

# Fair admissions to university in Ireland?

## A tale of two policies

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# Overview of Presentation

- Description of university admissions
- Key facts & trends
- Policy 1: Fee abolition
- Policy 2: University access programs
- Conclusions

- Key readings:

Denny (2011) IFS working paper W11/05

Denny, Doyle, O'Reilly & O'Sullivan (2010) " W10/12



➤ [www.ifs.org.uk](http://www.ifs.org.uk)

# Secondary education in Ireland

Consists of :

- **Junior cycle** : 3 years
  - Examined by Junior Certificate (like GCSE's)
- **Senior cycle**: 2 years
  - Examined by Leaving Certificate (like "Highers")
- Many students now do non-academic **transition year** between the two cycles



# Admissions process I

- Centralized application process (“CAO”)
- Students assessed on 6 best subjects
  - Maximum score  $6 \times 100 = 600$  points
- One application made with 10 ranked choices
- Places allocated to highest first preferences  
e.g. if 50 places in medicine in UCD
  - Given to students with 50 highest “CAO” points
- Students not offered first choice may get second, third choice etc



# Admissions process II

- Only total points matters
  - Not what subject they were achieved in
  - But some minimum requirements for sciences, engineering
- Universities have no say in who is accepted
  - No “clearing”, no interviews
- Points required varies massively across degree program
  - Medicine ~ 570
  - Business, law, engineering ~440-520
  - Arts, humanities, social sciences ~ 300-400
- System widely regarded as “fair”



# Student financial aid

- **Higher Education Grant scheme**

- Means tested
- Covers tuition fees & living expenses  
( at 4 levels )
- Maintenance grant higher if university >24 km away from home
- Some concern that self-employed are able to “game” the system
- % covered (at least partially) risen recently to c. 50%



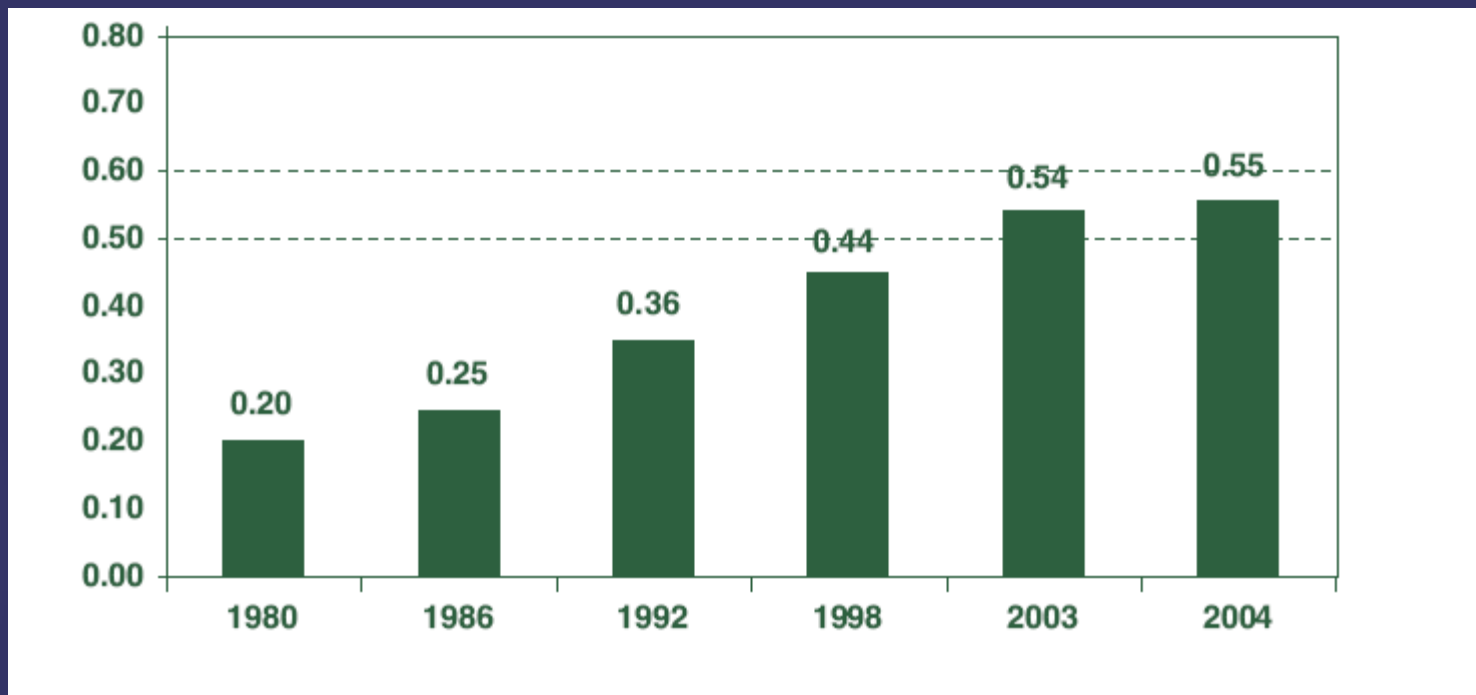
# Key trends

- % completing secondary education (to age 18) risen steadily

1960: 20%, 1995: 75%, 2008: 80%

- % progressing to higher education have also risen :
  - trend for university similar

