Bachelor

Branches of Study

The range of faculties, departments and subjects available varies from institution to institution. Details of all courses appear in the prospectus and student handbooks published by each institution. The CAO lists courses available. At the colleges of National University of Ireland, the duration of study for the first degree, the Bachelor's degree, in Arts and Humanities, the Social Sciences, Law and Commerce/Business Studies, is (with some exceptions) three years. Cognate degrees would generally be of four years' duration at Trinity College, University of Limerick and Dublin City University. Students on a range of degrees have the opportunity to do part of their study in another EU college.

First-degree courses in Engineering, Agriculture and Science generally take four years; five years in the case of Architecture and Veterinary Medicine, five or six years for Dentistry. Six years are required for Medicine.

Post-graduate diplomas are increasingly available in a range of subjects, frequently linked to continuing professional development.

All the universities tend to offer courses in the Humanities and Arts, Science, Mathematics and Computing, Social Science, Business and Commerce, Engineering and Law. Professional disciplines such as Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Architecture and Agriculture are not available in all universities, and are located in the longer established universities.

The first postgraduate degree, the Master's degree, requires in general 1-2 years of study and can be taken either by thesis or by examination and minor thesis. A doctoral degree generally takes 3-4 years to complete.

More than a third of primary degree graduates proceed to further study, which includes a postgraduate degree, teacher training and other professional training.

The introduction of modularisation, symmetrisation and credit transfers is allowing more flexibility for students, including mobility between institutions.

The duration of degree courses in IoTs is three and four years (Ordinary and Honours Degrees respectively). The full-time students in the Institutes of Technology by main fields of study in 2011/12 were proportioned as follows: Social Science, Business and Law 26.3%, Humanities and Arts 11.1%, Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction 18.7%, Science 15.9%, Health and Welfare 13.9%, Services 11.4% and other 2.7%. The proportion of full-time students at the different course levels was: Diploma and Higher Certificate (Level 6) 8.5%; Ordinary Degree (Level 7) 36.3%; Honours Degree (Level 8) 51.1%; postgraduate (Levels 9 and 10) 4.1%.
The establishment of the National Qualifications Authority Ireland (NQAI) in 2001, which has since been subsumed into Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), provided an overarching body for all education and training awards which facilitates access, progression and transfer for students within and between courses and institutions.

**Admission Requirements**

The main entry requirement for higher education is the Leaving Certificate, which is taken at the end of post-primary schooling. Most pupils are aged 17 or 18 on leaving school. Because of competition for places, a student leaving school in Ireland and possessing the academic qualifications for entry to a higher education institution is not automatically entitled to a place. The institutions reserve the right to restrict the number of students entering first-year undergraduate courses. Where it is found necessary to limit the number of entrants to a course, places are allocated in order of merit on the basis of points achieved in the final school-leaving examination, the Leaving Certificate. In general, prospective undergraduate students are accepted on the basis of examination performance and are not interviewed by the college in question.

The increase in demand for third-level places in certain faculties which took place over the last two decades has caused the entry requirements to rise beyond the basic academic entry standard set by each college. Accordingly, competition for entry is very keen in such disciplines as medicine, veterinary, law, pharmacy. The number of places for such courses is determined by government and agreed by the institutions. Entry to some courses such as art or architecture requires portfolio submissions and sometimes, aptitude tests. Subjects such as Engineering and Medicine may require applicants to have a particular subject such as Mathematics or Science.

In 2009, a new entry mechanism to undergraduate medical education was introduced. The new selection process includes a medical school admissions test that complements the Leaving Certificate examination for selecting applicants for admission to an undergraduate Medical School programme. The admissions test selected by the Irish medical schools is called HPAT-Ireland (Health Professions Admission Test-Ireland). This test is independently administered by ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research). ACER has an international reputation and a track record in the development, management and research of selection tests for undergraduate medical and health related programmes. The HPAT-Ireland test measures a candidate’s logical reasoning and problem solving skills as well as non-verbal reasoning and the ability to understand the thoughts, behaviour and/or intentions of people. It does not test academic knowledge and candidates do not require special understanding of any academic discipline.

