



**CENTRAL
APPLICATIONS
OFFICE**

STRATEGIC PLAN

2024-2029

CAO
www.cao.ie

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	4
INTRODUCTION	5
Members of the CAO Strategic Plan Development Committee	6
MISSION AND VALUES	8
KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PREVIOUS STRATEGIC PLAN	10
Review of the Strategic Plan 2018 To 2023.....	10
Achievements of the Strategic Plan 2018 - 2023	10
CONTEXT FOR THE STRATEGIC PLAN	15
Analysis of the related environment.....	15
Policy context.....	15
Other central applications systems	17
PREPARING A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN 2024 - 2029	20
Phase 1: Data Collection.....	20
(i) Consultation with Management and Staff.....	21
(ii) Consultation with Admissions Officers	22
(iii) Consultation with Applicants (2023 and Previous).....	23
(iv) Consultation with Guidance Counsellors/Careers Advisers	24
Review of and consultation on the plan.....	27
Recommendations from Stakeholders	27
STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2024 - 2029	29
Phase 2: Strategic Plans and Priorities	29
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY	30
Phase 3: Implementation and Alignment.....	30
APPENDIX A - ACRONYMS	31
APPENDIX B – SURVEY OF THE RELATED ENVIRONMENT	32

Chapter 1

Introduction



FOREWORD

As Chairman of the Central Applications Office, I am pleased to introduce the *Central Applications Office Strategic Plan 2024-2029*.

As this plan will highlight, CAO as an organisation is constantly evolving to meet stakeholder needs and demands, as well as proactively responding to the challenges of its operating environment. A review of achievements under the previous strategic plan was our starting point for the new plan, and it showed effective delivery on priorities by the team, particularly significant across the very challenging pandemic period.

The *Central Applications Office Strategic Plan 2024-2029* allows CAO to refine and emphasise the role and mission of the organisation: “to be the leading provider of centralised application processing services into higher education in Ireland”. It also sets out the organisation’s key values and strategic priorities which will be a primary focus over the lifecycle of the plan.

It is worth clarifying that this plan relates to the CAO as a company. All too often, CAO is incorrectly conflated with, or used as short-hand for the Common Points Scale established by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to facilitate their admission decisions. The basis of admissions is a matter for HEIs. As a company, the role of CAO is to process applications for entry to undergraduate courses in line with that basis, and to manage its affairs cognisant of legal, regulatory, environmental, governance and financial factors and our responsibilities to stakeholders and employees. This plan reflects that remit and is ambitious for the company in the context of a rapidly changing external environment.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who contributed to this plan, either by completing an online survey, taking part in a facilitated session, or providing valuable feedback during the stakeholder consultation phase; the engagement at the data collection phase has really helped to shape the key values and strategic priorities that are outlined in this plan.

I would also like to thank the members of the Strategic Plan Development Committee for overseeing the preparation of this plan, and to the CAO staff who supported the committee throughout the process.

I look forward to supporting the CAO executive and staff throughout the implementation process.

Professor Lisa Looney

Chairman, Central Applications Office

January 2024

INTRODUCTION

The Central Applications Office (Universities and other Higher Education Institutions) is a not-for-profit company which processes applications for undergraduate courses in Irish Higher Education Institutions. The company was incorporated on 23 January 1976 and is commonly known under the short title 'CAO'. Its membership is representative of the higher education sector, and it is governed by a board of directors drawn from the membership.

CAO owes its origins to the increased participation in higher education which resulted from the free secondary education policy of the 1960s, together with the greater availability of student support grants. By 1970, significant difficulties were arising because of multiple applications for admission and the introduction of *numerus clausus* in certain professional courses. To tackle the issue, several Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) developed their own points systems. While points systems were helpful in that they placed applicants in an order of merit for admission, they did not deal with the key problem of multiple applications.

In 1971, senior university officers responsible for admissions agreed unanimously that a central application "clearing house" should be founded.

Aims of the Universities in establishing CAO:

- The central application service means that applicants are not required to submit multiple applications if they wish to apply to more than one HEI.
- Application and qualifications data is collected and processed at one office, rather than multiple offices collecting and processing the same application and qualifications data.
- Using the applicants' expression of preference, HEIs can ensure that they offer applicants the best position that they are entitled to (this is regardless of the selection mechanism employed by a HEI).

Contrary to a quite prevalent public misconception, CAO has no authority in assessing applications for admission. From the start this has been, and remains, the sole preserve of the individual admitting institutions. CAO requires only that applicants for each course be placed in an order of merit for admission based on the criteria used by the HEI offering the course – just as would have been done before CAO came into being.

The phrase 'CAO points' is a common conflation of two separate mechanisms: the CAO application system established by Universities in 1976, and the Common Points Scale (CPS) agreed by HEIs in 1992. The CAO application system and the Common Points Scale are separate to, and independent of one another.

In 1977, for CAO's first application season, there were 5 participating HEIs, 69 Level 8 courses, and 14,845 applicants. The system grew steadily over the years, and in 2023 there were 32 participating HEIs (universities, technological universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education and other HEIs including private institutions) 1,497 courses and 84,674 applicants.

The office currently employs 17 permanent staff supplemented by seasonal staff at peak intervals throughout the application processing cycle. Significant technological enhancements and changes to traditional practice have arisen to meet the demands of the expanding application process. These changes have resulted in a contraction of the organisation's workforce, with the number of seasonal staff on core operations reducing from 35 to four in recent years.

The exception to this trend is the operational element of the DARE HEAR schemes, which CAO coordinate on behalf of HEIs and involve significant short-term seasonal resources. DARE is a third level alternative admissions scheme for school-leavers under the age of 23 whose disabilities have had a negative impact on their second level education. The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is a higher education admissions scheme for Leaving Certificate students (under 23) whose economic or social background are underrepresented in higher education. There has been a 102 percent increase in assessed DARE applications since CAO took over the coordination of DARE HEAR operations in November 2016 (from 3,895 applications in 2016 to 7,910 applications in 2023). The number of HEAR applications assessed has decreased by 20 percent from 6,080 applications in 2016 to 5,066 applications in 2023 – this scheme is currently under review with changes planned for entry 2025. CAO is committed to working closely with the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and HEIs on the ongoing coordination of both schemes, and the implementation of changes for DARE and HEAR as they arise. It is notable that the DARE and HEAR access routes are almost unique internationally.

A number of the recent changes to CAO processes have come about as a result of the strategic priorities identified in the previous strategic plan, a summary of which can be read further into this document. These enhancements and adaptations to the system highlight the necessity for strategic direction to help the organisation proactively meet stakeholder needs, while aligning with the aim of the founders to provide an efficient and cost-effective service.