Figure 1



# Key facts

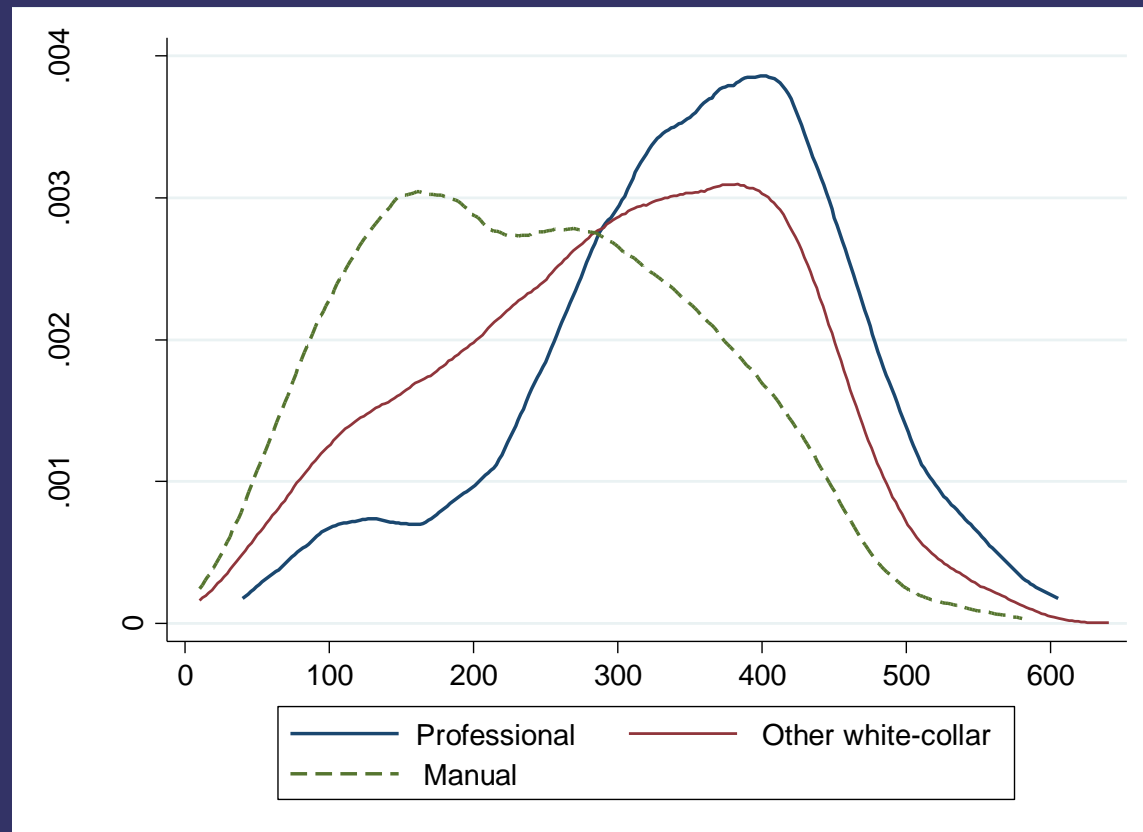
- There is a very large socio-economic gradient in secondary school attainment **Figure 2**  
i.e. exam results at age 18 are much better for children of white collar workers (esp. professionals) than those of blue collar workers
- There is also a large socio-economic gradient w.r.t. progression to university in Ireland **Figure 3**
- By one estimate, the correlation between parents' and childrens' education levels is amongst the highest in Europe
  - Chevalier, Denny, McMahon (2009)
- This pattern shows little sign of going away





# Attainment ("points") by SES

Figure 2



Source: Denny (2011)

# Key trends: HE participation rates

- Figure 3

**Estimated Participation Rates in Higher Education by Fathers' Socio-Economic Group (New Classification), 1998 and 2004**