**Entrance Examinations**

Individual institutions do not hold entrance examinations nor do school reports or interviews form part of the entry procedures for school-leaver applicants. Some institutions hold interviews or entrance examinations for mature applicants.

**Numerus Clausus**

In courses where numerus clausus does not exist, it is up to the institutes to accept students subject to the availability of space and staff.

Applications for entry to undergraduate courses in universities, colleges of education, institutes of technology and some other institutes of higher education, are processed by the Central Applications Office (CAO), located in Galway. Applicants submit one application form which allows them to choose up to 10 courses from the higher certificate/ordinary bachelor list and/or up to 10 courses may be
chosen from the honours degree list. In both cases, courses must be listed in order of preference. The aim of the system is to process applications centrally and to deal with them in an efficient and fair manner. The participating institutions retain the function of making decisions on admissions. Since 1996 a number of the private colleges have joined the CAO system. However, these colleges charge fees and student grants are not available.

Applications for postgraduate courses are made directly to the relevant institution, except in the case of Higher Diploma in Education courses for which the NUI universities have a central applications system, also located in Galway.

**Mature Student Entry**

The majority of institutions have developed entry routes and quotas of reserved places for mature students. These are generally defined as applicants to higher education who are over 23 years of age (on the 1 of January in the year of entry), who may not have achieved the same entry requirements as school leavers. Institutions vary in their criteria for mature student admission. General information on entry requirements is available on the Qualifax [1] website which is managed by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The majority of third level institutions require a mature student to apply in the first instance through the Central Applications Office [2]. However applicants are also advised to contact the colleges directly to establish if there are any additional admission requirements. In most instances, credit is given for prior work experience, particularly if it has some relevance to the intended course of study. Interviews are held, samples of written work may be sought and some institutions [3] hold entry examinations.

A number of colleges offer pre-entry access/foundation courses to prepare mature learners for entry to tertiary education. Since the launch of a National Framework of Qualifications there has also been increased progression by students with further education awards to higher education. The National Access Office estimates that at least one third of higher education entrants who apply on the basis of a further education award are mature learners. In 2011/12, 14% of full-time undergraduate new entrants were mature learners.

Development of alternative routes of access is increasing levels of access and lifelong learning in Ireland. There are also increased levels of transfer and progression within higher education by holders of tertiary level certificate or diploma level awards on to degree-level studies. It is worth noting that institutions with quotas for mature students report that in general those students perform well in their studies. Routes of progression between the higher and further education sectors continue to be developed - 6.6% of students were accepted on a place in higher education in 2012 on the basis of having applied with a further education qualification. This compares to 2.8% of acceptors in 2007.

The majority of institutions have access offices. Many also have mature student offices and disability support services. Learning support centres, counsellors and career guidance personnel act as a support infrastructure for all students while also focusing on the specific needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, mature students and those with disabilities.

In 2008, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education [4] set a target to increase proportion of full-time mature students in higher education from 13% (in 2006) to 20% by 2013. It also set targets for increased participation by mature learners in full and part-time higher education (from 18% to 27% by 2013). In 2011/12, 14% of full-time undergraduate new entrants were mature students.
Higher Education Access Programmes and Supports

Programmes targeting the increased participation of mature students are supported by core access funding allocated as part of the annual recurrent grant of each institution by the HEA. From 2006-2011, collaboration between groups of institutions in the development of regional models of support have also been developed with the support of Strategic Innovation Funding. Each higher education institution has an access office and most also have mature students offices and centres of adult and lifelong learning. These units provide support and advice to prospective and current mature students. A range of initiatives facilitate the return to learning by adults seeking second chance entry into higher education, including guidance and information measures such as open days, taster courses, foundation courses and outreach programmes, including links with the further and community education sector in each county.

The core objectives of the plan include the progression of the lifelong learning agenda in Ireland through the development of broader routes of entry to higher education, a significant expansion of part-time/flexible courses (from 7% to 17% by 2013), in tandem with financial measures to address the student support implications of lifelong learning.

