



University Admission Practices – Ireland

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Relevant country background

Education in Ireland is divided into primary education (6-12 years old), secondary education (12- 17/18 years old), further and higher education (>17/18 years old). The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) measures the knowledge and skills expected to be achieved at each level, making it easier to compare students' qualification from different study tracks. The Department of Education and Skills (<http://www.education.ie/>) administers education policies at all levels, including aspects such as curriculum and syllabus, quality assurance and evaluation, as well as funding. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) acts as the advisory body to the Department of Education and Skills for policy planning and development related to higher education. In addition, it provides funding for the universities, institutes of technology, and a number of other institutions[1] (The university Act, 1997², and The Institutes of Technology Act, 2006 [2]). The funding covers courses costs, research and capital/infrastructure investment. Most higher education providers are publicly funded, with the exception of a few private providers.³

The higher education system has been actively regulated and reformed, notably in widening access. The standard route to higher education is to apply upon finishing secondary school. The second route is for “mature students” who are above 23 years old on the 1st January of the year of entry. The third route is for students from low socio-economic background through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR). To be eligible for HEAR, the student's family income cannot exceed a certain limit (€48,811 for less than 4 depending children) plus two of the other HEAR indicators. The fourth route is for those with disability through the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE). The fifth route bridges further and higher education. Students can study courses organized by Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) (usually 2-year professional-oriented programs) after secondary school. This route allows them to continue on to courses at universities or institutes.

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² HEA finances 7 universities, 14 institutes of technology and 7 other institutes. The detailed list can be found at: <http://www.heai.ie/en/AboutHEA>

³ A list of private higher education providers can be found at: <http://www.educationireland.ie/index.php/irish-colleges/independent-colleges>

“Matching in Practice” is a research network that brings together the growing community of researchers in Europe working on the various aspects of assignment and matching in education and related labour markets.

These country profiles are part of a collective effort by network members to map matching practices across Europe

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As a result of these policies, higher education attainment rate for people age between 30 to 34 was 49% in 2009, well above the EU average 32.3%, while the investment in education is 4.9% of GDP, close to the EU average of 4.96% [6].

Each university or institute has the freedom to set their own admission policies within the HEA guidelines. This involves setting requirements to assess students based on their exam results. Admission policies have to comply with national targets. The HEA sets targets for the entry of students coming from socio-economic groups under-presented in higher education.[8] As response, some universities and institutes reserve quotas for DARE, HEAR, mature and FETAC students according to the budget and demand from previous years. The quota is disclosed every year before the application starts [10,11,12].

Irish and EU students who are eligible for Free Fee Initiative pay a student charge instead of tuition fee.⁴ The student charge is used to cover the costs related to examinations, registration and student services. The charge was €150 when first introduced, and has since been increased to € 2,000 in 2011-12 [9]. Tuition fees vary considerably from around €9,000 up to around €40,000 depending on the program. Non-EU students have to pay the full tuition fees. Student grants/scholarships are also available.⁵

While overall capacities for Irish and EU new entrants are set according to government financing, usually no such limit applies to non-EU students, since non-EU students are charged their full cost.

Summary box

Organization of higher education	Mostly publically funded universities.
Stated objectives of admissions policy	Universities set their own admission policies within the guidelines of the ministry of education (HEA).
Who's in charge of admissions?	Universities/institutes and the central applications office (CAO).
Admissions system in place since	1976, with some changes since then.
Available capacity	Each university decides their capacity according to the available funding and demand from previous year.
Timing of enrolment	Enrolment takes place over several rounds that spread over the period from November the year before class starts to October.
Information available to students prior to enrolment period	Each university publishes information online on the degree programs they offer, admission requirements, minimum entry levels from past years, and number of places. CAO publishes an annual handbook to instruct students on the application procedure.
Restrictions on preference expression	Applicants can apply to a maximum of 10 courses in order of preference, for different degree levels (level 8 and level 7/6).

⁴ To get a fee waiver, students need to meet degree restrictions and nationality restrictions in addition to living in an EEA member state or Switzerland for at least 3 of the 5 years before starting the course. For more details please refer to <http://www.studentfinance.ie/mp9377/course-fees/index.html>

⁵ More details on grants/scholarships please refer to <http://www.studentfinance.ie/>

Matching procedure	4 rounds for matching (different categories of students qualify for different rounds). The algorithm used in each round is the college-proposing Deferred Acceptance algorithm.
Priorities and quotas	Priorities are given to students with higher scores on the Leaving School Examination (LCE). Some universities have quotas for students with disabilities, students from socio-economically disadvantaged background, mature students, and FETAC applicants.
Tie-breaking	A randomly-generated number is assigned to every student.

