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Eoin Murphy

CAO Admissions Criteria

1 Introduction

The following paper discusses the Central Applications Office in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) admissions criteria for Northern Ireland (NI) students. It also considers the points equivalence for A-Levels and AS-Levels to Leaving Certificate Exams (LCE) and the number of NI domiciled students attending ROI Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

2 The Central Applications Office (CAO)

As stated in the CAO Admissions handbook:¹

CAO is an organisation which was founded in 1976 by the higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Republic of Ireland. The HEIs have delegated to CAO the task of processing centrally applications for admission to their first year undergraduate courses. The purpose of the CAO is to process applications centrally and to deal with them in an efficient and fair manner. The HEIs retain the function of making decisions on admissions.

¹ Central Applications Office, 2012 CAO Handbook <http://www2.cao.ie/handbook/handbook/index.php>

It should be noted that:²

CAO is [an] agent for the HEIs participating in the Application System. These bodies agree annually the application regulations, procedures and timetable. CAO has no discretion to set them aside so as either to afford special treatment to any applicant over another or to deprive any applicant of their entitlement in favour of another.

Forty-six Institutions³ agree admissions policy and points requirements, with the CAO acting as the administrative body for the applications process.

3 CAO Admissions Policy for NI Students

Northern Ireland students apply under the same system as ROI students, using the CAO system. The main difference is that the majority of NI resident students apply with A-level qualifications rather than LCE results.

Discussions with CAO identified that there are two criteria for entry to an ROI HEI:

- **Eligibility:** This is based on the number of points received in one sitting of the Leaving Certificate or A-Levels for UK applicants. Different courses have different points, with the most popular courses attracting the highest point requirements (for example Dental Science at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) needs 590 points). In addition, some courses, such as Medicine at TCD, require students to sit an additional admissions test, HPAT⁴ – Ireland, with a total points requirement of 731⁵ (with A-level applicants having to *satisfy matriculation and specific course requirements within three consecutive years, e.g. GCSE (2010), AS (2011), A-levels (2012)*)⁶; and
- **Subject:** For a number of courses, certain subjects (with qualifications gained in them) are needed in order to gain access. These subjects can have been studied at any time (except in certain specific cases such as Medicine).⁷

The table following details the points applied by the CAO to A-level and AS-level results.⁸

² Ibid

³ As stated by the CAO

⁴ Health Professionals Admissions Test

⁵ Applicants must have a minimum of 480 points and meet the matriculation and course requirements of the College. The HPAT provides additional points in order to access the course. Please note, additional information is available regarding medicine applications at: http://hpat-ireland.acer.edu.au/files/2012_Admission_Guide_to_Undergraduate_medicine.pdf

⁶ Trinity College Dublin, Medicine, <http://www.tcd.ie/courses/undergraduate/az/course.php?id=187>

⁷ Further information on Subject requirements can be found here: <http://www.nui.ie/college/entry-requirements.asp>

⁸ CAO, Applicant Scoring for GCE/GCSE, <http://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=scoring&s=gce>

Table 1: Applicant Scoring for GCE

From 2010	
	All HEIs
A Level	
A*	150
A	135
B	120
C	100
D	75
E	40
AS Level	
A	65
B	60
C	50
D	35
E	20

In addition:

Applicants are scored on the basis of their best four A levels or three A levels and an AS level in a different subject from the same or preceding year. The maximum number of points that can be achieved is 600.⁹

For LCE students, the best six results they receive are considered, with a maximum number of points also 600.

It should be noted that the CAO Applications Handbook stresses that:

It is very important to remember that this Handbook does not in any way remove the fundamental need for you to consult the appropriate HEI literature or HEI website. Only the official HEI material will give you the essential information about the content of courses, minimum entry requirements, course duration, career prospects, etc.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ CAO, The CAO Handbook, <http://www2.cao.ie/handbook/handbook/index.php>

4 Northern Ireland Student Admissions to the Republic of Ireland HEIs

The table below details the attendance of NI domiciled students at ROI HEIs.¹¹

Table 2: Attendance of NI domiciled full-time undergraduates at HEA funded universities 2005-2010

