

## **QQI Theme: Access, Transfer and progression: exploring pathways and innovations from FE – HE**



Case-study A: Widening Access from Further to Higher Education:  
The NCI Higher Certificate in Business

### **1. Introduction & Context**

The Higher Certificate in Business has been a cornerstone of the academic programmes provided by NCI for over two decades. It is a multi-purpose award with a broad educational base in business designed to maximise entry, transfer, and progression for a wide range of learners. The programme consists of applied and conceptual modules that provide learners with a solid foundation in the field of business that provide the opportunity for graduates to progress further in their education or enter supervisory or administrative roles should they decide to leave education following the completion of this programme of study. Despite the changes and challenges to the third level landscape this programme continues to provide learners with access to third level education, progression routes to further qualifications, and career opportunities. Importantly the Higher Certificate in Business provides life chances as it leads to the development of knowledge and skills, but also self-esteem and self-confidence. The revalidation of the Higher Certificate in Business provided the valuable opportunity to further widen access to those from Colleges/Institutes of Further Education.

### **2. Programme Revalidation Objectives**

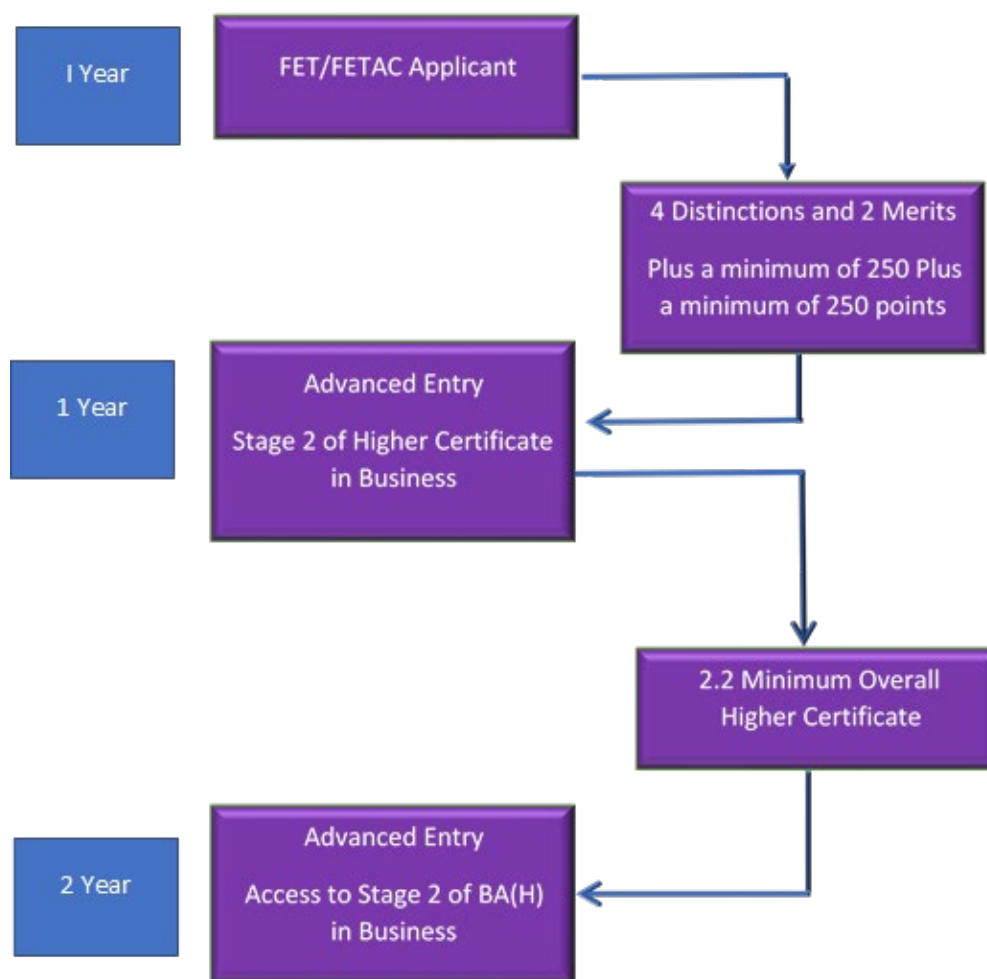
The Higher Certificate in Business was revalidated in 2023 and one of the key objectives of the revalidation was to support Government policy to extend and expand pathways and access opportunities to learners coming from Colleges/Institutes of Further Education. In preparation for the revalidation the courses provided by Further Education Colleges/Institutes were researched and consulted with to evaluate the possibility of widening access to the Higher Certificate in Business in NCI.

Following consultation with a range of stakeholders including current and past students, the programme team, and those with experience and expertise in Further Education, the programme was revised. The practical skills and theoretical foundation in business required to complete the HCBS were considered, and fundamental changes were made to the programme schedule for Stage 1/Year 1 and Stage 2/Year 2 of the programme. In Year 1 the objective was to embed key knowledge and skills required for business and in Year 2 to provide a solid foundation in the field of business. This revised structure provided for the development of key skills and knowledge, but also

significantly for the widening of access for learners to the programme as admission to the programme would now be possible in both Year 1 and Year 2.

Following the revalidation of the programme access to the Higher Certificate in Business has been widened to include school leavers who apply under the CAO system, mature, and DARE/HEAR applicants, but also applicants from FET/FETAC Level 5 will now be considered for entry to Stage 2 of the programme on successful achievement of 3 distinctions and the equivalent of 250 CAO points.

Figure 5: Pathways to entry and progression from the Higher Certificate



### 3. Programme Progress

The academic year 2023/2024 is the first year of the programme post-programmatic review. The uptake of places on the programme has significantly increased on previous years. There are currently over 30 students registered on this programme which compares favourably with a total of 21 registered learners in 2021. Based on the feedback from students they are enjoying the modules and learning challenges

presented. They have demonstrated a high level of success in completing the required assessments.

#### **4. Looking Forward**

As Year 2 of the revalidated programme will commence in September 2024 attention now turns to reaching out to connect and communicate with College/Institutes of Further Education to inform them that access to the Higher Certificate in Business programme is available to their students for both Stage 1/Year 1 and Stage 2/Year 2, subject to the required entry requirements, for the academic year 2024/25. As part of NCI's revised Annual Programme Monitoring (APM) process and student feedback mechanisms, we will actively monitor and assess the impact of the revised FE entry pathways in the coming period.

#### **5. Every Learner Matters**

The Higher Certificate in Business programme speaks to current Government policy and the College's mission to widen access and participation at third level education, as well as our core belief that every learner matters. This programme aims to provide a wider range of learners with the skills and knowledge to position themselves as business studies graduates and to provide them with the opportunity to progress further in their personal, academic, and career development. The inclusion of students from Colleges/Institutes of Further Education will provide enhanced learning opportunities for all involved in the programme.