This *Strategic Plan 2024 – 2029* will build on the work of the previous plans, identifying areas that are working well, areas that are under-serviced, and items from previous plans that need to be reconsidered.

MEMBERS OF THE CAO STRATEGIC PLAN DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

In December 2022, the CAO board of directors appointed a Strategic Plan Development Committee to be tasked with overseeing the development of a new strategic plan.

The members of the committee were as follows:

Dr. B. Bennett (Chair)

Prof. N. Hourigan

Prof. S. Byrne.

The subcommittee was supported by the CAO Executive and staff members.

Chapter 2

Mission and Values



MISSION AND VALUES

Mission

“The mission of the CAO is to be the leading provider of centralised application processing services into higher education in Ireland.”

To enable that mission, the following key values will be proactively fostered across all of CAO’s activities.

Key Values

After careful consideration of CAO’s existing core values and the findings from the data collection phase of the strategic planning process, the following key values were proposed:

- **Fair and Impartial** – *CAO will continue to deliver a fair and transparent service to applicants, remaining independent of higher education institutions but maintaining a good working relationship with these important stakeholders*
- **Efficient** – *CAO will continue to process applications in a manner that demonstrates efficient and effective use of resources, while maintaining a consistently high level of service quality and delivering value for money*
- **Responsive** – *CAO will continue to monitor its operating environment carefully in order to adapt swiftly to the changing needs of stakeholders and the landscape*
- **Accessible** - *CAO will provide a user-friendly and inclusive application processing service that meets its diverse stakeholder needs*
- **Sustainable** – *CAO will work to ensure that the organisation is setting and meeting environmental and social goals.*

Chapter 3

Key Achievements of the previous Strategic Plan



KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PREVIOUS STRATEGIC PLAN

REVIEW OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN 2018 TO 2023

During the development of the 2018-2023 Strategic Plan, it was decided to focus on areas where CAO could deliver for its key stakeholders – applicants and Higher Education Institutions. The following summary highlights the current status of the *Strategic Priorities* and shows the volume of work that has been completed or is still ongoing.

This summary demonstrates CAO's ability to adapt to changes in the operational, educational and global landscapes. The number of completed and ongoing projects highlights CAO's willingness to efficiently evolve to meet stakeholder needs, whilst continuing to maintain existing services to the high standard that has come to be expected.

In line with CAO's Environmental, Social and Governance values, new priorities were also identified, and projects implemented. It is anticipated that any new plan would carry forward the ongoing projects, identify new strategic priorities, and carefully consider the viability of those priorities identified as incomplete at the end of the lifecycle of this plan.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN 2018 - 2023

There were significant changes in the educational landscape throughout the lifecycle of the plan, including the establishment of five Technological Universities; the introduction of EU General Data Protection Regulations in 2018; the uncertainty around Brexit; an increase in EU applicants; a global pandemic; changes to the Leaving Certificate resulting date (due initially to the pandemic); applicant disengagement due to schools being closed at key stages of the application process; a lack of in-person engagement with stakeholders throughout a 2.5 year period; and, the establishment of the *Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Skills* and the creation of a ministerial post for further and higher education.

As with every organisation, operational activities were challenged throughout the pandemic, however, in some instances the interim tools put in place helped to accelerate a number of the strategic priorities and highlight the importance of the priorities identified by the plan.

At the start of the pandemic, document processing presented a significant challenge. The uncertainty around access to the building, as well as the reliance on external providers, created difficulties particularly for the processing of HEAR and DARE documentation, as well as evidence of qualifications being provided by GCE, Mature and EU applicants. All documents received by CAO within the deadlines stated in the handbook were processed and uploaded to applicants' accounts for viewing in late-June/early July (and earlier for the HEAR DARE assessment process).

Our admissions colleagues in the Higher Education Institutions were also supported by CAO through the provision of additional software tools primarily focused on the assessment of mature applications, but pilot schemes (already underway) for EU qualifications and Graduate Entry Medicine were also received extremely positively by our educational partners.

In 2020, much of the entire process was managed by CAO and HEIs with many of our colleagues continuing to work remotely. Almost 50,000 applicants entered Higher Education in 2020 and 2021 through the collaborative efforts of CAO staff and management, and our Higher Education colleagues. The difficulties faced by the applicant-body in 2020 continued into 2021 - post primary schools faced closures, many students reported difficulties with remote learning, and uncertainty about examination arrangements continued.

PRIORITY 1 – LEAD THE DEVELOPMENT OF CENTRALISED APPLICATIONS SYSTEMS

Two main projects have been completed under the heading of ‘Shared services for the sector’. The developments arose out of feedback received by CAO at the CAO AOA Technical Working Group, and include mature and EU qualifications assessment via CAO/HEI interface. The technical working group meets at least twice per year, and additional developments are ongoing. FE Progression has also been addressed by the Technical Working Group with a view to standardising entry and Leaving Certificate equivalence. Some progress on this was made in October 2023 with the AOA Technical Working Group proposing a standard alignment for use by all HEIs, and CAO is in preparation to implement this.

In relation to the promotion of education in Ireland and overseas, CAO is constantly monitoring queries in order to establish what information gaps may exist, and developing resources to fill these gaps. For example, in 2022 CAO introduced two sections on the CAO website with Information Sheets specifically tailored for GCE applicants and Other School leaving candidates. The personalised CAO Handbook makes all courses and instructions easily accessible for all those interested in studying in Ireland. The remainder of activities are ongoing, for example, CAO’s attendance at larger/regional education events, the coordination of the IGC/AOA/CAO Conferences, online webinars for guidance counsellors, parents/guardians and applicants, etc.

In relation to providing application processing services for categories of application that are un-served, informal consultation has taken place, but no firm plans have been agreed and this priority is marked as incomplete.

To allow for the greater visibility of further education and apprenticeship options, CAO has added a section to its website at cao.ie/options which provides direct links to the service providers.

PRIORITY 2 - ENABLE GREATER ACCESS TO AND USE OF DATA TO SUPPORT HEIS

There were a number of enhancements to the CAO interface for HEIs. The majority of these enhancements came via feedback from the CAO AOA Technical Working Group. CAO’s priority is to ensure that HEIs have the tools necessary to increase efficiency and reduce duplication of effort where possible. An ongoing project under this priority is the project to include the display of IB results to HEIs in a convenient format.

PRIORITY 3 - ENABLE THE CAO TO BE THE PORTAL OF CHOICE FOR ALL APPLICATIONS AND ALL HEIS FOR ALL ENTRANT ACCESS POINTS

For both the part-time/flexible applications and the further education progression projects, CAO is awaiting reports from the Access Steering Group before any further steps can be considered.

