

We should change the Irish admissions system rather than abandon another generation to the cruelties of the points race

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The current admission system to Irish universities has been blamed for having a damaging effect on both the teaching and the learning experience ever since its inception, failing to recognize critical thinking, and ignoring potential. [Patrick Geoghegan](#) describes the advantages of a new admissions system to deal with these deficiencies that will be tested in a feasibility study. It will use three scales rather than the current 'points system' in order to better evaluate students and provide ways to gauge context and potential.



On 14 January 2013 in the Royal Irish Academy, Ireland's national academy for the arts and the sciences, a pioneering feasibility study was launched by Trinity College Dublin, to see if there was a fairer and a better way of admitting students to university in Ireland. The study will test a new admissions route on behalf of the third-level sector in 2014, on three of the most popular courses, with the results and processes shared with the other Irish universities and institutes of technology. Reaction has largely been positive, despite some critics maintaining that existing system should be preserved no matter what.

International observers are usually amazed to discover how the Irish admissions system works. For more than 30 years Ireland has used a 'points system' to admit students to third-level. An applicant's points total is based on his/her best six results in a final-year examination (the Leaving Certificate), and nothing else is taken into account for admission. The points for each course at college depend purely on supply and demand, and so changes every year, and colleges have no say over who they admit – if applicants meets the minimum points requirement for a course they have applied for then they are automatically accepted. The system is administered by the Central Applications Office (CAO), an independent and trusted body which was established by the universities to oversee admissions in 1976.

The 'points system' has been criticised every year since its inception. Business leaders, educational experts, politicians, students, teachers, and parents have all blamed it for having a damaging effect on both the teaching and the learning experience, for failing to reward and recognise independent and critical thinking, and for ignoring potential and the context in which the results were achieved. Yes it is a transparent system, but unfair, because it uses only a single scale to evaluate applicants. Crucially, it does not look at the context in which the results were achieved. And it is based on an examination which rewards a culture where teachers or paid consultants can 'prep' the students with answers to be memorised and regurgitated, without the material ever being understood. As a result university admission tends to favour students from privileged backgrounds, and although modifications to the system (points bonuses) were developed for students with disabilities or from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, these have only had a marginal impact. But people have been unwilling to change the system, fearing that any alternative system could be compromised or corrupted. For example, there is little public trust in interviews being part of the admissions process, with a belief that this would promote inequality, and likewise there are fears about any other kind of supplementary assessment.

In devising this new admissions route we were careful to follow international best practice. Professor Steven Schwartz, the former Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University in Australia, produced the groundbreaking report on fair admissions for the UK government in 2004. He agreed to speak at the international one-day conference we held in Trinity on admissions in May last year, and he endorsed the work we were doing to try and find a better national admissions system. We quoted him at our launch: 'The best approach is not to use a single indicator of score (such as the Leaving Certificate). It is better to use a comprehensive set of predictors in the hope that the weaknesses of

one might be compensated by the strengths of another”. His advice and support proved invaluable as we worked to develop the use of three scales (or ‘predictors’) in our feasibility study. Following the launch in the Royal Irish Academy, I received an email from Professor Schwartz who told me how proud he was that Trinity was showing national leadership in this area.

We also had key support from all around the world. Over the summer I visited admissions offices in some of the leading universities in the United States, and at Harvard I found solutions to many of the problems we were facing. Dr. William R. Fitzsimmons has been the Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Harvard since 1986, and is an internationally respected leader in this field. He reminded us that the context in which the results were achieved also mattered, and he flew to Ireland to deliver the key-note speech at the launch because he wanted to show his public support for this attempt to bring about an historic reform of the Irish education system.

The new route that will be tested in the feasibility study will be administered by the Central Applications Office (Trinity’s partner in this scheme) and will be completely anonymous (with the CAO assigning random numbers to the applications) and will use three scales – it will look at Leaving Certificate results, it will look at the Relative Performance Rank (RPR) of the student (the performance of the applicant in the Leaving Certificate relative to other applicants from that school), and finally a personal statement which will allow for contextual data and broader experiences to be assessed. The hope is that these three scales will combine to provide a fair and a better way of admitting students. While there have been legitimate concerns raised in the UK and elsewhere that personal statements can be manipulated and written by others, the assessors will be looking for evidence of academic potential and suitability for course that cannot be coached. Indeed we have been explicit that we are not looking for the statements with the best vocabulary or grammar, but something that is an honest presentation, and we will be looking for something that provides some context and allows for a wider evaluation.

Support for the study was immediate and decisive. We were delighted by the reaction of the main teaching unions (the ASTI and the TUI), the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, and the representative bodies of the second and third-level students. The Labour Party, one of the two Irish coalition parties, even made it a headline issue on their official webpage: ‘Trinity College leads the way on admissions reform’. In the *Sunday Business Post* the weekend after, the new approach was praised and it was recognised that ‘There are few, if any, in the education sector who would advocate staying with just the current points system... The results of the study, which will run for at least two years, will be shared with TCD’s [Trinity’s] fellow universities and institutes of technology (which is to be welcomed). Only then will the long process of change begin”.

More importantly, our own students in Trinity were supportive of the proposed changes – they had been through the current points system and knew how flawed and stressful it was. Even those who were sceptical about any radical changes, were none the less proud that Trinity was the only college in Ireland with the courage to lead on this issue. An editorial in *The University Times*, one of our student newspapers, welcomed the proposed changes and declared that, when the new students entered under this new route, it is ‘sure to be considered a milestone in the history of Irish higher education by future generations’. This success has encouraged the other Irish universities to explore the use of supplementary assessments alongside Leaving Certificate results, and our feasibility study – whether it succeeds or fails – has begun a long overdue debate about reforming the current admissions system.

Some have – and will remain – cynical about any attempts to change the existing points based system. For example, a letter was published in *The Irish Times* on 19 January 2013 from someone who called for ‘more scrutiny’ of the proposed changes, and who warned that students might get in ‘on a nod and a wink’. But to them I would quote from one of my favourite speeches from Abraham Lincoln, a speech that inspired me as I developed this study:

‘I do not mean to say that we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so, would be to discard all the lights of current experience, to reject all progress, all improvement. What I do say is – that if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers in any case, we should do

| so upon evidence so conclusive, and argument so clear, that even their great authority – fairly considered and weighted – cannot stand.’

That is what we are doing in this study. We are attempting to use international experiences, progress, and improvements, to see if there is a better and a fairer way, and we are doing so because we are convinced it is the right thing to do. We are prepared to fight for what we believe in, rather than abandon another generation to the cruelties of the points race.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Patrick Geoghegan is the Dean of Undergraduate Studies at Trinity College Dublin. Further details about the feasibility study can be found [here](#).