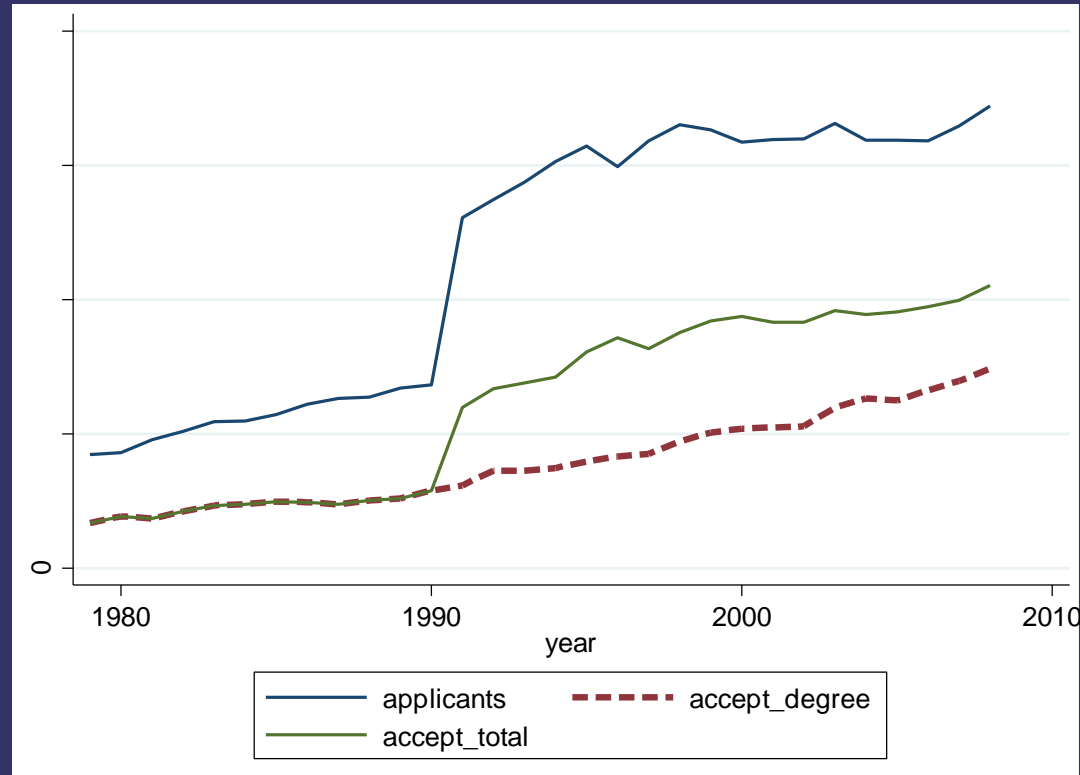
	1998	2004
Employers and Managers	0.65	0.60 – 0.65
Higher Professional	1.11	1.25 – 1.36
Lower Professional	0.63	0.59 – 0.65
Non-Manual	0.29	0.25 – 0.27
Skilled Manual	0.32	0.60 – 0.50
Semi- and Unskilled	0.23	0.33 – 0.40
Own Account Workers	0.39	0.60 – 0.65
Farmers	0.65	0.82 – 0.89



Source: HEA "Who went to college?"(2004) p.9

# Key trends: applications & acceptances to CAO

Figure 4



Prior to 1990, only Universities  
Number of applications are a multiple of places

Source: Denny (2011)

# Summary of facts

- There is excess demand for university places
- There is growing demand for places
  - Supply has also trended up
- Attainment at second level is used to ration places
- There are large & persistent inequities in university access
- Given attainment, admission process is efficient & fair
- But is attainment a fair reflection of students abilities?



# Policy 1

- In 1995 the government abolished undergraduate university tuition fees

“These decisions are a major step forward in the promotion of equality. They remove important financial and psychological barriers to participation at third level.”

- Small problem: low SES students didn't pay fees

Means tested grant

Policy changed relative price against them

- The international evidence tends to suggest that “**credit constraints**” are not that important:

Carneiro & Heckman (2002) for the US

Dearden *et al.* (2004) for the UK



# Policy 1: what happened?

- **Nothing**

- The socio-economic gradient w.r.t. university unchanged
  - Anecdotally, the demand for private secondary schools rose

- Because its educational attainment that drives the gradient & low income students not paying fees anyway

- Very similar to UK evidence

- Chowdry *et al.* 2010 IFS working paper 10/04

- “Its attainment, stupid” (Nick Barr)



## Policy 2

- In response to slow progress in increasing participation of low SES groups, universities developed “Access programs” c. 2000
- Disadvantaged schools are linked with particular universities
- A range of activities designed to increase participation
  - Summer schools, visits to campus, mentoring
- Program provides a second route to university
  - Students can be admitted with lower CAO points than others
- Eligible students can enter under either route
  - Get extra financial support & mentoring
- Scale of the program is small: a few % of total intake



## Policy 2: what happens?

- One access program (University College Dublin) studied in detail
- Schools that have been “treated” compared to similar schools that have not
- Outcomes studied include:
  - Progression to university: does being in a treated school help?
  - Performance at university: is post-entry support effective?

