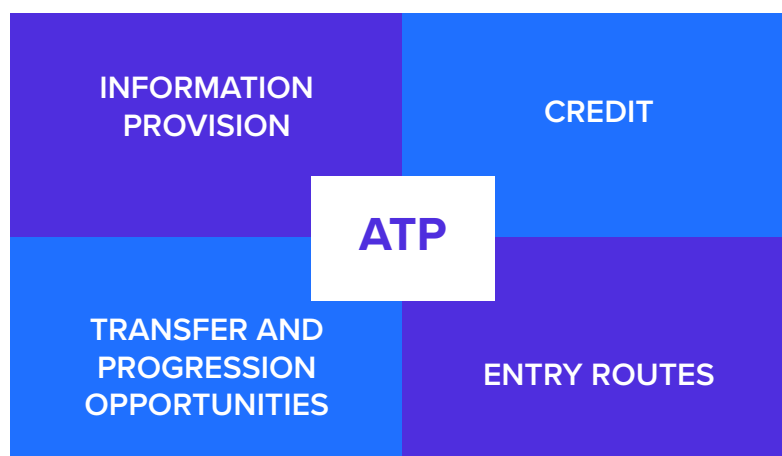


Figure 1: NQAI approach to ATP

The key aims and objectives were to increase opportunities for entry (in terms of both eligibility and availability of places); appropriate support for successful participation; clarity of the process leading to an award outcome, including possibilities for transfer and progression; arrangements for participation in a variety of modes and formats, including the possibility of achieving an award by accumulating credit for learning achievements over a period of time; and access as appropriate to initiatives to promote equality and combat discrimination.

The NQAI published [Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training](#) in 2004. The objective of these principles and guidelines was to support HEIs in a common use of credit in a way that complemented the NFQ and which, in time, could be extended to FET:

It is recognised that the overall aim is to establish a common currency of credit in higher education and training that can also provide a basis for the development of credit in further education and training. The approach is also based on the need to establish zones of mutual trust for credit to operate within and between institutions at all levels. This takes time to establish and the Framework is expected to play a significant role in building this trust (NQAI, 2006, p. 6).

Separate [Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training](#), an additional tool in the ATP toolkit, were published separately by NQAI in 2005. RPL, whilst an important element in achieving ATP was, and has always been, treated as a distinct policy area by the NQAI and its successor agency, QQI. Nonetheless, and in consideration of RPL as a fundamental element of ATP, the project team explored, at a high-level, current approaches to RPL in practice and have highlighted examples and case studies of good RPL practice across Chapters 3 and 4 of this report.

Both the principles and operational guidelines for credit and RPL outlined above remain in effect.

1.2 SUPPORTING LIFELONG LEARNING AND MEETING NATIONAL SKILLS NEEDS

From conception, the 1999 Act and resulting NFQ and ATP policies were intended to underpin the dual objectives of enabling lifelong learning and ensuring national readiness to meet the economic needs of the future. In addition to supporting access, transfer and progression for learners, the 1999 Act had the explicit objectives of:

(g) ... contribute[ing] to the realisation of national education and training policies and objectives and, in particular, to meeting the education and training requirements of industry, including agriculture, business, tourism, trade, the professions and the public service;

(h) ... promote[ing] co-operation between providers of programmes of education and training and industry, including agriculture, business, tourism, trade, the professions and the public service; (Section 4 (1)).

ATP was, therefore, from inception, firmly linked to the creation of routes and pathways through the qualifications system which support national skills objectives, as well as enabling access for learners through (upwards only) progression through the ten levels of the NFQ. A more holistic conceptualisation of lifelong learning as encompassing engagement with different levels of the NFQ at different stages in a learner's lifetime, reflective of their educational and skills needs at a given point in time, was not predicted nor supported by the legislation, nor subsequent policy approaches informed by that legislation.

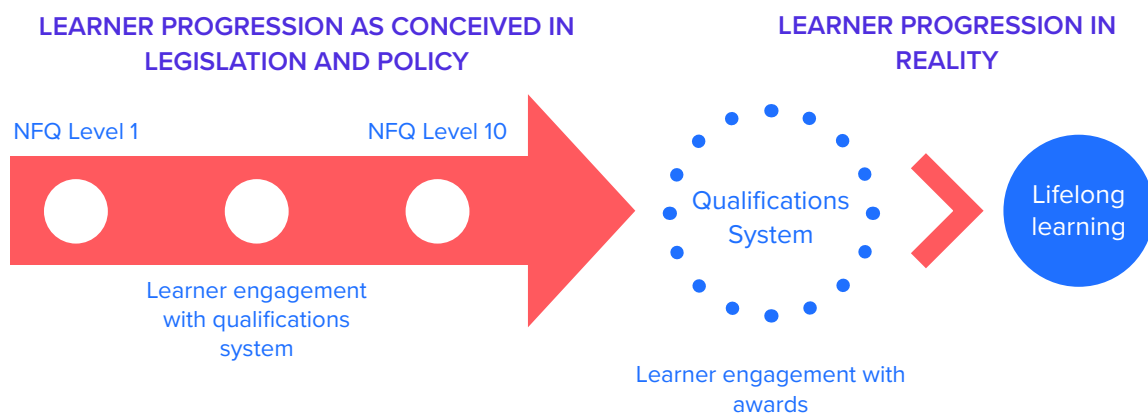


Figure 2: Conceptualisations of Learner Engagement with the NFQ

A focus on lifelong learning; building the knowledge economy and increasing skills were dominant themes in public policy throughout the decade, with the NFQ and ATP central to the delivery of policy objectives. This concern was reflected in the National Development Plan 2007-2013 which had as an objective the reform and modernisation of programme delivery, by *inter alia* the:

“Promotion of access, transfer and progression and incentivising of stronger inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes” (NDP, 2007, p. 204).

The Higher Education Authority's (HEA) Strategic Innovation Fund also sought to “support access, retention and progression both at individual institutional level and through interinstitutional, sectoral and inter-sectoral collaboration” (NDP, 2007, p. 205). A series of four national access plans were launched by the Higher Education Authority (initially from its new National Access Office) commencing in 2005. The plans set specific targets for participation in higher education by traditionally under-represented groups, such as learners with disabilities, those facing social and economic barriers and mature learners, with the overall objective of increasing equality of access to, and participation in, higher education. This ambition was explicitly linked to the achievement of economic goals:

We have now reached a point in our national educational development where the achievement of further growth in higher education will require continuing progress in relation to widening access. This means that the achievement of our national objectives in relation to upskilling the population will require further success in extending higher education opportunities to groups that have traditionally been under-represented in higher education. This fact, that our economic sustainability is increasingly dependent on the learning achievements and skills of all citizens, is a very concrete illustration of the interdependence of our national social and economic objectives (HEA, 2008, p10).

The focus on progression was upwards, in keeping with the legal definition set out in the 1999 Act, and as evidenced in the National Skills Strategy’s “one step up” recommendations (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007). The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) proposed “a vision of Ireland in 2020 in which a well-educated and highly skilled population contributes optimally to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy” (2007, p. 7). Meeting this objective, the EGFSN advised, would require enhancing the populations’ skills levels.

The report made specific recommendations on how these skills needs could be met, setting out targets for participation rates at each level on the NFQ by 2020:

- 48 percent of the labour force should have qualifications at NFQ Levels 6 to 10;
- 45 percent should have qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5; and
- The remaining 7 percent will have qualifications at NFQ levels 1 to 3.

In order to achieve these objectives, action is required at a number of levels:

- An additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce will need to progress by at least an NFQ level.
- Specifically, upskill 70,000 from NFQ levels 1 & 2 to level 3; 260,000 up to levels 4 & 5; and 170,000 to levels 6 to 10 ...
- The proportion of the population aged 20-24 with NFQ level 4 or 5 awards should be increased to 94 percent, either through completion of the Leaving Certificate or through equivalent, more vocationally oriented programmes. The retention rate at Leaving Certificate should reach 90 percent by 2020.
- The progression rate to third level education will have to increase from 55 percent to 72 percent (p. 7).

Current objectives around ATP are articulated in both the *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028* (HEA, 2022b) and the Government funding and reform framework for higher education to 2030, *Funding the Future - Investing in knowledge and skills: Ireland’s competitive advantage*. Part 3, Strand 3 of Funding the Future (Policy and Funding responses to drive high-quality outcomes and greater access to education) concerns “enhancing student participation and success with a focus on under-represented groups” (p. 14). The report acknowledges a need to look beyond programme entry to measures to support successful participation (as per the original NQAI vision for ATP) and that universal design for learning will be an important aspect achieving this (2022, p. 14). The report also acknowledges the importance of widening and increasing opportunities for access in driving skills and engagement:

In the medium term, a focus on lifelong learning, supporting part-time and blended provision and micro-credentials will facilitate the ongoing adaptation of skills to areas of particular need and allow more flexible access by more diverse learners to higher education (DFHERIS, 2022b, p13).

The personal and wider societal benefits of widening participation in education and training are recognised by the current Government:

Education is the greatest of levellers, and therefore inclusion of all groups in Irish society in the third-level system is a key priority for me and my Department. We have embedded a social inclusion and equality approach across all project and programme delivery, from apprenticeships to further education and training, research, and high education (Harris, 2022, pp. 3-4).

Government policy over the past two decades also reflects a recognition that access to higher education can be both personally and materially transformative, with the possession of higher education qualifications directly correlating with higher earnings (CSO, 2016). It is clear that within Ireland's long-standing higher education access agenda, the objective of strengthening social equality has been partnered with the objective of guaranteeing economic competitiveness. Access to education is believed to prompt economic innovation and lead to restructuring in the labour market that will suit a knowledge-based economy. In this sense, the access agenda has combined "hard-headed economic pragmatism and generous social aspirations, tied to a belief in equality" (Finnegan et al., 2017, p.108).



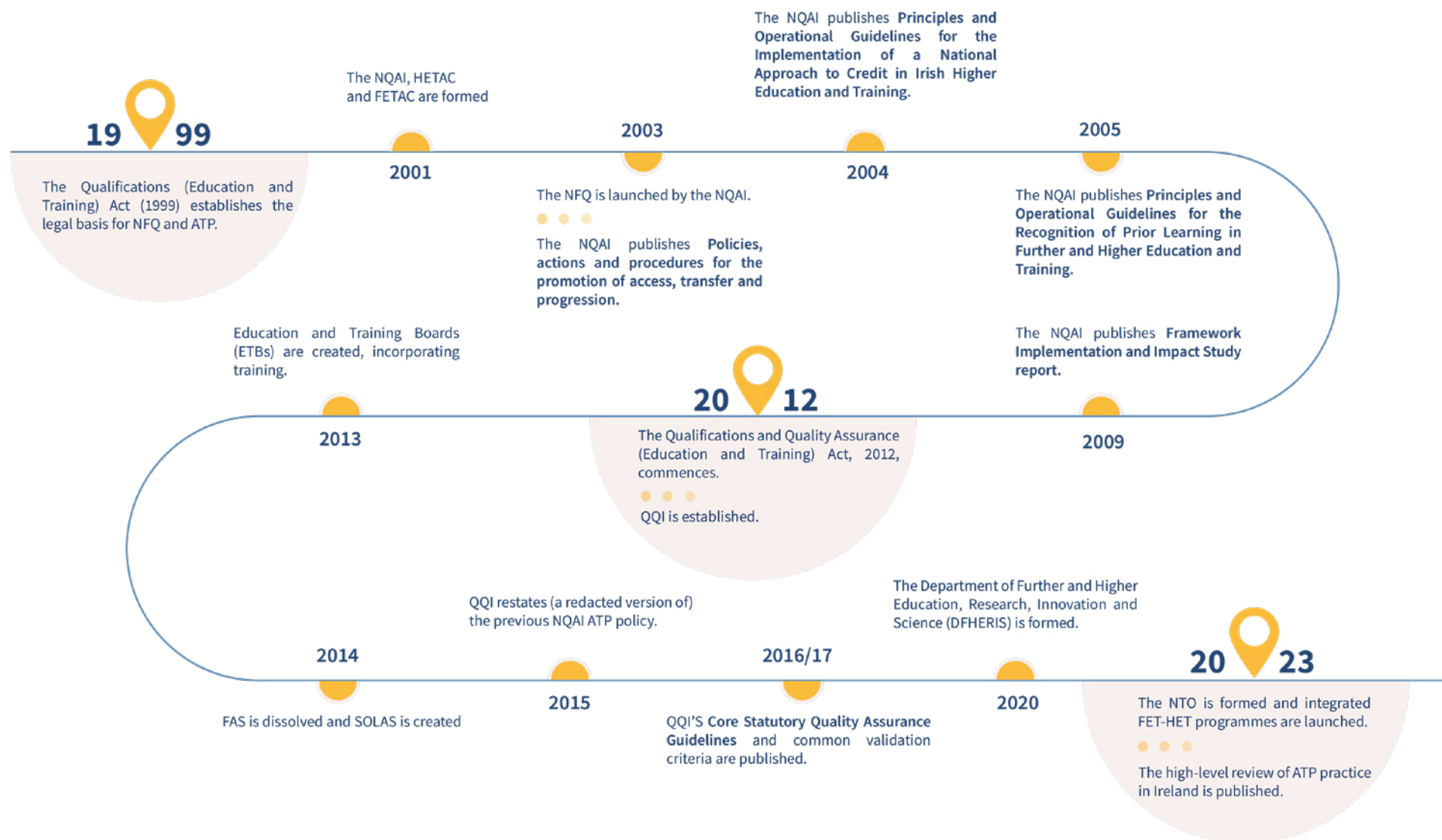


Figure 3: Key Milestones in ATP Regulatory Context in Ireland 1999-2023

1.3 MOVING TOWARDS A TERTIARY EDUCATION SYSTEM – THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

From the outset, it was anticipated that the implementation of the ATP policy would take time and that there would be variance across sectors, which in 2003 were highly fragmented and differentiated. However, over the past twenty years, the education and training landscape in Ireland has changed radically with incremental, steady progress made toward the implementation of a cohesive and integrated tertiary education system. In 2012, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012, established QQI to replace four predecessor agencies. Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were created in 2013 and in 2014 the integration of training into the ETBs saw the dissolution of FAS and the creation of SOLAS. Mulvey describes the new FET sector as “a significant historical development within the Irish education and training landscape” (2019, p.156).

Subsequently, in 2016 and 2017, the adoption by QQI of a single set of Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines and common policy and criteria for programme validation replaced a range of approaches previously in operation across the sectors. The relatively recent establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), the National Apprenticeship Office supporting new apprenticeships spanning NFQ levels 5-10, the creation of a new National Tertiary Office within the HEA and related government strategy continue to reflect progress towards a unified tertiary education system in which access, transfer and progression *should* be easier and more straightforward for learners. Within this changing landscape, it must be acknowledged that the embedding of the NFQ and ATP policy has required significant administrative, academic and cultural change.

Section 2 (5) of the Quality and Qualifications (Education and Training Act) 2012, which established QQI, retained in large part the definitions of ATP set out in the preceding 1999 Act, with the exception of specifying that recognition refers to learning “previously” acquired. The upwards definition of progression was also retained, and consequently, so were the challenges associated with that narrower definition. These are elaborated further in Chapter 2.

The 2012 Act mandates QQI to develop policies for access, transfer and progression for learners and monitor the implementation of ATP procedures by providers. To that end, in 2015, QQI published a restatement of the original 2003 policy: [Access, Transfer and Progression in relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training](#). Notably, whilst the restated policy confirms that the original NQAI vision, principles and objectives for ATP remain “valid and relevant” (QQI, 2015, p. 3), these are not actually restated and the NQAI policy is no longer publicly available. The result is that the broader and more holistic ambition for ATP articulated by the NQAI in terms of successful learner participation and award achievement are currently absent from the ATP policy landscape.

The current (restated) ATP policy sets out requirements for education and training providers under four main areas: credit, transfer and progression routes, entry arrangements and information provision as set out in the diagram below:

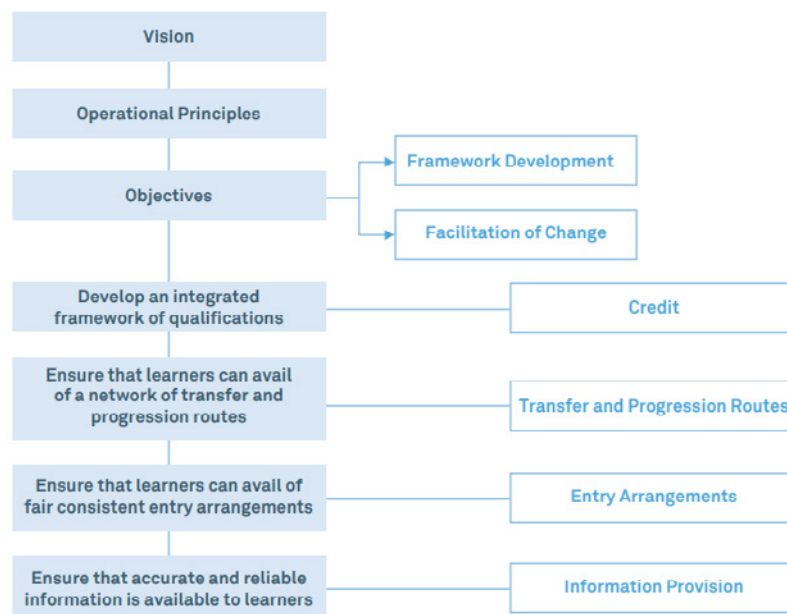


Figure 4: Structure of QQI's restated ATP Policy (extracted from QQI ATP policy, 2021a, p.4)

Under the ATP policy, QQI requires providers to make certain information regarding entry arrangements and criteria for programmes, options for transfer and progression and the awards to which programmes lead available to learners:

To ensure the maximum effect of the framework in promoting transparency and clarity for learners, ... [and] ... to ensure that learners and prospective learners are able to get comprehensive information on the possibilities for access, transfer and progression in a clear, straightforward and consistent manner (p. 8).

The restated policy is intended to inform the development of local ATP policies and procedures by providers. The monitoring by QQI of providers' implementation of access, transfer, and progression primarily occurs through provider QA approval processes, programme approval (validation) and through cyclical review of providers' quality assurance systems (QQI, 2021a).

A review of QA approval reports ([reengagement](#) and [initial access](#) for new providers) indicates that ATP is not a significant focus in the QA approval process. The process is compliance focused and seeks to determine that relevant policies and procedures are in place. Provider ATP policies are typically written at a high level of generality and reflect a certain level of abstraction. The detail in provider ATP procedures comes into more acute focus in the context of particular programmes and cohorts of learners as evaluated in programme validation processes. At this juncture, ATP moves from being a conversation about compliance to implementation in a specific context. The focus in programme validation is on ensuring that learners admitted to a programme have the capacity to successfully participate and achieve the associated learning outcomes. How other designated awarding bodies in the State consider ATP as part of their own programme approval processes was not available to the project team.

ATP is not a formal category for reporting in QQI's annual quality report process for HEIs, though many HEIs report on aspects of their ATP related activities under other related headings, such as supports for learners (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2). Private, independent and voluntary sector FET and HET providers have yet to undergo cyclical QA review by QQI, where the implementation and impact of approved policies and procedures are evaluated. All public FET and the majority of public HET providers have now completed an external QA review by QQI. These reviews considered (somewhat briefly) ATP. Outcomes and findings in this area are discussed in Chapter 2.

1.4 EVALUATING IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

This review is not the first study to consider implementation of national ATP policies and procedures. In 2008, the NQAI commissioned a review of implementation to date of the Framework and related policies on ATP and of their initial impact. The resulting [Framework Implementation and Impact Study in 2009](#) found that:

*... the full implementation of the Framework including the wider use of learning outcomes and the **further development of awards and standards at Levels 1-6 is critical to the establishment and use of pathways throughout the Framework.** Action in these areas would complement the significant attention paid by the Qualifications Authority and awarding bodies to progression into higher education and training. **An assessment of overall progress on access, transfer and progression was hindered by the lack of data available to the Study Team.** However, there is **evidence that progression routes into higher education and training have increased and have become more transparent.** There is considerable interest in and demand for the recognition of prior learning (RPL), but there are **inconsistencies in policies and use of RPL, gaps in the communication of policies and in the development of credit** (NQAI, 2009, p. vi) [emphasis added].*

Whilst the Study was concerned with the wider implementation and impact of the NFQ, the Study Team made a number of recommendations relevant to ATP:

9. The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers should work to improve transparency and consistency in the interpretation and application of prior learning and in the communication of pathways other than the Leaving Certificate into higher education and training.

10. Inconsistencies in the operation and application of RPL that present barriers to progression should be addressed. Action should be taken by the Qualifications Authority and awarding bodies to:

- encourage institutions and providers in further and higher education and training to clarify the contexts and circumstances in which RPL is available
- promote awareness and knowledge of institutional and sectoral arrangements for RPL amongst users
- explore the potential to develop cross-sectoral and cross institutional brokerage services for RPL for learners – develop and implement transparent sector-wide approaches to RPL.

11. The Qualifications Authority and relevant bodies should address a range of issues associated with the operation of credit, including:

- the need to develop common arrangements to ensure that different credit systems are compatible with each other
- the need for consistency in the association of credit volume with titles of awards
- the need to fully implement a credit system for further education and training awards and to ensure that it is compatible with the emerging European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) (NQAI, 2009, pp. 53-54).

19. **Existing gaps in data, both qualitative and quantitative, on the availability and use of pathways and of their outcomes for learners**, and on the implementation of the Framework by institutions and providers should be addressed. In particular, so as to establish the value of the Framework from a learner perspective, it is **recommended that the Qualifications Authority embark on a longitudinal study of a cohort of learners as they navigate their way through the Framework. The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies, universities, the Higher Education Authority and Department of Education and Science should work together to address these gaps** (NQAI, 2009, p. 55). *[emphasis added]*

Whilst some of these recommendations have been addressed in the intervening period, particularly those relating to credit, a number remain outstanding as indicated in the documentation examined as part of this review. As set out in Chapter 3, a national policy approach to RPL remains outstanding. As reflected in Chapters 2 and 3, learners and practitioners report an opaqueness around how the variety of existing pathways into higher education (aside from the Leaving Cert) operate and can be accessed and there are significant gaps in the quantitative and qualitative data available to inform policy and decision makers on the effectiveness of current ATP approaches and interventions.

Despite these gaps, it is clear from the available data that progress has been made in increasing participation and widening access in the twenty years since the ATP policy was first published. For example, according to the OECD, “Ireland is one of the 14 OECD countries where at least half of 25-34 year-olds have a tertiary education” (OECD, 2022, p. 2).

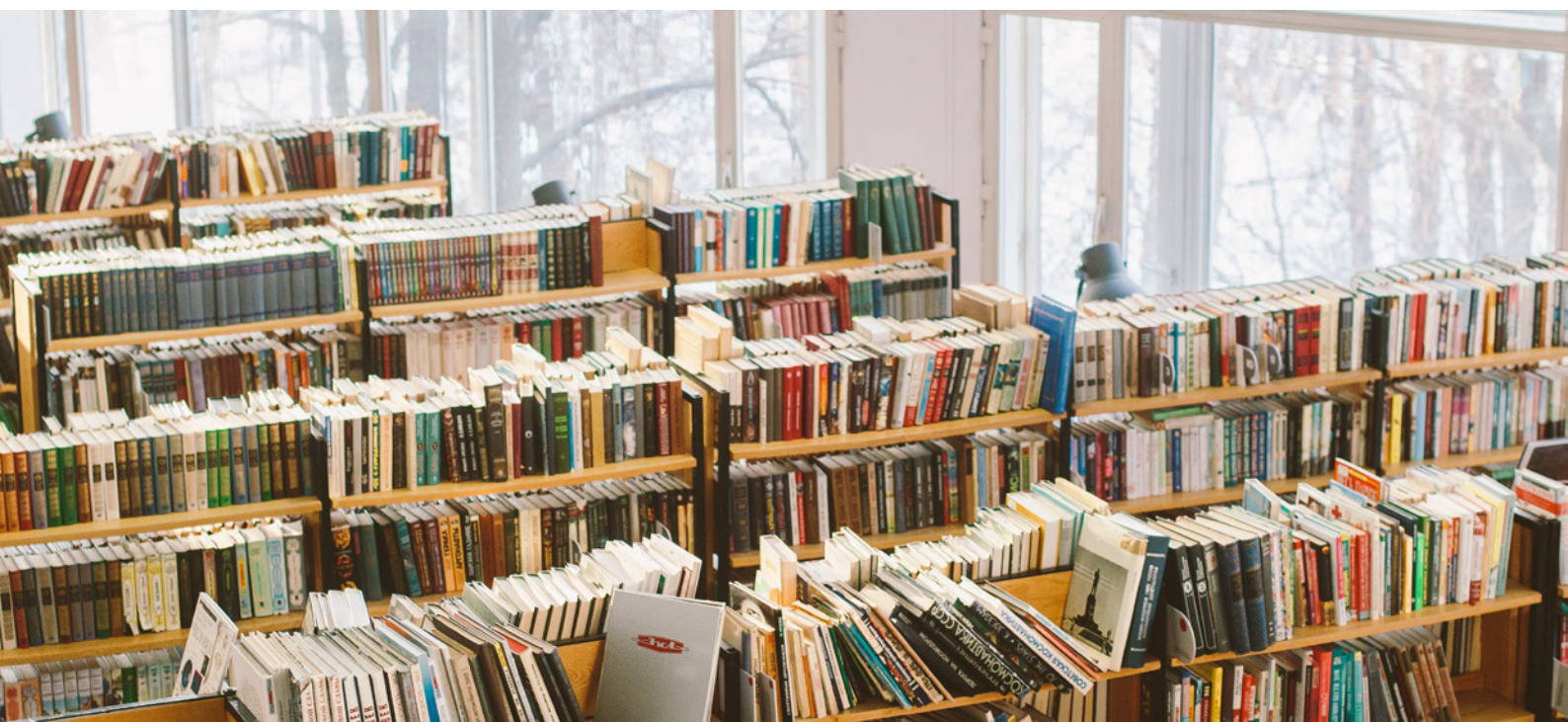
A significant question which the project team sought to address, but which remained elusive was the capacity of the tertiary education system to meet learner demand, especially demand for HET places from non-traditional learners transitioning with FET awards. We know the demand, capacity and gaps or shortfalls for school leavers within the CAO system. This enables the State to make informed decisions related to strategy, funding and employment or labour market needs. What seems less clear (at least publicly) is the level of demand for HET places from FET award holders, even when those learners come through the CAO system. Some HEIs, such as ATU, have very clearly published information on the number of FET places available on each programme annually and how these can be accessed by learners. But this level of detail is not consistently available across the sector. Where this information is published, it is clear that there are very limited places available on programmes, even on those in high-demand areas for FET graduates such as nursing (between 1 and 4 places on average in ATU for example). The lack of centrally located and

publicly available data hinders the establishment of a complete understanding of where demand for places outstrips capacity and thereby limits the State's responsiveness to meeting learners' educational ambitions. The lack of centralised and readily available data on this may also mean that learners undertaking FET programmes may not be adequately informed regarding the degree of competition they should expect to face when attempting to progress to HET.

Research into the experiences of students underrepresented in third level education in Ireland suggests there is work to be done to extend the focus of the access agenda beyond supporting entry to the system. The published literature offering insights into the experiences of learners post-entry and direct contributions to the review suggest placing greater emphasis on the adaptations and supports required to facilitate student success is warranted, particularly in HET. This is brought to the fore in the project team's exploration of the learner experience of ATP in Chapter 4.

The findings of this project team align with recommendations made by the OECD (2023) and also with the objectives set out in *Funding the Future* (DFHERIS, 2022c) and *Future FET* (SOLAS, 2020b) in suggesting that alongside continued efforts to facilitate entry to the system, emphasis needs to be placed on inclusive practice across the entirety of the learner journey. It is important to state that such a finding is not 'new'. Rather, it echoes the recommendations found across the educational research literature (both local and international) and represents an approach to ATP that practitioners on the ground have long advocated for.