Curriculum

In general terms, tertiary institutions enjoy academic freedom in the design of their curricula. No guidelines exist regarding a minimum common curriculum for tertiary level. Once courses are established academic departments have the authority to adapt and refine them, but major course changes need the approval of internal bodies such as faculties. Periodically, peer reviews of the work of departments take place as part of quality assurance processes, and course content may be subject to change in the light of outcomes of the review process.

Where courses are subject to the approval of professional bodies such as the Medical Council or the Law Society, tertiary institutions need to abide by the requirements of such bodies if the courses are to be recognised for professional license purposes. Within the university sector, new course proposals are processed through formal approval mechanisms. Those proposing new courses are required to justify their initiative under a variety of headings, including the need/demand for such a course, the proposed content, costings, pedagogic and assessment methods etc. External peer review opinions are obtained on the proposal which must then be approved by the academic council, the finance committee and the governing body.

Within the IoT sector, a rigorous procedure is also in place, of a different kind, to win approval for new course proposals. As well as gaining the approval of internal institutional bodies, new courses need to satisfy the requirements of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and in some circumstances the approval of the HEA.

Thus, while the institutions enjoy a high degree of academic freedom in relation to curricula and course design, this is conducted within control parameters which seek to ensure the quality of what is being proposed, and the legitimacy of need for such courses.

With regard to language teaching, the methodology in some instances operates on a sequential basis from the school-leaving standard in the subject while in other cases it is presented from an ab initio perspective. In University College Galway, some courses are provided through the medium of the Irish language. In modern language teaching, efforts are made to teach in the direct method using the target language as the medium of instruction. Courses at undergraduate and post-graduate level on European Studies, combine language study with subjects such as history, geography, art and philosophy. Special efforts are made to support students who have a limited standard in the target
language for such courses. Most universities have language centres which specialise in supporting students to develop a functional knowledge of languages required in their academic studies. European Studies has become an increasingly attractive option. Course pairings such as a European Language combined with Business, Law, and Economics have also become more popular.

**Teaching Methods**

Teaching and learning and successful student completion is at the heart of higher education. Through its funding approach, the HEA provides particular support to these key objectives. Targeted funding has been directed at providing excellence in teaching and learning and support for student retention since 2000 – this was subsumed into the core funding in 2006.

Teaching and learning have always formed the central core of the work of a tertiary education institution in Ireland. However, in the context of mass higher education, more specific attention is being given to promoting improved quality in teaching with a view to improved learning on the part of students. This new emphasis on teaching quality has become very much in evidence in Irish institutions. In the first instance, stress is being laid on increasing the repertoire of teaching styles. Lectures continue to be a staple format, but are increasingly supplemented by a range of other teaching approaches. Thus, seminars, tutorials, case studies, practicals, workshops, demonstrations, role-play, and action research projects now more regularly feature in the teacher-student interaction.

Methodologies tend to vary from discipline to discipline. Because of the large number of students on some courses there needs to be a reliance on the lecture method, supplemented by tutorials and workshops where the larger group may be broken up into smaller units. In 2011/12 the average student-teacher ratio in universities in Ireland was 23:1 and in the institutes of technology was 16:1.

Arts, humanities, social science and general science courses tend to have large student numbers which influence the teaching methods employed. While students utilise ICT in a variety of ways to support their learning, the integration of ICT into the actual teaching-learning interaction seems to be best developed in science, architecture, engineering and medical courses.

Course structures are being remodelled as Irish institutions change towards course symmetrisation and modularisation. The institutions have prepared to ensure that the shift from the traditional course framework would be achieved satisfactorily. Modularisation and credit transfer are seen as promoting student mobility within and between institutions at home and abroad, facilitating access, facilitating mature and second chance students, and enhancing continuing or recurrent education. Teaching continues to be discipline- or module-based by the particular department with direct responsibility for the course. Some experimentation is occurring with multi-disciplinary teaching, but this tends to be more at post-graduate level. Courses are taught mainly to cohorts of full-time students on a structured, daily, time-tabled basis. Teaching for part-time courses usually takes place in the evenings, supplemented by some weekend work, or summer courses. Provision for courses on a sandwich basis is, as yet, very limited, but increased modularisation may extend this form of provision.