### Key result:

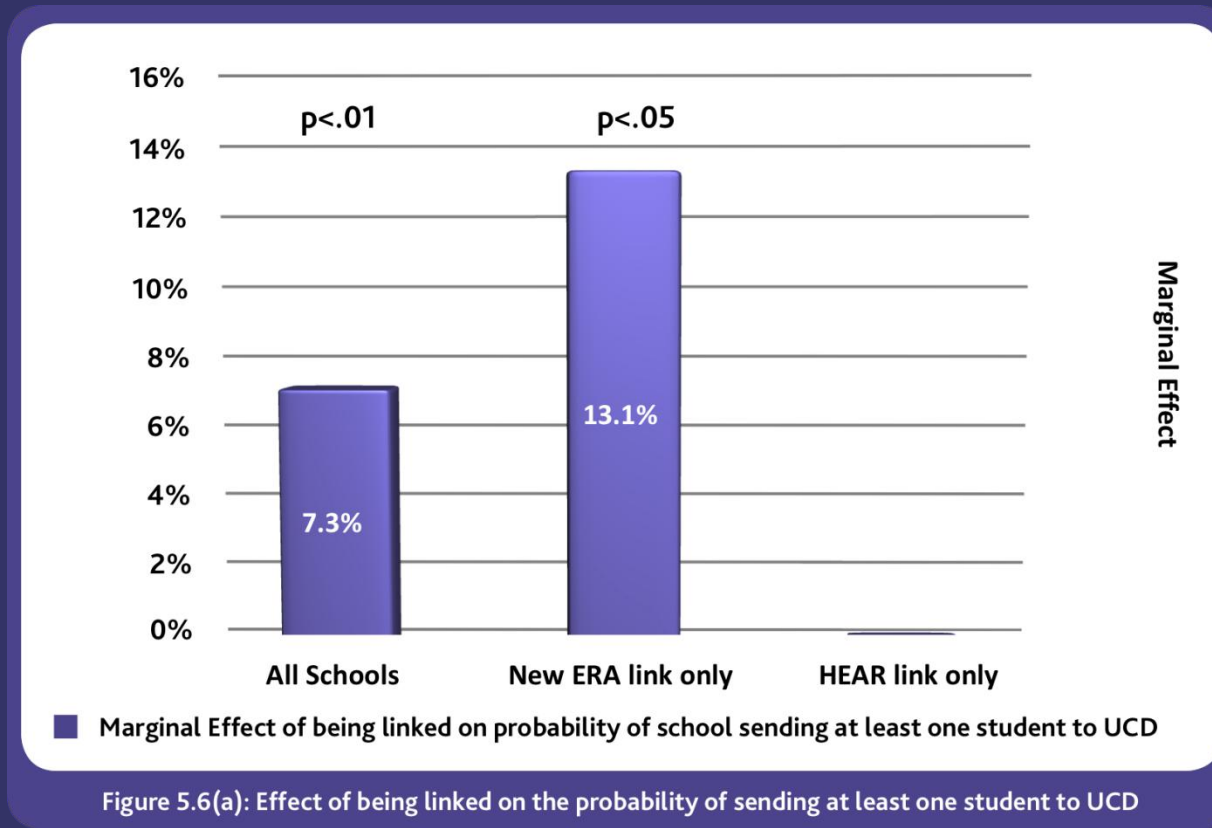
- Yes, being in a treated school makes a big difference
  - Both pre- and post-entry
- Students admitted with lower points than normal do fine





# Policy 2: Progression Rates to UCD

## Figure 5



- Source: Denny et al. (2011)
- **Result:** A school being linked to access program increases the probability that it will send at least one student to UCD by approximately 13%



# Post-script on Policy 2

- Individual access programs now co-ordinated
  - Central **Higher Education Access Route** for the disadvantaged
  - No longer need to be from a dis-advantaged school
  - More comprehensive definition of disadvantage
  - Need to have low income & 2/5 other criteria
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that the most disadvantaged are being “crowded out” by children from relatively better off backgrounds
  - i.e. from better schools, white collar unemployed



# Conclusions I

- The main proximate determinant of attending university is attainment at second level
  - Because attainment is used as a rationing device
- Should this be the only rationing mechanism?
  - Why should a “better” student be preferred if both are “good enough”?
  - On equity grounds it is not obvious why
  - On efficiency grounds, it is an empirical question:
    - To whom is the return the highest?



# Conclusions II

- To address inequitable access to university requires “fixing” the schools
  - But the problem partly originates much earlier in the life-cycle
  - “The Heckman equation” :early investments more productive  
[www.heckmanequation.org](http://www.heckmanequation.org)
- But universities can and should help:
  - Well targeted programs to reach out to schools and communities that are under-served
  - Rôle models may be important
- “Second chances” need to be improved
  - Alternative access routes
  - Adult education