What may be novel in the history of ATP in Ireland is the level of consensus now converging around this position, which is facilitating greater (and perhaps unprecedented) levels of cross institutional and cross-sectoral collaboration. An example of this is the collaborative development of a national universal design charter (UD for 3) supported by Path 4 funding, highlighted in this report in Chapter 3. Notably, such adaptations and supports will better facilitate *all* students, not only those identified as underrepresented in the system.





CHAPTER 2.

CHAPTER 2: LEARNER PATHWAYS

The project team, following a review of a wide range of secondary documentation and public webpages, identified eleven broad categories of ATP pathways through the qualifications system. These are depicted visually in subsequent subsections. A variety of individual pathways or networks may exist within any one given category identified here.

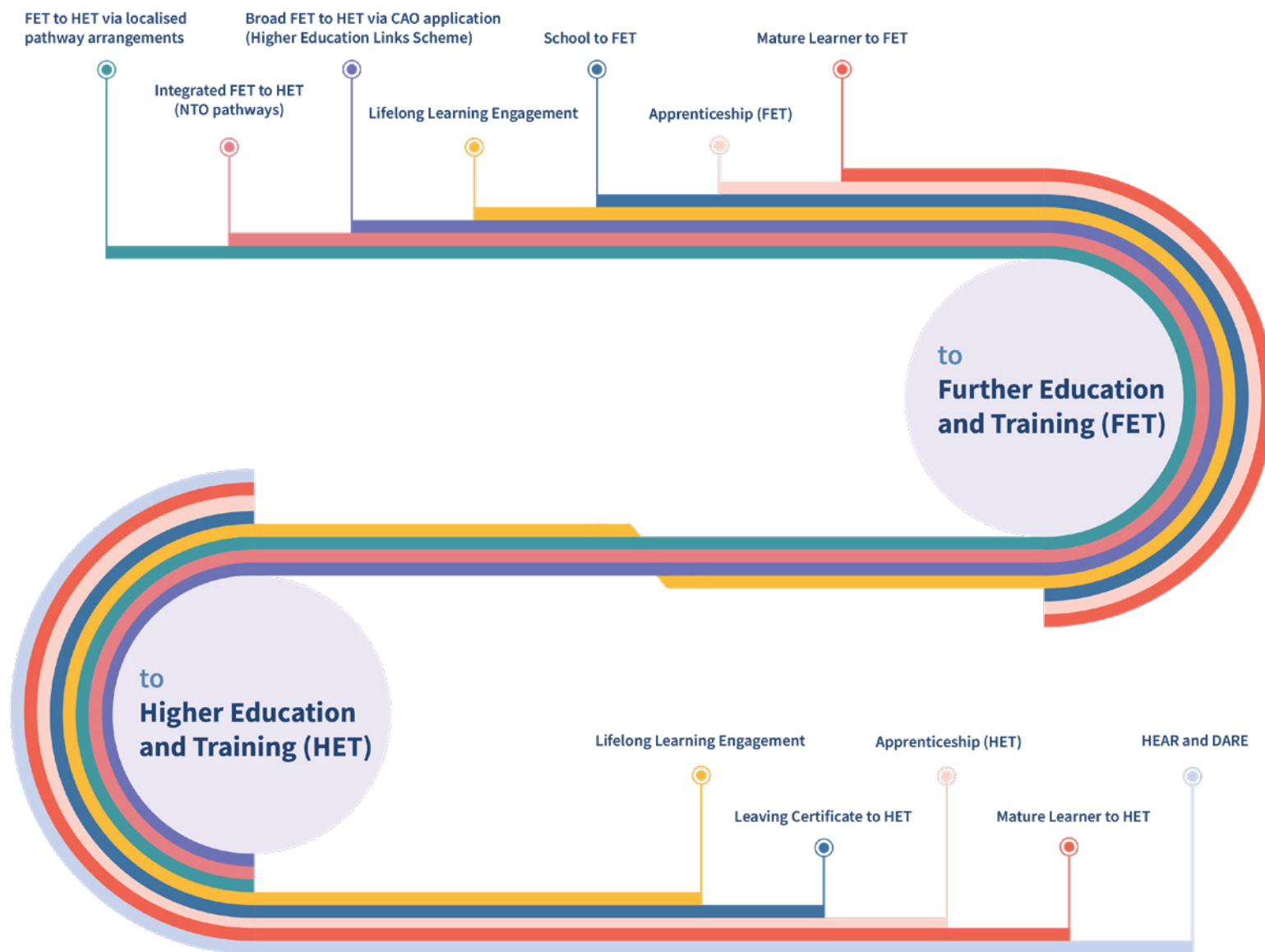
The project team notes that whilst these broad categories provide a useful lens through which to visualise the primary pathways used by learners to navigate the qualifications system, they may mask significant complexity within that system. For example, although the pathways available to learners and associated funding supports are typically discrete, it is important to recognise that the identities of learners are frequently intersectional. For example, UCD has reported that 30.5% of its access students are in more than one access group (Fleming et al., 2022, p.66). Stakeholders have also noted that this complexity creates challenges for ascertaining, for example, the rate of FET to HET transitions with precision:

FET is incredibly diverse ... often the FET link is overlooked due to applicants pursuing other access pathways (e.g. mature, socioeconomic, disadvantaged cohorts) on the basis of previously attained Leaving Certificate qualifications, including via the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) or the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) schemes (DoES, 2020, p.10).

In summarising these pathways, the project team notes the challenges reported by learners, practitioners working in the access space (including guidance professionals), and, indeed, by the team itself, in both identifying and navigating these pathways. Information on the wide variety of means by which qualifications in the tertiary education system can be accessed by learners is not centrally collated; it changes annually in some cases and is quite complex overall.

In consequence, although huge efforts have been made to create pathways for learners across the sector, the wider ATP objective of bringing transparency and simplicity to the qualifications system and information on it for learners is not being achieved.

2.1 ALL PATHWAYS



Pathways to Further and Higher Education and Training in Ireland, 2023

Figure 5: Pathways through Tertiary Education and Training

PATHWAY 1

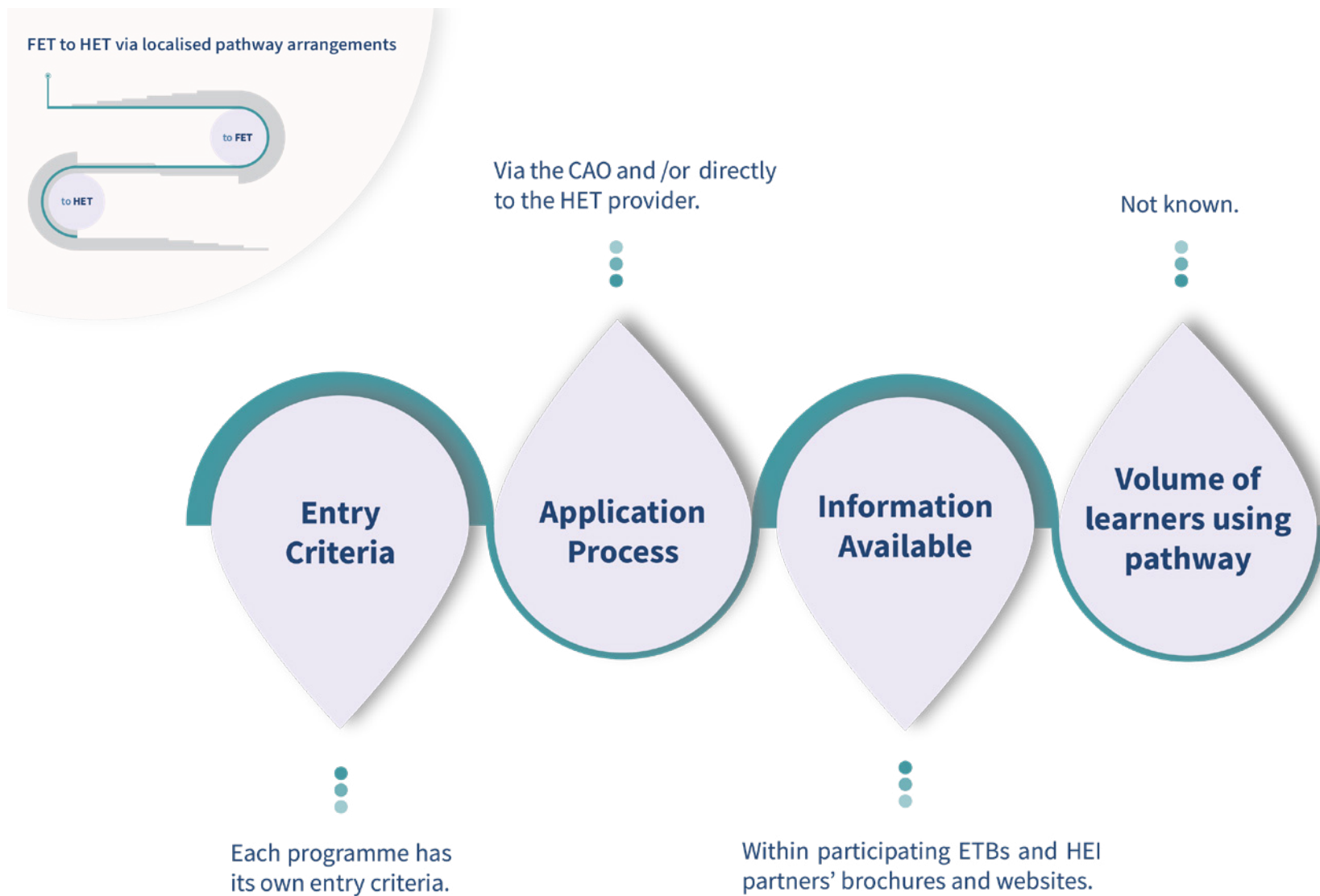


Figure 6: FET to HET via Localised Pathway Arrangements

PATHWAY 2

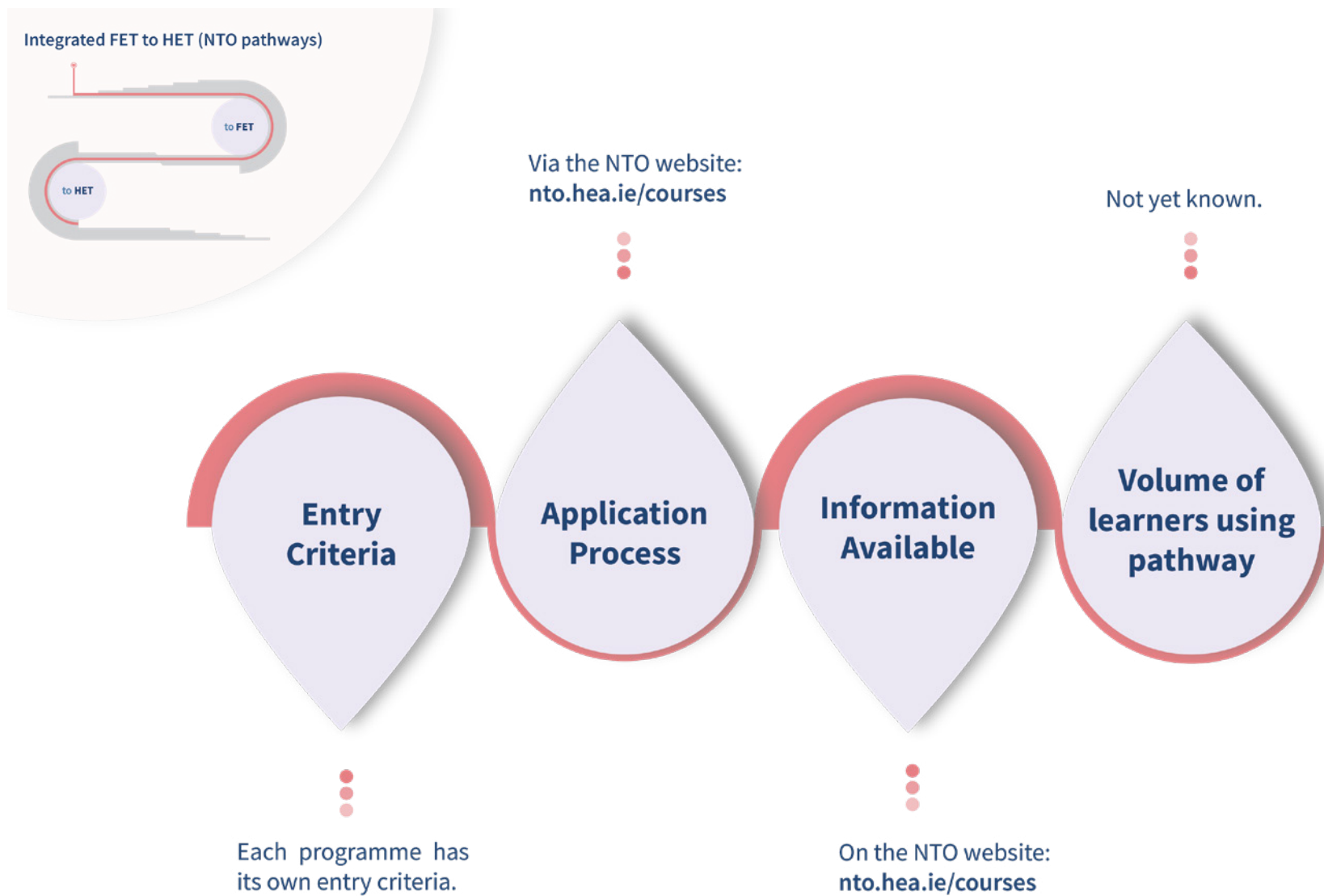


Figure 7: Integrated FET to HET Pathways

PATHWAY 3

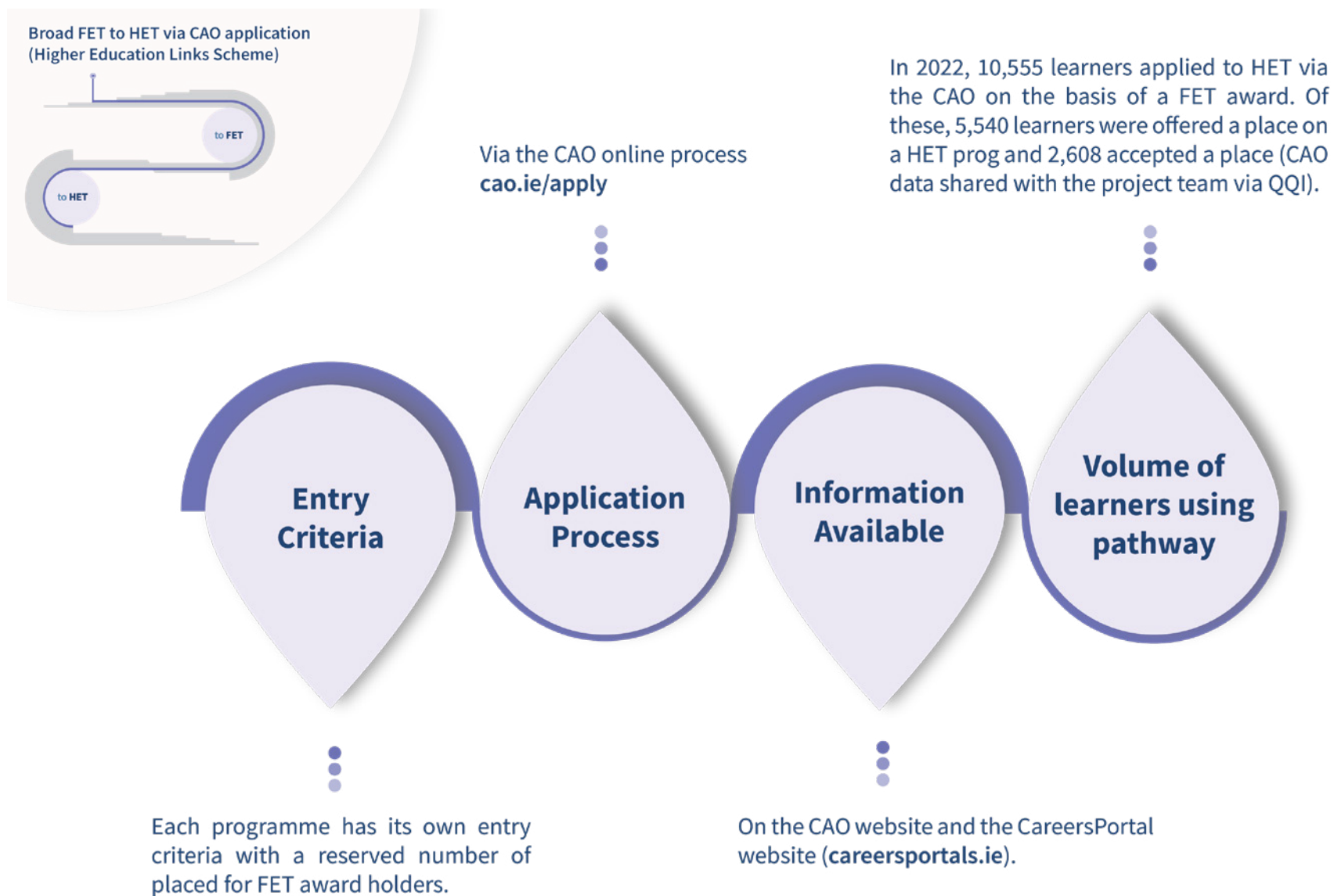


Figure 8: Broad FET to HET via CAO Pathways

PATHWAY 4

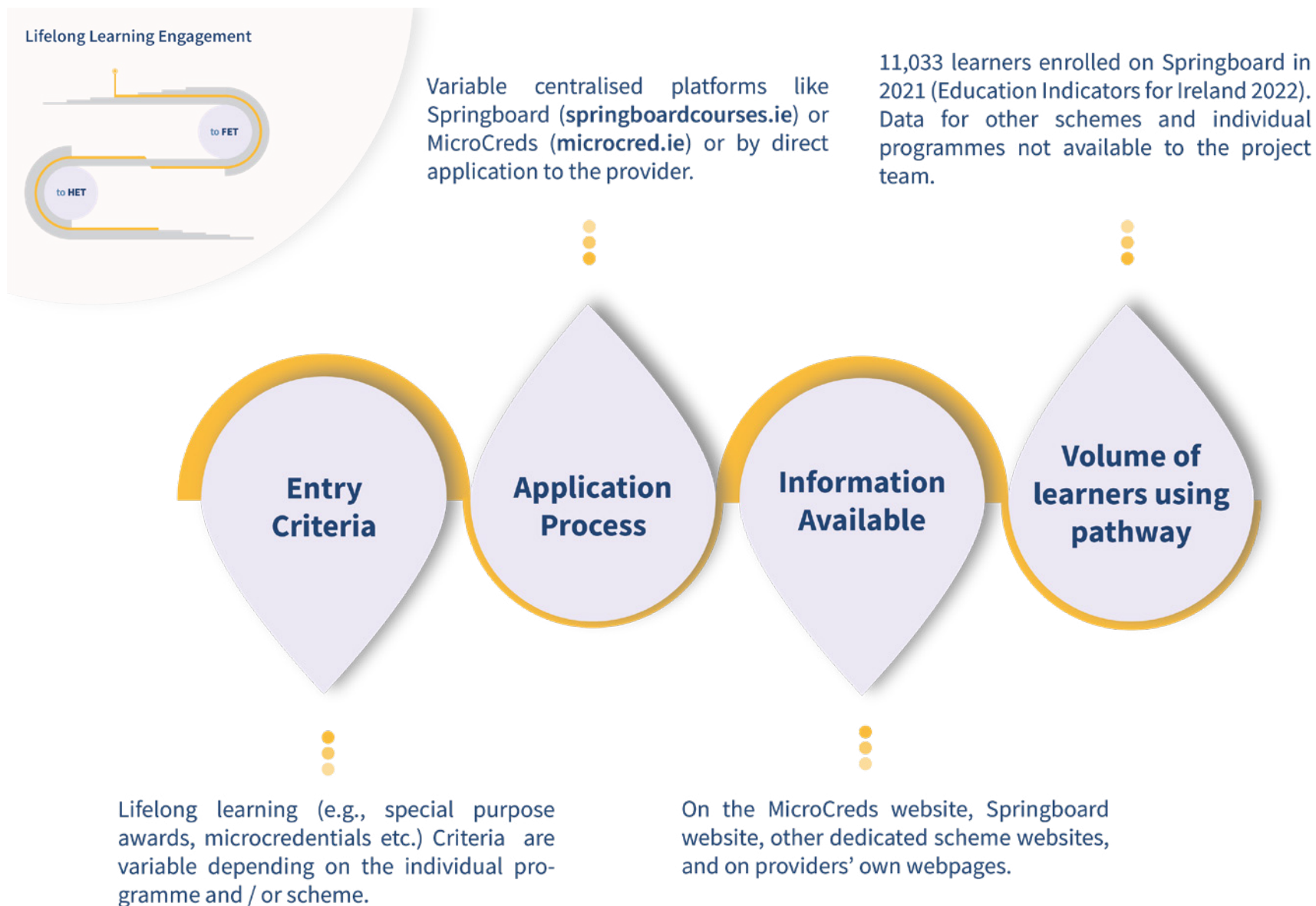
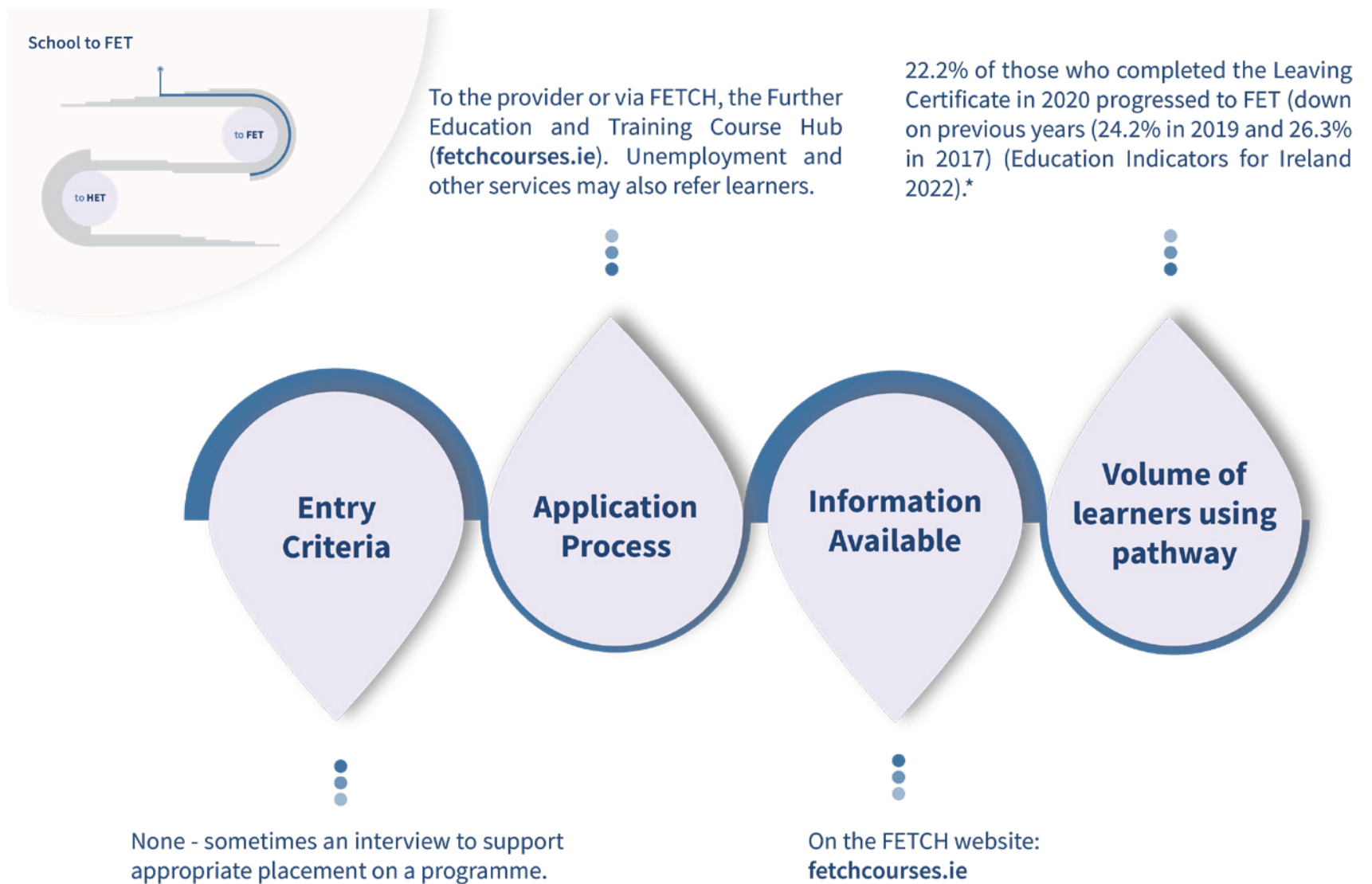


Figure 9: Lifelong Learning Engagement

PATHWAY 5³



*Precise figures for early school leavers who transition directly

Figure 10: School to FET Pathways

3 *Precise figures for early school leavers who transition directly to FET are not visible in the data available to the project team.