PRIORITY 4 - BUILD MECHANISMS FOR SYSTEMATIC AND STRATEGIC CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT WITH HEIS

In most of the priorities, there will be reference to the CAO AOA Technical Working Group. This was a new and more formal addition to CAO's existing close relationship with HEIs, in particular, the admissions function in HEIs. Existing knowledge sharing and cooperative activities are still ongoing, with a large number of these activities moving online and increasing in frequency throughout the pandemic in order to overcome the challenges faced by CAO and HEIs during this time of uncertainty and changes in work practices.

A great deal of work was involved in supporting those HEIs amalgamating to form technological universities. Lessons from the establishment of the first technological university were used to assist with the transition process. Training was provided, both in-person and online, and also by way of more informal email and phone support. The channels of communication are always open between CAO and HEIs.

CAO is currently facilitating HEIs with tools across the evaluation of EU Qualifications, with a review of GCE qualifications also imminent. CAO is in close contact with HEIs who are currently examining the scoring mechanism in place for applicants presenting such qualifications.

PRIORITY 5 - ADVANCE ICT AND SYSTEM USABILITY

Enhancements to the way CAO interacts with its primary stakeholders - applicants - was a primary focus throughout this plan, and particularly throughout the pandemic when there were significant changes to timetables and much uncertainty around examinations, assessment and the offers process. In light of the pandemic restrictions, major changes to CAO's Statement of Application process took place which involved eliminating paper mailings, including a facility for applicants to edit their own account, and to confirm their account information is correct. For the 2023 season, the number of applicant errors reduced significantly when compared to 2020, 2021 and 2022 as a result of additional steps taken to increase awareness of the issue of incorrect or missing examination data. In 2022, an additional GCE exam verification process was also developed.

From a customer service perspective, enhancements were made to CAO's online offering including the addition of tailored FAQ pages, a virtual assistant, and a redesign of the layout of the CAO homepage in 2022. A new telephone system was installed in September 2022 which now allows for callers to join a queue and provides analytics to assist with planning.

In relation to interaction between CAO and Admissions Officers, there has been a move from legacy technology to modernised facilities on the CAO interface for HEIs, to allow the flow of instructions to CAO and to receive reports and feedback from CAO.

PRIORITY 6 - DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Staff are regularly encouraged to participate in additional training. In-house training also takes place at intervals, particularly throughout 2022/2023 with a number of new employees starting in reception/administration replacing retiring long-term employees with an excellent knowledge base. A number of admin policy and procedure documents have been prepared (along with training documents) to ensure all staff are aware of their duties and to assist with any future retention and recruitment.

PRIORITY 7 - MAINTENANCE OF SELF-FUNDING MODEL

The reduction in postal mailings to applicants and schools contributes to continued affordability for applicants. The CAO mailing to schools with information literature in September can now be merged with the HEAR DARE mailing, reducing duplication of cost and the related environmental consequences. Staff are always aware of the necessity to seek multiple quotes for significant procurements and are always conscious of the need to find the best value possible. Despite inflationary pressures and increasing baseline costs, the lowest price of the CAO application fee (€30) is the same as the lowest cost application fee available to applicants in 2011.

PRIORITY 8 - MECHANISMS OF HANDLING EMERGING ISSUES

With the number of emerging issues occurring throughout the lifecycle of the plan, it is clear that CAO is well equipped to handle many unprecedented events. The move to remote working was very quickly coordinated to ensure CAO was able to continue to provide a service for stakeholders. A trial run of a remote offer allocation process had taken place in 2019, allowing for greater confidence in a remote offer allocation process in 2020. The main issues experienced by CAO and HEIs was the uncertainty around the resulting date and schedule, as well as subsequent issues arising as a result of the Leaving Certificate results data error in 2020, and the re-expression of GCE grades in summer 2020.

The CAO's disaster recovery plan assisted with all of this, as well as the crisis management plan which was in early draft stages when the pandemic began. This document is still under review, however, learnings from the pandemic will help to create a more comprehensive plan.

As always, CAO has obtained professional assistance when required to ensure compliance with all regulatory requirements.

Chapter 4

Context for the Strategic Plan



CONTEXT FOR THE STRATEGIC PLAN

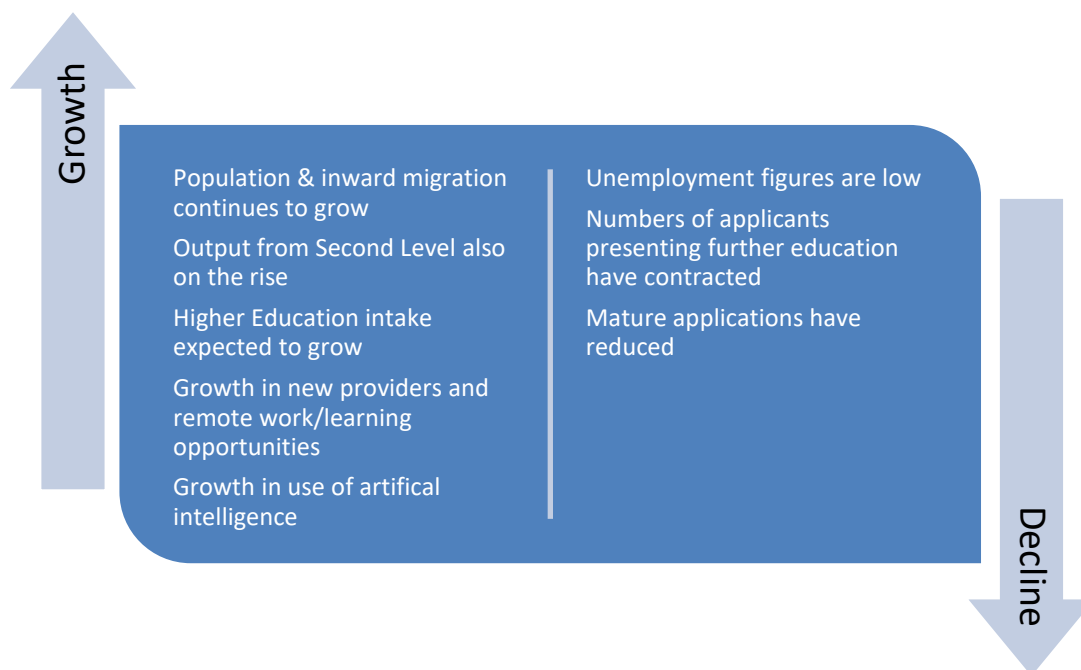
The following sectoral analysis and projections for the Irish higher education landscape, including international comparison, helped to shape the strategic priorities of this plan.

