

HEA

Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas



An Overview of Applications
and Acceptances to **Higher Education**

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1. Background

1.1 Recent media coverage of the 2006 CAO process has claimed that the reduced number of applications, in conjunction with the greater number of courses and places on offer, has resulted in a “downward slide” in the points required to secure a place at third-level. The “end of the points race” has been trumpeted. Significant attention has been directed at the vacant places advertised at a number of higher education institutions even before the CAO first round of offers issued.

The overall picture presented is of a declining cohort of school leavers, declining higher education student numbers and reduced competition for courses (except for an elite sub-set of medical and related courses).

1.2 Much of the discussion on the applications for entry to higher education has been misleading. It has failed to contextualise this year’s reduction in CAO applications in terms of overall trends in higher education participation and in terms of short-term demographic changes.

1.3 The purpose of this paper is to place this year’s applications in perspective and to present an accurate picture of the demographic profile of the school leaving population and trends in applications and acceptances to higher education.

- Section 2 looks at overall participation rates and enrolment levels in higher education. The analysis demonstrates consistent growth in the demand for higher education and continually upward participation levels. This trend is evident even in years where there has been a decline in the numbers of school leavers.
- Section 3 discusses trends in CAO applications and acceptances, paying attention to sectoral differences and increases in mature student acceptances.
- Section 4 examines the extent of CAO offers not accepted and shows that our student numbers are clearly not at “capacity” level.
- Section 5 examines CAO acceptances by discipline, highlighting those disciplines that are experiencing a downturn in demand.
- Section 6 sets out some concluding remarks.

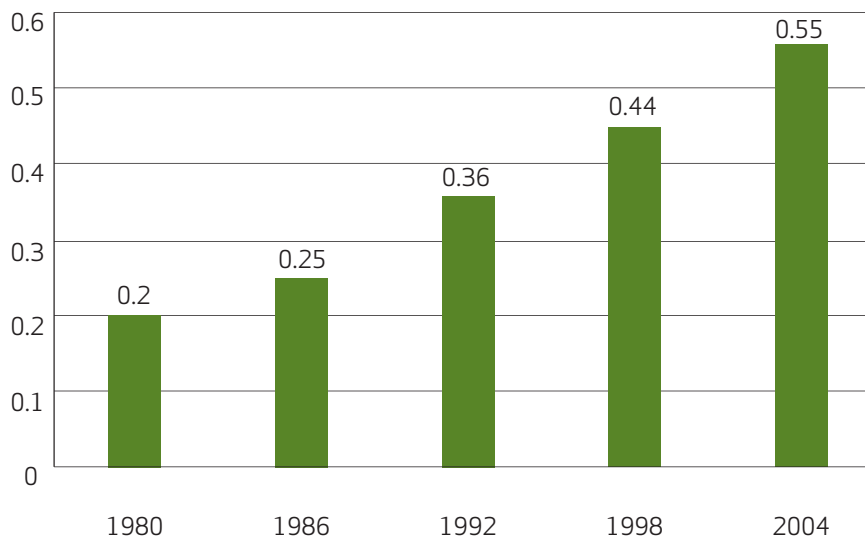
2 PARTICIPATION AND ENROLMENTS

Participation

2.1 The participation rate in higher education has consistently increased over the past number of decades. In 1980 the participation rate in higher education was 20%; by 2004 it was 55% (Figure 1).

The participation rate in higher education was 44% in 1998. Over the period 1998 to 2006 the school leaving population fell. Although this is the traditional cohort from whom new entrants to higher education are drawn, the participation rate in higher education grew by a significant 11% over the same period. This demonstrates that students are increasingly recognising the value of a higher education and are choosing to participate.

FIGURE 1. Third Level Participation Rate 1980 - 2004



Source: *Who Went to College in 2004?*, Higher Education Authority 2006.