To a large degree, teachers are free to choose their own teaching methods and styles. While the policies of institutions encourage varied styles of teaching and reward teaching prowess, they do not prescribe methodologies. Most departments will have evolved preferred policies on teaching styles and seek to encourage and promote variety of approach. Teaching staff are expected to implement such policies, but there is no specific obligation on them to do so. Most teachers use audio-visual aids such as the overhead projector, PC Powerpoint or other multimedia in presenting material and tend to prepare their own teaching materials such as handouts, visuals, graphs etc. The latter materials are made available to students free of charge or, if voluminous, at a nominal charge. Students are
expected to back-up such materials by purchasing course texts and/or utilising course books in the institution's library. All institutions now have quality promotion officers who organise a great range of staff development courses. Many of these are in the area of methodology, including the integration of ICT into teaching-learning contexts. Each university department, on a cyclic basis, is subject to quality assurance exercises, including peer review evaluation. The quality and range of teaching methodology forms a central role in this process, to which students contribute. Prowess in teaching now forms a more important part, than hitherto, for staff promotion. Incentives towards excellence in teaching have also occurred through the introduction of a competitive process of awards for distinguished teaching by many tertiary institutions. Some institutions have also devised teaching-learning charters which set out objectives and guarantees on teaching and learning requirements, for both staff and students.

The more extensive use of information and communication technologies (ICT) is greatly enriching the teaching-learning engagement. Students also benefit from course handbooks/guidelines which set out objectives, course outlines, teaching approaches and modes of assessment. Again the availability of ICT, internet and duplication facilities has been of great benefit to students' learning.

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 makes a number of recommendations to build on initiatives to develop excellence in teaching and learning.

**Progression of Students**

Normally, students need to be successful in the formal examinations laid down for each year of study to progress to the next stage. In the event of failure in one or more subjects provision exists for repeat examinations. If the end-of-year examinations occur in May-June, it is usually possible to take the repeat examination(s) in the autumn of the same year. The number of repeat attempts permitted varies according to discipline. In the case of professional courses e.g. teaching, success in the practical or professional side of the course is an essential requirement for passing. Subjects such as modern languages also require success in the oral test(s) as essential for passing final degree examinations. In some programmes provision occurs for passing *by compensation*. This means that, for instance, if there were three subjects being studied, students could be regarded as successful if they achieved well in two of them, and did not fall below a certain percentage in the third subject, even if they did not achieve the normal passing grade in that subject. In many courses, considerable flexibility is allowed for students to satisfactorily complete their courses in an extra time period – for instance, four to six attempts of examinations may be permitted. The increasing availability of modularised courses has introduced more flexibility into student assessment. Students do not necessarily have to take all course modules in sequence. However, due to a possible unavailability of certain modules each year, unsuccessful students may also be delayed in accumulating the required modules. Most courses are now credit-weighted which also allows more flexibility for transfer between tertiary institutions within Ireland and internationally. Students engaged in part-time courses are usually facilitated by employers with time off for assessment purposes.

There tends to be more flexibility in course duration for post-graduate studies such as masters and doctorate studies. Extensions of time for completion of research or assignments are frequently provided on the recommendation of heads of department. Provision also exists for *being taken off the register* for periods if students encounter serious health or other difficulties, permitting a resumption of studies/research when the difficulty is resolved.