PATHWAY 6

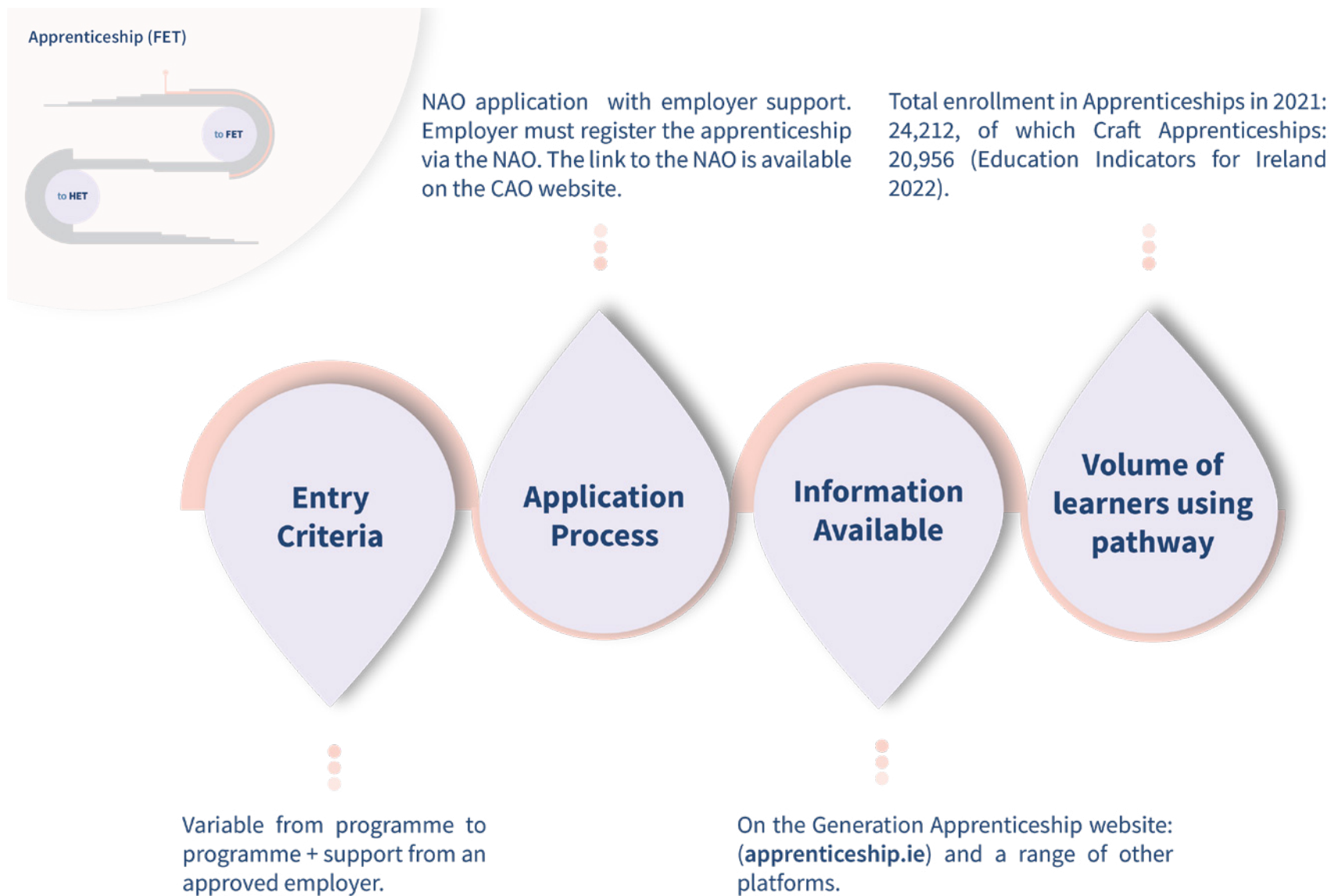


Figure 11: Apprenticeship (FET) Pathways

PATHWAY 7 ⁴

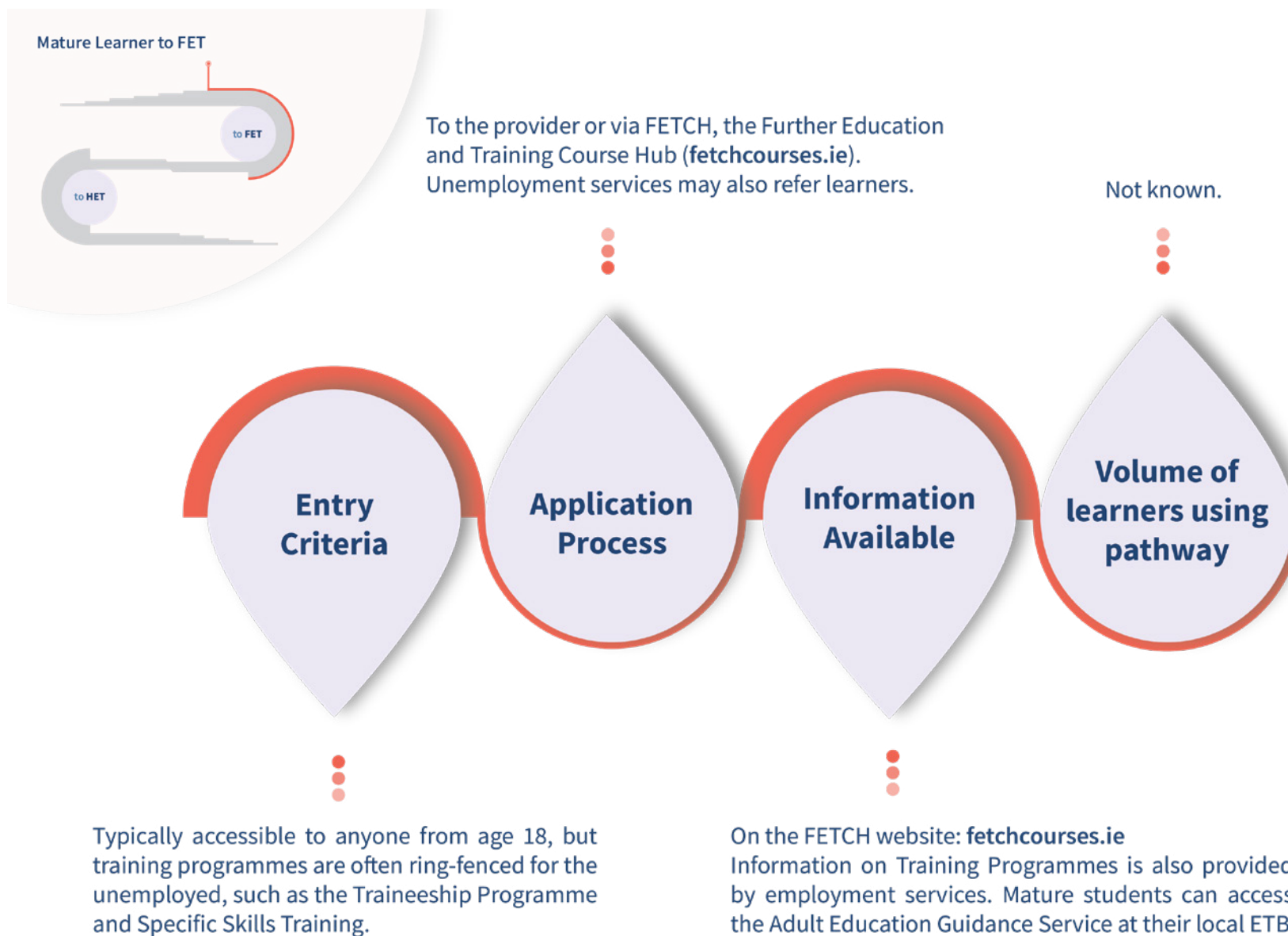


Figure 12: Mature Learner to FET Pathways

⁴ There were 129,805 learners with a start age of 25+ in 2022 (SOLAS, 2022). The number of learners who entered FET aged 18-25 is unknown.

PATHWAY 8

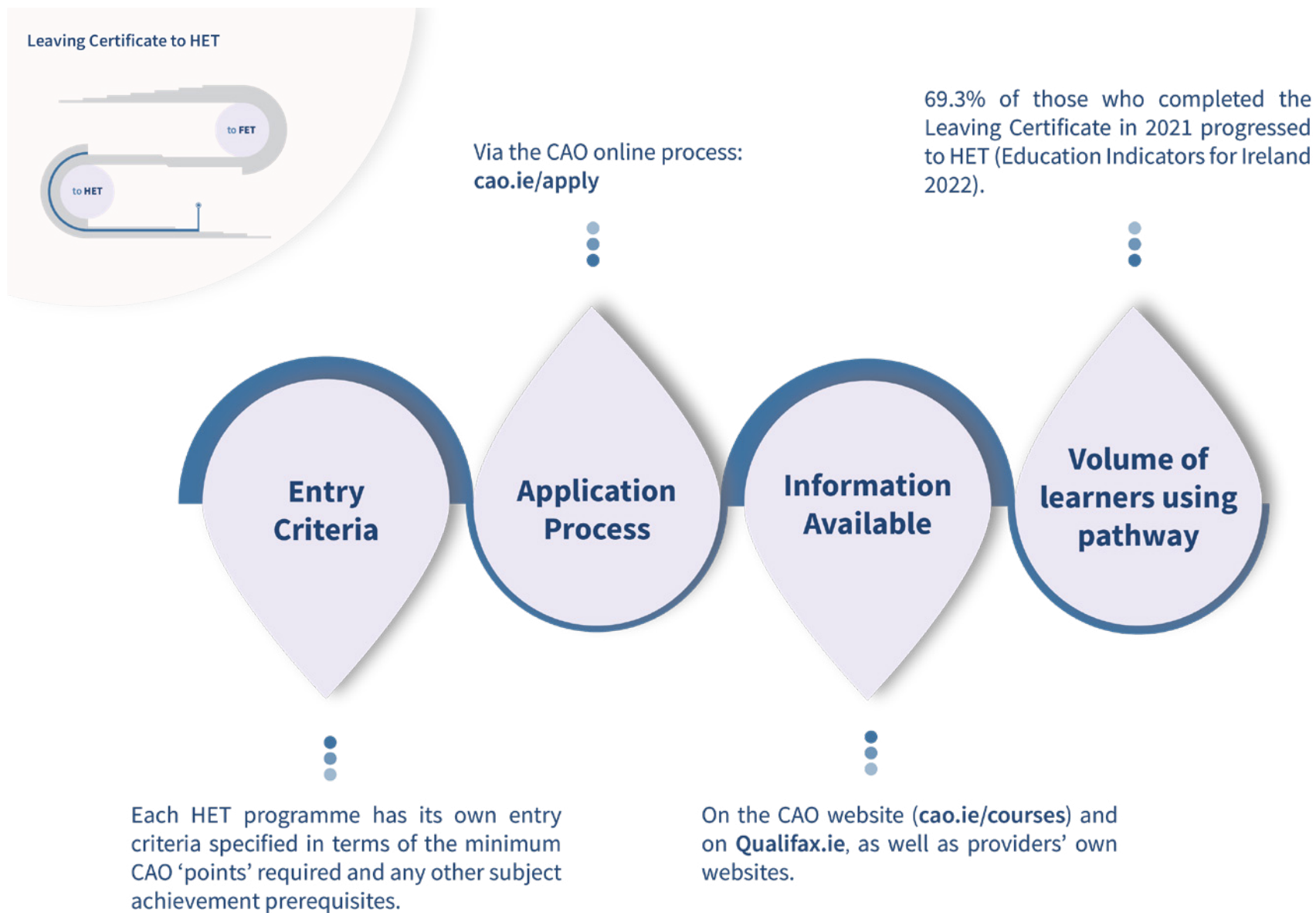


Figure 13: Leaving Certificate to HET Pathway

PATHWAY 9

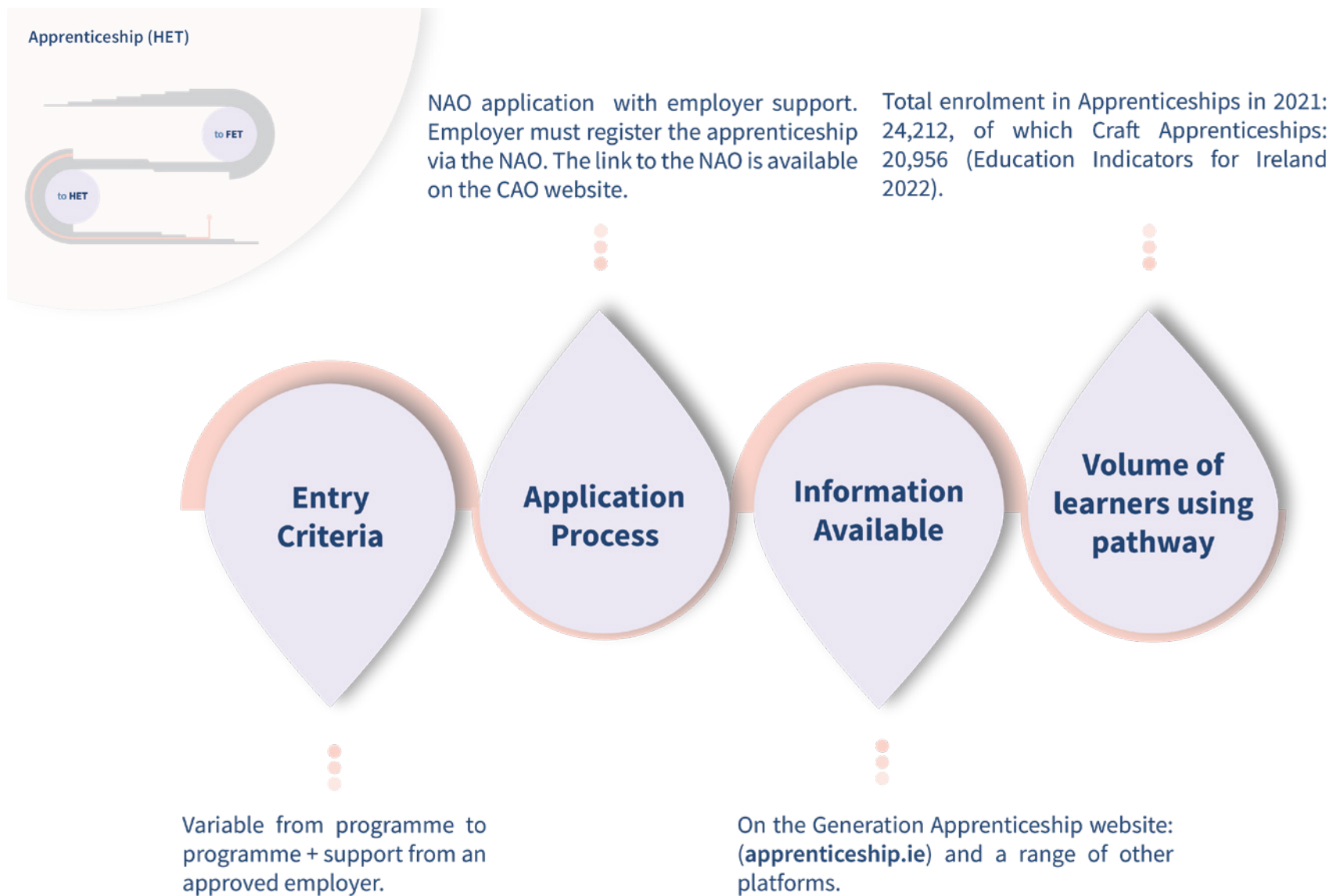


Figure 14: Apprenticeship (HET) Pathway

PATHWAY 10

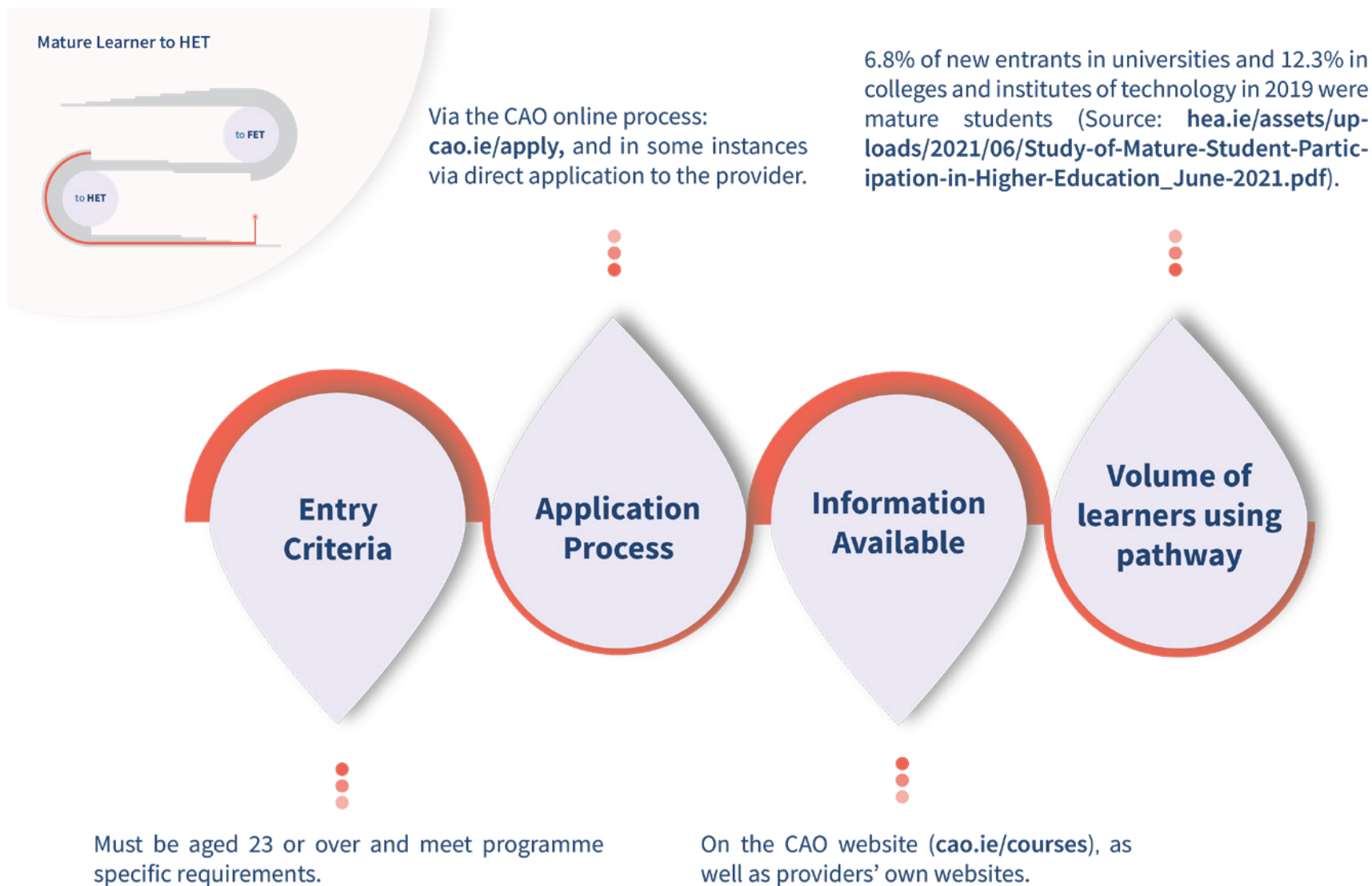


Figure 15: Mature Learners to HET Pathways

PATHWAY 11

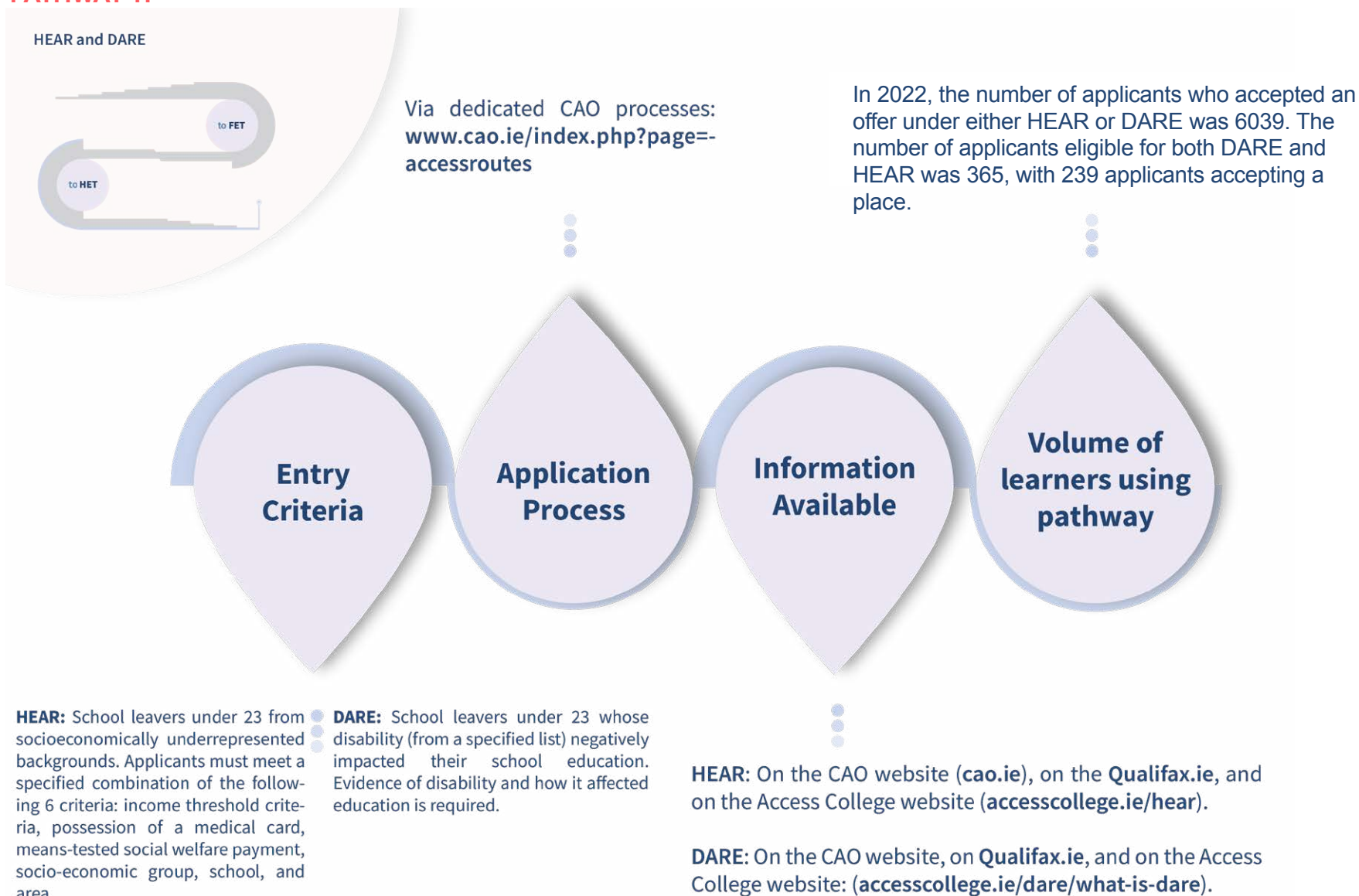


Figure 16: HEAR and DARE Scheme to Pathways

2.1 LIFELONG LEARNING AND NON-LINEAR PROGRESSION

The legal definition, set out in the 2012 Act (and earlier legislation and policy), links progression with upward movement through the 10 levels on the NFQ. As outlined in Chapter 1, this notion of upward progression through the qualifications system was reflected in other national policies and strategies, for example in relation to upskilling. However, in practice, learner engagement with the qualifications system is not always so one-directional. Upskilling and/retraining may very well take the form of pursuing awards at the same or lower NFQ level than the highest award already held by the learner. This has implications for eligibility criteria for funding schemes and related mechanisms that enable learner progression. For example, although recent data was not available a published evaluation of the Springboard+ programme for the period 2011-2016 indicated that although the majority of participants held previously obtained HET awards, with over half of those at NFQ Level 8 and above, 85% undertook programmes at NFQ Level 8 and below (HEA 2016).

The project team therefore suggests that the conceptualisation of learner progression as exclusively upward is unlikely to continue to support national ambitions around lifelong learning, as already acknowledged by stakeholders in the community and adult education sector (AONTAS, 2023, p.12) and the Department of Education and Skills:

In considering FET-transitions, it is critical to recognise that there is often not 'upwards' linear relationship in the way in which learners engage with FET and HE. Analysis of movement across award levels within FET has shown a pattern of learners moving up and down NFQ levels, and there is qualitative and quantitative evidence of those with HE qualifications using FET to upskill or reskill in key areas, with around 2,000 PLC students per annum recorded as having some form of HE experience. With a lifelong learning approach so critical to future economic and societal development, the engagement in multiple courses at different NFQ levels across both FET and HE will be expected to expand significantly (DoES, 2020, p.24)

The project team is of the view that this should be addressed, as the notion of upward progression is not only embedded in legislation, but also informs how learners are funded. For example, SUSI Grant eligibility requires upwards only progression - learners must be enrolling on a programme leading to an award at a higher level than the highest award they already hold:

You must be progressing in your education by attending an approved course:

- *that leads to a higher level of qualification than any you may already hold;*
- *that is at a higher level than any course you may have previously attended*

(SUSI, 2023).

The inevitable result of such approaches is that learners seeking to upskill or retrain at the same or lower NFQ level may be deterred from doing so through lack of funding opportunities.



CHAPTER 3.

CHAPTER 3: ATP IN PRACTICE

In this chapter, we traverse the wide landscape of ATP practice in Ireland, focusing on how ATP has been implemented ‘on the ground’. In doing so, we consider how the wider ATP toolkit of credit, the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and information and guidance for learners have been employed by institutions and practitioners. We highlight some of the significant achievements across the tertiary landscape to date, including initiatives that reflect an understanding of ATP as a holistic and cross-institutional or cross-sectoral endeavour. In the process we identify a number of ongoing challenges to be addressed.

The documentation available to the project team highlighted a number of challenges to, and opportunities for, successful ATP implementation, which are outlined in the sub-sections below. Some of these are particular to either FET or HET and are therefore discussed in sections specific to each area. Others apply across the tertiary sector as a whole. It is important to note, however, that this report is the outcome of a time bound review of published material and voluntary contributions. It does not represent primary research or direct engagement with stakeholders over an extended period of time. As such, the issues identified below may not represent the entirety of the concerns to be addressed, nor achievements to be highlighted.

In addition to drawing upon published research, reports and available data, this chapter is informed by direct responses to an open call for submissions to the review of ATP practice in Ireland made by QQI in May 2023. This chapter therefore draws upon the dedicated work of many committed practitioners. It brings together findings from a breadth of previously published analyses, policy documents, quality assurance and research reports as well as sources of quantitative data. These reference points have been supplemented by a number of documentary submissions to QQI from stakeholders across the sector who responded to a call for contributions and case studies of ATP practice. The work of the project team was further informed by meetings with a range of stakeholders in further education and training (FET), higher education and training (HET), relevant government agencies and non-governmental organisations.

3.1 ATP IN FET

The Irish FET sector has a long history of facilitating a diversity of learners to enter or return to the qualifications system, progress their educational ambitions and find employment. Programme provision ranges from community outreach programmes offering literacy and numeracy development to specialised healthcare, technical and work based learning programmes such as apprenticeships and traineeships in software development. Traditionally, FET has operated an ‘open door’ policy. Although learners can access valuable individual guidance to support them in finding and selecting appropriate courses, barriers to entry have been intentionally limited. A number of direct submissions to this review contained learner testimonials that highlighted the positive impact of the work of dedicated educators and guidance practitioners across the FET sector. Nonetheless, a number of challenges and associated opportunities can be identified for ATP practice in FET.

3.1.1 FET PROGRAMME PROFILES

The project team undertook an in-depth review of documentation (including self-evaluation reports and review reports and recommendations) arising from the recent QQI QA reviews of the 16 ETBs, as well as wider FET sector reports.

The majority of new programmes developed by the ETB sector in recent years are in the area of apprenticeship. At the time of writing, there is only one new national programme developed by DDLETB in collaboration with other ETBs in the area of Early Childhood Education. Driven by the apprenticeship action plan, which expands apprenticeships beyond the traditional craft model, ETBs have also been collaborating on the development of new apprenticeship programmes, with most ETBs involved. Three review reports recommended the establishment of Curriculum Development Units within ETBs (WWETB, TETB and KWETB) in order to update existing programmes and develop new programmes, while other reviews such as LCETB's recommended ETBs should work together to address this issue.

A prominent issue discussed in those reports and in the Sectoral Report on Quality Assurance of Further Education and Training in the ETB Sector (QQI, 2023, p. 18) was the outdated nature of some programmes in the FET sector. Thirteen of the review reports highlight that the current CAS programmes are dated, and that the challenges in developing new programmes in the sector has a negative impact on ATP. While ETBs have attempted to update programme content, they cannot change the stated learning outcomes in award specifications, which severely limits the amendments that can be made to curricula. This has the potential to impact on progression opportunities to both employment and HET, as graduates are emerging from programmes with dated curricula. Similarly, a 2022 review of consortia-led apprenticeships in Ireland highlighted the challenges associated with new programme development, which entails a significant workload and can be especially challenging when a consortium has limited resources or prior experience in this area (McManus, Peck & Vickery, 2022).

Some ETBs are increasingly offering non-QQI awards (e.g., City and Guilds) for more updated and quickly developed programmes to meet industry and employer needs. However, learners completing programmes leading to alternative non-NFQ awards will not benefit directly from the portability of credits at a framework level (the imminent introduction by QQI of a process whereby other awarding bodies in the State can become [Listed Awarding Bodies](#) whose awards are included in the NFQ may address this issue). Compounding this issue, the QA review reports indicated that no ETB (as yet) had a systematic or strategic approach to reviewing the CAS programmes in operation. Review reports indicated that most ETBs address programmes when the need arises and the issue is raised by a centre. Eight ETB review reports make recommendations in this regard.

The project team understands that QQI and ETBI are currently discussing possible approaches to resolving the issue of high numbers of outdated CAS programmes, which negatively impact transfer and progression opportunities for learners. This will be a significant development, as demand for progression within FET is high. With the exception of statutory apprenticeships, FET courses tend to be of shorter duration than those in HE. This means that learners often enrol in multiple courses and often do so in the same year. For example, SOLAS identified that in 2018 there were 340,000 engagements in FET courses by 200,000 learners (SOLAS, 2020, p.22).

