



Forum Insights

REPORT

Transition from Further Education and Training to Higher Education

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This **Forum Insight** summarises the key aspects of a research project which investigated students' experiences of the transition from further education and training (FET) to higher education. It will be of interest to students, teachers and managers in FET and higher education.

Introduction

The first enhancement theme of the National Forum focused on transitions into and through higher education. As part of this enhancement theme, the National Forum commissioned a series of research projects on the transition of students into higher education. Among these was the focused research project *Transition from Second Level and Further Education to Higher Education* (National Forum, 2015b). This report indicated that the experiences of transition of second level students and FET students were different. In partnership with the FET sector, the National Forum set out to explore the particular transition of FET students into higher education. This research begins to fill an important gap in our understanding of transitions, and it recognises the often substantially different experiences of those entering higher education from school, and those entering from the FET sector.

Transition from Further Education and Training to Higher Education

The purpose of this project was to combine new and existing data on Irish FET students' transitions to higher education to further our understanding of the experiences of those who choose to embark on higher education following engagement with further education. The project also examined the effectiveness of FET programmes in preparing students to participate successfully in higher education and compared the transition experiences of FET students to those entering higher education directly from the Leaving Certificate. The report outlines the results of a survey of 108 FET students carried out in 2016 and it presents the insights arising from individual follow-up interviews conducted with 17 of those survey respondents. This data is supplemented with data from the survey used in the 2015 study of transitions from second level and FET to higher education (National Forum, 2015b).

What are the key findings?

Motivations and decisions

- FET students enter higher education because of personal motivation, their focus on career development and their interest in learning a particular subject. Encouragement from family and FET staff often impacts their decision.

- Respondents indicated that the most effective source of information in the decision-making process for FET students was learning from the experience of students already in higher education.
- Respondents referred to the numerous practical arrangements they had to make prior to entering higher education and referred to many related concerns, the most frequently cited of which was financial.

FET preparation

- 83% of participants felt their FET had prepared them well for higher education.
- There was an overall sense that the FET experience built the confidence and self-efficacy of students, giving them the skills and self-belief to succeed in higher education.

Challenges faced

- Among the most challenging aspects of transitioning to higher education for FET students were mathematics requirements, time management and engaging in college life outside the classroom. Group work (in mixed groups where some members came straight from school and were often seen as having a different approach to learning) could also be challenging. In contrast, students coming directly from Leaving Certificate were more challenged by participating in lectures, time management, researching topics for themselves and being able to critically assess materials. Financial constraints were challenging to both groups.
- Being proportionally older than their peers and having more external responsibilities influenced the transition experiences of many FET students.
- To overcome challenges, FET students sought advice from staff, availed of institutional supports and drew on their own perseverance and life experience.

Aspects of successful transition from FET to higher education

The data suggests that FET preparation is most effective when:

- FET teachers and staff focus on building the confidence and self-efficacy of students, particularly with regard to study skills and various types of assessment.
- There is a strong link between the course content in FET and that on the programme of study in higher education.
- The level of challenge experienced in FET prepares students for the rigours of higher education.

- Students receive a good introduction to the higher education institution, and are informed about procedures and supports.

The importance of consistency in the nature of the preparation students receive within and across both FET and higher education was highlighted. Consistency appeared particularly important in the following areas:

- In introducing FET students to higher education institutions and available supports.
- In the clarity and detail of information students receive regarding their prospective higher education course.
- In the information received regarding the academic rules and procedures across FET and higher education.
- In the level of challenge students experience across FET and higher education.

What are the implications of these findings?

The FET sector may benefit from the **evident good practices experienced in some institutions being replicated** by FET providers nationwide. Such practices have a substantial impact on student learning and on effective transitions into and through higher education. Successful FET provision was characterised by a strong link between the content and procedures on the FET course and those on the subsequent higher education course, and the academic workload and range of assignments being pitched at the appropriate level. Equally, successful induction and support services in the higher education sector could be replicated nationally.

The **level of connection between FET and higher education institutions** appears to be important for students' smooth transition. FET institutions should have structures and initiatives in place to introduce students to higher education institutions. Before entering higher education, students benefit from more communication between FET and higher education institutions regarding areas such as course expectations, academic expectations, the level of challenge anticipated and institutional supports available. Providing FET students with information at the right time in the right amount is key to a successful transition.

Many participants in this study mentioned a need to **publicise more widely progression routes** through FET to higher education. In addition, many FET students were unaware of how their prior life and work experience might be recognised by a prospective institution. These findings support the call from a recent overview of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Irish higher education for clear information for potential applicants regarding the availability of RPL within institutions and how it can be accessed (National Forum, 2015a).

Now that more is known about the transition experiences of FET students in higher education, it may be possible to **tailor higher education supports** to cater for the specific challenges faced by this cohort. This may include, for example, pre-entry preparation in mathematics, supporting students to balance the demands of home, work and study, and facilitated opportunities to discuss working in groups to promote shared understandings and approaches.

A challenge in accessing participants in this study was that many higher education institutions do not keep a record of which students enter from FET. In addition, FET institutions do not always track students after they finish their programmes. This poses a difficulty for those attempting to gain accurate insights into the higher education experiences of these students. It also poses a barrier for those attempting to ensure appropriate supports are in place to ease the transitions of such students. Being able to **track which learners enter higher education from FET** would also allow for more accurate monitoring of the completion rates and outcomes of FET students within higher education.

It may be beneficial to **allow time and space for stakeholders within the FET and higher education sectors to come together** to promote a shared understanding of the goals and potential benefits of capturing the experiences of transition of FET students on an ongoing basis, and to put frameworks in place which would allow this to happen.

References

National Forum. (2015a). A current overview of recognition of prior learning in Irish higher education. Dublin: National Forum.

National Forum. (2015b). Transition from second level and further education to higher education. Dublin: National Forum.

Further Information

For further information on this project, including a copy of the full report, see www.teachingandlearning.ie