

The Points Race

Are parents driving or responding?

In opening up the discussion about the points race, it is important to look at the players and the associated issues. There are many drivers and mixed agendas and a lot of interacting pressures and tensions.

Parents worry, some more than others. Most will readily admit that the worry of an unhappy or an unwell child is the greatest burden of all. Some parents with the best interest at heart can inadvertently place undue pressures on students to achieve beyond their ability, building anxiety and fears around the academic experience.

Regardless of socio-economic background, every generation, in the main, wants more for its children. Some will say it is more of a middle class phenomenon when it comes to the drive for high points and the economics associated with the adoption of the grinds culture that is so prevalent today.

Some parents can get fixed on the notion that certain career paths must be followed, that the student must be somebody, must be something, must do what they (parents) have or haven't done. This is intertwined with the model of the more traditional careers of the graduates of years gone by, not taking into account the breakthroughs in science and the advent of an information and digital age.

Career paths have changed and movement between jobs and across sectors, often quite unrelated to the study path taken at third level, is not unusual as employers seek out specific sets of skills to fill roles that have yet to be created and defined to meet social, economic and cultural challenges.

Parents of this generation are accused of 'hovering' and 'helicoptering' students as they facilitate the educational experience, keeping the student on a tight leash and then letting go without adequate preparation and due warning about the first solo flight into the abyss of third level independent thinking and learning.

Some parents feel the need to broadcast to the world about how academic/intellectual/non-academic their sons or daughters are and how many points are achieved or not achieved.



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All the world's a stage,
And all the men and
women merely players;

They have their exits and their
entrances,

And one man in his time plays
many parts,

His acts being seven ages.

As You Like It – William Shakespeare

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There is also competition within families, between families, between city/town and country. The question of students 'wasting' excess points gained in the Leaving Certificate, maybe studying Botany instead of Medicine, History of Art instead of Actuarial Science, Business instead of Law, or attending an Institute of Technology over the traditional university can be a source of serious irritation to some parents.

In these situations students can feel the pressure not to let parents down. What does it matter if the students are happy and the outcome is that they 'stay the course', enjoy the experience and mature to become contributing, mobile, employable and fulfilled citizens at the end of the journey? Life is for looking forward, not for looking back.

The purpose of the CAO system is to handle the administrative function of allocating places to students entering undergraduate courses in the third level system. It is a cruel system that requires students to place courses in order of their choice on a list. By process of elimination under the allocation of points, places are offered primarily based on availability and demand. Students who score top end points tend to enter what would be termed the higher professions of medicine and law; however, they may also choose other course options such as English and History, Business or Science.

Is there something seriously amiss when a student gains 500+ points out of a maximum score of 600 (approx. 10% of Leaving Certificate students), yet fails to get a place on the course of choice, leaving him/her with a sense of failure, raising anxiety levels not only within themselves but within their family unit?

Equally, is there something awry when a Leaving Certificate student could gain a place on a particular course in 2008 with 300 points and in 2015 needs a staggering 515 points to gain a place on the same course?

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What do high results in the Leaving Certificate examination tell us? Are they evidence of brilliance of mind and/or brilliance of application to a process? Is it evidence of a clever approach to the choice of subjects studied, of getting to know a system and work it to best advantage? Is it evidence of money talking, playing to the grinds culture? Is it evidence of a good memory and learning by rote? Is it a test of suitability to any particular profession? Is it a middle class phenomenon? Is it a combination of all? This makes uncomfortable reading as it questions both fairness and privilege.

Anxiety not only rests with these 'high achievers' but also with students who have equally worthy aspirations of gaining good average points and wishing to follow a particular course of study at a chosen institution. These students may be pipped at the post and have to bear the consequences of random selection, standing by while others who get the identical points are accepted. This rigid structure is killing the passion, the dream, the wants and the interests of so many. It makes a mockery of the concept of career choice and questions the place of career guidance in matching student desires for this cohort. Are we saying that this system helps fulfil student wishes in terms of preference, potential and profession?

Those who score much lower will have different but again equally worthy aspirations, choosing to opt for different pathways and access routes through Further Education and Training, PLC courses or apprenticeships which have proven their worth over many years not least within the accounting, legal and insurance professions.