Enrolments

2.2 Student number enrolments in higher education also grew significantly over the 1998 to 2005 period (Table 1). Again this increase has occurred despite a decrease in the cohort of school-leavers. The increase in student enrolments reflects the fact that more students are opting to go to higher education but also that more students are opting to spend longer periods of time in higher education and achieve higher level qualifications, e.g. honours degrees, masters, PhDs.

Table 1. Full and Part-time Stock Enrolments for All Higher Education Institutions 1998/99 – 2004/05

	Full-Time	Part-Time
1998/99	108,509	27,764
1999/00	115,696	31,469
2000/01	119,991	32,265
2001/02	124,589	34,965
2002/03	129,283	34,680
2003/04	133,887	34,000
2004/05	135,360	35,047
% Increase 1998/99 - 2004/05	25%	26%

Undergraduate enrolments have increased by 19%, while postgraduate enrolments have increased by 46% in the period 1998/99 – 2004/05.

Table 2. Full-Time Stock Enrolments at HEA Funded Institutions 1998/99 – 2004/05

Full-Time Stock Enrolments to HEA Funded Institutions	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
1998/99	54,863	10,483	65,346
1999/00	57,665	10,887	68,552
2000/01	60,013	11,226	71,239
2001/02	61,804	12,536	74,340
2002/03	63,143	14,07	77,221
2003/04	64,531	15,345	79,876
2004/05	65,300	15,339	80,639
% Increase 1998/99 - 2004/05	19%	46%	23%

Part-time undergraduate enrolments have shown a greater increase (78%) than full-time enrolments in the period.

Table 3. Part-time Stock Enrolments at HEA Funded Institutions 1998/99 – 2004/05

Full-Time Stock Enrolments to HEA Funded Institutions	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
1998/99	5,454	5,085	10,539
1999/00	5,486	6,007	11,493
2000/01	5,831	5,992	11,823
2001/02	7,148	6,874	14,022
2002/03	7,504	7,338	14,842
2003/04	7,204	6,689	13,893
2004/05	9,727	6,977	16,704
% Increase 1998/99 - 2004/05	78%	37%	58%

Table 4 shows that the new entrants to HEA funded institutions has increased by 13.5% from 16,172 in 1998/99 to 18,356 in 2005/06.

Table 4. New Entrants to HEA Funded Institutions 1998/99 – 2005/06

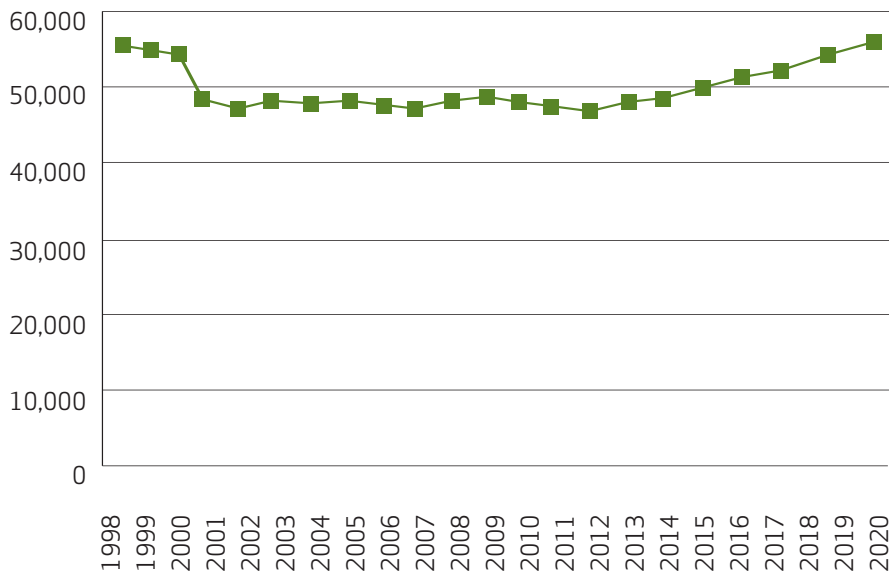
Year	
1998/99	16,172
1999/00	16,958
2000/01	16,757
2001/02	17,251
2002/03	17,359
2003/04	18,017
2004/05	17,921
2005/06	18,113