**Employability**

Certain courses, involve work-placement in Ireland and/or in another European country. In addition, a developing aspect of student services at third level is a job promotion/contract service. Relations
between employer bodies such as Irish Business Employers Council (IBEC) and the universities have become much closer in recent years. University-industry links have become much more integral in higher education. Grants and sponsorship from firms has become much greater than formerly. Many individual firms of a certain type maintain close links with particular departments and faculties. Some firms hold orientation sessions with final year undergraduates in some disciplines. IoTs usually have developed close links with employer bodies in their regions, and some interchange of staff experience takes place. Career guidance personnel tend to have close liaison with employers, and maintain lines of mutual communication between industry and the tertiary institution, to their mutual benefit. There is very little tradition of external employers participating in the assessment of students, but such personnel form part of accrediting committees and peer review teams in areas where this is productive. Representatives of external stakeholders participate in the governing authorities of tertiary institutions and bring perspectives from such agencies to bear on the deliberations of the bodies.

Engagement with enterprise is one of the core pillars of the National Strategy for Higher Education and detailed framework and range of recommendations to ensure the system continues to respond to enterprise needs is being implemented. This includes structured employer surveys and interaction, increased work placement opportunities, staff mobility into enterprise and a renewed focus on generic skills. Progress on the implementation of the Strategy is regularly updated on www.education.ie [5].

Student Assessment

Within the universities, modes of student assessment (marks and standards) are proposed by individual departments for adoption or adaptation by the faculties and academic councils of the institution. Within the IoT sector, as well as the processing of assessment procedures within institutions, there is also the need to gain the approval of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). In the past, there was a strong tradition of end-of-year summative assessments. These have now greatly altered, and while still operating for course elements, they are now supplemented by a range of other assessment modes. These include continuous assessment by means of assignments, projects, extended essays and action research. As well as contributing to the overall assessment of the student, they also allow for formative feedback to students on the strengths and weaknesses of their performance. With the increasing incidence of modular course provision, assessments are undertaken at end of the module, rather than at year-end, as well as accommodating features of continuous assessment. Of course, modes of assessment vary with the nature of different disciplines. For instance, modern language teaching requires oral examinations, sciences require laboratory practicals, and archaeology requires fieldwork assessments.

There is a strong tendency for heavy assessment in Irish tertiary education, in that most course elements are formally assessed in one form or other. The assessment modes, while varied in format lead to an overall quantitative assessment where total marks indicate the level of honours, pass or fail attained by the student. The subject department retains the key academic responsibility for student assessment. This is conducted according to the marks and standards agreed by the institution, and communicated to the student in course documentation. The system of external examiners exists for each department, whereby at the end of the assessment process, approved examiners, external to the institution, conduct a review of the department's assessment gradings and help to resolve problems or divergences of opinion which may exist. Subsequent to this, a board of examiners is convened by the university authority where an overview and appraisal of assessments across the institution take place, and agreement is reached prior to the issuing of students' results. In the case of the IoTs, a representative(s) of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is also present for the institutional board of examiners meetings. In all institutions provision for student appeals is made, subject to published procedures.
Certification

As academically autonomous institutions, the universities have the authority to set the course content of their courses, to decide the methods of student assessment and to certify the awards given. They have the right to confer their own certificates, diplomas and degrees. These awards are recognised by the State. Where courses are subject to the approval of professional bodies such as the Medical Council or the Law Society, tertiary institutions need to abide by the requirements of such bodies if the courses are to be recognised for professional license purposes.

There has been very little, if any difficulty, relating to the recognition of Irish university qualifications by the State, professional bodies or international agencies. Consultation, good communications and trust have ensured that academic and professional standards are maintained to the satisfaction of all parties. Where adjustments and reforms are periodically needed these are addressed without problems ensuing. The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) enjoys the same degree of academic freedom as the universities in determining its standards, and conferring its academic professional awards.

In the IoT sector, each institute, following agreement of its quality assurance procedures with QQI, validates its own programmes. Additionally each institute, under delegated authority, under the Qualifications Education and Training Act 1999, grants its own awards. Most IoTs have delegated authority to make awards up to Level 9 (Masters) of the NFQ and about half of them have delegated awarding powers up to Level 10 (Doctorate). PhD degrees for the remainder are granted by QQI.

Source URL: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/ireland/bachelor_en

Links