



# POLICY SUBMISSION

## Submission to the Commission on the Points System

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## **1. The Combat Poverty Agency**

The Combat Poverty Agency is a state agency which works for the prevention and decrease of poverty and social exclusion and the reduction of inequality in Ireland by striving for change which will promote a fairer and more just, equitable and inclusive society. The Agency is committed to addressing the causes of poverty and social exclusion by seeking to influence life chances in particular through working for a reduction in long-term unemployment and educational disadvantage. The Agency also seeks to address the consequences of poverty by working for the empowerment of those who are marginalised and excluded as a result of poverty and by addressing the problems that are manifested in disadvantaged urban and rural communities. It is a centre of expertise on poverty issues, policies and practices. A key element of its work is advising government on all aspects of economic and social planning in relation to poverty.

In drafting this submission, the Agency has drawn on the expertise of its Policy Advisory Committee on Educational Disadvantage and Long-Term Unemployment. The committee consists of a wide range of external experts who advise the Agency on relevant policy issues. The Agency has also consulted the networks involved in its Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage in drafting this submission. Four local networks are involved in the programme: Tralee, Tuam, Drogheda and Killinarden in Tallaght. The aims of the programme are to develop an integrated response to the problem of educational disadvantage at a local level and to influence policy at a national level drawing from the local experience. The Agency would like to acknowledge the assistance received from these two sources in the preparation of this submission.

## **2. Commission on the points system**

The Agency welcomes the establishment by the Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin, TD, of the Commission on the Points System to review the present system of entry to third-level education. The last few years has seen considerable pressure for third level places and an escalation of exam tension for students, parents and teachers. The subsequent 'points race' for courses has brought into question the adequacy of the current system of entry to third-level education.

This review comes at an opportune time as third level education looks to a future where, due to demographic change, there will be a reducing stock of young people progressing through the education system. The current economic boom also means that more young people are entering the work force after their Leaving Certificate rather than continuing their studies to third level.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there is an increasing appreciation of the need for lifelong learning and the expansion of second chance opportunities for those who have previously not fully benefited from the education system.

It is therefore important that the review of the points system is placed within the wider educational and social and economic context. The Education Bill (Number 2) 1997 puts a welcome emphasis on the promotion of equality of access to and participation in education and to the means whereby students may benefit from education. It also states as an objective the promotion of opportunities for adults, in particular adults

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<sup>1</sup> See Williams, J. and Collins, C. (1997) *The Economic Status of School Leavers: Results of the School Leavers' Survey*. The Department of Education and Science, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and The Economic and Social Research Institute.

who as children did not avail of or benefit from education in schools. It is crucial, however, that plans to achieve these objectives are properly resourced.

These objectives are very much in keeping with the overall objective of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy<sup>2</sup> (NAPS) in relation to educational disadvantage, which is *To ensure that children, men and women living in poverty are able to gain access, participate in and benefit from education of sufficient quality to allow them to move out of poverty, and to prevent others from becoming poor* (*Sharing in Progress*, 1997, p. 9). The points system should, therefore, be reviewed in terms of its contribution to tackling educational disadvantage and the degree to which it facilitates greater opportunities for participation by disadvantaged students.

The Commission's terms of reference require that, in looking at the system of entry, the review should have particular regard to:

- a) its effect on the personal development of students;
- b) its impact at the post-primary level, particularly on the senior cycle, in terms of its influence on teaching, learning and assessment techniques;
- c) its impact on selection of third level courses;
- d) its effect on access to third level of students who have experienced significant educational disadvantage;
- e) its effect on access to third level of non-standard students, e.g., mature students;
- f) international experience of entry systems.

The Agency's comments on each of these areas is detailed in section four of the submission.

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<sup>2</sup> The NAPS, launched in April 1997, is an attempt to bring a strategic approach to tackling the underlying causes of poverty and social exclusion. It marks the development of agreed targets and goals to fight poverty and social exclusion. The following five areas were identified by the NAPS as needing particular attention in tackling poverty: income adequacy; unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment; educational disadvantage; disadvantaged urban areas; and rural poverty. For further details see *Sharing in Progress* (1997). Dublin: Stationery Office.

