



## Points system a crude measure of student's suitability for third level

Irish universities have essentially no role in the undergraduate admissions process. This must change

### KEVIN DENNY, COLM HARMON OPINION

**T**HERE ARE a number of problems with the CAO points system, this year's outcome of which is now awaited anxiously by the latest crop of Leaving Certificate holders.

A simplistic view holds that the system is meritocratic. However, it is anything but that. Research shows that children whose fathers are professionals get significantly more Leaving Certificate points than the child of a manual worker, despite the fact that for those lesser-off who make it, they graduate with as good – if not better – grades than their wealthier peers.

Getting through university is not the problem – getting in is the hard part. A characteristic of the points system that seems bizarre to outsiders is that all Leaving Certificate subjects are treated equally. This gives students an incentive to “game” the system and study subjects that are regarded as easy and not subjects they are interested in.

Students and their teachers are assiduous in figuring out which are the more “profitable” subjects to study. Bonus points for maths is a small step in the right direction. A more sensible idea would be to examine grading to ensure there is no greater probability of getting an A1 in one subject over another. This would incentivise students to take the subjects they want and like, rather than those they believe to be easier. This, coupled with points bonuses, could improve outcomes measurably.

Many outsiders also find it striking that universities here have essentially no role to play in the undergraduate admissions process. While such a system is common in some European

countries, it is very different from both the UK and US. This is convenient for the universities, which would otherwise have to employ admissions officers and spend time sifting through thousands of applications. Yet many of the best universities in the world do exactly that.

Why would one want to? The reason is that a simple points score based on school attainment is an extremely crude measure of a student's suitability for higher education.

It neither measures the student's intellectual capacity nor reflects how much the student wants to get into a particular course. All it measures is success on a set of exams which are not necessarily related to their higher-education choices.

In the UK and elsewhere, the idea is emerging that admissions should take account of “contextual data” so admissions decisions would compare students' secondary school performance with that of their school peers and not, as now, of their cohort.

So the highest performing student in an otherwise weak school might be the target of the system rather than the otherwise identical student in a school full of high achievers.

That Irish universities are in effect “divorced” from the admissions process is unhealthy for another reason: they have little opportunity or incentive to tackle inequalities in access. Contrast this with the UK, where universities are required to have an access agreement approved by the Office of Fair Access which they must follow through on.

The university admissions system should be seen as a vital part of our education infrastructure, ensuring that students are matched fairly and efficiently to educational choices.

Failure to get it right will be very costly as the State attempts

to grow out of its present difficult circumstances.

Any unwillingness to confront vested interests would be unconscionable.

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