ANALYSIS OF THE RELATED ENVIRONMENT

Analysis of the related environment and how access to education is distributed and managed is a question of importance to students and potential students, their families, educators, employers and policymakers.

Figure 1 provides a summary of a survey of the related environment, followed by brief descriptions of some of the centralised higher education application systems in place in other countries. To view the full survey, go to Appendix B of this document.

Figure 1 - Summary of the related environment



POLICY CONTEXT

The landscape of Higher Education has shifted significantly. Since 2019, five Technological Universities have been established, the number of Institutes of Technology has reduced to two, most Colleges of Education have merged with universities, and the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has been established. There were 32 HEIs participating in the CAO process in 2023, down from a peak

of 45 HEIs in 2014. This reduction in the number of HEIs has taken place in the context of growing numbers of applicants.

Below is an attempt to extract the essence of various stakeholder strategies and/or mission statements into points relevant to CAO strategy development.

Stakeholder
Strategies/Mission
Statements

National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 "The Irish higher education system must continue to develop clear routes of progression and transfer, as well as non-traditional entry routes."

DFHERIS Strategy Collaborate with FEIs and HEIs - regional clusters and diverse pathways and transition points. It is now Government policy to develop a unified tertiary education and research system. This has already resulted in tertiary education programmes, with delivery shared between HEIs and Further Education Institutes.

Higher Education Act Changes to governance structures and oversight of HEIs.

National Access Plan - Raised targets suggest a potential increase in HEAR/DARE applications and opening of other access routes.

HEAR & DARE Reviews - Implementation of the HEAR review has potential to grow HEAR applications. DARE is already growing substantially and there is potential to grow further with a DARE Review imminent.

ETBI Strategy - Partnerships, networks, improve recognition/visibility/appeal of ETB brand.

SOLAS FET Strategy - Recognises the opportunity to grow the FET contribution to a more collaborative and cohesive tertiary education system for Ireland. The strategy aims to do this by simplifying the FET structure, improving access to it, supporting its learners consistently and building its provision around a distinct, diverse and vibrant community-based FET college of the future.

NUI Strategy - Responsive to Universities and stakeholders.

IUA Strategy - Represent the interests of member universities through collaborative networks; widen access and promote sustainability and equality, diversity and inclusion.

THEA Strategy - increase awareness of attributes of the technological sector and member networks.

USI Policies - Equity of access, "common admissions route for all publicly-funded third-level institutions where contextual data, including but not limited to socio-economic background, is considered in addition to prior academic attainment."

Department of Education - In 2022, The Minister for Education set out a programme for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle, guided by the vision of a Senior Cycle that delivers "equity and excellence for all".

QQI - Entry arrangements to programmes leading to qualifications included within the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, are subject to the national policy on access transfer and progression.

OTHER CENTRAL APPLICATIONS SYSTEMS

Most countries do not have a central application or admissions system as well developed as Ireland's. Those that exist tend not to be self-funding, raising funds from HEIs, advertising, state support, or are state run. Conditions in Ireland necessitated an efficient and transparent mechanism (due to the high rate of transfer from second level to third level, competition for places in certain disciplines, and the need for a fair and transparent process).

Table 1 provides a brief survey of a selection of the central application systems in place around the world. Centralised application or admissions systems such as CAO or UCAS are rare in the EU and EEA. Most countries do not have any centralised service. Some, such as Denmark, Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands offer a centralised or partly centralised service - particularly for courses/programmes delivered through the English language. The elegance and efficiency of the preference model employed in Ireland is evident, but it is used rarely elsewhere. Some of the similar models, in the list below, have been modelled on Ireland's CAO.

Australia	Each state has a processing unit – selection by performance in school leaving qualification.
Brazil	Mixture of centralised and direct, with quotas based on ethnic background.
Hong Kong	Centralised with a preference type system. Ranking on examination performance, but with bonus for relevant subjects in some cases.
India	Centralised systems for various categories of Higher Education Institution, with selection by ranking in admissions examinations.
Nigeria	Controlled by Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board, conducts Unified Tertiary Matriculation. Candidates achieve a minimum mark and then take another evaluation at their HEI of choice.
Norway	Centralised Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service with a preference type system and ranking on examination performance with bonus for relevant subjects in some cases
Oman	Centralised process through the Higher Education Admission Centre which was modelled closely on Ireland's CAO.
South Africa	Centralised process through their Central Applications Office, which was modelled closely on Ireland's CAO.
Sri Lanka	Elements of a centralised application and offer process were modelled on Ireland's CAO
Thailand	The Thai University Central Admission System has a preference type system, ranking on examination performance with bonus for relevant subjects in some cases.
Turkey	Centralised admission process with some features similar to CAO in Ireland.
United Kingdom	UCAS application/entry process is not independent of schools, there are requirements such as a reference/recommendation from teacher/advisor/professional who knows the applicant academically; a personal statement, and a selection and offer process that lacks transparency. Post results and confirmation of conditional offers comes the process known as Clearing, which differs to the transparent CAO Available Places service. The funding model employs advertising and HEI charges.

Observations - Very few examples of centralised or partially centralised application systems share the key features of the CAO model (efficient, elegant preference model, fair, self-funding, trusted and independent). Some examples of the user experience will be useful to inform improvements (websites, communications) but none of the examples suggest that any change to the fundamental model would be an improvement for HEIs or applicants. It is surprising that so few countries adopt efficient applicant/course matching processes for entry to Higher Education. The CAO model is known to HEIs outside Ireland and, on occasion, has been emulated. Other efficient algorithms are also known, for example, Lloyd Shapley and Alvin Roth were awarded the 2012 Nobel Prize in economics for their matching algorithm. With ever greater computing power and tools such as Artificial Intelligence, efficient student/course matching would appear to be worthy of exploring.

Chapter 5

Developing a New Strategic Plan



PREPARING A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN 2024 - 2029

In December 2022, the CAO board of directors appointed a Strategic Plan Development Committee to be tasked with overseeing the development of a new strategic plan.

