Matching practices for secondary schools – Ireland

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Relevant country background

In Ireland, secondary education (sometimes referred to as post-primary) caters students in the 12 to 18 years old group. Students start with the 3-year junior cycle study, followed by the 2-year senior cycle study. They can take an optional 1-year transitional study to bridge the two cycles, which leads to 5 years or 6 years in total for the secondary education. An evaluation test takes place at the end of each of the two major cycles (i.e. junior and senior cycles). The results obtained on the Leaving Certificate Examinations at the end of senior cycle year are important criteria for admission at universities.

Education in Ireland is compulsory from age 6 to age 16, but students have to have a minimum of 3 years of secondary education before leaving school (Education (Welfare) Act 2000 [1]).

The Department of Education and Skills regulates the organization of secondary education, including the curriculum, the organization of schools, and the enrollment process.

There are currently 723 secondary schools in Ireland (2011/12 statistics [6]). Among them, voluntary secondary schools have the largest share (with 376 schools in total, enrolling 186,409 students), followed by vocational schools (254 in total, enrolling 116,839 students), and community and comprehensive schools (93 in total, enrolling 55799 students). Voluntary secondary schools have long been dominating secondary education in Ireland. They are owned by religious authorities, for example, the Catholic Church. These schools focus on academic education and are intended to serve as a preparation for further studies. Vocational schools are owned by the local vocational education committees [2], and focus on technical and professional training. To meet the demand of multi-denominational and secular education, community and comprehensive schools were established in the 1960s as the state schools, with the aim to combine both academic and professional training.

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Independent of the type of schools, teachers are paid by the state directly. Vocational and community and comprehensive schools are fully state-financed, but this is not always the case for the voluntary schools ([7]). The state finances the voluntary schools which choose to be non-fee paying on a per capita basis. However, the 55 fee-paying voluntary secondary schools (enrolling 25,601 students, 13.7% of total voluntary school students in 2011/2012) do not receive the per capita grant, and charge the students a fee of several thousand euros. [8]

Some schools, both fee-paying and non-fee paying, offer scholarships to students from low socio-economic backgrounds or students with good study results.

Admissions to secondary schools are largely decentralized. Admission rules are decided by the schools' board of management (which typically includes nominees of patrons, parents' representatives and teachers' representatives), within the guidelines set by the government (Education Act 1998 [2], the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 [3], and Equal Status Acts 2000 and 2004 [4] [5]). The current regulations require schools to provide transparent information on admissions and prohibit schools to discriminate students on the grounds of studying ability, gender, family status, age, disability, race, religious belief or membership in the Travellers community (an Irish ethnic minority), unless rejection is necessary to maintain the school's ethos. It is common for schools to organize diagnostic tests or interviews to assess students' abilities, but these are not used for admission purpose, just to know students' abilities for educational purpose.

Summary box

Organization of education	Three categories of secondary schools (voluntary, vocational and community/comprehensive schools). Most schools are publically funded.
Stated objectives of enrolment policy	Fairness and equality are the main objectives along with other objectives depending on, for example, the denominational status of the school.
Who's in charge?	Individual schools
Admissions system in place since	n/a
Available capacity	Decided by schools, subject to government funding.
Timing of enrolment	Decided by schools. Usually starts around the summer of the preceding year, but could be even earlier.
Information available to students prior to enrolment period	The list of schools is available on a website maintained by the Department of Education. The website does not provide information on admission criteria or the timing of admissions.
Restrictions on preference expression	None
Matching procedure	Mostly decentralized admissions. Some centralized enrollment in a few regions.

Priorities and quotas	Left to decide by schools
Tie-breaking	Large heterogeneity, i.e. various rules applied

Description of current practices

Secondary school admissions in Ireland are mostly organized in a decentralized manner, with the exception of some regions discussed below. Parents and students apply directly to the school of their choice. A list of schools can be found on the website of the Department of Education and Skills (http://www.education.ie/en/find-a-school). The information available there includes the name, the location, the number of students, and the type of schools. It does not include information regarding the timing of admissions or the admission criteria. Schools usually organize an open day for parents and children before the start of enrolment process.

