

through. Lest I seem obsessed with religious affiliation, which had an obvious historical importance, I do not believe that religious affiliation should play any part in selecting candidates for university places or posts. When I was Provost I brought the recording of religious affiliation to an end as I viewed it as a matter for private conscience outside the College's remit.

FOUNDING THE CENTRAL APPLICATIONS OFFICE

Although the great growth in student numbers was still to come, the admissions system was already under strain in the early seventies. In particular, application to Trinity's and UCD's medical schools were often from the same people and there was no procedure by which preference could be established. Hasty exchanges between College Green and Belfield of the type 'are you offering to Kelly, J. and has Smith, W. accepted a place?' were only just tolerable as a procedure. If both Colleges made offers to the same very talented students only, no offers might be made to perfectly adequate students when places were still available.

At that time Trinity required a school report, intended to be rather comprehensive, on the academic promise of the potential student. This was a well-known procedure for Northern Irish and English universities which issued place offers based on the report together with an interview, and set a level of performance which guaranteed a place if achieved. We did not have the resources to conduct interviews, which are potentially very expensive and time-consuming, but the system was also failing with the Republic's Catholic schools which were unused to the report system and would write impossibly short references. Conscientious nuns always found the best in their girls while one Irish-speaking boys school had only one reference — *buachaill ar fheabhas* (an excellent boy), perhaps a tongue-in-cheek testing of Trinity's suspected linguistic incompetence.

At the same time computers were rapidly becoming important

and our applicants were recorded on huge computer print-outs. With no real competence in computing — it still escapes me — it was yet easy to see in principle that admissions could readily be processed by computer, making use of Leaving Certificate results. The principle was simple. Applicants for university admission would be permitted to record ten choices of College plus course in order of preference and they would be admitted to the highest choice to which their Leaving Certificate performance entitled them. Thus, an applicant who wished to study medicine could apply to all four of the medical schools then in the system in order of choice and could follow these by other subject choices up to a total of ten. The best achieving students would gain their first choice, others might have to settle for lower choices or, if their objective was simply to go to a particular College, they could accept offers at lower levels of preference.

Long discussions followed early in the seventies between representatives of the Colleges. Liam Barrett, then Assistant Registrar of UCC, Joe McHale, Secretary/Finance Officer of UCD, Séamus Ó Cathail, Academic Secretary of UCG, and Michael Doherty of Trinity, a computer specialist, were usually present. I chaired the meetings. Martin Newell, the future Chief Executive of the Central Applications Office (CAO) was seconded to us from Trinity in December 1975. The discussions were sometimes difficult and tough and seemed to be going nowhere. They had been interrupted in 1974 when Leland Lyons became Provost in Trinity and I resigned as Senior Lecturer to facilitate him in making his own choice of Annual Officers. After an interval the new Provost invited me to continue the discussions and to bring them to a conclusion.

Cork, Galway and Trinity led the debate with UCD hesitant but, in fairness to UCD, the reservations expressed were very pertinent and could not be avoided. It was clear that Trinity's system of asking for school references would not be followed by the other Colleges and could not be built into a new system for one College only without causing extreme distortion. References were favoured in theory by Trinity's Academic Council but most Council members

had no hands-on experience of the difficulties they caused. With some reluctance Trinity agreed to abandon references and to adopt a scoring system based on the Leaving Certificate results similar but not identical to those already in use in the NUI Colleges — the famous or infamous Points System, depending on your viewpoint. With the principles agreed, and with excellent support from Tarlach (Terry) Ó Raifeartaigh (Chairman) and Jim Dukes (Secretary) of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) which provided start-up funding, the CAO was launched. Its Articles of Association, of which I wrote the first draft, made it a company limited by guarantee, owned by the Colleges collectively, and independent in its operation.

I became the first Chairman. I like to record that I was supported in becoming Chairman by Joe McHale, saying that he would not trust just anybody from Trinity but that he would give me his trust. I still cherish this as a very great compliment. Representatives were appointed by the NUI Colleges, including Maynooth, represented by its then President and future Bishop of Limerick, Dr Jeremiah Newman and by the HEA, represented by its Secretary, Jim Dukes. The CAO Memorandum and Articles of Association were agreed at a meeting of the Committee of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) and Mr Dukes on 9th October 1975 and signed on the 19th December of that year. Thus the CAO came formally into being.

Martin Newell transferred from Trinity's Computer Science Department to become Chief Executive and Secretary to the Company. There was some insistence that the new post should be advertised and it was, although Martin had already contributed greatly to the CAO's evolution. He was incomparably the best qualified candidate of those interviewed. He had an added advantage. He already had academic experience of working in both UCD and Trinity. Martin's appointment was, and continued to be, a very great success. He retired late in 2005. Much of the development of the CAO can be attributed to his very high administrative ability and to the skill with which he gained the trust of the secondary schools. For the first year of the CAO's operation Martin and I worked from a temporary office in Clare Street. We

tested the new system on data from the previous year. It operated satisfactorily and, for the following year, we took the risk of moving to the new system. It was launched successfully and we did not run into serious snags then or subsequently.