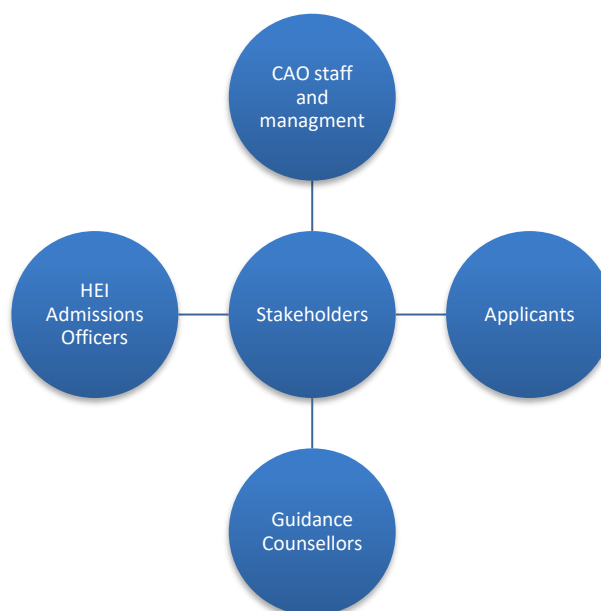
The subcommittee set about this task in three phases:



PHASE 1: DATA COLLECTION

In the initial data collection phase, CAO embarked on a wide scale data collection process, capturing important stakeholder feedback from the following key groups:

Figure 1 – Stakeholders consulted in the initial data collection phase



Data was collected in the form of online surveys for applicants and guidance counsellors, and facilitated workshops with staff, management and HEI admissions officers. The majority of the questions in the online surveys were closed questions allowing respondents to rate CAO under different headings. A couple of optional open-ended questions were also included where respondents could provide more detailed feedback. A summary of the methodology and key findings from the survey responses will follow, as well as a report on the facilitated sessions with staff, management and Higher Education Institutions.

(I) CONSULTATION WITH MANAGEMENT AND STAFF

Facilitated sessions were carried out with CAO staff and management. The sessions were moderated by an independent consultant. At the CAO staff session (attended by all CAO staff and independent of senior management), the facilitator focused on the relevance of the previous and new strategy, and how to make the new strategy more relevant. A SWOT analysis was subsequently prepared. The group was also asked to consider what current activities are not working and should be stopped, what activities are working well and should be built on, and the activities that CAO is currently not doing but should start doing.

Relevance of old and new strategy

Some staff noted that the strategy was relevant as it summarised their jobs; for others it was deemed to be irrelevant as they do not refer to the strategy in their day-to-day work. A theme emerged during the session that there was a lack of awareness of the projects that formed part of the plan (and the implementation process), and it was suggested that the new plan should focus on providing more specific objectives. It was also noted that the plan was developed before the significant restructuring that took place in 2022. Staff did note that a number of the items in the strategy were delivered, for example, the CAO interface for HEIs system enhancements for assessment and access to data; the interactive handbook, etc.

When asked about the relevance of a new strategy, the group discussed the proposed document upload facility, and the opportunity to increase staff training and to develop tools and mechanisms for internal communications, particularly around new and existing projects and their progress. Staff also requested that the new organisational structure be shared internally, with a clear definition of roles outlined.

Items for review

Staff provided feedback on activities that they feel the organisation should review, which include:

- Duplication of work for HEIs processing Other School Leaving applications
- DARE/HEAR process – operations such as scanning, screening require a re-evaluation
- Internal communications mechanisms
- Paper consumption/processing
- Electricity/heat consumption
- Sufficiently resourcing additional activities
- Supplying more detailed information for overseas applicants

Activities that are working well

Staff spoke positively about the main activities of the business, for example the central application system/central scoring and the allocation process. Staff noted that there is good engagement with HEIs and excellent relationships between the CAO team. Staff noted the positive impacts of the recent enhancements to the system and processes (including advancements towards paperless processes) and improvements in

customer service tools and resources for applicants (e.g. digital handbook, webinars, information sheets, etc.); staff agreed that the organisation should build on these activities. The following **SWOT Analysis** was developed based on the feedback from this session:

Table 2 – SWOT Analysis of consultation with management and staff

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff • Quality of service • Robust system • Adaptability • Location: Galway • Strong stakeholders relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal communications mechanisms • Training and succession planning • Up-to-date procedures • Legacy system • Insufficient resources for specific areas • Office building (maintenance and age/dated)
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion/diversification into other areas • Enhance brand reputation • Promotion of CAO process outside Ireland • More data sharing • More stakeholder engagement • Simplification of process for end user • Improvements in services for HEIs • Further engagement with schools • Employment of new technologies, e.g. AI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate change • Cost of living/emigration (reduction in applications) • Competitors • Misinformation and misrepresentation in the public domain • Third-party error • Incorrect application information • Malicious attacks/data privacy • Physical threats • HEI retirements and transfer of skills • Increase in incorrect information (e.g. AI, social media)

(II) CONSULTATION WITH ADMISSIONS OFFICERS

During the facilitated session with Admissions Officers (CAO Correspondents), the group was also asked to consider the relevance (to their group) of the old and new strategy. Members of the group questioned why CAO was listed as the portal of choice for all applicants on the previous plan, and suggested that this priority needs clarifying. Other members of the group suggested that most of the priorities are still relevant, and wanted to identify ownership of these priorities and where the budget, people and resources for each item will come from, with clearer timelines and updates to be provided around the implementation of these priorities. Members of the group suggested that the strategy should address the public perception of CAO. They also suggested that the composition of the CAO board should be considered as part of the new strategic planning process.

Challenges and frustrations

The group was asked to express any challenges or frustrations associated with the CAO system/processes. The group indicated a desire for enhanced reporting capabilities and data analytics. Document processing was also highlighted as an area in need of attention. Other issues included the existence of dual systems, a desire for additional training, and a lack of public awareness of CAO remit. The group also expressed frustration with the currently compressed operational timelines, particularly at the offers stage.

Activities that are working well

The Admissions group identified that CAO recognises the value of its stakeholders and respects same, providing a very responsive service that is always willing to listen and implement positive change. The group agreed that there is more functionality in the CAO interface for HEIs, as well as positive information/knowledge sharing experiences and targeted/systemised training offered.

The group also noted that the organisation offers centralised services that are relevant to all institutions and add value. The group suggested building on these existing offerings by way of detailed collective data analysis and data analytics, additional training, and continued engagement.

Items to reconsider

Admissions Officers provided feedback on activities that CAO should reconsider, for example:

- Asking applicants to physically post documents to the CAO
- Using legacy technology
- HEI communications with CAO
- CAO needs to focus on brand awareness and marketing
- Expanding central evaluation
- DARE HEAR operations

Items to consider

The group provided the following specific recommendations of activities that CAO is currently not doing, but should consider doing:

- Document upload facility
- Data analysis dashboards
- Training programme for internal stakeholders
- More tools to explain CAO system internally (e.g. CRM system)
- Centralised scoring for IB and Other EU qualifications
- Communications Strategy – Plan, Milestones and Awareness Campaign
- CAO Organisation Structure /Roles and Responsibilities to be shared with HEIs
- Suggest a review of HEAR and DARE with relevant stakeholders

(III) CONSULTATION WITH APPLICANTS (2023 AND PREVIOUS)

In April 2023, the CAO Stakeholder Survey page went live on the CAO website at www.cao.ie/survey. A prominent link to the dedicated survey page was placed on the rotating banner at www.cao.ie. A link was also placed in the 'My Application' section of the website encouraging applicants to 'Have your say'.