To address these issues, SOLAS has also committed to substantially reducing the number of FET programmes over the lifetime of the current FET Strategy (2020-24):

The existing portfolio of 34 FET programmes is incredibly complex and confusing for the potential learner and undermines the credibility of FET as an option for school leavers and lifelong learners looking for appropriate education opportunities. An ecosystem of eligibility criteria, operational guidelines, staff terms and conditions and funding has grown up around each of these individual programmes. This has led to a very silo-based approach to delivery, with the result that the offering to the learner across FET can be very inconsistent (2020: p. 52).

This issue was recognised as a serious impediment to creating clear progression pathways within FET on part-time and full-time programmes. The Strategy sets out how a clearer learning pathway, articulated on the basis of NFQ level and programme purpose will be developed as follows:

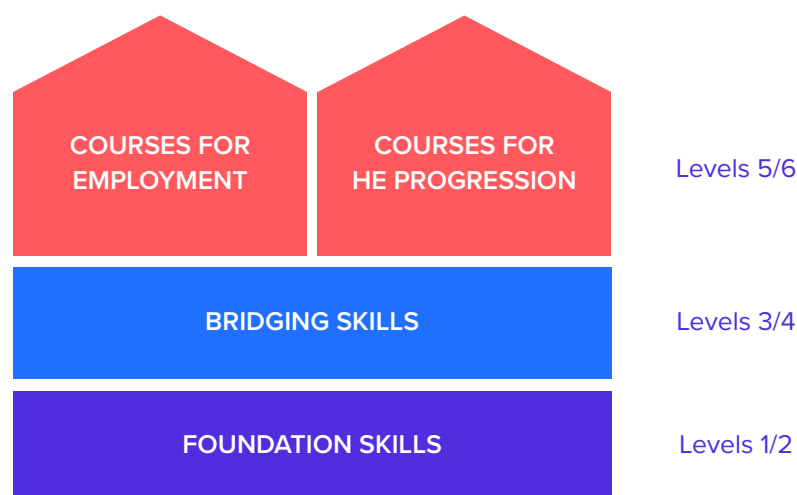



Figure 17: FET Strategy Learning Pathways. Image Extracted from: *Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-24* (SOLAS 2020) p.53

In addition, the SOLAS FET Strategy will see the creation of progression pathways through the levels, which will be enhanced by the creation of a FET College. The Strategy states that “closer links and pathways between the different levels of FET provision will be facilitated by continuing to concentrate FET provision in larger centre and college facilities”(2020, p. 52).

SOLAS has also increased its focus on lifelong learning and the creation of part-time, flexible and modular study options, as well as the creation of progression pathways to further study in FET and HET as well as to employment (2020).

Lifelong Learner



“I have local access to education opportunities that I can dip in and out of whenever my life and career requires.”

#FutureFET will mean:

- I will have access to year-round learning options in a local FET centre or college where I can share my experience with other learners
- Part-time options will be available at Level 5 and Level 6 to allow me to re-skill or up-skill and enter a new career or provide a pathway to further study in FET or HE
- I can access my learning in bitesize chunks, taking modules and courses that fit with my personal and working commitments, that enable me to also build my credits and credentials over time
- Learning opportunities will be available in flexible modes, allowing me to study in my own time using technology wherever appropriate, and a range of blended and online options will be accessible from an eCollege portal
- A range of providers will offer me a variety of community education options which can link to longer-term pathways within FET and beyond
- The outcomes of all the learning I undertake can be recognised
- I will be able to track and plan my past, current and future learning in FET and easily understand the courses that may be most relevant to my needs
- Learner support and guidance will be tailored to my individual needs and available within my local community setting

Figure 18: FET Strategy Supporting Lifelong Learning. Image Extracted from: *Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-24* (SOLAS 2020) p.10

3.1.2 FET PROGRAMME PROCESSES AND SUPPORTS

Although the ‘open door’ policy may frame overarching practices, the documentation reviewed by the project team indicated that within this, ETBs do not operate a common system for assessing the suitability of a learner for a particular programme before they enrol, both internally and across the ETB network. Therefore, no consistent procedures are in place to assess a learner’s ability to successfully engage with a particular programme and achieve an award. Individual services within the FET system may conduct their own entry assessments through interviews or other methods, but there are no common processes across all FET programmes within a given ETB or across all ETBs for a specific programme.

As FET provision develops to respond to technological advances, automation of work practices and address the digital divide, it is reasonable to anticipate that some FET courses, and particularly those at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, will need to clearly define the prerequisite knowledge, skills or competences a learner should have to enjoy a reasonable chance of succeeding and assess this prior to enrolment. This is also a validation requirement for QQI. Two ETB review reports recommend the development of such a policy (WWETB and MSLETB). Although aspects of the open door approach may be desirable to maintain and an important mechanism for engaging

with particular cohorts of potential learners, the current impact of not having such a system in place on learner retention and certification outcomes warrants further exploration.

Post entry, the supports available to learners are known to be inconsistent. A sectoral report on the outcomes of QA reviews of the ETBs published by QQI in March 2023 indicates that there is a lack of consistency in the support services available to learners in FET following enrolment (p. 14). The impact of this inconsistency on retention and award achievement is unclear. For example, disability support services are limited to eight of the 14 FET colleges in Dublin and while there are some supports available to VTOS, BETI and PLC learners (different depending on the programme funding), there are none available to learners on training programmes in the main.

The project team was provided with access to data collected from ETBs pertaining to post-award progression opportunities for learners. Although the data reflected a considerable effort to draw information together, its value was limited as it did not differentiate between formal articulation agreements, progression pathways with reserved places for FET graduates or progression opportunities that were in effect places that learners could compete for if they wished after having met the stated entry requirements on the basis of their FET award. The project team observed that the information presented, if provided to learners in a similar format, was somewhat concerning. This was because it did not make clear whether learners would be guaranteed an opportunity to progress to the programmes identified upon successful completion or would be competing with learners from other ETBs for a very limited number of places (capacity is not specified).

Moving forward, QQI may wish to give due consideration to how it will monitor ATP practice in the FET sector and support the ETBs to work toward consistency of opportunity and experience for learners nationally. Ideally, this would complement the system of Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and the ETBs and the strategic dialogue process that was established for the further education and training system over the period 2018-2020.

The agreements contain individual ETB contributions to six core national FET system targets, including one focused on progression to higher education. This has articulated ETB plans for more learners to transition to other further or higher education courses, with particular focus on bridging pathways through FET and PLC to HE mobility (DoES, 2020, p.7).

3.1.3 FET FUNDING STREAMS

An additional challenge for FET is that current funding streams entail distinct eligibility requirements that can act as a barrier to ATP. SOLAS recognises that the funding for VTOS, Community Education, BTEI, Youthreach, Training and PLC courses impose different conditions, eligibility and entry requirements, which can limit the ability of learners to move between streams.

In its Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-24 Strategy, SOLAS points to the inconsistency of this experience for learners, noting that a learner on an NFQ Level 5 PLC course can avail of a SUSI support grant as a HET student would. However, a learner commencing an NFQ Level 5 traineeship must sign on as unemployed if they are to receive a training allowance. Such issues are noted to reinforce cultural issues surrounding the credibility of FET (SOLAS, 2020, p.45). The strategy outlines that the Future FET Strategy, when fully implemented, will address this:

From the perspective of a school leaver:

The financial support I receive in FET will be the same regardless of the course I do and will be consistent with what I would receive with an HE choice (SOLAS, 2020, p. 9).

From the perspective of a returner:

The financial support I receive while engaging in FET will be clear and DEASP and ETB advice and support will be consistent and focused on meeting my long-term and development needs (SOLAS, 2020, p.13).

In its review of the current funding model, SOLAS outlines plans for a move away from the current differentiated approach:

The terms PLC, Traineeship, specific skills training, evening training and Back To Education Initiative are no longer officially used to describe this provision which typically covers levels 4 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Rather the focus is on the NFQ level, the discipline, and the outcome, in terms of whether the course principally prepares you to move straight into a career or to transition into a higher education degree programme (2022, p.51).

The project team is unable to ascertain the extent to which progress toward this has been achieved on the ground. Stakeholder inputs suggest that challenges persist because the circulars governing these streams are still operational and thus subject to review by EU and government auditors. As the current requirements of the programme budgets set conditions for VTOS, PLC and BTEI, these may be limiting the options for learners and impacting on the creation of progression pathways for learners. This is perhaps indicative of the complex challenges entailed in realising the ambitions of the Future FET strategy, in which ATP is inherent. These ambitions are set out graphically below.

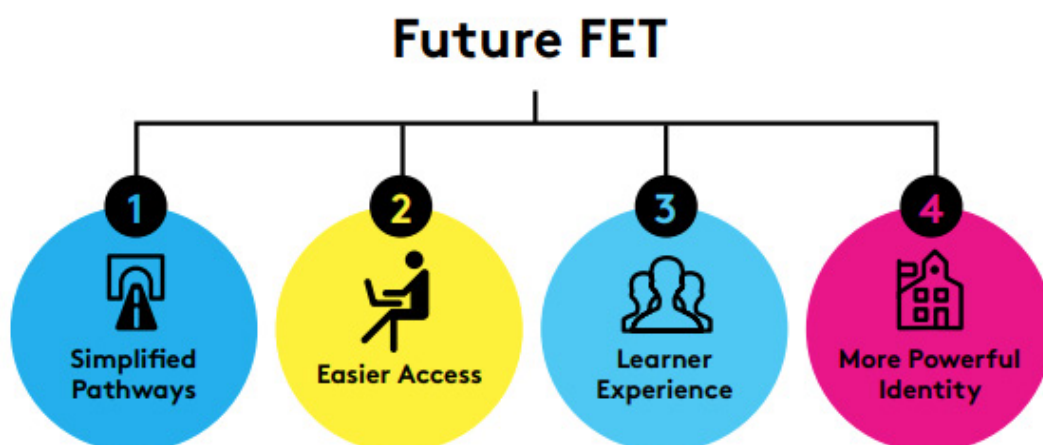


Figure 19: Future FET Ambitions. Image Extracted from: Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-24 (SOLAS 2020) p.8

3.1.4 FET AND HET AWARDS – PARITY OF TREATMENT FOR PROGRESSION PURPOSES

Although cultural issues surrounding perceptions of FET have been noted as a challenge to be overcome by SOLAS in its current strategy, the specific issue of parity of treatment of FET awards for progression purposes to HET is particularly significant. A recent Community Needs Analysis published by College Connect states that:

... despite the restructuring, the FET sector has an image problem, and FET in Ireland has often struggled to reconcile the economic and educational values of our society ... the standing and esteem in which FE is held by Irish society has stood in contrast to the higher esteem in which HE is held (Sartori and Bloom, 2023, p.20).

Raising the status of FET is a clearly stated priority for government, as indicated in the extract below from an article by Minister Harris in the Education Matters 2022 yearbook:

Further education and training is one of our greatest national strategic assets, yet for too long it has lived in the shadows of other educational programmes. We are beginning to put our money where our mouth is and rolling out huge capital investment to this area (Harris 2022 p.3)

Evidence from a number of sources considered by the project team in the course of this review indicate that FET awards continue to lack parity of treatment by comparison to the same level of second level school or HET awards for progression purposes. Writing in Ireland's Education Yearbook, O'Sullivan (2021) points out that for a learner hoping to achieve a first-year place in HET, the Leaving Cert remains a more advantageous route due to structural inequities in the current system.

Two State certification systems provide pathways to HE: the State Examinations Commission (SEC), and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Yet while both are State-owned, the Leaving Certificate (LC) or SEC pathway is more valued and more advantageous than that provided by QQI (O'Sullivan, 2021, p. 199).

Not all courses on the CAO have a QQI pathway, though this is improving. According to O'Sullivan (2021), over 88% of HE courses on the CAO have a QQI link through the HELS (www.careersportal.ie), compared to 100% for the Leaving Cert. For those that do, a FET graduate is only allowed to compete with a maximum of 390 points (out of a possible 600 for Leaving Cert graduates) regardless of how highly the learner achieved in their FET award. In 2022, 51.5% of Leaving Cert graduates scored over 400 points ([CAO, 2022](#)). QQI data for the same year indicates that 37% of FET learners who had achieved a level 5 or 6 major award in one academic year and applied to the CAO in the same year earned the maximum 390 CAO points possible ([QQI, 2023](#)). However, the system prevents those learners from competing equitably with those holding a Leaving Cert, who comprise about 70% of new entrants to tertiary education (OECD, 2023, p.15). This project team notes that although the issue of grade inflation has been widely reported in relation to its impact on graduates of the Leaving Certificate (see, for example, O'Brien, 2022; Walshe, 2022) it is also exacerbating the inequity experienced for graduates of a FET Level 5 major award. "If the ultimate goal is for all students to have an equal chance of a place in HE, then one pathway

cannot be seen as more advantageous than another” (O’Sullivan, 2021, p.99).

In 2022, the public consultation report published by DFHERIS on progressing a unified tertiary system stated that submissions had also highlighted the differences between HET entry requirements for Leaving Certificate and FET graduates. Submissions proposed increasing the overall ceiling of CAO points available to FET students to facilitate a more level playing field. The report notes that:

“The maximum of 390 points attainable via FET qualifications means that many HE programmes, especially those in high demand, are inaccessible to learners who want to use their FET award to gain entry.” (DFHERIS, 2022b p.15).

The project team notes that in direct contributions to the review by HEI representatives, the issue of inconsistent outcomes across the FET sector was raised. These stakeholders indicated that progression arrangements with particular FET colleges were a preferred mechanism to facilitate entry for FET learners. This was because these colleges had been observed to have a better track record than others of producing graduates prepared for entry to HET. The view reflected in these inputs was that certain FET colleges were known to have deficits in this regard. Although this view could not be evidenced via data or reliable measurement for this review, it has potential explanatory value. The project team found that pathway and progression agreements from FET to HET were typically localised and seemingly idiosyncratic agreements. In practice, this means that learners graduating from different FET colleges with identical levels of achievement at NFQ Level 5 are not able to access equivalent opportunities for progression to HET.

A 2020 working paper of the Transitions Reform Sub-Group of the DoES noted that there was strong demand from FET stakeholders for a comprehensive benchmarking exercise of Leaving Certificate and FET Level 5/6 awards, in part due to the limitations that this distinction places upon FET learners attempting to progress to HET (DoES, 2020 p.25). QQI subsequently undertook a detailed evaluation of the comparability of the NFQ Level 6 Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate major award qualifications. Indicators from that evaluation suggest that the distinction between FET and HET at NFQ Level 6 is largely legacy rather than reflective of enduring differences in learning outcomes. A noteworthy finding was that there were no significant differences in the average (median) NFQ levels between the two (Ecctis, 2021). The evaluation report notes that in Ireland:

... the parity of esteem of further and higher education has been challenged by the perception that those in possession of a higher education award at Level 6 have greater chances of progression to higher education awards at Levels 7 and beyond (Ecctis, 2021, p.3).

SOLAS addresses this issue directly in its current strategy, stating that criticism of vocational education and training that suggests an over-focus on technical skills pigeonholes learners and leads to stagnation of career opportunities in the longer term. Such criticism:

... ignores the significant developments which have taken place in FET, and which already embed strong transversal skills enhancement in areas like communication, entrepreneurship and digital capability (SOLAS, 2020, p.40).

Notably, the extent to which FET learners are accommodated across the HET sector varies substantially between HEIs. For example, in June 2023 when the government announced that it had approved, in principle, an expansion of the overall places available across medicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry and veterinary programmes by 1,300 learners per year, it was noted that when Maynooth University commences offering a nursing degree from 2025, half of the places will be reserved for learners progressing from FET programmes (Donnelly, 2023; O'Brien, 2023; DFHERIS, 2023b).

This review highlights that there are a number of long-standing challenges for ATP in FET that need to be addressed. Some of these fall in part or in their entirety outside of QQI's remit. Progress on the latter is in many instances being approached under the auspices of the Future FET strategy. However, with regard to parity of treatment of NFQ major awards at levels 5 and 6 for progression purposes, the project team makes the recommendation that, in its role as custodian of the National Framework of Qualifications, QQI should take all necessary steps to address current imbalances. The project team notes that the current Government policy on progressing a unified tertiary system acknowledges that the historical evolution of FET distinct from HET has not been to the advantage of the system as a whole:

The operation and evolution of the sectors in separate spheres has restricted the scope to derive the benefits of more integrated thinking and actions across the system (DFHERIS, 2022).

3.2 ATP IN HET

The Irish HET sector is internally diverse, and has seen significant change over the past twenty years. The sector comprises institutes of technology (IOTs), established universities, independent and/or private providers and, more recently, technological universities (TUs) as former IOTs merge. ATP has been reflected somewhat differently across these provider types, being informed by status as a designated awarding body and institutional mission (as determined under relevant legislation) and institutional strategy (informed by and reflected in funding arrangements by the HEA). Public HEIs have a legal mandate to support the national access agenda. For example, universities must ensure access by disadvantaged or under-represented learners under Section 18 (5)(b) of the Universities Act, 1997, which requires the institutions to:

... promote access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body (Universities Act, 1997)

The new technological universities are also obligated to fulfil a very similarly worded function under Section 9(L) of the Technological Universities Act, 2018, to promote access to specified groups of disadvantaged learners in their region:

promote access to the technological university and the education it provides, by economically or socially disadvantaged persons, by persons who have a disability and by persons from sections of society in the region in which the campuses of the technological university are located who are significantly under-represented in its student body (TU Act, 2018).

The Higher Education Strategic Performance Framework, which was established over the period 2014-2016, involved the agreement of performance compacts between the HEA and individual HEIs. These contain commitments for each HEI aligned with system objectives. A key objective of the 2018 - 2020 system performance framework for public HEIs was that the system “*significantly improves the equality of opportunity through Education and Training and recruits a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population*” (HEA, 2018, p.1). The framework contained related targets of 2,000 additional enrolments from socio-economically disadvantaged groups and 1,000 from further education access programmes (DoES, 2020, p.7).

To date, the HEA’s performance compact agreements have successfully compelled HEIs to expand access places across Ireland’s public higher education sector. The project team acknowledges input from institutional contributors to the review who point out that, to an extent, the approach is ‘all stick and no carrot’, as additional funding to support learners’ transitions and post-entry support needs is not provided. Looking to the future, access will remain a priority. Strand 3 of the Government’s [Funding the Future](#) strategy focuses on enhancing student participation and success, with a focus on underrepresented groups.

For all programmes in this sector, published, defined entry requirements are the norm. Although ATP in the HET sector is somewhat consistent in being governed by overarching policies as well as localised, programme specific requirements and procedures, a number of challenges and associated opportunities remain. These are outlined below.

3.2.1 ATP MONITORING IN HET

The project team undertook a review of the Annual Quality Reports (AQRs) submitted by both public and independent/private HEIs over consecutive reporting periods.

Among the universities, the project team observed an overall trend toward the inclusion of increased detail on ATP related activities in more recent AQRs. Across the sector, AQRs confirm that ATP policies and procedures are in place and typically identify participation in the HEAR and DARE funding schemes. HEIs including TCD, UCC, UCD and University of Galway identify the percentage of students in the undergraduate population entering the institution via access routes. Although the level of detail provided is variable, the AQRs as a whole paint a picture of a sector actively and creatively engaging in supporting students who may be, for example, mature, progressing from FET, living with a disability, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, asylum seekers or socioeconomically disadvantaged. There is some observable variance in focus regionally and by institutional profile. For example, MTU and the University of Galway highlight work to support Traveller and Roma participation; DKiT and MTU report on work to support learners with experience of the prison system and TCD, UCC and DCU report on initiatives providing scholarships and support to asylum seekers.

However, the AQRs may not represent the entirety of a HEI’s activities in relation to ATP. This is because ATP related activities are not directly elicited in the current AQR template. Many HEIs

choose to report on ATP under a variety of other headings derived from the 11 sections of the Core QA Guidelines and some additional related areas. In practice, this means that information on ATP is not presented in directly comparable ways. For example, DCU and Maynooth University both report on a breadth of ATP initiatives in the 2023 AQRs. However, DCU's AQR reports a significant amount of activity to facilitate access and widened participation under a Part A section pertaining to Learner Resources and Supports, whereas Maynooth University reports on the institution's access programme and extensive work with underrepresented groups in Part A in relation to Admission, Progression, Recognition & Certification.

Reporting on ATP in AQRs is not only inconsistent across providers but across years, which doesn't enable an examination of year-on-year trends. Stakeholders (including this project team) attempting to gain insight into ATP practice across the sector must be cautious not to assume that lack of reporting on ATP equals lack of activity. To enable a better national understanding of ATP practice within providers, the project team recommends that in its review of its current monitoring policy and approach, QQI give consideration to how routine monitoring of ATP should be facilitated.

Notably, private and independent providers do not have legal obligations to promote the wider national access agenda. However, QA approval processes (reengagement and initial access to programme validation) have ensured that policies and procedures for ATP, inclusive of RPL, have been embedded across private and independent providers. These are examined in more detail and in context through programme validation. Following a review of the AQR reports submitted by independent and/or private sector HEIs, the project team finds that the extent to which ATP appears to form part of the institutional mission is highly variable. As previously noted, these institutions are not funded by the HEA (although some access public funding via programmes such as Springboard+) and as such they are not required to meet systems performance targets for particular access groups. Nonetheless, ATP initiatives to support entry are reported by a number of providers in this sector. For example, Dublin Business School reports that three scholarships are offered annually to local schools within the community to facilitate opportunities for learners who would not normally be able to avail of higher education. The scholarship covers the learner's tuition fees and provides a monthly allowance to assist full-time study. Griffith College offers a range of general and targeted bursaries and scholarships and reports recently launching a Creative Bursary aimed at disadvantaged and DEIS schools. NCI also offers various scholarships, including two for international protection applicants via the Irish Refugee Council, and engages in extensive ATP related activities via its Early Learning Initiative and P-Tech programmes.

The project team additionally reviewed the published reports for the last CINNTE QA review cycle. ATP is a feature of CINNTE reviews, and these reports provide further confirmation that ATP policies and procedures are in place and highlight examples of good practice that panels have identified or commended. For example, DCU was commended by a CINNTE review team for its widened participation initiatives and DKIT was commended on its mature entrant route programme. CINNTE review teams have previously noted a range of other initiatives and supports for ATP in place across the sector, for example the clear RPL information provided for prospective learners on Letterkenny IT's website and the additional maths support provided at IT Sligo.

3.2.2 FINANCIAL SUPPORTS FOR LEARNERS IN HET

The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) offers means tested funding to eligible students undertaking approved full time courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Funding is additionally available to eligible students in approved full time PLC courses and to students

studying in the UK or EU. SUSI funding may contribute toward fees (if the free fees scheme does not apply) and may also offer maintenance grants to contribute to living expenses. The free fees scheme is available to full time undergraduate students who meet eligibility requirements (nationality and residence requirements; duration of programme).

Although these supports are essential enablers for many learners in the system, they are limited to learners who have the capacity to engage in full-time study, excluding many who could otherwise benefit. For example, submissions by AHEAD to this review draw attention to the strong relationship between disability and poverty in Ireland. This means that a compound disadvantage is experienced by some learners with disabilities. On the one hand, such learners may feel more confident to pursue higher education part-time (or flexibly). On the other hand, financial pressures may force them to take on a full-time load or deter them from engaging altogether. In the subsequent section, issues pertaining to part-time provision are discussed further. Notably, learners living with disabilities are able to access assistance from the Fund for Students with Disabilities on either part time or full time courses of specified durations. However, this assistance is limited to supporting the costs of assistive technology, non-medical helpers, academic/ learning support, deaf supports and transport support. It can not be used for living costs or for the assessment/diagnosis of a disability (HEA, 2023a). The Fund for Students with Disabilities has been noted to be administration-heavy, with a call for more streamlined processes made in a submission to National Access Plan 2022-2026 (SOAR, 2021).

Additional financial support in the form of the 1916 bursaries (ranging between €1,500 and €5,000 in value) has been made available since 2017 under the HEA's Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) under PATH 2, targeted at learners who are the most socio-economically disadvantaged and who are from communities significantly underrepresented in the student body availing of higher education. Both the Student Assistance Fund and the 1916 bursaries can be accessed by both part time and full time learners. They are managed on behalf of DFHERIS by the HEA, which devolves responsibility to HEIs, and in the case of the 1916 bursaries to regional clusters of HEIs (HEA, 2022b, p.6). The administrative burden associated with managing the bursaries has been identified as problematic in published evaluations.

When we talk about the impact on the student, one of the things I think we have to talk about is the impact on Access services in trying to implement these really administratively heavy and burdensome processes and what it takes us away from doing...the amount of time...spent last year in assessing those 237 unsuccessful applicants was time that they didn't spend...working with students...because they were...basically acting as assessors...(for) 10 bursaries (Staff focus group participant).

Extracted from an evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund by Sartori et al 2023, p. 23

A 2021 evaluation of the impact of the 1916 bursaries fund conducted by researchers within the SOAR cluster, which comprised IT Carlow and WIT (now SETU), MTU and UCC found that the number of eligible applicants far outstripped the number of awards available, with only 12% of those able to receive the support (Cummins et al, 2021, p.4). The evaluation explored the impact not only on learners who received the bursary, but on the 88% of eligible learners who applied but were unsuccessful.

“ I have to think how I was going to pay the rent and how I am going to eat tomorrow or stuff like this. I have to think about college work, and I have to think how can I do good in this module. I was being so stressed, seriously. I was so stressed. Sometimes, I would have my laptop open, I am in class but my mind is not in class. I am just looking at the screen but I am not learning anything – I can’t even see the image because I am thinking somewhere far. ”

(Learner and unsuccessful applicant to the 1916 Bursary Fund. Extracted from an evaluation of the initiative and its impact from the awardee’s perspective by Cummins et al 2021, p. 41)

This finding was echoed in a 2023 evaluation conducted for the Midlands East North-Dublin (MEND) Region, which comprises DCU, DKiT, MU and TUS, Midlands. A College Connect report found that the discrepancy between the number of applicants and the number of available bursaries was being exacerbated by recent crises, noted to be impacting most on groups already experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

Both the 2021 and 2023 evaluations identified that the extent of the challenges faced by learners who experience multiple disadvantages required urgent consideration of the type and level of support being provided to target access groups, with an increase in the number and value of bursaries recommended (Cummins et al, 2021, p. 47; Sartori et al, 2023, p.10).

A 2017 review of the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) indicates that the average award amounts are lower than those provided by the 1916 bursaries. The SAF is available to assist learners with costs including books and class materials, rent and other utility bills, food, essential travel, childcare and medical costs (HEA, 2023b). Although disparities are noted between regions, HEA financial data is cited that indicates average award amounts ranging from €350 – €700. No data was available to the 2017 review team to indicate the extent to which there was unmet demand for the SAF, although it was found one-fifth of applicants that applied did not receive funding. The review concluded that the SAF was a worthwhile initiative but noted that administrative costs associated with the SAF were disproportionately high, a sum equating to one quarter of the total of financial support provided to students (2017, p.54). A visual summary of the financial supports available in 2021 relative to core funding is reproduced below from a College Connect report, providing a useful indicator of distribution.