### 3. Principles underpinning the system of entry to third level education

It is important that the system of entry to third level education is underpinned by stated and agreed principles. It is clear that the system should be **transparent** and **accountable** and that it treats all applicants **fairly, consistently** and **objectively**. The points system should also be committed to the principle of **equality**, in terms of access, participation and outcome. The system of entry should also be **holistic** in what qualities it measures, to ensure the maximum of a person's various talents are taken into consideration in the selection process for third level places. This would also need to be balanced by a necessity to ensure **administrative simplicity** and **cost-efficiency**.

The current system scores quite well against these principles. It is transparent, accountable, fair, consistent and objective. Considering the large number and complexity of courses on offer to students, its current centralised administrative procedures and cost-effectiveness is probably preferable to a decentralised application system. The need for supportive guidance for applicants is clear, however, to ensure that the process of administration does not become a barrier to participation. As discussed in more detail below, the current system's performance in relation to the principle of equality is seriously impeded by the deep-rooted inequality which currently exists in the Irish education system.

A serious weakness of the system is that it is not holistic. This is, for the most part, a reflection of an inherent weakness of the leaving certificate examination system, which manifests itself in the points system. Therefore, reform of the points system must be viewed in the context of the need to consider reforms of the examination system and indeed curriculum on which it is based. There is also a need to consider if and how the points system could operate in tandem with other selection criteria. It is possible that the domination of the points system has inhibited the development of alternative access routes to third level education for students with special needs and has impeded their access to this level of education.

### 4. Review issues

This section of the submission makes specific points on the areas that the Commission were asked to give particular attention to. Many of the issues raised and discussed in the submission are not, however, specifically related to the points system *per se* but the broader operation of the educational system around the points system.

A cross-cutting issue, which applies to many of these review issues, is the lack of detailed, up-to-date educational research (for example, on retention on third level courses) and the subsequent need to apply more resources to the monitoring and evaluation of the educational system in general and particular mechanisms of the system, such as the points system, in particular.

#### a) *the points system's effect on the personal development of students*

A positive effect that the points system can have on the personal development of students is that it can give them a target to work towards and a level of certainty that if they perform well enough in their exams they will be able to access the course of their choice. However, the points system can also have negative effects on students' personal development in terms of the pressure that some students feel under to perform in certain academic subjects while not giving the same level of attention to their own personal development and to other important non-examined subjects. The

lack of measurement and accreditation of students' personal development is a serious weakness of the points system. It is also important to consider the degree to which the focus on the points system within schools can alienate non-academically focused students and curtail their ability to gain to their full potential from the education system. Furthermore, the competitive nature of the points system may lead some students to develop a sense of no-hope and leave the education system all together.

b) *the points system's impact at the post-primary level, particularly on the senior cycle, in terms of its influence on teaching, learning and assessment techniques*

Most schools and teachers will want students to do well in their Leaving Certificate, as they recognise that this is probably the most important public examination pupils will ever sit. However, it can also be seen as a reflection of the success of the school at a local level. The points system then becomes an easy 'ready-reckoner' of how well students have performed and how successful the school and teachers have been at imparting knowledge and facilitating further educational opportunities to students. This may, in turn, be a consideration that parents take into account when choosing a school for their children, so perpetuating the system.

The points system, then, can influence the scope and method of teaching within a school, leading to an over-emphasis on academic achievement to the detriment of the other elements of a young person's development. One way to tackle this problem would be to extend the national examinations system to subjects that give greater focus to the personal development of students, for example sports. This would help to increase their currency within the school system. All students should have access to adequate sports facilities through their schools. Unfortunately, this is currently not the case as some schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas, lack access to proper sports facilities. A special programme of capital spending on sports facilities in disadvantaged areas is urgently required, and particularly in advance of the inclusion of sports in the examination system. In relation to the points system, this would be vital to ensure fairness and equality. However, as a more general point, greater investment in sports facilities in disadvantaged areas might also have a positive effect on countering early school leaving.<sup>3</sup>

Much informal education provision use person-centred, participative, experimental methods and group work to good effect. These methods could be employed to a greater extent within the formal education system, especially in post-primary schools, particularly in the development of students' social and analytical skills.