There were three survey links on this webpage for the different target stakeholder groups:

1. Current Applicants
2. Pre-2023 Applicants
3. Guidance Counsellors/Careers Advisers and professional users

For data privacy reasons, CAO did not solicit participants for the applicant survey using direct mail. The response to the ‘Current Applicant Survey’ was very positive, with 768 participants completing the survey between 6 April and 22 May 2023. For pre-2023 applicants, the response rate was lower but still significant, with 193 responses received during the same timeframe. In order to target this group, CAO shared the survey link with the HEI Correspondents group and asked that the individual HEIs consider ways to target their registered students, particularly first year students.

Key Findings from the online applicant survey of 2023 Applicants (768)/ Pre-2023 (193) Applicants are represented in the following **SWOT Analysis**.

Table 3 – SWOT Analysis of consultation with applicants (current and previous)

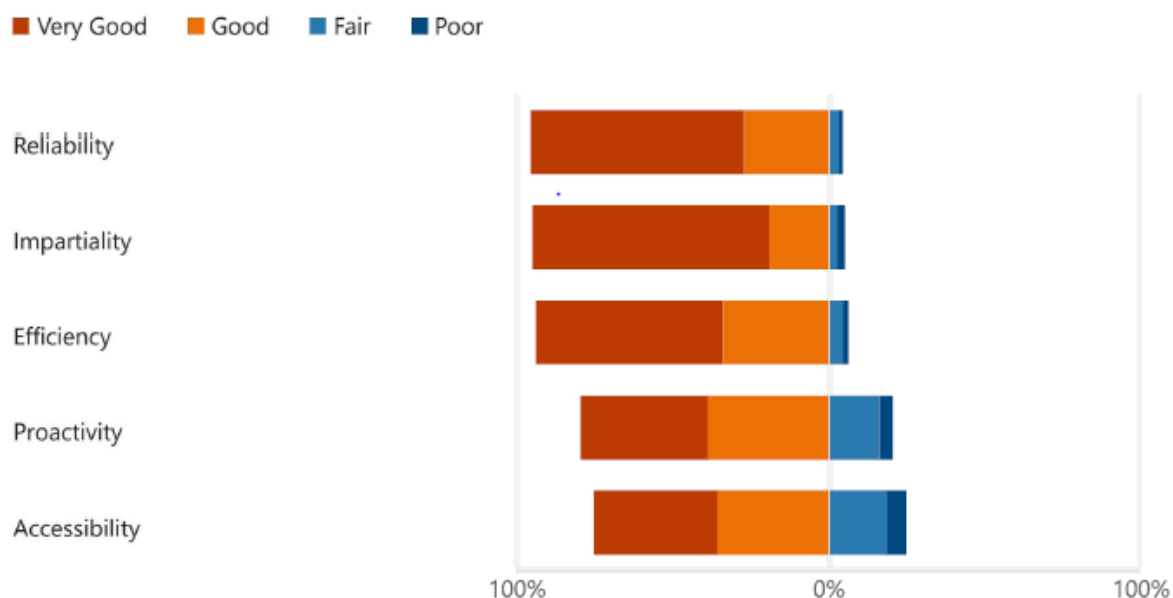
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Key principles of the system understood by target audience e.g. order of preference, minimum entry requirements, restrictions. - CAO is using the correct channels of communication to reach applicant-body - The most popular resources on the website are the handbook, the demo application form, the course search facility and the ‘Have a Question?’ page. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceived difficulty around the application process from end-user - Lack of awareness of the importance of the Statement of Application process - Lack of clarity around relevant offer round for different cohorts of applicants - Lack of clarity around important dates in the application schedule - Difficulty around submitting supporting documents - Instructions for applicants who are required to complete an additional assessment - Over 40 percent of applicants indicated that they had not read the CAO Handbook
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review the application form and related instructions to make the process easier to complete - Improve communication around important dates, relevant offer rounds, and the Statement of Application process in the CAO Handbook and on the CAO website. Also consider direct communications with applicants. - Enhance website functionality and quality of existing resources - Introduce a document upload facility - Review promotion of digital CAO Handbook - Review of timelines for different processes, e.g. Change of Mind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 34 percent of respondents did not receive any help with their application

(IV) CONSULTATION WITH GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS/CAREERS ADVISERS

In addition to publishing the survey on the CAO website, the survey link for Guidance Counsellors/Careers Advisers and professional uses was shared via the CAO’s Mailing List for this group. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) and the Northern Ireland Schools & Colleges Careers Association (NISCA) also shared this link with their membership on CAO’s behalf. A total of 162 respondents participated in this survey.

Key Findings from CAO Survey for Guidance Counsellors and Other Professional Users indicated that CAO is performing well under the core values of reliability, impartiality, and efficiency (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 - CAO Survey of Guidance Counsellors/Professional Users – results of question 6 “How would you rate the CAO under some of the following ‘core values’ of the organisation?”



The majority of the questions in the survey were closed questions, however, two open-ended questions were included at the end to allow this important stakeholder group the opportunity to provide further feedback. Respondents were asked to suggest the words that best describe their opinion of the CAO, and to propose ways in which CAO could improve its service.

Twenty-six percent of respondents used the word ‘efficient’ to describe CAO. A number of other core values were also reiterated in the feedback to this question. Overall, the feedback was largely positive, with the exception of the issue of printed CAO Handbooks no longer being supplied for all users.

Forty-one percent of respondents to the question ‘Have you any suggestions for ways that CAO could improve its service?’ suggested that printed handbooks should be reinstated; 17 per cent suggested updates to the CAO website, and ten percent suggested amendments to the HEAR and DARE schemes/processes.

CAO is performing well (rating of 4 out of 5) in the following areas:

- Responding to queries in a timely manner
- Providing satisfactory responses
- Providing the necessary information on the website
- Communicating frequently enough with Guidance Counsellors

Many of the resources provided by CAO were rated as very good or good by 85 per cent of respondents. Figure 3 shows how a number of the resources were rated by respondents, and Table 4 provides a SWOT Analysis based on findings from the Guidance Counsellor survey.

