

# **Submission by the Irish Board of Speech & Drama in relation to the system used for entry into higher education in Ireland**

**The Irish Board of Speech and Drama requests that consideration be given to a proposal that achievements by young people in out-of-school or in-school extra-curricular activities be given recognition by the awarding of points or credits in the current CAO system or any system that replaces it.**

Many young people in Ireland are engaged in artistic, cultural, youth and sporting activities and other pursuits promoted and organised by bodies outside the formal education system, through which they acquire valuable, identifiable and verifiable skills, in addition to the broader learning and development that young people gain from participating in such activities.

Much of the focus of the criticisms of the current entry system for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has been on what has been termed 'the points race' and its effects on learning and teaching in schools. However, in her discussion paper 'Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', Professor Hyland pointed to a series of long standing broader issues of concern in relation to the preparedness of senior cycle students for third level education, and of the efficacy of the current points system as a mechanism allocating places in HEIs.

Among the issues highlighted were the 'negative impact of the points system on students' personal development' (p.6), that there is an inadequate focus on broader educational goals (p.7) and that graduates of the future will require excellent skills in communication (p.8), amongst other things.

In the section of the paper on 'How these concerns might be addressed' the suggestion was made that these and other concerns might be addressed, inter alia, by 'Using other selection mechanisms in addition to the current Leaving Certificate' (p.18). This was discussed briefly on p.20, one of the suggestions being that 'recognition could be given by HEIs for activities and achievements undertaken by students in senior cycle but not recognised or rewarded by the Leaving Certificate'. However, only one school-based mechanism for achieving this was considered and it was rather hastily dismissed as being too difficult to administer and as being open to challenge.

This dismissal ignored two things:

- a. the vast range of informal education taking place outside the school system that encourages and fosters general social and intellectual development, and also leads in many cases to the acquisition of key skills and competencies that supplement the more narrowly focussed learning that takes place through the formal school curriculum;
- b. that a system for the recognition of these acquired skills does not have to be effected through the school system. A mechanism could be formulated whereby bodies and organisations operating outside the formal education system and involved in tuition and/or assessment could be recognised formally, and that their assessment and certification could be validated.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, certain achievements in out-of-school or in-school extra-curricular activities are recognised and rewarded through the provision of tariff points by the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). To take one example, in speech, drama and communications, pass, merit and distinction awards in Grade 6, 7 and 8 speech and drama examinations operated by a variety of speech and drama examining bodies are recognised in the UCAS system, and students achieving these awards are given tariff points. It is our understanding, from the UCAS website and also from the paper prepared for the recent NCCA/HEA seminar, 'Transition or Transaction?' ('Application, selection and admission to higher education: a review of international practice') that these points may be used by HEIs, at their discretion, to assist them in the selection of students for relevant courses.

In Britain, there is also a body called the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) that provides formal recognition to bodies and organisations that deliver qualifications and assessments, accredits their awards and monitors their activities. (<http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/> and <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/11-03-03-introducing-ofqual.pdf>). No such equivalent body exists in Ireland and consequently the work of many bodies and organisations involved in educating, training and assessing young people is both unrecognised and, in many cases, unregulated.

The Irish Board of Speech and Drama is an examining body that provides an independent professional assessment of skills gained in communication and the dramatic arts. We examine thousands of students each year of all ages, report on their skill level and provide certification in relation to their achievements.

**The Irish Board of Speech and Drama wishes to propose that a mechanism be formulated that would provide for the recognition of certain organisations, following due process, and that their professional assessment of the skills acquired by young people in both out-of-school and in-school extra-curricular activities be recognised for the awarding of credits or points that could be used by HEIs as evidence of the achievement of certain skills and in the selection of students for relevant courses.**

We believe that such a mechanism could

- a. recognise the valid educational value of many activities in which young people are involved that take place outside the school system or as extra-curricular activities within schools;
- b. provide tangible recognition for young people who have acquired particular skills through their involvement in out-of-school or in-school extra-curricular activities;
- c. encourage more young people to acquire such skills that are arguably more effectively delivered and assessed outside the formal school system;
- d. provide additional and more nuanced information for HEIs in the selection process for third level courses.

Thank you for your attention. The Irish Board of Speech and Drama would very much welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this proposal in greater detail.

David Meredith  
Director  
Irish Board of Speech & Drama  
[www.irishboard.ie](http://www.irishboard.ie)

20 October 2011