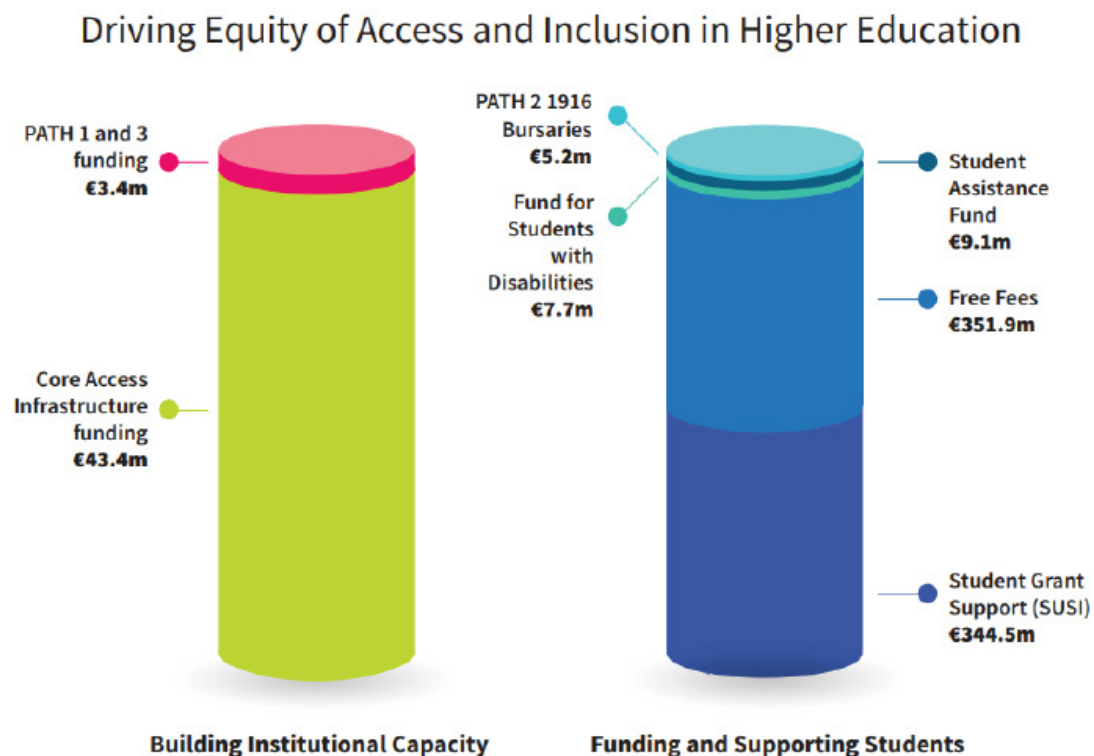


Figure 20: Driving Equity of Access and Inclusion in Higher Education. Image Extracted from Evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund for the Midlands East North-Dublin (MEND) Region (Sartori, Bloom & Murphy, 2023) p.19

Although the presence of financial support for learners is undoubtedly an important enabler of access for underrepresented groups in third level education, and of learners more generally, it is now widely acknowledged that the current streams may not be adequate to meet needs across the sector.

Improvements to funding models for part-time students from under-represented and economically marginalised communities who need to work and to attend higher education at the same time was noted, highlighting the need for parity of funding for part-time students, particularly in postgraduate professional programmes, and more flexible funding models, for example, by aligning funding to level of attainment achieved (DFHERIS, 2022b, p.23)

The requirement for learners to engage with distinct funding streams in order to be able to progress from FET to HET is also identified by stakeholders as a challenge. Submissions to public consultation on a unified tertiary sector indicated that:

Separate funding streams for FE and HE learners are an identifiable barrier to a more unified and seamless tertiary education system, noting that they can create specific affordability issues for FET students. In this vein respondents suggested increasing grants and widening eligibility criteria to increase accessibility (DFHERIS, 2022b, p.22)

3.2.3 PART-TIME AND FLEXIBLE PROVISION

The vision of access outlined in the NQAI's original 2003 ATP policy encompassed the provision of part-time and flexible delivery options to enable learners to not just access (or enter) a programme, but to successfully complete it. This was considered especially important in the context of non-traditional learners.

Twenty years on from when this vision was articulated, there remain gaps and shortfalls in its achievement. Data indicates that the majority of mature students currently participating in higher education are enrolled on full-time programmes (HEA, 2021). However, inputs to the review and an analysis of contextual factors suggest these figures may be more reflective of opportunities than preferences. Qualifax figures provided to the project team indicate that of 5,868 major award programmes, only 2,511 are available part time. This difference is greater on undergraduate programmes than postgraduate provision. For example, of 1,383 NFQ Level 8 (Hons) degrees, only 203 are available for part time enrolment. Less availability of part-time or flexible programmes and the previously discussed reduced eligibility for funding when participating in part-time may therefore constitute two significant considerations.

Various stakeholders, including the OECD (2023) and the IUA (2020) have identified that a better understanding of the profile and needs of contemporary learners is required. In particular, the distinction made at a systemic level between full-time and part-time provision for funding purposes has created a barrier for cohorts of prospective learners, preventing them from engaging with the system.

A further challenge is the lack of agreement on what actually constitutes 'part-time' or flexible learning. This issue was set out effectively in a [2020 position paper](#) developed by the IUA Part-Time/Flexible Subgroup. Consultations led by the Subgroup found no agreement across the sector as to the definition of 'part-time' study (variables included number of ECTS, number of contact hours, duration of programme, mode of study, rationale for study and delivery during 'normal working hours' as opposed to evenings weekends), arguing that in the context of lifelong learning "*A Student is a Student is a Student*" and challenging the "*myth of the full-time student ... it being noted that many full-time students are also working, some even full-time hours*" (2020, p.6).

QQI has a significant opportunity to address some of the issues identified in this section by initiating and leading discussion with DABs and providers to determine nationally agreed definitions for part-time and full-time study. The project team strongly advises that any such definitions should be cognizant of the challenges faced by learners in balancing study with other life commitments and / or managing illness or disability. Definitions, therefore, that focus more on the scheduling of provision without appropriate consideration for the volume of learning to be undertaken within a given time period are unlikely to adequately address the difficulties faced by learners.

Further opportunities to realise the original vision for ATP include incentivizing providers to increase the flexibility of their offerings and ensuring parity of funding for part-time learners. To that end, submissions to public consultation on a unified tertiary sector indicated that appropriate financial support for part-time learners will be important (DFHERIS, 2022, p.22). The OECD has also identified that increased flexibility will not only support ATP but will facilitate responsiveness to Ireland's skills needs.

Ireland should make learning pathways more permeable so that students can easily adjust their learning plans in response to evolving needs and expand flexible learning opportunities (e.g. part-time learning, modular courses) to facilitate the quick acquisition of new skills in response to changing skills needs (OECD, 2023, Accessed Online)

3.3 CREDIT

The implementation of credit systems, which provide a mechanism for associating the volume of hours (and notional learner effort) associated with a module or programme of study, has been a foundational element of ATP Practice. The NQAI developed and implemented a national approach to credit in higher education and training aligned with European developments: [Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training](#) (2006). The Principles and Guidelines define the credit values associated with HET awards in the NFQ, establishing a national consensus that one credit is notionally equivalent to 20-30 hours of learner effort. These Guidelines remain in use by QQI today.

The FET credit system emerged from the old school system where it was estimated (at that time) that an academic year comprised 1200 hours of notional learner effort. This determination was made independently of developments in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) for higher education. There are different multipliers for credit in the two national credit systems. All level 5 and 6 major awards in FET are designed to be 120 FET credits, so that every credit relates to 10 hours of learner effort. In HET, there are 60 ECTS in an average full academic year; 60 ECTS is the equivalent of 120 FET credits.

From the available information (for example, programme validation and revalidation reports provided by QQI and reviewed by the project team), it appears that both credit systems are well embedded and function as intended as accumulation systems for learning achieved, whilst providing a rough approximation of the input required to gain an award. The evidence considered for this review was consistent in indicating that credit allocations in both systems currently in operation (FET and ECTS) are utilised to indicate the (estimated) volume of learning, often referenced as notional learner effort required. From the limited documentary evidence available to this study, it appears that both credit systems have and continue to facilitate transfer and progression well within their own sectors. What is less clear is the extent to which the continued existence of two credit systems nationally supports or hinders progression between FET and HET.

Other questions which could not be answered within the scope of this review, but which warrant further exploration, include the extent to which the two-credit system continues to serve learners and the tertiary education system as a whole, though there is some indication that it may act more as a barrier than an enabler. A 2022 DFHERIS report on progressing a unified tertiary system indicated that submissions had suggested QQI examine ATP policy, encompassing an approach to enhance the recognition of learning credits between the further and higher education sectors, as well as the transparency of entry requirements for learners by providers (2022, p.15).

There were proposals to introduce a simplified shared credit system between FET and HE, based on ECTS in order to give equal recognition and opportunity to FET learners, particularly those aiming for entry at the same level as their FET award (DFHERIS, 2022 p.15).

The OECD's 2023 assessment of Ireland's skills strategy also identified developing credit recognition across the system as an opportunity for Ireland to strengthen pathways between FET and HE, stating that:

Overall, Ireland needs a more joined-up approach for FET and HE, where the sectors work together more actively, better align programmes and improve pathways between them. This can be achieved by developing universal and consistent criteria for facilitating transitions between FET and HE and cross-system credit recognition. (OECD, 2023, Accessed Online)

This raises the question as to whether, post the 2012 establishment of a singular qualifications body in Ireland (QQI), a clear rationale exists for continuing to operate two credit systems, requiring providers and learners to comprehend and navigate dual credit systems to facilitate progression from FET to HET.

3.4 RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)

An important area of ATP practice that has been enabled by the adoption of a credit system(s) is the recognition of prior learning (RPL). RPL is defined in the [Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training](#) (2005) as:

... a process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and be formally rewarded for it. The term 'prior learning' is learning that has taken place, but not necessarily been assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal routes (p. 2).

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) established the Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training in June 2005. Within the rationale set out for encouraging a national approach, the need to bring coherence and consistency to RPL practice was emphasised, as well as the removal of difficulty for individuals wishing to transfer within and between education and training sectors. QQI's Core QA Guidelines and programme validation criteria require providers to have policies and procedures in place for RPL for the purposes of access and/or advanced entry to a programme and the granting of exemptions from elements of a programme as appropriate. Under QQI requirements, providers must have procedures for:

- credit accumulation,
- credit transfer and identification, and
- the formal assessment of the knowledge, skill and competence previously acquired by learners [formally and informally] ([QQI](#), 2021).

All national statutory awarding bodies, QQI, the universities, technological universities and

institutes of technology, can make awards on the basis of RPL. Relevant providers can request that QQI make an award on the basis of RPL for a learner who has met the standards for that award. Public data is lacking on the extent to which the DABs have utilised RPL for this purpose, although Goggin (2023) indicates that 37 major academic awards have been acquired through RPL processes at MTU. Similarly, concrete data on the volume of learners who access programmes for direct or advanced entry or who are granted exemptions on the basis of the recognition of prior certified or experiential learning is also not available (O'Brien 2023, p.2), though use of RPL for advanced entry or exemptions on HET programmes has been reported in previous research (Goggin et al., 2015, Goggin 2023).

In Ireland, RPL practice was initially championed by clusters of dedicated individual practitioners, but has been reported to comprise of “dispersed initiatives and practices on the ground” (Goggin et al., 2015, p.11). Over time, interest in developing RPL has grown and it is now actively promoted via practitioner networks. The wider interest in RPL in the European context (where it is more commonly referred to as validation of formal and informal learning) has also been an important enabling backdrop to local activities. Most significantly, in 2012, the [EU Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#) required all member states to have validation arrangements in place by 2018 (EU Council, 2012). Nationally, as QQI points out, RPL has become an important aspect of national Government strategy as evidenced by its inclusion in the [National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030](#), the [National Skills Strategy](#) and the [Programme for Government, Our Shared Future](#) which commits to “develop and implement a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning taking account of previous education, skills, work experience and engagement in society” in FET (Dept. of the Taoiseach, 2020, p. 98).

Although at a regulatory level, RPL has been supported across both FET and HET by NQAI and subsequently QQI, contextual differences are apparent in how RPL as an instrument of ATP has been employed across the sectors.

3.4.1 RPL PRACTICE IN FET

“Inclusion is central to the ethos of the provision to ensure all nationalities, ethnic groups and people with disabilities are welcome and accommodated. Initial assessment is informal and there is flexibility to move classes depending on the learners’ needs and abilities.”

Extract from a contribution to the Review by Cork ETB

In FET, RPL has not traditionally been a significant feature of the landscape as an open approach was adopted to enable learners access the programmes of their choice. However, a focus on RPL is now more evident: for example, the current FET strategy ([Future FET: Transforming Learning The National Further Education and Training \(FET\) Strategy](#)) recommends the mainstreaming of RPL pilot projects:

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) should also be an important feature. Although this can be a very resource-intensive process, ETBs are beginning to demonstrate that RPL can be delivered at significant scale, and the models that have been piloted should now be mainstreamed as this route into education and awards can be a real attribute and selling point for FET in the future (Solas, 2020, p.45).

ETBI RPL Conference: Mainstreaming RPL in the ETB FET context

On the 8th of December 2021, the ETBI Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) conference 'Mainstreaming RPL in the ETB FET context' launched the report: '[Evaluation of TOBAR – a pilot project in the recognition of prior learning](#)'. This project was delivered in partnership with the Irish Defence Forces and 10 ETBs in 2018 and 2019. The recommendations set out in the TOBAR Report show considerable promise in the mainstreaming of RPL across the ETB and FET sector. The conference launched this pivotal report, and showcased the experiences of learners and employers who have participated and engaged with RPL processes ([ETBI, 2023](#)).

Research drawing upon the evaluation of the TOBAR project has highlighted the role of the mentor in both supporting RPL candidates and informing the work of assessors (de Paor, 2023, p.7).

Recently, and partially in response to QQI QA and programme validation requirements, a more formal approach to RPL has emerged. QQI's QA approval process, [reengagement](#), for all legacy providers that had 'transitioned' to QQI regulation from the antecedent agencies HETAC and FETAC, ensured that all providers in a feasible position to utilise RPL for ATP purposes have appropriate policies and procedures in place to do so.

Similarly, QQI's QA review processes have highlighted the need for formalised approaches to RPL in the ETB sector (Magee 2023, p.3). Seven ETB review reports from 2021 and 2022 contain recommendations for the development of an RPL policy. A number of ETBs have adopted a shared framework/policy approach to implementing RPL. The shared framework defines RPL in terms of both prior certified and prior experiential learning; sets out the RPL processes (separate for certified and experiential learning); and describes the roles and responsibilities of key personnel in the process, most importantly, the Programme Coordinator, the RPL Assessor and the RPL Mentor/Facilitator who guides the learner through the process - a particular strength of the approach. The [Cavan Meath ETB 2021 RPL policy](#) is an example of this approach. An RPL Toolkit was launched in June 2022 and made available to all ETBs (Magee 2023, p.5). Two examples of innovative recent RPL practice in the ETB sector are highlighted below.

RPL for Award for Individuals in Changing Professional Environments

A significant volume of work has been undertaken within Donegal ETB to facilitate learners working in sectors with changing requirements, utilising a process for the Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning that enables candidates to have their experiential learning validated and achieve a full award. A direct contribution to this review outlined that this has been particularly important for workers in the healthcare sector who may have substantial experience and who require a specific number of awards to maintain their employment, meet contractual requirements or to progress. It has also been used to recognise the learning of individuals who have been made redundant from the banking industry following decades of service, who had not previously achieved learning recognised on the NFQ. Subsequent to undertaking the RPL process and achievement of the award, many were able to progress to higher education and obtain advanced entry to programmes. This work is also documented in an article by Magee (2023).

RPL for award has also been undertaken in FET in the context of the Advanced Certificate in Hairdressing Apprenticeship programme, with the first eight graduates were conferred following a process facilitated by the Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board. A pilot group of eight experienced hairdressers completed the RPL process in nine months, as distinct from the three years required for the apprenticeship programme. The process followed and benefits obtained are set out in detail in an article by Hogan et al (2023).

3.4.2 RPL PRACTICE IN HET

Primary research among RPL practitioners in higher education institutions in Ireland conducted by Goggin et al. was published in 2015. The researchers positioned RPL as a key enabler of lifelong learning, critical to the development of an accessible higher education system and made the following recommendations to support a consistent and coherent approach to RPL that would position Ireland appropriately to meet relevant EU recommendations:

- A national policy and strategy should be developed and implemented across higher education
- An agreed definition of RPL in higher education in Ireland
- Good practice guidelines should be developed to support practice at institutional and national levels
- Higher education institutions should seek to collect data in a consistent and systematic way
- Clarity of roles and adequate training and development for staff involved in the process
- The inclusion of RPL processes in a higher education continuous professional development framework

([Goggin et al](#), 2015, p.1)

QQI's subsequently published Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines, (2016), require all providers to have policies and procedures in place for learner admission, progression and recognition, to include "Fair recognition of education and training qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning" (QQI 2016, p.11). Evidence considered by the project team, including review of the AQRs and CINNTE reports of HEIs indicates that institutional RPL policies are established across the HET sector, a possible reflection that inclusion of RPL in the QA contributed to a formalisation of provider's approaches that had not existed before. However, as yet, Ireland does not have a national policy and strategy in place for RPL.

An important initiative for the HET sector is the five year (2020-2025) €6.9 million [National RPL Project](#), funded under the Irish Government's Human Capital Initiative. The project is a collaboration between the technological universities, the eight previously established universities and the remaining institutes of technology. A published output from the ongoing project is a *Pilot Framework for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education*. The framework identifies learner-centredness and quality assurance as the underpinning values of RPL, which may encompass entry, advanced entry and credit towards an award or exemption from some programme modules. It additionally sets out a five stage process (Information - Identification - Documentation - Assessment - Certification) that maps closely to the four stages indicated in Cedefop's 2023 guidelines (excluding information).

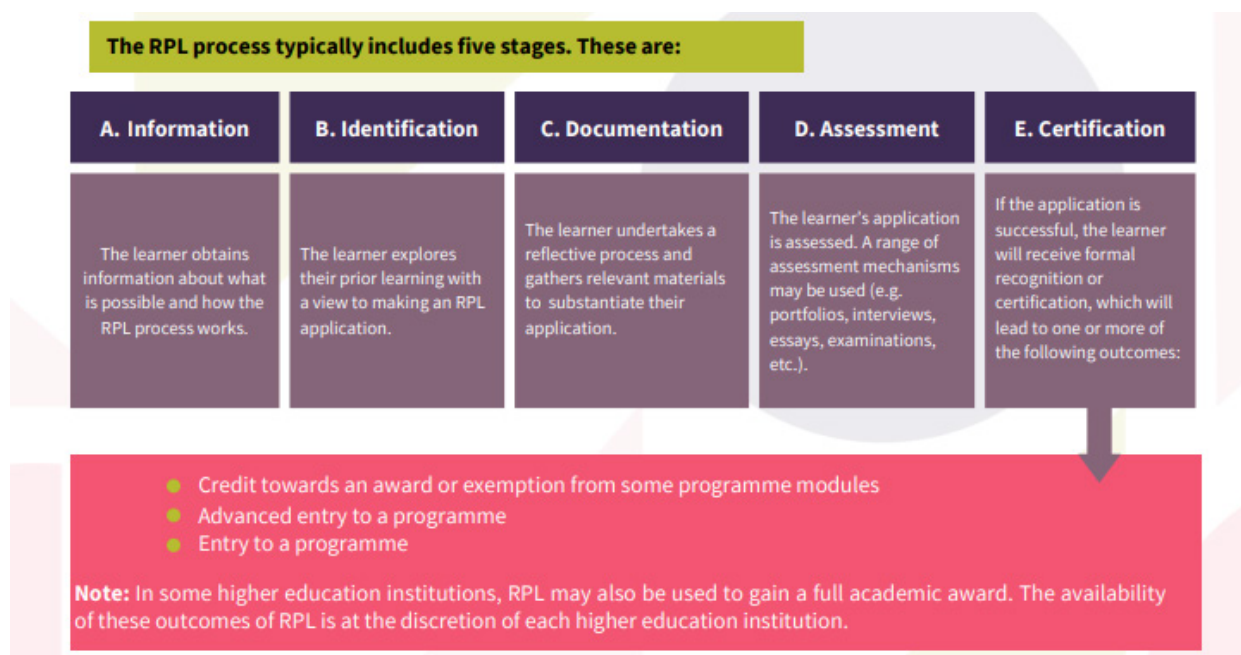


Figure 21: Five Stages of RPL Process from Framework Summary at [priorlearning.ie](#)

Cedefop's guidelines emphasise that giving voice to successful users of RPL processes may serve to promote opportunities and motivate potential users, who may find it easier to relate to previous user experience and explore validation possibilities. In Ireland, this has been achieved via the high quality multimodal promotional material developed by Ireland's National RPL Project, which draws upon learner and institution perspectives and stories to illustrate the opportunities to access and progress within the system that RPL enables.

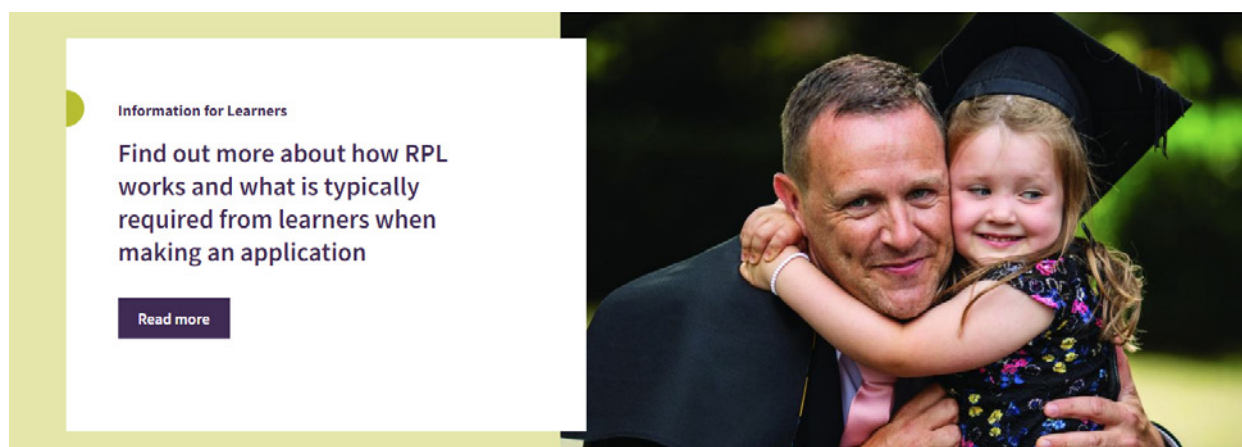


Figure 22: Promotional material from priorlearning.ie

Moving forward, the sector as a whole stands to benefit from the significant experience accumulated under the auspices of the National RPL Project and the dissemination of project outputs, learnings from which have been clearly set out in O'Brien (2023).

However, the project team notes that thus far, the *Pilot Framework for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education* is process focused. It does not identify or define the high-level criteria or reference points that will be applied to inform localised assessments of applications for RPL, for example, the currency, relevance and authenticity requirements for the documented learning an applicant wishes to have recognised. Such considerations for RPL assessments (alongside relevant programme or module specific standards) may or may not be referenced in the policies of individual providers. In the absence of a national policy to facilitate a degree of conformance in this area, variability can be anticipated.

Inputs to the review by provider representatives indicate that the potential non-equivalence of RPL practices between providers could be perceived as undermining fairness and consistency in the treatment of RPL applicants across the sector. Moreover, this may be undermining confidence in the rigour and veracity of RPL among broader stakeholders. Research has identified that the benefits of RPL (access and credits) are dependent on the maintenance of standards in HET (O'Leary, 2023, p.770). Direct provider inputs to this review indicated that this is a particularly relevant issue in relation to programmes leading to professional accreditation, where considerable hesitancy is observable regarding the use of RPL. This suggests that a conversation may need to be opened with professional bodies. Such potentially negative perceptions of RPL are also acknowledged at European level by Cedefop:

In some cases, certificates based on validation are perceived as inferior to those awarded by traditional courses and programmes; to counter such perceptions, tools and processes must be presented in as transparent a way as possible and must be linked to clear standards (2023, pp. 16-17).

Stakeholder perspectives across the sector indicate that although much has been achieved in RPL practice in Ireland, there is work yet to be done. For example, submissions made in response to public consultation facilitated by DFHERIS in 2022 on progressing toward a unified tertiary system

for learning, skills and knowledge highlighted the positive developments in RPL practice, but called for measures to strengthen, expand and streamline RPL across the FET and HET sectors, as well as the development of a national policy approach toward RPL (DFHERISb, 2022). The OECD has also explicitly recommended that national guidelines be established outlining the procedures and processes of RPL (OECD, 2023, Accessed Online).

RPL practice in Ireland may also benefit from the development of stronger linkages and a joined up approach in relation to guidance services. One example of work in this area is the my.experience.ie project at ATU reported in Ginty et al (2023). Guidance services are discussed more specifically in a subsequent section of this report. European RPL guidelines reiterate that linkages between guidance services and RPL practice can facilitate better use of resources, reduce procedural costs and help reach disadvantaged groups that may otherwise not be aware of the education and training opportunities available to them (Cedefop, 2023).

3.4.3 MOVING FORWARD WITH RPL PRACTICE

In summary, it is clear that there has been significant achievement to date in the development and implementation of RPL across both the FET and HET sectors in Ireland. Dedicated work in this space has opened opportunities and pathways for a diversity of learners and enabled access and progression across Ireland. The project team notes that RPL practice in Ireland has benefited greatly from the sustained commitment of a core group of practitioners who have progressed objectives in this area.

However, the review also indicates that to build upon the significant gains to date and safeguard the credibility of RPL practice across the education and training sector, further development is needed (see also discussion in O'Brien 2023). Notably, this aligns with similar calls at the European level. Cedefop's recently published 3rd edition of guidelines for practice in this area open with a call for intensified cooperation and coordination between stakeholders to provide individuals with easier, more reliable and credible access to opportunities for their prior learning to be recognised (2023). Research conducted in the Irish context concluded that RPL is experienced by practitioners as significantly more challenging than high-level policy documentation suggests, recommending that *"Future policy documentation needs to reflect the realities of the challenging nature of RPL, and re-emphasize the supports that should be available to applicants and staff"* (O'Leary, 2022, p.189).

Calls for greater coherence, consistency and coordination in this area have been repeated by key stakeholders (at European, national and institutional practitioner levels) since at least 2005. It is therefore appropriate and timely to consider whether further policy enablers may be required to facilitate this.

3.5 INFORMATION FOR LEARNERS

It is widely acknowledged that the provision of relevant information to learners is critical to ensuring transparency and aiding successful navigation of the qualifications system. This objective is embedded in the 2012 Act (as discussed in Chapter 1) and reflected in the establishment of a number of national services which signpost available education and training programmes to learners and provide information on how these programmes may be accessed. The OECD in its 2023 *Skills Strategy Ireland* report, also recognises that in order to better secure a skills balance,

Ireland needs to “improve information and guidance for individuals on learning and career pathways”.

Additionally, a variety of guidance services exist in the FET and school sectors (school guidance services are not dealt with in this report) to support learners in the identification and selection of appropriate programmes to fulfil their educational ambitions. The provision of such information and guidance can be transformative for learners.

“This woman changed my life and helped me through such a difficult time where I thought I couldn’t succeed or achieve anything in life. She really did guide me through every little thing from figuring out what I love to do, finding a college that provides a course in something that I love to helping me apply for that course and then helping me with their interview process.”

Early School Leaver currently undertaking year 2 of a 4 year degree after progressing via FET.