The new Board settled down well. I was amused, when the question of purchasing a more powerful computer arose, that my more revolutionary younger colleagues wished to go back to the Colleges for advice on what to buy, while I insisted that there was no point in having a technically accomplished Chief Executive if he was not to be allowed to make decisions on equipment. The question was decided by a vote. Desmond Connell, then a Professor in Philosophy in UCD, subsequently Cardinal, voted with me as did other older members to gain the decision. We never looked back. Subsequently we gained another first. Martin had carried out research which showed that the postal service was able to deal with the volume of CAO business anticipated, if its office was based in Galway, which was being lobbied for within our organisation. I thought 'Why not?' So the office was established in Galway where it has been ever since. This was one of the earliest decisions to decentralise from Dublin, a procedure with which most Departments of State are still struggling. I resigned as Chairman when our office was established in Galway, my task in getting the organisation going now complete. I was succeeded by Séamus Ó Cathail, Academic Secretary of UCG.

The advantages of the new system were very clear. Anyone could apply to any College and there was no distinction in terms of religious affiliation, gender, race or physical disability. Children from deprived backgrounds or unpretentious schools had exactly the same examination-based chance as anyone else. Over the years it has become clear that the system, in spite of its rather mechanistic aspect, was absolutely fair and that there was no way by which an advantage could be gained by knowing some important public figure. Absolute confidence of fair treatment was and still is a major aspect of its success. The rules were straightforward and could not be bent. The Colleges had the relief that no one could usefully lobby them. When I was in charge of admissions for Trinity I had

to deal individually with applications from the children of both the President and the Taoiseach of the day. It is comforting to be able to record that neither attempted to influence the decision in any way whatsoever. It was a relief nevertheless that TDs' 'Green Harp' letters became a thing of the past.

The CAO system has been much criticised. It is not always seen as what it sets out to be, a fair method for sharing out a scarce resource, university places, especially in sought-after faculties such as medicine and law. One simple solution in response to demand is to provide more places by erecting new buildings and creating more teaching posts but, financial constraints apart, this runs into the difficulty that the State or the professions may decide on the desirable number of graduates to produce in particular disciplines, so some must be disappointed even if they have high Leaving Certificate scores. The worst situation is when a number of equal-scoring candidates compete for the last, too few, places and names are chosen by random number, a bitter experience for the losers.

Although several Ministers for Education in recent years have decided that the CAO system should be reviewed and have set up committees to do so, none has come up with a better idea that is relatively inexpensive and equally transparent in operation (a CAO application today costs €35 euro in comparison with a Leaving Certificate cost per candidate of €90 euro). When pressed, many teachers concede that the system is generally accepted as fair. Much criticism of the CAO is based on the pressure to which it exposes students and the competitiveness it generates. Some of the problems arise from the ambitions of parents as much as from the hopes of students. There is a belief that to study medicine or law or other high-demand subjects must naturally be the first choice of school-leavers and some are pressed into subjects for which they have little or no taste, while actually preferring subjects in which places are more easily gained.

There is a tendency to try to beat the system by developing strategies to maximise point scores by identifying supposedly 'easy' subjects. There is now a group of new colleges which specialise in preparing second-chance applicants to the CAO by intensive

teaching. It is a financially rewarding business. Some journalists have made a career of advising would-be-students on preparing themselves for university entry and on CAO procedures. Journalists have, in my opinion, contributed significantly to the levels of hysteria, which affect some parents and school-leavers, who find it difficult to make a calm appraisal of their situation. My advice to parents is, within the limits of good sense, to give their children freedom to choose the careers they wish, even if some choices do not promise substantial financial rewards. My advice to Ministers of Education about the CAO and the Points System is to heed the old American saying, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', or at least proceed towards change with great caution. It is the best system we have and it has worked successfully for over thirty years.

I believe in equality of opportunity. Much inequality in our secondary schools arises from excessive class size, limits on funding, quality of buildings and equipment and shortage of teachers in some subjects. Schools with limited financial resources may suffer from all of these handicaps in a competitive environment. The best way to promote equality of opportunity is to address these questions which have obvious funding implications. Unless we try to achieve a totally egalitarian society, an impractical objective in my view, there will always be some difference in the quality of secondary school experience between privately-funded schools and schools entirely dependent on the State. The important objective is to come sufficiently close to equality to guarantee everyone a reasonable chance of competing successfully. In the course of its more than thirty years history the CAO has contributed importantly to equality of opportunity. Long may it flourish!

Since I wrote these paragraphs in 2004 a new initiative on numbers to be admitted to medical training has been proposed in a report prepared under the chairmanship of Professor Patrick Fottrell on behalf of the Higher Education Authority. The number of students in medical training annually has been capped at 306 since 1978. Now it is proposed that a total of 725 Irish and EU students should be admitted annually by 2011, four years from now. It is planned that undergraduate admissions will continue to

be by existing procedures but that a significant number of graduates in other subjects will be admitted to training in medicine. The problem has been the realisation of the serious insufficiency in graduate output to meet the needs of the medical services. There are many aspects to the proposal which will need further elaboration but the CAO procedures should be sufficient to deal with the mechanical aspects of admission.

At present (2007) it is proposed to admit graduate students to the College of Surgeons and the University of Limerick (which does not have a medical school as yet) in the current year. The NUI Colleges expect to admit both undergraduate students as at present and an additional cohort of graduate students in 2008. Trinity's position is to maintain its present undergraduate procedures and, at least in the short term, not to follow the graduate admissions route. The decisions to be made are still under study by the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education. It is, in my view, important to retain the transparency of the present CAO procedures with very clear rules governing graduate admissions to avoid any suggestion of unfairness and special treatment for favoured individuals. I shall be glad to be an observer from the touchline of what promises to be a very interesting time.