The student is the most important person in all of this discussion. This fact we cannot and must never ignore. The third level experience is a costly process, requiring a massive economic and social investment with a substantial price tag for state, student and family.

The question is often asked if the 'herd mentality' influences direction, making particular courses and colleges fashionable and popular. Classes of students can have an undercurrent of fixed interests such as business or engineering. Students need to be cognisant of this space and not feel pressure to follow the pack, doing the same thing with the same set of people – repeating their life cycles albeit in its different stages.

The need to conduct research for all courses and options cannot be underestimated. Students must accept that a strong work ethic will be required during college with the responsibility lying solely with them to earn the academic reward. This approach has to be fostered much earlier in the second level cycle, empowering the student to put context on decision-making for third level. Such decision-making requires serious reflection, time and effort. The race for points can act as a barrier to such reflection.

The second level system is perceived as rigid with the points race driving the senior cycle. Teachers are often placed in the difficult situation of preparing students for one examination at the risk of sacrificing a deeper engagement in the broader aspects of these students' general education.

Some will say that as long as there are teachers who will give grinds and grind schools that will 'hothouse' students, there will always be a natural feed into the points race. Class sizes, temporary employment contracts and recent cutbacks in the education sector only fuel this grinds culture.

Ireland needs to continue to produce highly skilled graduates who can contribute professionally in their chosen careers at the earliest possible opportunity to meet economic and societal needs, both at home and abroad.

The generation of students starting college today have come from a different age, the age of 24/7 interaction. The pace of life has quickened with technology and social media facilitating a world of instant answers. While our society has changed dramatically, it doesn't alter the fact that college students need:

- » to learn how to learn
- » to develop a strong broad base of knowledge within the discipline of study
- » to develop thinking skills – make sense of learning, how to analyse and sort data, how to solve problems

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The CAO is a cruel system that requires students to place courses in order of their choice on a list.

- » to be entrepreneurial, intrapreneurial and innovative
- » to think outside the box – to be confident to question
- » to be flexible and adaptable, able to deal with the unexpected
- » to extend what they learn and to generate new ideas and concepts
- » to deal with knowledge in a critical and analytical way
- » to communicate information and argument in a well-reasoned manner
- » to deal with the fast moving changes in a technological and digital age
- » to become ‘work ready’

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It is widely acknowledged that the current Leaving Certificate process encourages ‘rote learning’ with the sole purpose of gaining points. The third level system seeks to move away from this type of learning to a deeper understanding of the subject matter and to rewarding evidence of engagement and development of sound argument, critical thinking and evaluation.

The CAO first came into being in 1976. Surely some reform is required, given that in 1980 only 20% of the second level school population in Ireland went to college and digital technology and scientific advances as we know them today had yet to be discovered. Google hadn’t quite made it to the Oxford dictionary and the concept of Social Media didn’t exist.

A big player in all of this is the Media – all sizes, shapes and formats. Is there unnecessary hype each year with too much focus on the technical aspect of the system? Guides are churned out, top tips squeezed into A4 pages and again the ‘rote learning’ is encouraged. Some will say these are of great benefit to students while others will say it only adds to the hype and creates consequent nervous tensions.

Could we consider abolishing the CAO system and replacing it with something different?

Could we consider abolishing the CAO system and replacing it with something different? This is not to advocate a return to the old fashioned queuing system that was prevalent in the 50s and 60s – many a surgeon and lawyer will tell the tale of how they managed to get their places and those who are still alive to remember will tell you that the queue was shorter for engineering than for medicine! The braver of these will say, if pressed, that their points equivalent might have been a little short of that required today.

Is it now time to look at the transformation of the education sector as a whole? Is it not possible to seek a better, fairer and more comprehensive solution to the points race, one that improves quality and satisfies all the stakeholders involved: students, parents, employers, academics, professional bodies, state agencies and government?

Educational reform is a slow and tiresome process but maybe the moment has come to put the Leaving Certificate, the CAO and the ‘fit for purpose’ debate firmly on the table.

All the world’s a stage and there are many players.