Figure 3 - CAO Survey of Guidance Counsellors/Professional Users – results of question 7 “Please rate the following CAO resources based on your user experience”

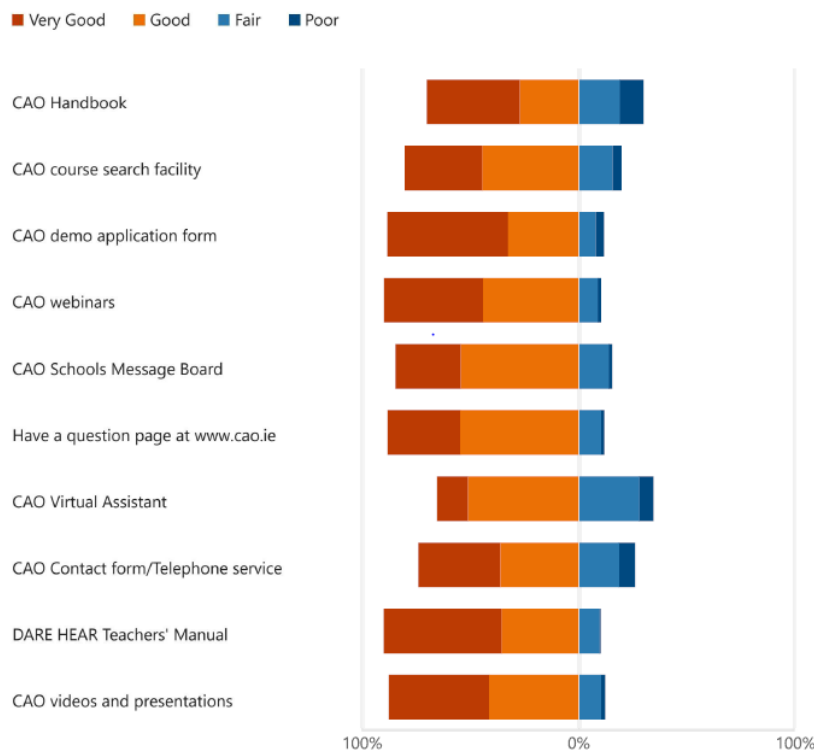


Table 4 - SWOT Analysis based on findings from the Guidance Counsellor Survey

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognised for core values of reliability, impartiality and efficiency - Customer service – timely query handling, satisfactory responses - Frequency of communications with stakeholder group - Information/resources currently available on website – demo form, CAO webinars, Schools Message Board, Have a question page, Videos/presentations, DARE HEAR Teachers’ Manual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not performing as well under the core values of proactivity and accessibility - Website design/navigability (including course search facility) - CAO Handbook - Perception of virtual assistant
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Build on positive customer service experience - Enhance website design/content with focus on UX/UI - Review HEAR DARE application process - Update CAO video guides - Improve awareness of virtual assistant and improve VA responses based on analytics - Explore alternatives to printed handbooks/enhancements to digital handbook 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stakeholder relationship over the reduction in printed handbooks.

REVIEW OF AND CONSULTATION ON THE PLAN

A first draft of the *CAO Strategic Plan 2024-2029* was circulated in November/December to the following stakeholder groups:

Table 5 Stakeholders included in the Consultation Phase of the Strategic Planning Process

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• CAO Board of Directors• CAO Correspondents• CAO Staff• Department of Education• DFHERIS• HEA• HECA• IGC• IUA• NAPD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• NISCA• NPC• NUI• Path 4 (HEA)• QQI• SEC• SUSI• THEA• USI
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Stakeholders were encouraged to provide any comments or suggestions on the draft. The following section provides a summary of some of the recommendations received during this consultation phase.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM STAKEHOLDERS

From the feedback received from a number of the stakeholders mentioned in Table 5, the following common themes emerged for inclusion/consideration:

- CAO should highlight its flexibility to offer additional higher education application options, for example, micro-credentials, part-time courses, and postgraduate courses.
- When highlighting the challenges arising from the operation of the HEAR and DARE schemes (from a CAO perspective as well as the challenges for applicants and Guidance Counsellors) it is also important to demonstrate CAO's and other stakeholders' ongoing commitment to both schemes.
- The opportunity to review document processing and achieve a number of strategic priorities with same, e.g. sustainability, user experience, responding to change, was welcomed by the stakeholders who responded.
- CAO was asked to further consider assisting HEIs with the evaluation process for Other School Leaving qualifications.
- CAO should use its new mission statement in order to make a clear expression of the role of CAO.

Many of these comments and recommendations have been reflected throughout the final plan, with an enhanced introduction section focusing on the origins and functions of CAO. This section provided a timeline of developments including the establishment of the HEI Common Points Scale and an acknowledgement of some of the common misconceptions about the role of CAO.

CAO would like to thank those individuals and organisations who took the time to provide such valuable feedback.

Chapter 6

Strategic Priorities 2024 - 2029



STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2024 - 2029

PHASE 2: STRATEGIC PLANS AND PRIORITIES

FAIRNESS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

CAO will preserve the existing model of a self-funding not-for-profit that remains low cost and independent. In order to maintain this model, CAO will continue to foster strong corporate governance and internal controls.

ENHANCING THE USER EXPERIENCE

CAO will use the invaluable stakeholder feedback received to drive updates and enhancements to existing resources, and to develop new resources where relevant. CAO will also review its current practices and establish areas where adjustments to these practices will have a positive impact on users, particularly applicants and higher education institutions.

PEOPLE

CAO will utilise existing resources and channels to improve on formal and informal communications amongst CAO staff, with a strong focus on organisational structure/roles and responsibilities, knowledge sharing, training, expansion where necessary and, most importantly, staff retention.

SUSTAINABILITY, ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

In addition to setting environmental goals across the company, CAO will build on existing steps taken towards becoming a paperless organisation. CAO will also consider its social contributions, and ensure all investments are made responsibly using ESG framework.

COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

CAO will review its marketing and communications materials, updating existing resources or introducing new resources where necessary. Greater promotion of CAO's identity, with clearer definitions of the function of CAO, should take place. CAO should also review its communications practices with HEIs.

DATA

CAO processes a significant amount of valuable data. The organisation will carefully consider the potential of additional data analysis, analytics and artificial intelligence tools, with GDPR and IT security continuing to be at the forefront of every new development. CAO will also review additional anonymised data sets for statistical purposes, for example, HEIs and researchers, and to aid with HEI training.