Description of current practices

Admission for applicants of Irish and EU nationalities to first-year undergraduate programs is organized by the Central Applications Office (CAO). Mature students and non-EU students apply either through the CAO or to the university or institute directly, depending on the specific requirements. Students applying to graduate programs apply directly to the universities or institutes, except for graduate medicine applicants who also apply through the CAO.⁶ The current article focuses on undergraduate admissions through the CAO. The standard matching process (i.e. for school-leavers) takes place over 3 phases:

Phase 1: Application submissions. The standard application starts early November in the year previous to the enrolment year. There are 3 degree levels according to the NFQ standard: level 6 (2-year program leading to a Higher Certificate), level 7 (3-year program leading to an Ordinary Bachelor degree), and level 8 (4-year program leading to a Honors Bachelor Degree). Students can apply for maximum 10 courses for level 8 in order of decreasing preference, and the same for levels 6 and 7 together. Applications close normally on the 1st of February. For those who fail to apply before the deadline, late application is available until 1st of May but a penalty fee applies. In addition, late applications are subject to some restrictions. Late application is not allowed for degrees that require early assessment procedures, such as interviews. It is also not allowed for some categories of applicants, such as mature students applying for nursing and midwifery courses, and students holding qualification certificates other than the Leaving Certificate when applying to certain universities or institutions.

Students can freely amend their course choices before the closing deadline, and again between early May and the 1st of July (called “Change of Mind”). Thus, students can change their choices after taking the Leaving Certificate Examinations (LCE) in June, but before the actual release of LCE scores in mid-August. The same restrictions as those applying for late applications apply to Change of Mind.

Phase 2: Leaving Certificate Examinations (LCE). This phase is for school-leavers, whose admissions are assessed based on their results from the LCE. These examinations are organized by

⁶ The matching procedure for graduate medical applicants is similar to the standard undergraduate matching. More details can be found at: <http://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=medentry>

the State Examination Commission (SEC) (<http://www.examinations.ie/>) and include tests of languages, sciences, applied sciences and social sciences.

Phase 3: **Matching and Offer.** A combined scoring system is used by the CAO to generate a ranking of students for each degree to which they apply: the minimum entry requirements of the degree, the LCE results, and a randomly-generated number.

Students need to first meet the minimum requirements. This means that students have to choose the subjects required by the institution to which they apply in their Leaving Certificate Examinations (typically 6 subjects, including English, Mathematics, and a second language subject in addition to other degree-specific requirements), and that they have to obtain the minimum score on these subjects (for example, a pass in all subjects).

Since places are limited, all those students who meet the minimum requirements will then be ranked according to their LCE scores. Each subject in the LCE has a higher level and an ordinary level, and a same grade at the two different levels is given different weights in the CAO point system. For example, a top grade A1 is recognized as 100 points for a higher level by the CAO, and 60 points for an ordinary level. The CAO calculates points taking into consideration the six best scores. Bonus points are given to those students that take Leaving Certificate Higher Level Mathematics.

In addition to the LCE scores, each student is assigned a randomly-generated number to break ties.

Points are also given to interviews depending on the admission requirements set by each institution. Medical applicants have to take the Health Professions Admission Test (HPAT) in addition to the LCE. FETAC students are assessed by a different scoring system based on the best 8 subjects from their previous studies.⁷

The matching process has 4 rounds and different students qualify for different rounds:

Round A (early July): for applicants who deferred their admission from last year to current year, mature nursing/midwifery applicants, and non-EU students who require visa arrangements (and thus qualify for the full fees).

Round 0 (early August, before the release of LCE results): for applicants who are not waiting for the LCE results, for example FETAC applicants for the FETAC quota.⁸

Round 1 (mid-August, after the release of LCE results): this is the main round for the majority of the students who are ranked by their LCE results. (Some of the FETAC applicants are also matched in this round based on their adjusted FETAC results to compete with LCE applicants, which means they no longer have the priority as in the previous round.) HEAR and DARE quotas are also usually allocated at this round.

Round 2 (late August/early September): Unassigned students from previous rounds are matched to the remaining vacancies from round 1. Students can change their preference lists at this stage as long as they continue to respect the 10 courses limit.

⁷ A more detailed description of the FETAC scoring system can be found at: <http://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=scoring&s=fetac>

⁸ FETAC applicants are treated under two schemes depending on the course they apply to. Those who are assessed under HELS scheme (usually for applicants to university courses) will compete for the reserved quota in round 0. Offers are based on the merit of their FETAC results. Those who are assessed under Pilot Scheme will compete using their FETAC results against standard applicants using their LCE results in round 1.

Within each round, students (who pass the minimum requirements) are ranked for each course from high to low score based on the LCE results (with the random tie-breaking number used when needed). In the first step, the universities/institutes propose a place to the highest-ranked students. Students have one week to accept any received offer. If some of their offers are rejected, universities/institutes propose the freed places to the next students in their ranking, who then have one week to decide on the newly received offers and those accepted in the previous step. In other words, students can accept a new preferred offer, even if they accepted an offer in a previous step. The process continues until universities have filled all their positions or they have made offers to all students who have applied. This practice corresponds to the college-proposing deferred acceptance algorithm (with limits on the number of choices) in the matching literature, with the exception that students must manually accept/reject their offers. The algorithm is applied for each of the two degree levels (level 8 and level 7/6) separately and students can hold up to two offers at the end of the round (one from level 8, and one from level 6/7). In the end, students have to accept only one offer if receiving more than one offer.