There is also a need for greater articulation of the functions of a school. It should be considered as not just a centre for academic/technical education, but also a place to encourage personal and social development. This needs to be done at both a national and school level. There is also a need to heighten public awareness of the role of education in the development of society.

c) *the points system's impact on selection of third level courses*

A central consideration here is the degree to which students are unduly influenced by the points system to select courses for further education that match their points total rather than their own personal preference and aptitudes. There is a need for further

<sup>3</sup> See Morgan, M. (1996) 'Early School Leaving: The Lessons from Other Countries' *Poverty Today*. No 30. pp. 10-12.

research in this area to assess the extent to which students are influenced in this way. Particular attention should be given to the possible role that an increased career guidance system could play in helping students to choose the most appropriate course of further education.

d) *the points system's effect on access to third level of students who have experienced significant educational disadvantage*

Students who come from an educationally disadvantaged background encounter many barriers to accessing and participating in third level education - financial, social, cultural and educational.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the points system does not, of itself, have a major effect on access to third level for students who have experienced significant educational disadvantage.

More important in this context is the present systems of assessment. Lynch and O'Riordan (1996), drawing on interviews with school personnel, identified two main themes in this area. First, they found that the present examination system (especially the Leaving Certificate) does not assess students' capabilities in a holistic way, regardless of class. However, they concluded that middle class students are less disadvantaged by this as traditional academic appraisal, with its bias towards language based modes of written assessment, is more familiar to middle class students, most of whose parents had experience of it. Second, the fact that more advantaged students can 'purchase' extra points through grinds puts low income/working class students at considerable disadvantage within an open competitive system. Therefore, addressing the system of assessment rather than the points system, should be the priority in improving access to third level education for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

One way of reducing the emphasis on the points system as the route to third level education is to include interviews and an aptitude test for applicants. Given the points raised by Lynch and O'Riordan (above) in relation to social class differences in education, it would be important to ensure that any move in this direction did not have an adverse effect on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, if these measures were included, all students should have the opportunity to practice interview techniques, interview panels should be monitored to ensure balance, aptitude tests should be evaluated to ensure they do not have a class bias, clear appeal procedures should be introduced, etc.

Another important feature of access to third level education for disadvantaged students is the development of college links with disadvantaged communities. Many colleges are progressing on this issue, and should be supported in their endeavours - for example, the BITE programme in DCU and the TAP programme in TCD. Furthermore, particular attention should be paid to the development of links with disadvantaged students from rural areas. A national policy on reserving places for disadvantaged students is also required. Some faculties already reserve a percentage of places for disadvantaged students, but this needs to be put on a firmer footing.

Once disadvantaged students access third level education it is also important that proper support mechanisms are in place to help retain them in the system. In this regard, the adequacy of the grants maintenance scheme, the value of summer

<sup>4</sup> See: Lynch, K. and O'Riordan, C. *Social Class, Inequality and Higher Education: Barriers to Equality of Access and Participation*. (1996) Registrar's Committee on Equality of Participation in Higher Education, University College Dublin.

schools and access courses and the need for counselling and peer support should be recognised.

Finally, at a macro level, in addressing access to third level education for disadvantaged students there is a need to recognise that educational inequalities are a reflection of wider social and economic inequalities in society. Therefore, micro level policy developments can only have a limited impact on reducing educational disadvantage.

e) *the points system's effect on access to third level of non-standard students, e.g., mature students*

A first point to make is that the term 'non-standard' is not helpful in this case as many of the issues discussed above in relation to educationally disadvantaged students also apply to, for example, mature students. Perhaps a term such as 'students with special needs' would be more appropriate. That said, some students will experience exceptional access issues. An important first-step in this area would be the development of a clear policy on accreditation and certification of previous experience. Access to third level education for these students would also be assisted by further development of, for example: access courses, summer schools, out reach programmes, financial supports, child care services and guidance and counselling. Physical access to the college campus may also be an issue for some students. Measures are also required to help retain non-standard students in third level education.

f) *international experience of entry systems*

In relation to this issue, the Commission's attention is drawn to conference proceedings edited by Thomas Kellaghan.<sup>5</sup> In addition, in considering the transferability of foreign entry systems to the Irish context, regard must be given to the cultural context in which the respective systems operate.

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<sup>5</sup> Kellaghan, T. (1995) *Admission to Higher Education: Issues and Practice*. International Association for Educational Assessment. Educational Research Centre, Dublin.

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations**

It is clear from this submission that reform of the points system should be considered within the broader context of the educational reform package needed to tackle educational disadvantage. As a priority, the points system should become more holistic in its measurement of students' abilities and experiences, while ensuring that any new measures which are introduced are assessed to ensure that they do not have a negative effect on disadvantaged students. Educational research is needed to monitor and evaluate access to and retention of disadvantaged students in third level education and special supports are required to help tackle educational disadvantage at all levels of the education system.