School Leaving Demographics

- 2.3** School-Leavers represent the biggest pool of new entrants to higher education. Therefore a change in the size of this population group has the potential to impact on higher education student enrolments. Demographically, Ireland has witnessed a decline in the size of the cohort of school-leavers from a peak in 1998. However, as we have shown, this decline has not impacted negatively on participation rates and enrolment levels in higher education.

2.4 The decline in school leavers has reached its low point and is now beginning to stabilise and recover. It will begin a consistent upward trend from 2012. Demographically, we will reach the levels of the 1998 peak in 2020 (Figure 2). It should also be noted that Figure 2 depicts conservative estimates of school leaver trends. Given the levels of inward migration over the past number of years, higher numbers of school leavers can be expected.

FIGURE 2. School Leaver Trends 1998 - 2020



Source: Department of Education and Science Statistics.

Mature Students

2.5 Another factor impacting on sustained increases in student numbers is increased participation by mature students. Within the HEA designated institutions sector, the proportion of new entrants that were aged 23+ (mature) has increased to 9% of all new entrants in 2004/05. The proportion within the Institute of Technology sector is likely to be higher. Given the importance of lifelong learning and employee upskilling, the proportion of mature students participating in higher education is set to grow further – a highly desirable trend from a policy perspective.

**Table 5. Mature New Entrants to HEA Funded Institutions
1998/99 – 2005/06**

Year	% of New Entrants 23+
1998/99	6.90%
1999/00	7.50%
2000/01	6.60%
2001/02	8.30%
2002/03	9.20%
2003/04	10.00%
2004/05	9.00%

Source: HEA Statistics.

Key Points:

1. Short-term demographic trends have resulted in a temporary fall in the number of school leavers. This trend has not been reflected in higher education where both the participation rate and the actual numbers of students have increased.
2. Demand for higher education places has been supported by continuing increases in mature student participation.

3 CAO APPLICATIONS/ACCEPTANCES 1990 - 2006

3.1 Table 6 shows the number of CAO applicants, net acceptances (Level 7/6 – higher certificate and ordinary degree and Level 8 - honours degree).

Table 6. CAO Application/Acceptance Data 1990 – 2006

Year	Applicants	Level 8 Nett Acceptances	Level 7/6 Nett Acceptances	Total Nett Acceptances	HEIs
1990	27,259	11,540		11,540	10
1991	52,212	12,341	11,594	23,935	23
1992	57,877	14,488	12,274	26,762	31
1993	57,465	14,506	13,061	27,567	31
1994	60,548	14,900	13,559	28,459	31
1995	62,913	15,923	16,268	32,191	34
1996	59,778	16,667	17,644	34,311	34
1997	63,677	17,021	15,655	32,676	35
1998	66,012	18,872	16,189	35,061	38
1999	65,253	20,179	16,663	36,842	41
2000	63,451	20,786	16,739	37,525	44
2001	63,810	20,934	15,961	36,625	43
2002	63,886	21,101	15,526	36,627	44
2003	66,222	23,935*	14,398	38,333	43
2004	63,696	25,275	12,521	37,796	43
2005	63,716	24,982	13,193	38,175	43
2006	59,485	26,488	12,467	38,955	42

Source: CAO Directors Reports.

Applications

3.2 The table shows that applications reached their peak in 2003. The inclusion of Nursing Degrees in 2003 may have been a contributory factor to this increase. Significantly, the number of applications declined by 6.6% from 2005 – 2006.