Except for Round 0, there is no pre-assigned number of places assigned to each round and the capacity cap for each degree applies across the rounds (non-EU do not count towards the capacity).

The dates for the rounds are set such that the reply date of the previous round is ahead of the offer date of next round to avoid potential overlaps.

Performance

Applications to the CAO have increased steadily since its establishment in 1977. In 2010, there were in total 78,199 applicants, of which 45,623 got accepted in at least one degree. Net acceptance rate for level 8 degree programs is 70%, and the first preferences acceptance rate is 55% (slightly falling compared with previous years). Net acceptance rate for level 6/7 degree programs is 31% and the first preference acceptance rate 71%. It is also slightly decreasing also compared to previous years. Among the available degree tracks, dentistry and medicine tracks have the highest first-preference acceptance rates. [4] [5]

Recent policy change

Ireland used a post-LCE-results application system from 1972 to 1992. It was replaced with the current pre-LCE-results application system in 1992. There were several issues with the post-LCE results application system. First, the timing was tight which created logistical challenges but also limited the scope for preference changes as counselors were not as available during the summer times when “Change of Mind” was available. Second, there were worries that students tended to submit preferences based on their chance of getting in rather than according to their true preferences and that this created instabilities. In fact, according to CAO sources, a rate of more than 50% of first-year drop-out or no show after registration was common under the post-result system. This rate has gone down after the adoption of the pre-LCE result application system.

The more recent policy changes are mainly concerned with widening participation to higher education, from socio-economically disadvantaged students, disabled students, to mature students who have professional experience. Emphasis has also been put on the need to provide more and better lifelong learning [7].

Perceived issues

The current cap on total number of places only applies to Irish and EU students, and not to non-EU students, which has raised some complaints. Local and EU students may be denied a place, while non-EU students with inferior academic performance are still accepted because they can pay for their places. This has already resulted in court cases.⁹

In addition, truthful revelation of preferences may be an issue in the current Irish system given the high uncertainty students face about their LCE results when applying. The CAO advises students to submit preferences based on genuine career aspirations and not on projected exam results or last year's points, but given the limit on the number of choices, students may still prefer to enter their preferences based on perceived success at the LCE.¹⁰ Students may under or overestimate their results, which can lead to matching into less desirable degrees or no match at all. Students are allowed to revise their choices after taking the LCE but before the release of the results. Changes are mostly within the degree groups, e.g. degrees within the domain of business and economics.

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Existing data

1. CAO applicant statistics are available from year 2000 to year 2012, at: http://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=app_stats. The statistics present the total applicants number per course group, and the total number of applicants who rank the course group as their 1st preference.
2. Department of Education and Skills publish data on total number of students in higher education and students demographics: <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/>
3. Higher Education Authority (HEA) collects enrollment data (including number of students per course and students demographics) for HEA funded university and institution: <http://www.hea.ie/en/node/1424>

Legal texts

[1] The University Act, 1997: <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/>

[2] The Institutes of Technology Act, 2006:

<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2006/en/act/pub/0025/index.html>

Other resources and references

[3] CAO handbook, <http://www.cao.ie/handbook.php>

[4] CAO Board of Directors Report 2010, http://www2.cao.ie/dir_report/pdf/caoreport2010.pdf

⁹ The court case of Frank Prendergast <http://www.independent.ie/national-news/teen-sues-over-foreign-student-medical-places-1210884.html>

¹⁰ The quantitative importance of this potential problem is an open question. According to CAO sources, the 10-course limit does not seem to be binding for most students. Level 8 applicants apply on average to 6 degree programs and level 6/7 applicants to 4 degree programs.

[5] Higher Education Key Facts and Figures 10/11,

<http://www.hea.ie/en/statistics/2010-2011>

[6] Key Statistics 2009-2010, Department of Education and

Skills,http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/stat_web_stats_09_10.pdf

[7] National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/National-Strategy-for-Higher-Education-2030.pdf>

[8] National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008

[9] Review of Student Charge, Higher Education Authority, 2010

<http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/reviewofstudentcharge.pdf>

[10] The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) quota distribution:

<http://www.accesscollege.ie/hear/availability.php>

[11] The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) quota

distribution:<http://www.accesscollege.ie/dare/availability.php>

[12] The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) quota distribution:

<http://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=scoring&s=fetac>

[13] The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level

details:http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/about_NFQ/framework_levels_award_types.html

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 \(French-speaking region\)](#).