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Dublin City University	31	30	19	12	8	1
National University of Ireland, Galway	73	51	33	27	15	33
National University of Ireland, Maynooth	8	14	9	16	14	12
Trinity College Dublin	432	389	396	364	337	334
University College Cork	10	7	7	4	5	8
University College Dublin	210	223	219	256	270	283
University of Limerick	5	8	12	9	9	4
Total Northern Ireland undergraduates	769	722	695	688	658	675
Total full-time undergraduates (at the seven ROI universities only)	60775	60172	61241	63079	65880	66536
NI undergraduates as % of total undergraduates	1.27%	1.20%	1.13%	1.09%	1.00%	1.01%

Source: Higher Education Authority

As can be seen above, despite an overall increase in attendance at ROI universities, NI student numbers have fallen. Table 3 below details ALL Northern Ireland domiciled students (Undergraduate and Postgraduate).

Table 3: Attendance of all Northern Ireland-domiciled Undergraduate and Postgraduate full-time students at ROI HEIs

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
University College Dublin	210	219	201	231	254	260	248*	251	250	282	288	316
University College Cork	24	23	22	22	19	19	13	9	8	8	7	13
NUI Galway	60	51	74	77	87	83	93	81	50	35	27	46
Trinity College Dublin	609	624	590	556	508	501	460	423	427	392	361	366
NUI Maynooth	27	13	13	9	7	8	13*	18	13	20	17	16
Dublin City University	23	29	25	23	39	64	36	39	25	16	11	4
University of Limerick	13	10	6	8	11	8	8	11	15	16	16	12
Other HEIs (mainly National College of Art and Design)	35	48	36	44	35	39	38*	34	23	30	6	35
Total Northern Ireland students	1001	1017	968	970	960	982	909*	866	811	799	733	808

*There appears to have been a 'glitch' in the HEA statistics for 2005/06 –e.g. in one set of HEA statistics seen by this researcher 32 NCAD students were counted; in another set, no students were counted. This table uses the higher of the two recorded statistics.

Source: Higher Education Authority

¹¹ ibid

Table 3 shows a similar trend for all NI students (although the IBEC report states that 90% of students counted in this period were undergraduates).

5 Barriers to Cross-border (North to South) study

A 2011 Study carried out by the IBEC- CBI¹² Joint Business Council (JBC) IBEC identified a number of barriers to students from NI studying in the ROI.¹³ These barriers are:

- Lack of information about Universities in other jurisdictions;
- Lack of information about Institutes of Technology;
- The high cost of living (in Dublin in particular);
- Unfamiliarity with the CAO applications process;
- The smaller number of previous ROI graduates; and
- The change in the 'equivalencies' between A-level and Leaving Certificate Grades.

Of these, the most notable to this paper is the final barrier.

The study found that the problem stemmed back to 2005, when UCAS (the University and Colleges Admissions Service - the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK) altered the A-Level/LCE equivalences. Whereas each LCE subject was previously considered to have half the points value of an A-level, following a review this was moved to having two-thirds the value.¹⁴

This effectively devalued A-levels against LCE results. Following this change, Trinity College Dublin started to require NI students to have four A-Levels (with A, and later A*, grades) for high-demand and high-point courses such as Medicine, dentistry and law. As stated by the study:¹⁵

They felt that to do otherwise would give Northern students with top grade A-Level results an unfair advantage over their Southern counterparts with top grade Leaving Certificate results. This practice was eventually adopted by all the Southern universities' Admissions Offices.

¹² Irish Business and Employers' Confederation and Confederation of British Industry

¹³ IBEC, Few students from Republic take courses in Northern Ireland, <http://www.ibec.ie/ibec/press/publicationsdoclib3.nsf/2ACF8686274C6708802575F20030C085/18B57B560E1AC823802578F0003D5A89>

¹⁴ IBEC – CBI Joint Business Council Study on obstacles to cross border undergraduate education, [http://www.ibec.ie/IBEC/Press/PressPublicationsdoclib3.nsf/vPages/Newsroom-few-students-from-republic-take-courses-in-northern-ireland-18-08-2011/\\$file/JBC+study+on+obstacles+to+cross+border+undergraduate+education.pdf](http://www.ibec.ie/IBEC/Press/PressPublicationsdoclib3.nsf/vPages/Newsroom-few-students-from-republic-take-courses-in-northern-ireland-18-08-2011/$file/JBC+study+on+obstacles+to+cross+border+undergraduate+education.pdf)

¹⁵ ibid