Extract from a contribution to the Review by Cork ETB

Nonetheless, the project team found that the current patchwork of information services for learners, whilst user-friendly and beneficial in their own right, may be confusing for learners in their number. The team considers that the benefits of bringing the various strands of information and guidance together nationally under one umbrella website or service should be explored, as outlined by Minister Harris:

Our primary objective has been to create a system where every journey is valued and equal. One of my proudest initiatives as Minister in this Department has been to bring apprenticeships and further education onto the CAO website – to show students all of their options. We want to go further again, and alongside Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) – the third-level regulator – we want to develop a singular website with information for everyone aged 16 to 65. (Harris, 2022, p.4)

To that end, the project team endorses the recent OECD findings and recommendations on the provision of centralised information and guidance services to all learners:

The delivery of guidance is fragmented, and more could be done to ensure everyone can access guidance at all stages in life. Work by the National Policy Group for lifelong guidance on developing a coherent, long-term strategic framework for lifelong guidance provides a good starting point. Ireland should continue actively involving all relevant actors in developing this framework and strengthen national co-ordination of lifelong guidance services, including by establishing clear roles and responsibilities. Ireland could also better consolidate and improve online information on learning opportunities and careers to improve its navigability, accessibility and relevance. To this end, Ireland should develop a centralised online portal, make information more user-friendly and tailored to individual learners’ needs, and include more information on skills shortages

and mismatches, learning outcomes and pathways. In addition, Ireland should expand and strengthen guidance services to ensure that everyone can access high-quality guidance over the life course. This can be achieved by better supporting guidance counsellors, making guidance counselling services in schools more widely available, and covering a wide range of possible learning and career pathways. Finally, institutional support and guidance for adults could be improved, especially for groups most distant from the labour market and at risk of unemployment (OECD, 2023, accessed online).

Selected Government or State-funded Organisations with Involvement in Career Guidance

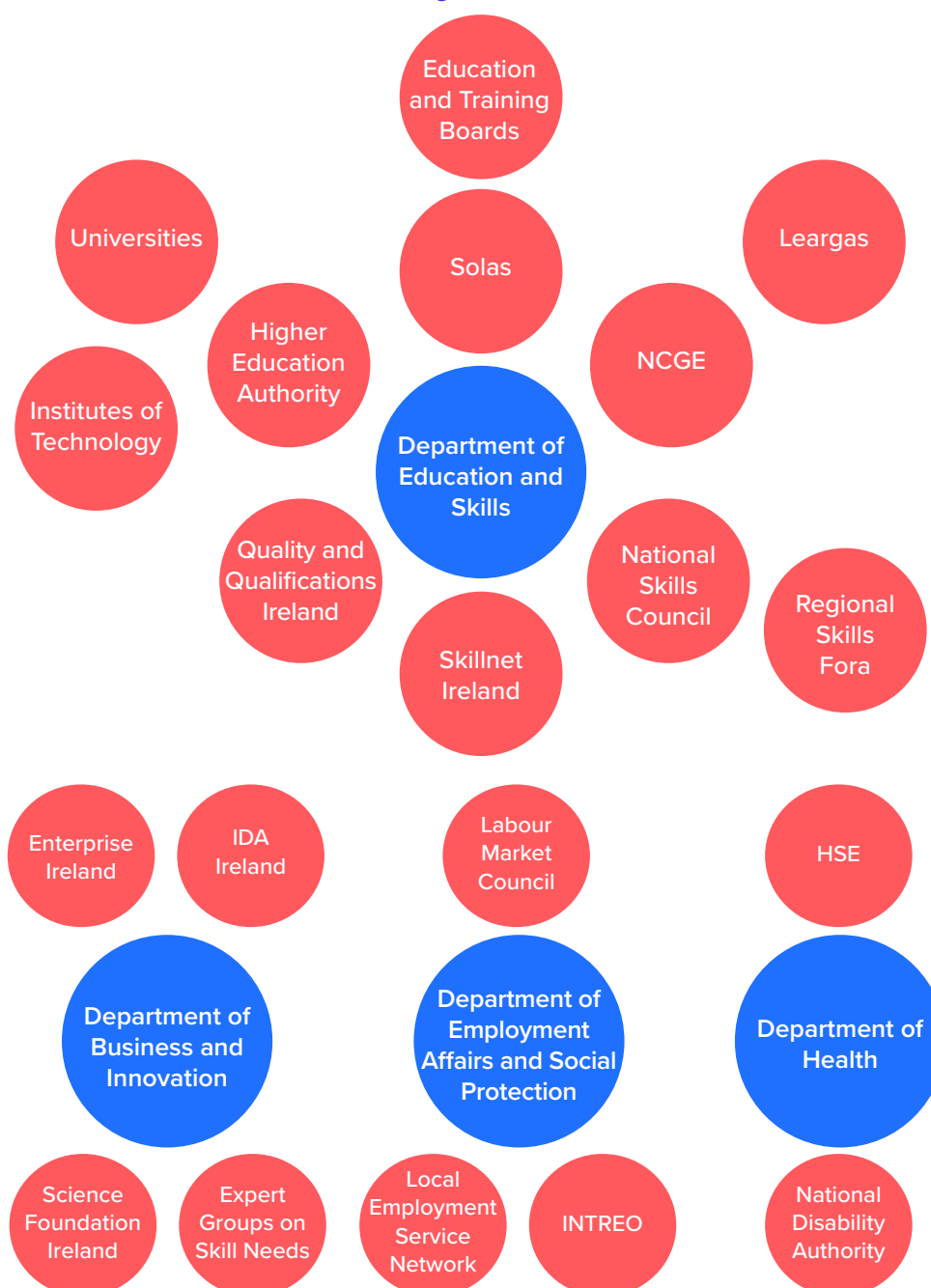


Figure 23: Guidance Services in Ireland. Reproduced from Indecon, 2019, p.ii

3.5.1 GUIDANCE SERVICES IN FET

It has been emphasised throughout this report that successful participation and acquisition of an award is the measure of success for ATP and not just entry to a programme. To that end, the provision of guidance services to prospective learners to ensure that they are matched with a programme that best meets their needs and abilities is critical. ETBs play an important role in this area.

In the majority of ETBs, recruitment and access is managed at centre level. One quality review Report noted that this can create competition between centres. Guidance and recruitment services are limited and fragmented with Guidance Counsellors in FET Colleges, and the Adult Guidance Service available to adult education and recruitment officers in Training Services. All ETB quality review reports recommend the development of a consistent approach to supporting learners to access the most suitable course for their needs.

Guidance Counsellors in FE Colleges

The allocation of guidance counsellors in a public FET college is based on the approved allocation of teaching staff which is based on the enrolment of students the previous year. Guidance counsellors are post primary qualified and Teacher Council registered teachers with a postgraduate qualification in guidance and counselling. Guidance counsellors are subject to the same terms and conditions as teachers and only work to the school calendar year.

The primary focus of counselling staff in a college is the support of the enrolled learners. Additionally, they may be engaged in outreach work to secondary schools to encourage progression to PLC programmes, but have no role in the recruitment of learners for their colleges. They do play a role in developing and advising on progression pathways to HET and employment.

The Adult Education Guidance Services

The Adult Education Guidance Services are based in the 16 ETBs. They were introduced by the Department of Education and Skills to support adults returning to education. They “offer a guidance service to adults which includes impartial adult education information, one-to-one guidance and group guidance, which help people to make informed educational, career and life choices” ([ETBI, 2023](#)).

Adult Guidance Counsellors must hold a primary degree and a postgraduate qualification in adult career guidance. The focus of the service is on adults over 18 years and those young people over 16 years who are out of education. At the outset, the adult guidance services were established as stand alone services parallel to literacy service, community education, BTEI and VTOS, but are now fully integrated. A number have developed outreach to adults in basic education programmes providing information and guidance on next steps in their progression including the development of CVs etc. The service is provided year round.

Youthreach Advocate

Within the Youthreach service, there may be Advocates appointed to provide support to learners across the provision. Typically, the advocate will have a guidance qualification. Not all ETBs with Youthreach centres will have an allocated advocate.

Training Services

There is no guidance service in training services. The training services employ recruitment officers whose role is the placement of referred persons on training courses. They are usually qualified instructors who are seconded to this role for a period of time.

Information for learners is presented in a wide range of formats within ETBs with many centres/ services producing their own brochures or websites within the ETB. FETCH website is a course calendar for FET nationally and applications can be made to a centre through this website. PLC courses are now included in the CAO application process. Seven quality review reports made the recommendation that the ETB should develop and implement a Communication and Marketing Strategy at central level moving away from the current emphasis of publication of courses at centre level.

QQI Core QA Guidelines state that:

Necessary guidance services are provided to learners on programmes as appropriate. Accurate and relevant information on the programme, which includes details on potential career pathways, is provided to learners prior to enrolment on the programme (2016, p. 18).

The challenge for ETBs is to provide a consistent level of guidance support to learners across its FET provision. The different staffing qualifications, terms and conditions of employment across guidance services poses a challenge for ETBs in moving to a standard guidance service for all FET learners. These difficulties are highlighted by Cork ETB in its SER for QA review by QQI. Cork ETB is the second ETB to move its provision into a collective entity, Cork FET College. This involved renaming its two training centres and its seven FET Colleges and numerous local adult education centres. Given the size of its provision, each centre continues to recruit its own learners and provide guidance and learner support services based on the programmes provided. Cork ETB describes its guidance support as follows:

Cork ETB provides guidance for learners to support them in accessing, transferring, and progressing between programmes. The Adult Guidance Service supports learners of Adult Literacy, Community Education and Back to Education Initiatives. Each PLC College/PLC provision in second level schools have a Guidance Counsellor allocation as per local agreement. However, Youthreach learners, Training Service and Evening classes do not have access to guidance services (SER, p.81).

The SER goes on to say that “Learning Supports vary across provisions and this could be further standardised. Similarly, guidance provision for Cork ETB varies across provisions” (p.82). The ETB identified that it needed to “expand Guidance provision to all Cork ETB centres” (p. 83).

Becoming a FET College of the Future at Kerry ETB

In the move to a FET College of the Future, Kerry ETB converted its PLC College and its training centre into Kerry College, with Youthreach, VTOS and BTEI centres as constituent parts. It also created an Admission Unit and described its role in its Self Evaluation Report: “The Kerry College Admissions Unit provides applicants with a consistent experience of admissions, from application, to interview, document verification, course place offer and course registration” (2021, p. 46). The ETB opened up two admission centres in Tralee:

The Admissions Office evaluates course applications and a decision is reached and communicated to the applicant, normally within ten working days. Courses for employment and Higher Education progression are offered within a single integrated FET College - Kerry College. For courses categorised as courses for employment, an interview forms part of the admissions process. The Admissions Office interviews applicants and verifies applicant documentation. The interview process and verification of the applicant's documents are, in effect, an assessment of the applicant's suitability for these courses. The basis of a decision of the applicant's suitability is derived from the stated entry requirements for the course (2021, p. 39).

Further actions to be taken are identified in Kerry ETB's Self-evaluation Report, and include establishing a Kerry College Support Unit for all of Kerry College which will build on the good practice in place across FET provision and developing a Learner Support Policy to be actioned by the Kerry College Support Unit.

Integrating Learner Support Services at Kildare Wicklow ETB

KWETB has moved to develop an integrated learner support service – ALISS. KWETB's Self-evaluation Report documented this at an early stage of development, but is designed to provide a consistent level of support to learners across all FET provision. has not involved merging the guidance roles existing within the ETB.

ALISS (the Accessible Learning Integrated Support Service) is a language and learning support service for learners in all KWETB FET programmes. It was developed as part of the social inclusion measures within KWETB's Strategic Performance Agreement with SOLAS.

What is ALISS's role?

There are two main aspects to ALISS's role – initial assessment and learner supports.

Initial assessment

The service is supporting the collation, sharing and building on existing expertise and good practice within KWETB to further develop a consistent, learner-centred approach for assessment of core skills. This will ensure learners can be supported to identify:

- their existing skills and experience
- the best course pathways to meet their current needs and goals
- any learning supports they will require to assist them in the successful completion of their studies

Learner supports

ALISS is supporting the development of a consistent approach for ongoing embedded support provision in literacy, numeracy, digital skills and language as required by learners participating in FET programmes to enhance the quality of their learning experience.

Recent ALISS initiatives

Initial assessment

- A digital assessment for entry to the new Early Learning and Care Programme has been developed and is at present being piloted in all participating centres
- A Common Initial Assessment QQI 1-4 resource has been developed and is currently being piloted in all ABE Centres
- A Common Initial Assessment QQI 4-6 resource is under development and is to be piloted 22/23
- An Assessment of Youthreach Language Learners Referral protocol has been agreed and is currently being piloted throughout KWETB Youthreach centres. (Self-evaluation Report, 2021, pp. 90-91)

3.6 DATA

Concerns regarding the lack, incompleteness and potential inaccuracy of available data sets (national, institutional and cohort specific) present a challenge for stakeholders that wish to track engagement with the system by underrepresented learner cohorts; the success of ATP interventions or the utilisation and impact of particular progression pathways. Data privacy, particularly where data identifies individual learners as members of a disadvantaged cohort or who are in receipt of support, is a legitimate concern. Nonetheless, a lack of available data presents a significant challenge for stakeholders aiming to inform policy decisions or to undertake impact analysis of specific ATP initiatives, such as measuring the impact of a particular funding mechanism or support. This is exemplified by the Transitions Reform Working Sub-Group of the Department of Education and Skills, which has identified robust and verifiable data on demand, progression and retention from FET to HE as being of critical importance to their work (DoES 2020).

The Equal Access Survey serves as an important source of information for access practitioners. However, the survey data relies upon voluntary completion by first year full-time and part-time undergraduate students at HEA funded institutions. Learners are invited to complete the survey as part of the registration process at the start of the academic year (HEA 2022a). Although the survey provides a valuable reference point for practitioners, the limited sample does not capture, for example, the perspectives of all access learners, postgraduate learners or those who have been unable to enter higher education.

HEA data also draws upon the Student Records System (SRS), which is the HEA's in-house database, containing an individual record for each student enrolment and graduation in all HEA-funded Institutions (HEA, 2020, p.9). HEA data published in 2022 indicates that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds remain more likely to not progress than affluent students, although the disparity between affluent and disadvantaged learners appears to have somewhat lessened between 2018/19 and 2019/20. The data indicates that in 2018/19 the non progression rate of learners from affluent backgrounds was 10% compared with 17% for disadvantaged learners. In 2019/20 the rates of non progression reported were lower for both groups, at 7% and 12% respectively (HEA, 2022c). Nonetheless, this supports the point raised elsewhere in this report that a shift in focus from entry to successful participation is warranted to ensure that the benefits arising from national efforts to facilitate entry for underrepresented cohorts to programmes are maximised.

Fleming advocates for communicating more effectively with the available data, despite gaps and imperfections, to drive change. She notes that:

... many practitioners can be frustrated by the fragmented data available, and the extent to which those fragments are scattered and hosted in various places across the institution. Similarly, there may be the inevitable promises of a future perfect dataset, which will require patience as the utopian scene is developed. The aphorism, 'don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good', is particularly appropriate here (2023 p.60).

Acknowledging the challenges of working with incomplete and partial data, this review is nonetheless able to highlight two distinct examples of practice in ATP that are utilising available data to inform and promote ATP policy and practice.

Who Counts? University for All Data, Metrics and Evidence at UCD

At an institutional level, UCD is using widening participation data to communicate with internal stakeholders and drive improvements in access. UCD notes that data only captures part of the picture of the learner journey, but provides metrics “which demonstrate access and inclusion through admissions, participation, progression, retention, outward mobility, completion and graduate outcomes” (2022, p.21). A notable finding from the data is that at UCD students eligible for DARE and HEAR (both above and below the CAO points requirement) are progressing at a higher rate than the UCD average (2022, p.45). The use of data at UCD to drive change is outlined in a chapter by Fleming (2023), who emphasises the importance of data visualisation and storytelling. One strategy employed was the use of the village scenario visualised below:

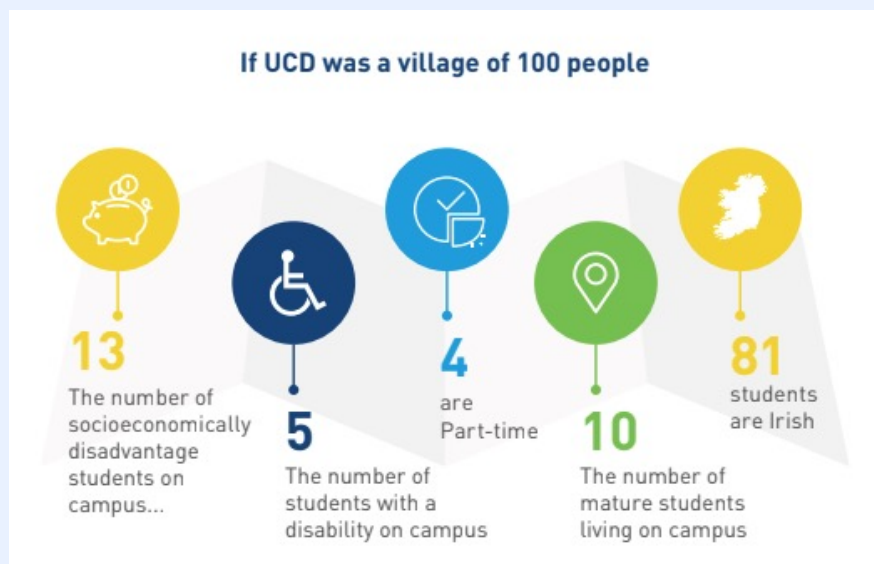


Figure 24: Image extracted from: Fleming et al (2022) *Who Counts? University for All Data, Metric, and Evidence 2020-2021*. Dublin: UCD Access and Lifelong Learning

Fleming outlines the impact of this technique:

Suddenly, we had colleagues sit up and react forcefully to what we were showing. There was general disbelief at the remarkably low levels of participation among some student groups and in particular programme areas ... There was now a sense of urgency in our collective drive to be inclusive ... The data helped us tell a story to trigger action (Fleming 2023, p.54)

The initiative has been captured in a 2022 [publication freely downloadable](#) from UCD's website at the time of this review and released under a Creative Commons 4.0 licence that enables users to share and adapt the material, appropriately attributed. It is further outlined in the chapter by Fleming cited above in a recent book publication: [Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality: Creating a University for All](#).

Using the Education Longitudinal Database to track FET Learner Outcomes

At a national level, analysis undertaken of FET Learner Outcomes by the Data Analytics Unit in SOLAS provides a good example of how coordinated work across the sector has enabled the utilisation of ATP relevant data. Reported both by Guerin & Hegarty (2020) and the Department of Education and Skills' Transitions Reform Sub-Group (2020), the analysis draws upon the Education Longitudinal Database (ELD). The ELD is a data source that brings together data from the Department of Education and a number of state agencies, including the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and SOLAS, with employment, benefits and earnings data from the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Social Protection. It is noted that access to this data source is strictly limited to Officers of Statistics and that the ELD is providing the basis for a series of projects that the CSO is facilitating in strict compliance with the Statistics Act.

The combined data allows researchers to provide greater insight into learner outcomes and has the potential to valuably inform impact analyses of policies and initiatives in ATP. For example, in 2020, it provided visibility on the proportion of PLC course graduates progressing to employment/unemployed, employment and higher education or higher education exclusively. It gave a view of median weekly wages for graduates of PLC courses in employment and it provided evidence that the number of learners progressing to HET from a PLC course remained stable at around 27% over the years 2012 – 2015, with most of those learners enrolling in a cognate discipline. It also provided evidence that PLC course graduate retention and progression in HET appears to compare favourably to those in HET from lower Leaving Certificate points brackets, although a caveat is provided that this analysis is indicative as SOLAS and the HEA work to develop directly comparable FET data with general HEI retention analysis (DoES, 2020).

Retention of PLC Graduates within HEIs

Year of PLC Graduation	HE Year 1	HE Year 2	HE Year 3
Class of 2017	100%	-	-
Class of 2016	100%	80.0%	-
Class of 2015	100%	81.6%	65.1%
Class of 2014	100%	84.6%	70.7%
Multi-annual Average Retention Rate	100%	83.1%	68.8%
IoTs Average Retention Rate 2013 & 2014 PLC Grads	100%	80.9%	64.3%
Universities Average Retention Rate 2013 & 2014 PLC Grads	100%	89.5%	78.5%

Figure 25: Image extracted from: Department of Education and Skills, Further Education and Training (FET) Progression to Higher Education (HE) Transitions Reform Working Paper, June 2020

The SOLAS report indicated areas where the data can be deceptive. For example, progression of PLC course graduates within the same field of learning is difficult to measure using ISCED coding due to differences between the HEA datasets and the PLSS. This results in learners that are PLC graduates of Early Childhood Care and Education courses who progress to a Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Studies being flagged as a mismatch as the former is coded in Education and the latter in Health and Welfare.

Nonetheless, the use of the ELD is a promising indicator that ATP practitioners will be able to avail of increasingly evidence-based insights in the years ahead.

3.7 SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION

Initiatives that support ATP by promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in tertiary education are often concurrently concerned with furthering the skills agenda, which places a focus on ensuring future workforce capacity. Stakeholders caution that where government policy under the theme of investment in human capital merges both social (access) and economic (skills) objectives, understandings of successful participation can be dominated by the latter. Accordingly, success “may come to be measured solely in quantitative outputs such as completion rates and employment statistics” (Gill et al 2013, p.40). The access and skills agendas share a number of complementarities, for example an interest in increasing flexible learning opportunities and enabling lifelong learning. It remains critical that ATP practice, grounded in the principles of equity and inclusion, is understood and measured on its own terms.

Those terms include a recognition that facilitating successful ATP is inherently complex. Learners from underrepresented groups are known to overcome not only practical but social, emotional and psychological hurdles to enter, to participate and to progress, dynamics that are powerfully set out in an autobiographical publication by O’Sullivan (2023). Consequently, simple metrics are unable to represent successful participation in the context of ATP. This point is well-acknowledged in the current Future FET (2020-24) strategy.

...measures of learner outcomes and employer perspectives are vital to understanding the impact FET provision has for learners and the wider economy. However it is also important that we measure the wider benefits of learning from FET, and those which have impact, in particular, at an individual level for the learner. These can relate to improved learner confidence, empowerment and engagement; increased appetite for additional study; community development; and enhanced societal engagement and integration. FET can have a transformative impact on the lives of our learners, therefore we must ensure that such a spectrum of benefits is integrated into the way that its value is measured (SOLAS, 2020, p.26).

The perspective set out in Future FET is echoed in findings from a national three-year research and evaluation study conducted on Rethink Ireland’s Education Fund (2017-2020). The research led to a recommendation that access and progression be conceptualised in terms of both ‘hard outcomes’, in the form of progression through NFQ Levels, and ‘soft outcomes’, which include, but are not limited to, increased independence, increased self-confidence and a more positive future outlook (Kovačič et al, 2021, p. 19).

In this part of the report, we spotlight local and national initiatives that reflect the complex realities ATP practitioners are engaging with as they work to better facilitate learners. These initiatives bring the interrelationships between ATP and adjacent areas of policy and social practice to the fore. They are grounded in an equity and inclusion paradigm and align with the principles set out two decades ago in NQAI’s published policies, actions and procedures for the promotion of ATP, which emphasised that programme provision should be structured not only to facilitate entry but to encourage learners to participate in the learning process and to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities (2003). As such, they extend our focus beyond measuring entry and progression rates, approaching the learner experience more holistically.

Direct submissions to the review and published source material have been drawn upon to highlight initiatives that enable successful participation. The project team emphasises that the initiatives featured in this section are by no means representative of the entirety of work in this area. The breadth and diversity of organisations, institutions and projects underway nationally precludes comprehensive representation within the space available.



3.7.1 INITIATIVES THAT ENGAGE WITH LEARNERS AT AN EARLY STAGE

The Early Learning Initiative

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at National College of Ireland (NCI) has had a long-term focus on supporting children and their families to interact with and progress through the education system and onto tertiary programmes from as early as 18 months via a range of programmes (Bleach, 2013). ELI runs a number of programmes, including parent and child programmes to encourage language, literacy and numeracy skill development at home, area-based after school literacy programmes, STEM activities in the local community, educational guidance and discover university summer programmes.

NCI, as a third level institution, is an important plank in building the educational capital of the community in the Docklands. Holding events in NCI gives children and their families a positive experience of third level as well as making them more aware of third level education in general (Bleach, 2013 p.11).

The ELI is currently reported to involve 14,000+ participants a year, having moved beyond its initial Dublin Docklands catchment area to reach other communities nationally (ncirl.ie/ELI, 2023).

Youthreach

The Youthreach Programme affords young people who no longer engage in mainstream education an opportunity to access education in an alternative setting. This ensures the retention of young people in the Irish Education system, whilst providing progression to FET, higher education and employment. Youthreach works closely with other Services including the Department of Social Protection, FIT and local employers in supporting students and their access to transfer and progression opportunities. The brief extracts from longer testimonials reproduced below are from current and former Youthreach learners and were directly contributed to this review.

“School wasn’t exactly an option for me at the time because every time I applied to a school or met with a school principal, I got denied. I looked at 8 different schools and unfortunately with covid-19 rampaging and high numbers in schools, there was just no room for me (Youthreach learner, extracted from a direct submission to the review).”

“I was told by my principal if I left school, I would end up going nowhere. I was doing nothing and stressing in school. Now I know I have a future. I feel more confident. I have friends and will be going to college next year to study (Youthreach learner, extracted from a direct submission to the review).”

“My friend couldn’t cope with the school environment. He was bullied for the first few years and never really fit in. Covid didn’t help because he was basically at home alone for two years. He was miserable in school but his teachers told him he had no other option. He was panicked because he didn’t want to go to school but didn’t have other options, so he just stayed at home. His mum found out about Youthreach through one of her colleagues who used to talk about how brilliant Youthreach was because she knew someone who had gone there. He says he is grateful because he thought he had nowhere to go (Youthreach learner, extracted from a direct submission to the review).”

A focused research report on transition from second level education to FET and HET published by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning found that, across both surveys and focus groups, the most frequent suggestion from learners was that they would have valued the opportunity to experience higher education in advance of commencing. Learners participating in the study referred to work placements undertaken during transition year and expressed that a college placement experience would have supported their transition (Denny, 2015, p.55). A number of initiatives reviewed in subsequent sections, both via direct contributions and reviews of publicly available information, indicate that institutions nationally are integrating opportunities for mentoring, visiting and more formal bridging programmes into the spectrum of activities they support.

3.7.2 INITIATIVES THAT OFFER MENTORING TO CURRENT AND FUTURE LEARNERS

Mentoring Programmes at MTU Kerry

MTU Kerry offer a Mentoring in Education Certificate. In 2022-23, four graduates of the programme have engaged in the Access Mentoring Programme in the five Kerry DEIS schools. The format of delivery is informed by school need and up to eight mentoring sessions per semester are delivered in all DEIS schools. Feedback from schools has been very positive. A campus visit with a variety of on-site activities for students and mentors takes place in May every year. MTU Kerry have produced a promotional video that demonstrates the importance and impact of mentoring initiatives in schools and communities and is used to further promote the programme.

MTU Kerry have also established a Mature Student Peer Mentoring (MSPM), which is a support programme which is available to help new mature students, entering full-time under-graduate courses with their transition to third level. It is aimed at aiding the process by which new mature students settle in by linking them to other mature students and a mentor.

Future You Mentoring at UCD

UCD Future You Mentoring is a college programme for fifth year school pupils who aspire to go on to third-level study. UCD Access & Lifelong Learning manages this programme with our partner schools. The programme goal is to:

- Improve the pupil's awareness of college
- Increase their belief in their own ability to attend college
- Share important information: how to study, how to apply for college and what are college supports

UCD Future You mentors are college students who have been supported in UCD by ALL. Structured mentoring sessions take place in linked schools throughout the one year programme. Pupils also have the opportunity to visit UCD where mentors have the opportunity to show mentees the campus and share their experience. Since 2012, over 1,600 school pupils have taken part in UCD Future You Mentoring.

3.7.3 VISITOR, BRIDGING AND FOUNDATION PROGRAMMES THAT SUPPORT TRANSITION

Access UCC's FE to HE transition support programme.

Launched in November 2019 as a new initiative, Access UCC PLUS Programme, in collaboration with [Cork ETB](#), provides support directly within the Further Education sector to students originating from UCC-linked [DEIS](#) schools and certain other centres. It was a response to the high number of students from these schools and centres progressing to FET rather than directly to HET and it aims to increase the number of these students who may then progress from FET to HET. The target cohort must be under 23 (after which they are classed as mature students) and it also includes Cork city and county Youthreach centres, [Cork Life Centre](#) and members of the [Traveller](#) and Roma community.