Acceptances

3.3 Net acceptances reached their peak in 2003 (again as a direct result of the inclusion of Nursing degrees on the CAO list in that year). Acceptance statistics also show that even in years where applications fell, acceptances continued to increase. In 2006 the lowest number of applications were recorded since 1993, yet acceptances have increased, with overall acceptance levels reaching their highest levels ever.

3.4 Within the overall acceptance data, trends are emerging between the University and Institute of Technology sectors. Table 7 shows that the proportion of acceptances to University courses has increased from 41.9% in 2000 to 47% in 2006. Level 7/6 acceptances have declined by 25% since they reached their peak in 2000. There was, however, a slight recovery in acceptances in 2005, perhaps due to the renaming of Diplomas as Ordinary Degrees. Declines in Level 7/6 acceptances have been cancelled out by the increase in level 8 acceptances. It appears that students are increasingly opting to pursue higher level qualifications in higher education.

Table 7 Sectoral Acceptances

Net Acceptances by Sector								
Type of Institution	2000		2002		2004		2006	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Colleges of Education	1,203	3	1,177	3	1,311	4	1,478	4
Dublin IoT	3,345	9	3,297	9	3,098	8	3,000	8
Other IoTs	15,722	42	14,812	40	14,345	38	14,294	36
Universities	15,714	42	15,629	43	17,398	46	18,226	47
Others	1,541	4	1,712	5	1,644	4	1,957	5
Total	37,525	100	36,625	100	37,796	100	38,955	100

Source: CAO Directors Reports.

3.5 Table 8 shows that mature acceptors, as a proportion of all acceptors, have more than doubled in five years. However, the number of mature students, as a proportion of the total student population, is still low.

Table 8. Mature Acceptors

Number of Net Acceptances 23+ on 1st January that year				
Year	Male	Female	Total	% of Nett Acceptances
2000	723	778	1,501	4%
2001	837	907	1,744	4.70%
2002	1,059	1,141	2,200	6.00%
2003	1,296	1,520	2,816	7.30%
2004	1,393	1,596	2,989	8%
2005	1,459	1,858	3,317	8.70%

Source: CAO Directors Reports.

Key Points:

1. Although first preference applications are at their lowest since 1993, acceptances are increasing and reached record levels this year.
2. There are different trends emerging in acceptance rates, with the universities gaining preference over the institutes of technology amongst students.
3. Though still low, the number of mature students entering higher education has risen significantly in the last five years.

4 UNACCEPTED CAO OFFERS

- 4.1** Every year a significant number of CAO offers are made and subsequently declined by students. In 2005 the number of declined offers was 13,555. This represents a decrease on previous years (Table 9).
- 4.2** These students have the ability and entry requirements to participate in higher education. It is a challenge for the higher education sector to attract them into our institutions. Currently, they represent untapped student capacity. That there are students who decline offers demonstrates that any concerns that the sector has reached full student capacity are unfounded.
- 4.3** Attracting these students into higher education would enable the sector to achieve a top decile positioning among OECD countries. Currently, Ireland requires circa 7,600 more graduates to achieve top decile performance. This target has been set for the sector in the HEA's own strategic plan as well as in Government policy documents such as the report of the Enterprise Strategy Group.

Table 9. CAO Offers Not Accepted 2000 – 2005

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Total Applicants	63,451	63,810	63,886	66,222	63,696	63,716
Applicants Offered but Not Accepted	15,583	15,334	15,520	15,107	14,182	13,555
% of Applicants not Accepting	24.6	24.0	24.3	22.8	22.3	21.3

Source: CAO Directors Reports.