RESPONDING TO CHANGE

CAO will continue to monitor its operating environment for changes to the educational, political and regulatory landscape through active engagement with a number of stakeholders. CAO will also ensure that plans to assist in times of crisis are sufficient to ensure continuity of service.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY

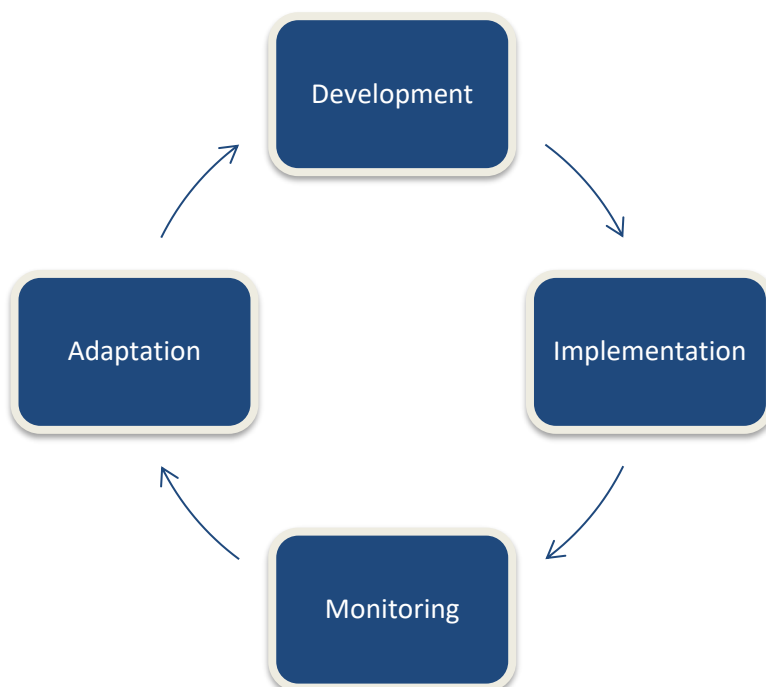
The implementation of the *CAO Strategic Plan 2024 – 2029* will be the responsibility of the CAO executive, with bi-annual Implementation Plan reports provided to the CAO Board of Directors. Plan progress will also be shared with the CAO’s Correspondents Group and the CAO Staff.

PHASE 3: IMPLEMENTATION AND ALIGNMENT

A detailed implementation plan will be prepared by the CAO executive on commencement of the new strategic planning phase. This plan will be circulated to all staff to ensure the CAO team is kept up-to-date on new and existing developments and their individual role in the Strategic Plan implementation process.

Throughout the lifecycle of this plan, it is expected that there may be internal or external factors that will impact the projects outlined in the plan, and when such situations arise, CAO will have the flexibility to adapt the Implementation Plan accordingly.

Figure 4 – Implementation of the *CAO Strategic Plan 2024-2029*



APPENDIX A - ACRONYMS

Below is a list of acronyms used throughout this document.

AOA	Admissions Officers Association
CAO	Central Applications Office
CPS	Common Points Scale
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DES	Department of Education
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HECA	Higher Education Colleges Association
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
THEA	Technological Higher Education Ireland
IUA	Irish Universities Association
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NISCA	Northern Ireland Schools and Careers Association
NPC	National Parents Council
NUI	National University of Ireland
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
USI	Union of Students in Ireland

APPENDIX B – SURVEY OF THE RELATED ENVIRONMENT

Demographics: CSO - Census of population 2022 preliminary results indicate a population that continues to grow and net inward migration since the last Census in 2016

School leaving - Output from Second Level continues to grow and is expected to remain above 2019 levels until 2033. Ireland has a high rate of transfer to Higher Education in comparison to most countries and this aspiration is expected to persist.

Second level students perform well in international comparisons, for example, in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, out of 81 countries Ireland's 15 year old pupils ranked:

Subject	Ranking	Countries above average
Maths	11	29
Science	12	27
Reading	2	25

CSO - The latest available EU figures showed that, in 2021, 85% of all 20-24 year olds in the EU-27 member states had attained at least a higher secondary level of education. The corresponding figure for Ireland was 96%, ranking the country joint second with Greece among EU member states.

Higher Education - Intake to higher education is expected to continue to grow.

OECD - Educational attainment has been increasing throughout the OECD, in particular at tertiary level. Between 2000 and 2021, the share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary attainment increased on average by 21 percentage points. In Ireland, the share increased at an even faster pace, by 33 percentage points (from 30% in 2000 to 63% in 2021). Ireland is one of the 14 OECD countries where at least half of 25-34 year-olds have a tertiary education.

CSO - The latest available EU figures (2021) show that 42% of 30-34 year olds in the EU-27 had a third level qualification. Ireland had the joint second highest third level educational attainment level at 62% along with Cyprus and marginally behind Luxembourg at 63%.

CSO - Looking at the gender gap in third level attainment for 30-34 year olds in the EU-27, the latest figures show that for every country females have higher third level attainment levels. For the EU-27 average, the difference is 11 percentage points with 47% of females and 36% of males having a third level qualification. Ireland has the fourth lowest difference between the sexes at only 6 percentage points, with 65% of females having third level attainment and 59% of males. Slovenia has the largest gap in the sexes at 25 percentage points, with females having a 63% third level attainment rate compared to males at 38%.

The Department of Education and Skills published *Projections of demand for full-time third level education, 2018 to 2040*, giving four scenarios. Under scenario S1 (baseline) total enrolments will rise each year up to 2030 and peak at 222,514, an increase of over 38,870 on 2017 levels, driven primarily by demographic trends. After 2030 numbers will fall steadily to reach 203,000 by 2040.

Scenario S2, which holds the transfer rate steady but increases international enrolments by an additional 25 per cent over S1, will add an additional 3,658 students by 2030, and over 7,300 by 2040.

Under S3 where both the transfer rate and international students rise strongly, enrolments in 2030 are projected to be 58,556 higher than 2017.

Further Education - Despite policy efforts, intake to and output from further education has contracted in recent years. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (such as increasing numbers of places in higher education, shortening of courses due to late release of Leaving Certificate results) is likely to have contributed to this trend.

Mature applications - for entry to higher education have also contracted - this is the application category that is traditionally most impacted by the economic environment.

Economic outlook:

Inflation/Employment - Employment levels in Ireland are strong. However, inflation remains a concern and central banks are continuing on a path of monetary tightening to counter inflation. Analysts expect the rate of tightening to ease in the second half of 2023. High interest rates frequently impact on investment with a consequent negative influence on employment. Higher unemployment figures are usually associated with increased interest in Higher Education from those exiting further education and from mature applicants.

Developments in Technology and Regulation - The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and expectations raised by regulation for remote working, along with changes in how Higher Education is delivered, pose known and unknown risks and opportunities to CAO and Higher Education.

Higher Education provision is changing with the potential for new providers coming into the market and offerings such as blended learning and fully online/remote learning. Technological developments have the potential to disrupt the environment CAO and the participating HEIs operate in. The use of autonomous machines, and the increasing employment of so called Artificial Intelligence or Machine Learning have potential implications for the world of work and education.

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