Pre-entry activities include visits to second level schools, linked centres and Youthreaches and engagement with Traveller interagency groups to deliver talks to 5th /6th year student classes (Leaving Certificate students) as well as attendance at parents talks, career events and facilitating visits to FET campuses by prospective students. Post-entry activities include a welcome and induction social activity, one to one personal meetings, the provision of academic support, supplementary study, study skills resources, financial assistance (in the form of vouchers), facilitating a Traveller/Roma assistance fund and support in accessing information, decision making and in the application process for higher education through the [CAO](#) and [HEAR](#).

Findings from research on the programme have indicated that the overwhelming response in relation to the FET to HET programme was a positive one. Participants pointed to the benefits of the guidance and support they received particularly in relation to the one-to-one support meetings when trying to navigate their new college environment. Students report a reduction in the challenges and stress of navigating the further education space, to the benefit of their mental health and overall enjoyment of the college experience. Students who were interested in progression to higher education valued and benefited from the support in this area.

NAVET at DCU

The Non-Award Visitor in Education and Training (NAVET) is a bridging programme that facilitates learners who are attending an FET college and studying a full level 5 module to simultaneously attend classes at DCU, where they study two 5 ECTS modules leading to an NFQ Level 8 Bachelor of Science in Education degree. These are (1) Social & Personal Development with Communication Skills and (2) Concepts & Contexts in Education and Training ([DCU](#), 2023). Successful completion of both courses provides direct access to the degree programme with exemptions in two modules. Research on the programme indicates that learners involved in NAVET perceive that the scaffolding offered by the programme and their FE college supported their successful transitions to HE (McElvaney, 2021).

P-Tech at NCI

The full Certificate in P-TECH (Pathways in Technology) programme is a 10 credit (ECT) Higher Education Award validated by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), designed by the National College of Ireland (NCI). As part of the higher education programme, learners can also earn a range of industry recognised credentials (or badges) and gain relevant work experience within the business or technical fields.

A large part of the programme is undertaken in Transition Year where it provides a range of learning opportunities, badge credentials and work experience. Learners that complete the full programme will gain a Level 6 Higher Certificate Award (10 ECTS). To complete the full award, students will need to choose the Certificate in P-TECH as a 7th subject and will continue in P-TECH classes in both 5th and 6th year.

Since the Certificate in P-TECH programme is QQI validated at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland, the 10 HE credits gained can be referenced within an application to further education colleges or universities if learners choose to continue their studies.

Youthreach and Cork College of FET

To support progression from Youthreach to further education, Cork College of FET's Morrison's Island Campus has been running a level 5 Communications class on Fridays for the past few years, specifically for Youthreach students. This gives Youthreach students a taste of college life and they can achieve certification in one level 5 component. A similar support is being provided in Cork College of FET Mallow Campus. Integrated provision in the same building is very helpful to transfer and progression for some Youthreach students. They are familiar with the resources and environment.

Trinity Access Programme

The Trinity Access Programmes offer young adults a foundation course for higher education. The course was set up in 1999 to offer another way into Trinity for young adults whose social, economic and cultural experiences have prevented them from going to college.

Learners can choose from two broad areas of study: arts and social sciences, or science, as well as taking part in a professional development and mentoring programme with Grant Thornton - a chartered accountants and management consultancy firm. In addition to classes in Study Skills, Educational Guidance and Information Technology, learners may choose from the following: English, History, Philosophy, Law, Politics, Psychology, Sociology, Economics, Business, Maths, Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Computer Science. While completing a foundation course at Trinity, students have full access to all college supports and services, plus additional TAP student supports

Level 5 Special Purpose Award in Maths for STEM

In response to the barrier faced by many access students who were not being admitted to engineering and courses that required higher level maths, an NFQ Level 5 Special Purpose Award in Maths for STEM was established. The 30 credit module is deemed equivalent to Higher Leaving Certificate Mathematics at Trinity College Dublin and University of Limerick. It is designed to equip learners with the mathematical skills necessary to pursue degree programmes in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects.

3.7.4 INITIATIVES UTILISING BLENDED AND REMOTE PEDAGOGIES TO FACILITATE LEARNER PARTICIPATION

iScoil

iScoil is an online learning service that supports equity of educational access for students who have disengaged from mainstream school and are in need of a flexible approach to support their engagement with education. All referrals to iScoil are made through the state agency Tusla, by Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs). Each referral submitted for review has to meet a set of basic criteria (see below) and other interventions to support a return to school must have been tried (iScoil, 2023).

The iScoil programme is tailored and the service deals with a small number of students at any given time. Over the first ten years of iScoil's provision it supported 400 learners, of whom 82% went on to achieve some form of accreditation (Eivers, 2021, p.2). iScoil's QQI Level 3 programme targets learners young people aged 13-16 years who are out of mainstream school and have not achieved certification at Junior Certificate level. Upon completion of the iScoil Level 3 General Learning Award, students will be supported to progress on to further education and training. We support all student progression through working with the young person, their parents/guardians and other relevant agencies to discern the most appropriate pathway after iScoil, e.g. mainstream school, Youthreach or other training or employment opportunities (iScoil, 2023). A 2021 report on the efficacy of iScoil's home based provision reported on the outcomes for a particular cohort as follows:

The target group of students had, prior to iScoil, highly problematic engagement with the education system. Despite this, almost half had obtained the Certificate in General Learning within a single school year, while the remainder were making progress towards obtaining it in 2021/22 or had returned to school. Attendance data shows that almost all students attended for almost all scheduled days. Bearing in mind that there is no expectation that the Certificate in General Learning must be completed within a single school year, the iScoil intervention can therefore be described as extremely successful in terms of both student engagement and student outcomes (Eivers, 2021, p. 76-77).

SETU – TIGLIN

South East Technological University (SETU), working in collaboration with Tiglin, has announced that it will deliver holistic and supportive educational programmes to Tiglin residential services users designed to advance their access to higher education and to better support their reintegration into society with appropriate skills. A submission to this review identifies that those accessing Tiglin's addiction recovery programme experience significant educational disadvantage. As the learners cannot leave their sites, funding will be spent on information technology infrastructure so as to enable delivery across all centres.

In an effort to provide and support equality of opportunity for all, SETU have identified and created a suite of programmes from levels 6 to 9 (from 5 credits upwards) leading to accredited awards for successful graduates. It is envisaged that the programmes will be minor award certificates which focus on the micro-credential approach to learning and will enable the learners to accumulate their learning through individual component certificates.

3.7.5 INITIATIVES THAT EMPHASISE UNIVERSAL DESIGN AND WHOLE OF INSTITUTION APPROACHES TO INCLUSION

‘Fragmented’ was an adjective commonly employed to refer to initiatives in ATP in both published source material and also within direct contributions to the review. This is particularly apparent in relation to funding streams and supports across both FET and HET (see sections 3.1.3 and 3.2.2). However, the project team also reviewed a number of initiatives that were characterised by coordination, collaboration and ‘joined-up thinking’, three of which are highlighted in this section as case studies of effective and innovative ATP practice.

UDL Digital Badge

In recent years, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has gained prominence among educators seeking to ensure their practice is inclusive and facilitates diverse learners. Padden reports that a development team for a digital badge in UDL for teaching and learning was formed in 2017, with UCD as a co-developer. The initial roll out involved five online self-paced modules and a half-day workshop with a redesign task. Subsequent interactions of the badge saw peer groups introduced as an alternative to workshop peer engagement and a MOOC style roll out of the badge in 2020. Over 3,000 FET and HET educators have registered across the course over the past three years (Padden, 2023, p.102). The evaluations by participants and the 2022 data for the digital badge below were shared directly with the review team by AHEAD.



Figure 26: Image Extracted from: Direct Submission to Review by AHEAD, 2023

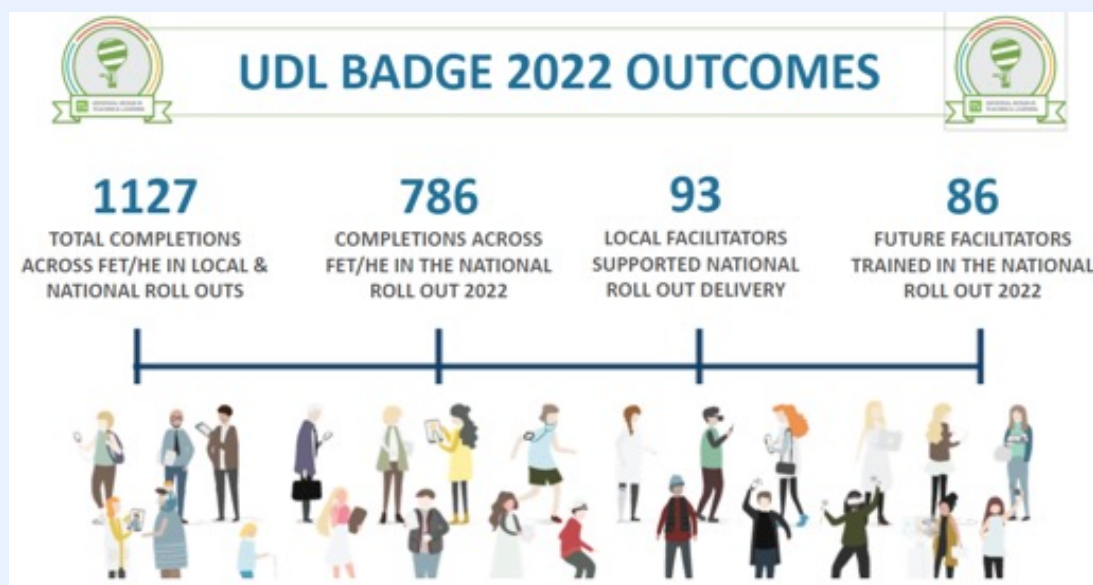


Figure 27: Image Extracted from: Direct Submission to Review by AHEAD, 2023

UCD Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions

In 2017 UCD's University for All initiative launched a toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions. The toolkit was produced for the higher education sector in response to the need for whole of institution responses to the challenges of ATP. The introduction to the toolkit pointed out that a "substantial body of literature considers access, participation, and success in higher education. Implementation practice, however, points to a 'gap'" (2018, p.13).

The toolkit encompasses the institutional foundation and scaffolding need to bolster access and inclusion, and sets out four pillars: (1) Programme & Curriculum Design, Teaching & learning; (2) Student Supports and Services; (3) Physical Campus and the Built Environment; (4) Information Technology Systems and Infrastructure.

Padden outlines that the toolkit is intended to assist HEIs to create action plans, recognise progress already achieved, identify priority areas, offer practical steps for implementing and embedding inclusive practice and facilitate dialogue between institutional stakeholders on the importance of higher education practice (2023, p. 78).

The toolkit has been published under creative commons licence, allowing for adaptation with attribution. It has been used in at least two other jurisdictions (Canada and the Netherlands) to date and is viewed by its creators as a living document that will evolve and adapt to the changing landscape of higher education (Padden, 2023, p.85).

The UD for 3 Project

Under the auspices of PATH 4 funding announced by DFHERIS in June 2022, a team led by staff from ATU, MTU and AHEAD are collaborating with HEIs, ETBs and governmental agencies to achieve two objectives that will support the principles of access across the tertiary sector. These are:

1. To develop a national Universal Design (UD) Charter for use in Tertiary Education.
2. To adapt the UCD toolkit for inclusive higher education institutions to create a national toolkit that can guide further and higher education institutions (ahead.ie, 2023).

The development of the Charter will address systems, policies and areas including student services, physical-built environment and IT/Digital accessibility (itsligo.ie, 2023). The scope and objectives of the UD for 3 project recognise the importance of the whole-of-institution approaches to student success across the student lifecycle and post entry. As such, the project aligns closely with the principles set out two decades ago in NQAI's published Policies, actions and procedures for the promotion of access, transfer and progression that programme provision should be structured not only to facilitate entry, but to encourage learners to participate in the learning process to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities (2003).

The three examples highlighted in this section reflect a wider movement toward inclusive practice across the sector. The government's *Funding the Future* clearly sets out that in the years ahead:

A broader focus beyond access will be taken to include successful participation and outcomes, across all programmes and all levels of higher education. The Department, in collaboration with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, will promote universal design for learning and student success (DFHERIS, 2022c, p. 14)

Moreover, it will be a priority to ensure that:

...our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities (DFHERIS, 2022c, p. 14)

3.8 RECENT AND ONGOING DEVELOPMENTS

The dynamic nature of ATP practice is exemplified by developments occurring concurrent to this review, including the establishment of a new National Tertiary Office. Although it is too early to make substantive observations, these developments are noteworthy as they provide some indications of potential new directions in ATP practice.

3.8.1 PROPOSAL TO CONSIDER INDIVIDUAL LEARNING ACCOUNTS

Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) have been proposed as a means for enabling individuals to participate in labour-market relevant training opportunities in a manner that would allow them to accumulate and preserve their individual training entitlements over time, regardless of funding source. Individual training entitlements are defined as the right to access a personal budget to cover the direct costs of labour-market-relevant training, guidance and counselling, skills assessment or RPL. The enabling framework for ILAs would include provision of guidance and RPL opportunities (CoE, 2022). In the Irish context, it is also likely that continued development of RPL practice will be highly relevant to any uptake of the recent recommendation by the Council of the European Union that Member States consider the establishment of Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs), which explicitly references the need for guidance inclusive of RPL opportunities to be available to ILA holders as part of a broader enabling framework (CoE, 2022). The exploration of ILAs is identified as a spotlight action within a report by DFHERIS on its public consultation to progress a unified tertiary sector in Ireland in 2022.

3.8.2 NEW TERTIARY PATHWAYS

In May 2022, DFHERIS released its Policy Platform: Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge, which sets out plans for reform of the system. Within the platform, dimensions of practice central to ATP (accessible, coherent and diverse pathways, flexibility, lifelong learning, equality, diversity and inclusion) intersect with those of the skills agenda (talent, access to skills at a regional and national level, innovation and enterprise, future workforce capacity).

In April 2023, the Minister for Further and Higher Education announced 14 pilot projects that will enable learners to undertake the first year(s) of their programme in an ETB college and progress to a Level 8 programme at a technological university or, in one case, at IADT (Mooney, 2023). The remit of the new National Tertiary Office (NTO), announced in December 2022 and established in 2023, is to encourage further such collaborations between FET and HET providers on the development of pathway programmes in areas where there are established industry needs and/or skills deficits. One example involves Laois and Offaly ETB working in partnership with SETU to deliver SETU's Higher Certificate in Business and Higher Certificate in Computing at Portlaoise Institute, with students able to study closer to home before progressing to SETU to complete the full Level 8 degree programme (Education Magazine, 2023). The suite of pilot pathways within this initiative was officially launched on the 7th of July by Minister Harris, who emphasised the departure from “the unnecessarily stressful points race that the CAO system puts on our learners” (DFHERIS, 2023) that the pathways represent.

Throughout this review of ATP practice in Ireland, the project team has considered substantial developments that have taken place across the further and higher education and training sectors over the past two decades. A number of systemic factors including policies, strategies, action plans and funding mechanisms that have enabled positive change to date have been discussed. We note that many of the good practice examples highlighted in this Chapter reflect holistic, whole of institution, cross-institutional and cross-sectoral endeavours. These developments demonstrate that if ATP practice in Ireland is to work for learners, it must be a shared and coordinated endeavour. From this review of current practice, it is clear that continuing to build trust across and between sectors and establishing equivalence of practice is essential if the full potential of ATP is to be realised and learners facilitated in navigating seamlessly through the qualifications system.



CHAPTER 4.

CHAPTER 4: THE LEARNER EXPERIENCE OF ATP

In this chapter, we explore the learner experience of ATP practice in Ireland, drawing upon published research, individual case study submissions, available data and reports by government agencies and stakeholder organisations. As this review was commissioned as secondary research, the insights the project team presents here are derived from a synthesis of published and/or directly contributed quantitative and qualitative source materials. The project team's capacity to apply the lens of the learner experience to ATP is therefore directly attributable to a body of existing work undertaken by dedicated practitioners, advocates and researchers.

The chapter is structured around what we know (and do not know) about the experiences of particular cohorts that are underrepresented in tertiary education and training. Specifically, this chapter spotlights learners who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, mature learners, international protection applicants, members of the Traveller community and learners living with a disability, and considers the particular importance of FET in facilitating learners to enter, re-enter and progress. These cohorts are presented (artificially) as semi-distinct categories of learner. This, in itself, is a compromise. The categories are employed here to facilitate coherence in our discussion.

The identities of both existing and potential learners are almost always intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991; 2019). A learner living with a disability may concurrently be facing socioeconomic disadvantage; a learner that is mature may concurrently be a single parent, a carer, seeking asylum and experiencing poverty. The compound disadvantages that such learners overcome to not only access, but succeed within Ireland's tertiary education system is a recurrent theme throughout the inputs to this review and is readily discernible in the learner voices reproduced throughout this chapter.

The project team emphasises that these are not the only groups that are underrepresented across our tertiary education sector, particularly in HET. A more targeted review of the learner experience could further explore the literature on learners with experience of the care system, domestic violence or the criminal justice system, homelessness, addiction, lone or teen parents, carers or who have intellectual disabilities (as identified within the HEA's National Access Plan for the period 2022-2028 as groups with life experiences that can lead to social disadvantage).

That QQI is the commissioning authority for this review is an important consideration. The project team notes that many of the themes which are prominent in the learner experience literature relate to aspects of ATP that QQI has the capacity to influence. For example, QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016) are of direct relevance to the provision of information to learners that will assist them to better navigate the pathways and opportunities open to them, the availability of appropriate supports, and the use of strategies for teaching, learning and assessment that facilitate diversity and support student success in an era of widened participation (as well as the necessary support and development for teaching staff that will make this possible). However, interwoven with these dimensions of ATP practice are issues that do not fall within QQI's remit. For example, the provision of adequate financial support and the availability of part-time enrolment options at undergraduate level across our HEIs. In considering the learner experience of ATP, it is simply unrealistic to exclude such fundamental issues from our discussion. Furthermore, the project team emphasises that the recommendations set out in this report are limited to areas of activity that QQI can realistically engage with.

4.1 SOCIOECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

Socioeconomic disadvantage is a cross-cutting theme, relevant to each of the cohorts discussed in this chapter. As such, an independent profile of the socioeconomically disadvantaged learner is somewhat artificial. This is a pervasive barrier to entry and participation that impacts learners from many backgrounds. Government reports, statistics and the wider research literature cumulatively provide ample evidence that socioeconomic disadvantage undermines the capacity of learners to enter the system, and once there, to successfully participate.

“ *Making sure you have the time and space to focus on the coursework, worrying about money coming in for bills and costs while studying, transportation to and from the site, not feeling like you can do it or that you won't get it or succeed at it.* **”**

FET full-time community education learner.

Extracted from: A study of the role, contribution and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) Services on Active Inclusion in Ireland by Roe, 2021, p.

“ *I even decided I want to drop out because the money I have saved I put everything because I pay my course myself. I just registered myself, I paid everything myself – my transport, everything was on me, food and everything. My parents – I know if they had money, they would help me but they don't have it and I don't want to ask them because I know they don't have it.* **”**

HET learner, who was an unsuccessful applicant to the 1916 Bursary Fund.

Extracted from an evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund and its impact from the awardee's perspective by Cummins et al 2021, p. 41.

Across both FET and HET, financial support is available to learners who meet eligibility criteria. However, the accessibility and adequacy of that support has been questioned in both sectors. A 2017 study commissioned by SOLAS to explore barriers to FET found that for prospective learners, financial issues were a key barrier. Moreover, as indicated in Section 3.1.3, the complexity of the social welfare system meant that costs, grants and entitlements were a source of confusion not only for learners, but for educators and stakeholder groups participating in the study. In addition, the costs associated with childcare were considered to be potentially prohibitive for women (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017, p.50). Financial support in HET is discussed in Section 3.2.2 of this report, where published reports and evaluations are cited that indicate these are insufficient to meet the needs of underrepresented learner groups. Conversely, when financial and practical material support is offered and adequate, and when reasonably priced courses are made available, learners report life-changing impacts.

“

I got a laptop at the start of Covid because my own was very outdated. It was offered to me straight away, it was brilliant. The one I had was stuck together with sellotape and I was afraid to install new updates. I didn't know what to buy but when it was offered to me everything I needed was on it. It has been brilliant.”

FET learner with a disability.

Extracted from: A study of the role, contribution and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) Services on Active Inclusion in Ireland by Roe, 2021, p. 76

“

I never thought these courses would be so reasonable. Private courses cost hundreds of euros and they are not achievable if you are in lower paid work and the ETB courses are free or very affordable and that is great. The course I was doing was €1,100 in a private college and it is €75 in an ETB.”

FET BTEI learner.

Extracted from: A study of the role, contribution and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) Services on Active Inclusion in Ireland by Roe, 2021, p.73

Addressing socioeconomic disadvantage is undeniably complex. Research that considers the relationship between socioeconomic deprivation and participation in tertiary education in Ireland indicates patterns of participation are multigenerational. For example, a 2021 publication on the longitudinal Growing up in Ireland study found that 87% of 20-year olds had participated in at least one FET or HET programme since leaving school (70% in higher education, 17% in a PLC course and 10% in FET). However, family background was noted to strongly structure that participation, with 86% of learners whose parents held degree level qualifications progressing to higher education compared with only 48% of learners whose parents held Junior Certificate qualifications or lower. FET was noted to cater more for those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (O'Mahony et al., 2021, p.67).

Nonetheless, demand for access to higher education via the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) which offers places on reduced points to prospective learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds continues. The IUA reports that in 2022, 3,619 individual applicants to HEAR received an offer of a place in higher education, of which 2,363 accepted their offer (IUA, 2022, p.3). This represents a slight decrease from 3,724 individual applicants receiving offers and 2,474 accepting offers in 2021 (IUA, 2021, p.3). The current NAP reports that in 2019/20 10% of the student population in higher education came from disadvantaged areas, compared with 19% from affluent areas (HEA, 2022, p.42).

For those learners from disadvantaged backgrounds that are able to enter higher education, it must be noted that disparities are persistently evident in comparison between them and their classmates from more socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds in relation to non-progression. Data reported in the HEA's study of progression in Irish Higher Education (2020) indicated that for 2015/16 and 2016/17 the rates of students who did not progress were higher among semi-skilled and unskilled socioeconomic groups, ranging from 13 – 15%. This contrasts with non-progression rates of 7 – 8% among higher professionals (HEA, 2020). More recent data indicates that non progression rates among students categorised as affluent stood at 10% in comparison with 17% for disadvantaged learners in 2018/19, and 7% (affluent) compared with 12% (disadvantaged) in 2019/20.

Another area in which the ongoing impact of socioeconomic disadvantage can be discerned is in the labour market earnings of graduates. The HEA's analysis of labour market earnings suggests that undergraduates who previously attended DEIS schools earn 6% less than peers who attended a standard school, while undergraduates who attended a fee-paying second level school are earning 9% more four years post-graduation (Stanley et al., 2019, p.58). The HEA report suggests that this is lessened to be not statistically different after controlling for course studied and other characteristics the difference is reduced. However, the project team suggests that characteristics such as the type of course studied and institution type are inherently linked with socio-economic disadvantage.

Although specific to higher education, the most recent National Access Plan 2022-2028 (NAP) explicitly recognises that socioeconomic disadvantage affects learners with diverse profiles and life experiences and acknowledges the experience of intersectionality. Accordingly, the NAP sets out the importance of whole-of-government and whole-of-education approaches to addressing access.



Figure 28: Life experiences that can cause socioeconomic disadvantage, reproduced from the National Access Plan 2022-2028 (HEA, 2022b p.53)

It would be remiss for the project team to conclude this section without reference to the current social and economic context. Although social restrictions have not been in place for some time, in 2023 we are still dealing with the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and its multiple impacts on individuals and society. Ireland is concurrently experiencing a chronic housing shortage, energy crisis and escalating costs of living. In this context, it is important to acknowledge that learners who may not be classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged by existing metrics may still be struggling to meet the financial demands associated with participation in tertiary education, living in precarious housing and/or managing significant personal stress and mental health challenges.

A number of indicators suggest that a more targeted review could provide valuable insight as to how adequate and appropriate current metrics, financial supports and associated processes are in a rapidly evolving socioeconomic environment and what impact this is having on ATP in our tertiary sector. For example, the HEA's 2017 review of the student assistance fund reflected a disbursement pattern in which the highest amount spent each year was being spent on rent (ranging between 39% and 49.6% across a six year period) followed by heating/lighting/food (ranging from 15.9% to 25% over the timeframe analysed) (HEA, 2017, p.21). It would be useful to understand how this, and other supports, are currently being disbursed. A relevant observation from a report outlining a recent study of mature student participation in higher education was that mature learners who were not classified as members of an access group were almost as likely as those that were to view the financial support available for mature learners as working poorly or very poorly (Indecon, 2021, p. 12).



4.2 MATURE LEARNERS

Mature learners make up the overwhelming majority of learners in the FET sector. SOLAS figures indicate that in 2022, 129,805 enrolments were spread across learners in age brackets from 25 to 64+, while an additional 56,935 learners were under 25 years of age (Dulee-Kinsolving & Guerin, 2023). Within these figures, mature learners in FET are engaging in a breadth of programmes, ranging from community and adult education courses to vocational programmes and the pursuit of major awards.

Dunne (2019) has pointed out that relatively little research has explored their experiences in FET as compared with HET. Nonetheless, the mature learner voice is discernible within a study by Roe (2021) on the impact of ETB FET services on active inclusion in Ireland and within direct contributions to this review. A recurrent theme was the important role that FET plays in assisting learners that have experienced redundancy or need to reskill in order to remain employable due to changes in the labour market.

“*As someone who needed to upskill for a career change, all my needs and hopes have been fulfilled and the difficulties I encountered have served to make me more competent and confident in using my new ICT skills and PE skills (p.45)*”

“*I have benefitted enormously from this course. It has given me a second chance to explore areas outside of my previous working life which I couldn't pursue in my earlier life due to financial needs. I can now compete for employment in those areas (p.48)*”

“*I would highly recommend it. It is the best decision I ever made. It was very daunting returning to study at my age but I'm so glad that I did, it has given me a chance to upskill and re-train in an area where now I have a recognised qualification (p.48)*”

Quotes from FET Full-time VTOS learners

Extracted from: A study of the role, contribution and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) Services on Active Inclusion in Ireland by Roe, 2021, p.45

“

I was made redundant in March 2018 from our local Bord Na Mona factory which left all 150 workers pondering their future. With a lot of help from BNM they gave us every chance to retrain and upskill ourselves.

So the search was on to find a skill that would be beneficial for years to come, after a lot of thought and discussions at home with my family I came upon upholstery and having some carpentry skills this was my future.

All very excited I started looking up upholstery courses which I found to be virtually non-existent after weeks of searching and getting disheartened I came across the [centre] which offered a course.

I wasted no time contacting them my details were taken and I shortly received a phone call to discuss the course and finally the call to say all was good I had been giving a taster course to see how I liked it, all went well, so I had no problem enrolling for level 3 and to my surprise it was free of charge. After level 3 finished there was no hesitation in signing up for level 4 or even level 5 which would give me another 3 years of learning.”

Extract adapted from a submission to the review by Cork ETB.

The role that the Adult Education Guidance Services play in assisting mature learners to navigate the FET system is a critical enabler. In Chapter 3 (section 3.5), the project team has discussed the role of guidance services and the challenges faced by ETBs in providing a consistent level of support to learners across the sector. The OECD has also noted that Ireland’s institutional support and guidance for adults would benefit from improvement, particularly for learners at risk of unemployment or at a distance from the labour market (OECD, 2023, accessed online).