Schools decide on the start of enrolment process, typically around the summer of the year preceding the enrolment. Due to high demand, some popular schools require parents to apply soon after their child is born.

Many schools define eligibility criteria for students. These may include the requirement that the family has lived in the catchment area for the past few years, religion, age, and so on. Some secondary schools also charge application fees.

Conditional on being eligible, many schools accept students on a first-come, first-served basis. When demand is higher than capacity, schools give priority to some categories of students. There is huge heterogeneity in this regard. Priorities can be given to children who have siblings already in the school, who are the relatives of the staff, who practice a certain religion or who come from a feeder school (a primary school affiliated to the secondary school). Some schools also give priority to students whose religions are not the one practiced at the school, but nevertheless who are living in the catchment area, or to students from nearby catchment areas. Lotteries are also used to break ties.

Due to the increasing saturation in some regions, schools sharing common interests or local education authorities have started to put in place coordinated centralized procedures. Among them, the most notable example is the common application system put in place in 2005 in the Limerickarea. Currently (2012/13), 18 schools participate in this system, out of 32 schools in the area [9]. However, one school dropped out for the 2013/2014 application, leaving 17 schools still participating [10]. Parents and students are asked to fill in an application form agreed by the participating schools, indicating family information related to the priority criteria used by the schools (e.g. catchment areas, religion, whether having siblings already in the school, primary school attended, and staff relative etc., but these priorities can be chosen or ranked differently by schools). In addition, applicants have to list a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 9 schools in decreasing order of preferences on the application form. The actual procedure is not implemented centrally, but it resembles the Boston algorithm. Applicants return the application form to their first-choice school before a common deadline (16th January). The first-choice school then decides to admit the students or not, based on their admission and priority criteria. If a student's application is rejected, his/her application form is passed to the second-choice school, and so on [10].

If a child is rejected for enrollment at a school, parents can appeal to the board of management, and if not satisfied by the outcome, they can subsequently appeal to the Department of Education and Skills.

Performance

Since admissions are mostly organized in a decentralized manner, and the schools have a large autonomy on admissions, there is no official evaluation of the performance of the current system. However the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) has initiated a postal survey of principals from 454 of 733 secondary schools in 2007 (the difference is due to non-response to the survey questionnaires sent out), which shows that 80 per cent of the surveyed principals reported that all students who applied to their schools were accepted, while 20 per cent of the schools applied selection procedures [11].

Recent policy change

There has not been any policy change at the national level, beyond the observed trend towards coordination and centralization in areas experiencing saturation or congestion.

Perceived issues

Secondary schools in Ireland face very much the same problems of demographic boom and tightening budgets as elementary schools, and with very much the same consequences, including increasing saturation and unraveling on enrolment dates.

A separate issue concerns the possible misuse of the exception clause by schools, i.e. the ability to refuse registration (especially to vulnerable groups such as Travellers, children of minority or of no faith, and children with special needs) on the grounds of the school's ethos. One example is a recent court case concerning Clonmel high school, where a student from a Traveller family was refused registration on the grounds that his parents were not former pupils of the school. The family claimed that the school admission policy discriminated against the Travellers community, because the Travellers were unlikely to attend any secondary education in the past. The appeal was rejected by the court however. The court ruled that the school admission policy, and in particular this eligibility rule, did not target the Travellers community (see [12] for a detailed discussion).

The centralized application system in the Limerick area is neither stable nor strategy-proof. In online forums, parents express concerns, that once they get rejected by their first choice school, they are very likely to receive a choice down at the bottom of the preference list. This also leads to tips suggested by some parents to top-rank a less popular school, and rank a school that they have higher priority at. [13]

Existing data

1. Individual school data (including total number of students, teachers, gender ratio etc.), class size can be found at the website of the Department of Education and Skills:
http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/

2. Growing up in Ireland — the national longitudinal study of children, provides educational achievements and progress for 19500 children. http://www.growingup.ie/index.php?id=83

Legal texts

[1] Equal Status Acts 2000, http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2000/en/act/pub/0008/index.html

[2] Vocational Education Act 1930, http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1930/en/act/pub/0029/index.html

[3] Education Act 1998, http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1998/en/act/pub/0051/index.html

[4] The Education (Welfare) Act 2000, http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2000/en/act/pub/0022/index.html

[5] Equality Act 2004, http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2004/en/act/pub/0024/index.html

Other resources and references

[6] Annual Statistics Report 2011/2012, the Department of Education and Skills.

[7] Depart of Education and Skills Annual 2010 report

http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Annual-Report/des_annual_report_2010.pdf

[8] Fee Paying Schools Lists (Post-Primary) Data,

http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/

[9] Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application System 2012-13 information sheet. http://www.stmunchinscollege.com/CAS_Information_Sheet%20pdf.pdf

[10] Limerick Area Post-Primary Schools Common Application System 2013-1014 information, Limerick Education Centre: http://www.lec.ie/Mainnav/Our-Projects/Common-Application-System-2013-14.aspx

[11] Adapting to Diversity: Irish Schools and Newcomer Students, Emer Smyth, Merike Darmody, Frances McGinnity and Delma Byrne, ESRI research series, No.8, 2009

[12] Travellers, Equality and School Admission: Christian Brothers High School Clonmel v. Stokes, Mel Cousins, Bar Review, 2011 http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2049914

[13] See for example boards.ie for parents' discussions: http://www.boards.ie/vbulletin/showthread.php?p=62434948

MiP Country Profiles downloadable from matching-in-practice.eu

MiP Country Profile 1. Cantillon, Estelle (2011), Matching practices for elementary schools – Belgium (French-speaking region).

MiP Country Profile 2. Kübler, Dorothea (2011), University admission practices – Germany.

MiP Country Profile 3. Irving, Rob (2011), Matching practices for entry-labor markets – Scotland.

MiP Country Profile 4. Kiselgof, Sofya (2011), Matching practices for universities – Ukraine.

MiP Country Profile 5. Biró, Péter (2011), University admission practices – Hungary.

MiP Country Profile 6. Biró, Péter (2012), Matching practices for secondary schools – Hungary.

MiP Country Profile 7. Chen, Li (2012), University admission practices – UK.

MiP Country Profile 8. Chen, Li (2012), University admission practices – Ireland.

MiP Country Profile 9 Cantillon, Estelle and Koen Declercq (2012), University admission practices – Belgium.

MiP Country Profile 10. Chen, Li (2012), Matching practices for elementary schools – Ireland.

MiP Country Profile 11. Chen, Li (2012), Matching practices for secondary schools – Ireland.

MiP Country Profile 12. Manlove, David (2012), Matching practices for primary and secondary schools – Scotland.

MiP Country Profile 13. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), Matching practices for elementary schools – Italy.

MiP Country Profile 14. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), Matching practices for secondary schools – Italy.

MiP Country Profile 15. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), University admissions practices – Italy.

MiP Country Profile 16 Hiller, Victor and Olivier Tercieux (2013), Matching practices in secondary schools – France.

MiP Country Profile 17 Calsamiglia, Caterina (2014), Matching Practices for elementary and secondary Schools – Spain.

MiP Country Profile 18 Lauri, Triin, Kaire Põder, and André Veski (2014), Matching practices for elementary schools – Estonia.

MiP Country Profile 19. Salonen, Mikko A.A. (2014), Matching practices for secondary schools – Finland.

MiP Country Profile 20 Terrier, Camille (2014), Matching practices for secondary public school teachers – France.

MiP Country Profile 21 Basteck, Christian, Katharina Huesmann, and Heinrich Nax (2015), Matching practices for secondary schools – Germany

MiP Country Profile 22 Cantillon, Estelle (2015), Matching practices for secondary schools – Belgium (French-speaking region).