“

This woman changed my life and helped me through such a difficult time where I thought I couldn’t succeed or achieve anything in life. She really did guide me through every little thing from figuring out what I love to do, finding a college that provides a course in something that I love to helping me apply for that course and then helping me with their interview process. Joan made me realise that I could succeed in whatever I wanted to do and helped me find the motivation to go out and grab it for myself.”

Extract adapted from a submission to the review by Cork ETB.

In HET, the current national access plan for higher education includes mature students who have never previously accessed higher education as well as mature students who previously attended

higher education but did not complete a course ('second chance' students) within the broader umbrella of students who may be experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage (HEA, 2022b).

Overlapping challenges are encountered by mature learners who fall under the category of socioeconomic disadvantage within the national access plan (first time entrants or 'second chance' learners who did not previously complete their HET studies) and those who may have previously completed higher education courses and are returning to the system to reskill or upskill. These challenges include balancing the demands of family and caring responsibilities with study and reduced time for paid work. Unsurprisingly, a 2021 study of mature student participation in higher education conducted on behalf of the HEA identified that 90% of part-time undergraduate courses were taken by mature learners, who comprised 15% of the full-time student population (Indecon, 2021, p.17). Comments from mature learners participating in a study evaluating the impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund reflect the aspirations, as well as the implicit challenges, among such learners.

“

I cried tears of happiness because it's given us a chance of a real future and I am now a positive role model for [my children]. They're talking about finishing school and going to college and not going on the social, which is lovely to hear.”

HET learner; Socio-economic group that has low participation rates in higher education; Lone parent; First-time mature entrant; QQI entrant)

Extracted from an evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund and its impact from the awardee's perspective by Cummins et al, 2021, p. 36.

“

Well, I really want to successfully get through the course and graduate and then get a good job out of it. And then just to be able to move on with my life. Rather than being in a situation where one minute you might be homeless, you don't know where you're going, so I want to be in control of my life.”

HET learner; Mature student; Ethnic minority

Extracted from an evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund and its impact from the awardee's perspective by Cummins et al, 2021, p. 36.

Notably, labour market trends may also impact the participation of mature learners, with research indicating that peaks and declines in the number of mature learners coincide with periods of recession and falling unemployment respectively (Indecon, 2021, p.3). The project team has further discussed the potential barrier that mature learners may experience, particularly at undergraduate level, due to the limited availability of part-time enrolment options and associated financial support in more detail in Chapter 3.

4.3 INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION APPLICANTS

The challenges international protection applicants (refugees and people seeking asylum) in Ireland have faced in accessing third level educational opportunities for most of the past two decades are set out in a comprehensive and well-researched community needs analysis published by College Connect (a six year HEA funded PATH 3 project) in partnership with the Irish Refugee Council (Sartori & Nawanze, 2021). They are also focal in a report on lifelong learning participation in Ireland that focuses on marginalised and vulnerable groups published by AONTAS (Meyler et al, 2023). These publications provide insights to the experiences of a cohort that have been underrepresented in the research literature pertaining to access to further and higher education in Ireland to date. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this group has faced significant financial barriers that have served to compound a complex and unique set of disadvantages. These are particularly amplified for learners living in the Direct Provision system, where access to transport and food may be subject to centre-specific practices.

“There is no communication in this place, unfortunately. If anything should happen, that the driver is not available to take people to there, they’re not going to know about it, because... the manager just won’t communicate that to the relevant people... there are times when you feel that you’d rather not rock the boat, you know, just be quiet and take what you’re given. Because if you do say something... it’s a very touchy subject.”

Learner in Direct Provision

Extract from: Meyler, A., Lovejoy, L. & Swan, L. (2023) Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland: A focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups, AONTAS, p. 31

Notably, until 2018, international protection applicants (refugees and asylum seekers) were required to pay prohibitive international fees to attend FE Level 5 one year PLC courses, amounting to some 3,600 euro (as opposed to a local fee of approximately 250). The 2021 College Connect report by Sartori & Nawanze commends the minister, Simon Harris, for removing international fees from PLC courses. Prior to 2015, international protection applicants were also required to pay the prohibitively high international student fees charged to non-EU citizens (typically upwards of 15,000, compared with a 3,000 contribution for domestic learners) if they wished to engage in higher education, effectively excluding them from access to the system (Cusack & O’Halloran, 2019). Sartori & Nawanze (2021) point out that many participants in their research:

... highlighted the absurdity of asking people who had no legal right to work and who were in receipt of thirty-eight euro and eighty cents per week, for fees running into thousands of euros. We would surmise that it must be uncomfortable for the person on the other side of the desk, particularly if it is apparent that the person making the inquiry is living in a Direct Provision centre and therefore living in poverty (2021, p. 58).

“

They told me that I have to pay an international fees... around 17,000 or something. So, I was like, I've been here for the past seven years, and I can't access that money. They said, 'No, no, you're not European either so you're International. So, you do not qualify for another scholarship, so you have to pay this money'. So, that was the barrier.”

International Protection Applicant & Survey Participant

Extracted from Sartori & Nawanze (2021) *A Community Needs Analysis with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum: Exploring Access & Barriers to Higher Education in Ireland*, Published by College Connect and the Irish Refugee Council, p. 58

Decisions taken by DFHERIS in 2019 and 2020 expanded access to a student support scheme (similar to the SUSI grant) to international protection applicants through amendments to the criteria to make it available to those that are resident in the state for three years or more and not subject to a deportation order. Meyler et al point out that the three year wait represents a significant ongoing barrier to access and participation in lifelong learning (2023, p. 31). Moreover, a number of ongoing challenges have been identified by researchers in the field, many of which are financial. These include:

- Learners living in direct provision centres being unable to access food from inflexible canteen style facilities in their accommodation while on campus and subsequently being forced to skip meals in order to attend class;
- Learners struggling to find or afford transport to and from college/university;
- Learners struggling to pay for books and materials;
- Learners struggling to meet requests from HEIs to pay fees;
- Learners reporting experiencing racism and microaggressions from fellow students and staff;
- Learners reporting being told that as asylum seekers they were unable to access courses higher than NFQ Levels 3 or 4.
- Learners experiencing difficulty having their prior learning and qualifications recognised.

(Sartori and Nawanze, 2021)

“

But every time I came across obstacles in college like books, like not being able to get money to take transport, it really frustrated me... (p.61)

...coming back late missing dinner because the dinner was 5pm to 6pm. And missing breakfast as well because I have to leave before breakfast is served (p.62)”

“We didn’t even bother about eating too much that term. We were receiving food from the canteen. We have to pick it up to receive food. If you went to school, nobody could collect food for you. That means you will be having no food throughout the day. If we had the money we’d buy bread. Sometimes we’d go to sleep without the bread. (p.63)”

**International Protection Applicant Focus Group Participants
Extracted from Sartori & Nawanze (2021) A Community Needs Analysis with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum: Exploring Access & Barriers to Higher Education in Ireland, Published by College Connect and the Irish Refugee Council**

The adoption by Irish HEIs of the Universities of Sanctuary initiative has enabled easier access for some international protection applicants as well as the provision of additional support to those able to obtain a scholarship (Sartori & Nawanze, 2021). Dublin City University became Ireland’s first University of Sanctuary in 2016 and at the time of writing the IUA report that University of Limerick, University College Cork, University College Dublin, University of Galway, Maynooth University and Trinity College Dublin have all achieved the designation ([IUA, 2023](#)).

However, it is noted that “the enormous success associated with receiving a University of Sanctuary scholarship, does not preclude someone from experiencing hunger on campus, or of having to walk long distances on dark dangerous roads, or of experiencing racism or stigmatisation and a feeling of ‘separateness’ despite their inclusion at higher education level, or of needing trauma support in order to be able to function on a daily basis” (Sartori & Nawanze p. 105). The limitations placed on access to higher education for international protection applicants in Ireland are also noted to have a negative impact on the social and labour market integration of this group (Cronin et al 2020).

Learners and potential learners in this category report challenges in navigating the information available to them.

“And yeah, I have to do most of the research myself, which I’m not exactly... like, I don’t know what resources I have to be referred to, or what kind of things I could miss in my research. Like there are always things hidden between the lines, I don’t have all the information and there’s no one ready to give me that information. And I found here in Ireland, there’s so many abbreviations and different forms you have to fill in the form process...can just get confused and miss many crucial things (p.68)

The website it says what level you are looking for, and then I write 9, okay. What is your bachelor? And then you can choose there are the various from psychological study to literature to law to anything, I say what is the relation between my bachelor and below? But I apply. And, and I do things wrong in the wrong way. So, I don’t find my application later (p. 69)

You have to figure out, you know, navigate the steps, accessing the information and all that. There's not much information provided for you. It's quite difficult (p. 70) ”

International Protection Applicant Focus Group Participants
Extracted from Sartori & Nawanze (2021) A Community Needs Analysis with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum: Exploring Access & Barriers to Higher Education in Ireland, Published by College Connect and the Irish Refugee Council

Sartori & Nawanze (2021) and Meyer et al (2023) have also called for RPL policies to be inclusive of the experiences of international protection applicants. Meyer et al note that learners in this group shared with the researchers that their work and educational experiences in their countries of origin had gone unrecognised in Ireland, suggesting that: “until a national policy is developed, educators and the labour market will work independently of one another, and migrants risk further exclusion from meaningful work and education” (2023, p.31.)

The NAP states that it targets underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged students who face challenges not only in accessing higher education, but also, crucially, in feeling they belong there (2022, p. 52). This recognises that inclusion and successful participation are central to ATP practice. With respect to International Protection Applicants, research in the community to date indicates that there is some distance to travel before this is achieved.

4.4 IRISH TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

The Irish Traveller community is reported to comprise an estimated 0.6% to 1% of Irish society (Pavee Point, 2021; NCCA, 2023). Working from those estimates, members of the Traveller community are proportionately well represented in further education, comprising approximately 1.5% of participants (SOLAS, 2020; Pavee Point, 2021). However, participation trends are concentrated on particular programmes and reflect certain demographics within the community. Of the 1,527 Travellers reported to be enrolled in FE courses in 2019, 40% were in adult literacy groups or in YouthReach and almost 60% were under 25 years of age (SOLAS, 2020, pp 1-5).

Although recent figures indicate that Traveller pupil enrolments in post-primary education have climbed steadily over the past decade, retention to Leaving Certificate remains low. FET programmes and onward pathways to HET remain an important enabler of progression for the Traveller community. A submission by Pavee Point to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the issue of Traveller Education with reference to Inequality; the Digital Divide and the Impact of Reduced Timetables in 2021 indicated that almost all Travellers who have completed higher education programmes transitioned from FET. However, it was also noted that Travellers’ experiences in FET varied and that routes onwards to other FET programmes or to higher education often remained unclear (Pavee Point, 2021, p.4).

Traveller organisations such as Pavee Point and individual members of the community have highlighted that Travellers face particular and compounding inequalities when pursuing studies at tertiary level. These include overcoming past experiences of discrimination and isolation in

schools, the invisibility of Traveller culture in the curriculum, mistrust of the education system, perceptions within their own community that participating in higher education may be a threat to Traveller culture, concerns that the qualifications attained will not lead to employment and the particular responsibilities of Traveller women in the home (MU, 2017).

“

It's hard to have those conversations in the family – it's like a parallel universe – you're the only one going.”

Learner voice. Extracted from: Report on the Implications of Covid-19 for Traveller and Roma transfer to and progression within Higher Education, Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women's Forum (2020, p.10)

All indicators continue to reflect that the Traveller community is severely underrepresented in HET, accounting for only 0.05% of enrolments in higher education in 2018 (Pavee Point 2021, p.5). Data cited in the Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019 - 2021 indicated that in 2019 just 61 Travellers were participating in higher education (DoES, 2019, p3). This reflected that the targets set for Traveller participation in higher education in the National Access Plan 2015 - 2019 had been unmet. HEA data included in the National Access Plan 2022-2028 indicates that 33 new entrants to HET were Irish Travellers, with 119 enrolled overall (HEA 2022).

The collection of adequate data to track access and participation by Travellers in higher education remains a widely acknowledged challenge. The process is dependent on Travellers' self-identification (or lack thereof) (MU, 2017; DoES, 2019; Pavee Point, 2021; NCCA, 2023). Pavee Point notes that “Travellers have centuries-long good cause to consider hiding their identity from public institutions” (2021, p.7) and suggests that a positive ethos and programmes informed by strong human rights, antiracist and intercultural principles may encourage self-identification.

“

After a few days' absence, I was asked what was the point in me coming back as I'd never amount to anything. I felt crushed. I went back to third level education as a mature student and successfully completed my degree in May this year with a first-class honours degree despite the challenges and barriers that COVID-19 created on top of the challenges and barriers that pre-exist before COVID-19.”

Tracey Reilly, Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Session on Traveller Education, with reference to Inequality, Digital Divide and the Impact of Reduced Timetables, June 2021.

What is clear is that complex systemic and socioeconomic disadvantages continue to undermine efforts to increase participation in HET from the Traveller community (Crickley & Kenny, 2020). Submissions to the Oireachtas in 2021 highlighted how COVID-19 had exacerbated the pre-existing 'digital divide', with many Travellers reported to be living without consistent electricity, with

poor or no broadband and with lack of access to IT facilities or devices. Moreover, lack of access to campus facilities reduced the availability of private, quiet spaces to study, libraries and other supports for learners whose home environments were often overcrowded (Pavee Point 2020; 021). Minister Harris subsequently announced the rollout of an additional €450,000 in funding to assist Travellers and Roma learners in higher education. That funding was intended to mitigate against the potential impact of COVID-19 on widening the existing gap in higher education participation by members of the Traveller community (DFHERISc, 2022).

“College was definitely an adjustment and not just for me; my family found it hard at first to get used to me going to college, as it is not something that is considered the norm within my community. It took me a while to fit in to college life. I was nervous and anxious at the beginning but the supports I received in college definitely helped me to get through my first year and to build my confidence so that I could fully participate in the college experience both socially and academically.”

Kathleen Lawrence, HET Final Year Degree Student. Extracted from: Seminar Report on Travellers in Higher Education (2017) Maynooth University

Despite the challenges encountered by members of the Traveller community in accessing HET, some positive success stories also emerged. A 2023 research report published by the NCCA identifies that despite persistent under-representation of Travellers in both further and higher education, a number of high-achieving individuals who self-identify as Travellers have been awarded PhDs in recent years. The contribution of Travellers who have progressed through the education system to bring about positive change for their community is highlighted (NCCA, 2023).



4.5 LEARNERS LIVING WITH DISABILITIES

A report published by SOLAS indicates that in 2020, 7.3% of learners enrolled in FET reported having at least one type of disability. Research focused on active inclusion within the ETB context has elicited the views of learners regarding the accessibility and inclusiveness of the ETB learning environment. Responses focused on the built environment indicated that learner experience varied between service locations, with some reporting stairs and a lack of disabled toilets as barriers and others referencing physically accessible and well resourced centres (Roe, 2021). This may be particularly important in FET, where research by AHEAD has found that although 32% of FET learners with disabilities felt that blended learning was the most accessible learning mode for them, 55% valued accessible on campus learning most (AHEAD, 2023).

In both FET and HET, learners living with disabilities have indicated a preference for approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that incorporate the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and offer choices to learners that allow them to demonstrate their achievement and learning using multiple modes of expression. However, research reports indicate that although UDL has become prominent in discourses on inclusion across the tertiary sector (see Chapter 3), practice on the ground has yet to consistently reflect this.

“Give people the choice to make videos about log books, essays etc. not everybody can write a thousand page essay making it impossible for them to do good in the course, it is unfair to people with learning disabilities such as myself, I lost out on marks because I had to write a log book instead of making a short video log, there were a few assignments that I was able to do a video log for and I got really good marks for those assignments. Case and point don't judge a fish's ability to climb a tree FET PLC learner.”

Extracted from: A study of the role, contribution and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) Services on Active Inclusion in Ireland by Roe, 2021, p.52

“...colleges need to understand that we all learn different, because the one module I got an A in last semester, (in) everything else I scraped a pass, or I just about failed. There was one module, I got an A in, which is obviously an outlier for that semester, but it was a lecturer who was really involved with universal design for learning. So, she gave a lot of, we had a lot of freedom in our topics and the ways we were assessed, the formats we used. And it really, really suited me. I really excelled; I would have liked more choice around everything else HET Learner living with a disability.”

Extracted from: AHEAD (2023) (Preprint) Changing Landscapes: Examining the experiences of tertiary education students with disabilities returning to post-lockdown learning, AHEAD Educational Press

In HET, according to data collected by AHEAD, for the academic year 2020/21, 17,866 learners with disabilities registered with disability support services across 25 higher education institutions surveyed. This figure represents 6.6% of the total student population reported by those institutions (7.8% of the undergraduate population and 2.8% of the postgraduate population). This reflects a continued upward trend in the percentage of learners registering each year⁵, although it should be noted that learners with disabilities who have chosen not to register for support are not included within these figures (AHEAD, 2022, pp. 2 - 14). Notably, the HEA reports that 12.4% of new entrants to higher education indicated living with a disability in their response to the Equal Access Survey (HEA, 2022b, p.99). The current NAP acknowledges the complexity of setting targets for students with disabilities, including differing definitions of disability, challenges in estimating prevalence rates and the potential for an individual's disability to change or develop over time. Nonetheless, a target of increasing the proportion of higher education new entrants with a disability to 16% over the seven year period of the plan (2022 - 2028) has been set (HEA, 2022b, p.99).

Research conducted by Rath (2021) on the social engagement experiences of learners with disabilities in higher education in Ireland has engaged directly with the learner voice, offering significant insight into the experiences of learners within this cohort. Although Rath found evidence of institutions devoting additional support to removing barriers to academic engagement, similar attention was not found to be paid to facilitating learners' social engagement. Moreover, learners participating in Rath's research reported that despite experiencing interactions with caring and well-meaning individuals, structures and systems were not always supportive or effective. Instances of failure to pass on to academic staff information about reasonable accommodations required for learners who had submitted medical evidence, academic staff receiving but not reviewing information pertaining to learners' needs and individual departments being unresponsive to basic support requests were noted (2021, p.151). This is borne out in more recent research by AHEAD among learners with disabilities, which found that although 89% of survey respondents were registered with support services only 60 - 65% responded positively to questions regarding the efficacy of the supports and ease with which the services could be contacted (AHEAD, 2023).

“

I am meant to get lecture slides prior to lectures but most lecturers don't send them. One lecturer even told me it was “inappropriate”, even though I have this provision through the disability services **Learner living with a disability and survey respondent.**”

Extracted from: AHEAD (2023) (Preprint) Changing Landscapes: Examining the experiences of tertiary education students with disabilities returning to post-lockdown learning, AHEAD Educational Press

Research published by AHEAD exploring the lived experiences of both FE and HE learners with disabilities engaging in work placements during their studies has also found that the majority of students faced barriers to the completion of their placements and had concerns regarding disclosure. Although some experienced a supportive placement environment where reasonable accommodations were in place, others felt that placement arrangements had been made without reference to their needs assessment (Waters & Rath, 2022, p.58).

⁵ Data collected by AHEAD indicates that there has been a 268% rise in the number of learners registering for disability support over the past 12 years.

The inaccessibility of buildings and teaching venues has been noted to be an ongoing concern for learners with disabilities. Rath cites learners who were unable to access elevators or lifts, unable to access their lecturers' offices, routinely late for class due to the distances they were required to travel on campus between timetabled classes and obliged to sit alone and apart from their peers at the front in lecture halls with tiered seating (2021, p.158). Research by AHEAD indicates that a return to in-person learning following the lifting of public health restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic has created additional challenges for learners with disabilities. Although the value of in-person learning is acknowledged among this cohort, reduced options to attend online or access lecture recordings are noted to be particularly disadvantageous for learners living with disabilities.

“ I honestly found it really challenging. It seems like the university’s attitude was that universally face to face is better. And I disagree with that. And I’ve found going to campus quite challenging, in part because of my limited vision. So, I was using a mobility device to help me navigate when I got here ... And so, the first week, I was on the phone trying to sort out training (for using the device) and, you know, figuring out how to take the bus and how to find my way to the classroom buildings on campus. So, all of that was just incredibly stressful... Learner living with a disability. ”

“ No automatic hybrid access was given. A personal request had to be made for online access on the grounds of Covid / immunocompromised. Students with disabilities (were) singled out by having to make a ‘request’ for access to multiple classes. It’s a missed opportunity to show equality by setting up automatic hybrid access available to all, as opposed to highlighting students with vulnerabilities to their lecturers Learner living with a disability and survey respondent. ”

Extracted from: AHEAD (2023) (Preprint) Changing Landscapes: Examining the experiences of tertiary education students with disabilities returning to post-lockdown learning, AHEAD Educational Press

Participants in Rath’s research indicated that staff in disability and access offices played an important role in helping them access practical support and develop a sense of belonging (2021). This is particularly noteworthy in light of figures cited in research by AHEAD, which indicates that for the academic year 2020/21, institutions reported a total of 414 students with disabilities per learning support staff member and 199 per disability support service staff member (AHEAD, 2021, p.62). Lack of resourcing is likely to be a contributory factor in Rath’s finding that a ‘fire-fighting’ approach is in evidence across our higher education institutions in response to the barriers exposed by disabled students.

4.6 THE ROLE OF FET IN FACILITATING ATP

“

I was very low and had no belief in myself. I had realised from previous experiences that a mainstream school education was not for me. [He] took me in and made me feel so incredibly welcome. He explained to me the importance of their QQI Level 3 & 4 courses that they offer and what would be available to me in order to achieve a leaving cert equivalent.”

Extract from a submission to the review - former FET learner who has since progressed to HET.

In this chapter, the substantial role that FET plays in facilitating access and in setting out pathways for learners to progress to either subsequent FET programmes or to HET has been brought to the fore. FET is known to be critical for many of the cohorts the project team has spotlighted for discussion. For example, FET is an important pathway into education for the Traveller community (Pavee Point, 2021, p.4). FET is known to be an important pathway for mature learners. Almost three in four mature students report having engaged in a FET programme or community education course prior to engaging in higher education (Indecon, 2021, p 14). Learners with disabilities have also voiced their appreciation for the additional assistance they received in FET (Sartori & Bloom, 2023, p. 42; Rath, 2021).

What is difficult to capture, both in this chapter and others, is the diversity and breadth of learners that engage with the courses and programmes in the FET sector. This is well articulated in the opening statement of *Future FET* strategy.

FET is unique. FET is for everyone. It is available in every community in Ireland, and offers every individual, regardless of any previous level of education, a pathway to take them as far as they want to go. It can offer personal development and fulfilment, a link to community and social networks, and a range of supports that reflect the diverse base of its learners. It also offers great opportunities to move into exciting and interesting vocations and careers, or a platform to develop the skills that will allow someone to flourish if they go on to further study in higher education (SOLAS, 2020b, p.8)

Submissions to this review representing the voices of learners within Youthreach programmes reflect the transformative nature of FET programmes for early school leavers.

“

I have dyslexia and they helped me get diagnosed for free. I am also from a different country and they are doing the best for me and I was always made feel very welcome and accepted.”

FET Youthreach learner.

Extracted from: A study of the role, contribution and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) Services on Active Inclusion in Ireland by Roe, 2021, p. 66

“

I applied to college and got a place in business studies. Youthreach helped me decide where I want to go and no pressure deciding. Being able to speak to someone and get their opinion and experience and help shape what you would like to do in the future.”

FET Youthreach learner.

Extracted from: A study of the role, contribution and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) Services on Active Inclusion in Ireland by Roe, 2021, p. 66

The research on FET learner outcomes from PLC courses also reflects positive outcomes for FET graduates. In 2016, 62% of graduates with full awards were in substantial employment in the first year after graduation, and over 30% of graduates in the same year were enrolled in higher education one year after graduation (Guerin & Hegarty, 2020, p.13). The HEA reported that in 2020/21, 6.1% of new entrants entered higher education based on a further education award (HEA, 2022a, p. 36). Of those that do transition to HET from FET, there is good evidence that they are well prepared, with FET graduate retention rates comparing very favourably with those entering HET directly from lower Leaving Certificate points brackets (Guerin & Hegarty, 2020, p.21).

“

Not in a million years did I think leaving school at 16 would result in me in an art college getting my degree. [FET Centre] gave me that opportunity to gain back my confidence and that realisation that I really could do whatever I put my mind to.”

Extract from a submission to the review – former FET learner who has since progressed to HET.

“

It turned my life around. I had a go at doing counselling for less than a year but I found that I was more interested in gardening. I checked out about horticulture course locally and applied. The course gave me a routine. I was familiar with doing assignments and prepared already for being given briefs and assignments so going to college was less daunting. I'm finished level 5 horticulture, completing level 6 in CSN and going onto a horticulture degree in CIT in the autumn. I would really recommend the level 4 as a start off for the basic skills.”

Extract from a submission to the review – current FET learner planning to progress to HE.

A 2023 report on a Community Needs Analysis carried out by College Connect at Maynooth University (a six year HEA funded PATH 3 project) in collaboration with DCU provides useful insights and amplifies the student voice regarding the experience of progression from FE to HE. The project engaged with 58 further education students across 7 FE colleges in the Dublin/DCU catchment area (Sartori & Bloom, 2023).

McElvaney (2021) identified that the distinct approaches to teaching and learning in FET versus HET, and more specifically differences in the extent to which learners were supported and scaffolded, to be significant factors for learners in making the transition for school leavers in particular. Participants in McElvaney's research (school leavers) "highlighted the "do your own thing approach" in HET and identified the 'two extremes' between FET where it's 'really supportive' and HET where it is 'sink or swim'." (p.62). The stigma associated with being a level 5 learner within the HE environment was also found to have impacted the academic and social integration of the FE learners who felt apart from the mainstream HE learners in that context. These themes were reinforced in Sartori & Bloom (2023), with learners participating in the research expressing trepidation about their capacity to make the transition from FET to HET.

“

I think that the course I'm doing now is easy to allow students to have time one-on-one with their teacher while it will be different in university since there would be more people in the course and less time to connect with teachers/professors (p.42) ”

“

And if you can't get a grant like, my sister is in university now. She lives at home with my parents, but they don't have a big income and she got refused from SUSI grant, she had to go out and get credit union loans, and she's only 20 years of age (p. 58) ”

“

[During FET] I learned from being able to, like, not be scared to put my hand up in a class that I could actually just have the conversation with the teacher, it was so much better. So I'm scared of going into college with the big, huge classrooms, the lectures, like it's gonna be a big step like having that many people and trying to listen to this one teacher at the top of the room. That's gonna be different (p.61) ”

FET Learner & Focus Group Participant

Extract from: Sartori & Bloom (2023) A Community Needs Analysis with Further Education Students: Thoughts Around Progression from Further Education and Training to Higher Education, College Connect

In Chapter 3, institutional and national initiatives to facilitate inclusion in not only teaching, learning and assessment but across our supports, systems and processes were highlighted as examples of success-oriented practice in ATP. As the project team reflects on these in tandem with the exploration of the learner experience of ATP set out here in Chapter 4, we are greatly encouraged by the critical mass that has built around inclusion and universal design across the tertiary sector. This is a clear priority within Future FET:

FET ensures that supports are available to allow any individual, regardless of background or formal education level, an opportunity to learn and develop. By pledging consistent levels of support and good practice for all learners; rooting FET in its communities; targeting and facilitating participation by the most marginalised groups in society; and tailoring literacy and numeracy resources to meet complex learner needs, a strong inclusive ethos will continue to underpin all FET (SOLAS, 2020, p. 45).

It is also reflected in the commitment made under Strand 3 of the government's Funding the Future framework, which states that:

A broader focus beyond access will be taken to include successful participation and outcomes, across all programmes and all levels of higher education. The Department, in collaboration with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, will promote universal design for learning and student success (DFHERIS, 2022a, p.14).



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