- 4.4** There are a number of possible avenues that those who do not accept CAO places may be taking – employment, going overseas (especially the UK) to study, going on to PLC/further education courses or undertaking apprenticeships. A proportion repeats their Leaving Certificate, e.g. 2,500 students repeated the Leaving Certificate in 2005.
- 4.5** There are significant increases in the numbers of school leavers deciding to do PLC and/or FETAC courses, which they may later use to assist them in accessing higher education (See Figure 1, Appendix A). In 2005, 2% of CAO applicants had completed PLCs, of which 956 or 53% were accepted.
- 4.6** This year FETAC graduates comprised almost 9% of CAO applicants, a significant rise on previous years. In 2005, 2,102 CAO places were offered to FETAC applicants, of which 1,041 were accepted.
- 4.7** Developing entry routes to higher education from PLC and other FETAC qualifications will be particularly important in the coming years. A recent ESRI report showed that the students who complete PLCs are more likely to come from lower and middle socio-economic groups . Furthermore, the study of new entrants to higher education in 2004 showed the capacity for additional participation in higher education from the higher socio-economic groups is very limited as these groups are reaching capacity levels. The growth in participation in higher education has to come from the lower and middle groups. As these groups are more likely to complete FETAC/PLC qualifications it is imperative that there are clear progression routes onto higher education.
- 4.8** Apprenticeships have become an increasingly common option for school-leavers, with numbers doubling since 1996 (See Figure 2, Appendix A). In 2005 over 8,300 students (99% of whom were male) registered in 25 trade areas, predominantly those associated with the construction industry. If one considers that the birth rate of males 17-18 years ago was about 28,000 per annum, then the significance of the size of the intake becomes apparent.
- 4.9** In recent years, increasing numbers of Irish students have travelled to the UK, often to gain entry to “elite” course, such as architecture. 2006 witnessed a significant reduction (14.7%) in the numbers of Irish students applying to the UK higher education system. This is probably the result of the introduction of fees to the amount of stg£3,000 in the UK. Nonetheless, Irish students still comprise the largest group of non-national students in the UK higher education system.

Key Points:

1. Irish higher education has not reached capacity – there are students with both the ability and entry requirements who are not pursuing a higher education.

*1 A Multivariate Analysis of Educational and Employment Outcomes, ESRI (June 2006).
2 Who went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education, ESRI (March 2006).*

5 CAO ACCEPTANCES BY DISCIPLINE

- 5.1** Within the overall figures there is evidence of trends emerging between disciplines – not all areas of engineering are experiencing a downturn. Construction courses, for example, have witnessed a rise in popularity.

Table 10. Level 7/6 CAO Acceptances by Discipline 2000 – 2006

Discipline Level 7/6	Acceptances 2000	Acceptances 2004	Acceptances 2005	Acceptances 2006
Engineering	14.50%	12.90%	12.10%	12.80%
Construction	12.70%	15.30%	16.20%	16.40%
Computing	13.70%	7.50%	6.30%	7.60%
Science	7.30%	5.40%	6.10%	6.90%
Total Technology	48.20%	41.10%	40.8%	43.70%
Health	1.50%	2.00%	3.10%	2.60%
Agriculture and Veterinary	1.70%	2.90%	2.70%	2.80%
Total Health, Vet & Agriculture	3.20%	4.90%	5.80%	5.40%
Arts and Humanities	8.60%	9.80%	9.30%	9.90%
Business and Law	31.20%	31.20%	28.50%	26.30%
Education	0%	0%	0.30%	0.30%
Social Services	2.10%	4.70%	6.50%	4.70%
Services	6.70%	8.40%	8.80%	9.70%
Total All	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: CAO.

- 5.2** The acceptance figures reveal that the number of acceptances to technology disciplines decreased by 33% since 2000. Acceptances to computing declined by 58% since 2000, though acceptances to science recovered in 2005. Similar trends have been observed in the UK, where uptake of places on engineering courses is also considerably down on previous years, to the extent that a large number of scholarships for disadvantaged students pursuing engineering courses have remained unclaimed in 2006.

Table 11. Level 8 CAO Acceptances by Discipline 2000 – 2006

Discipline Level 8	Acceptances 2000	Acceptances 2004	Acceptances 2005	Acceptances 2006
Engineering	8.00%	4.70%	4.80%	4.50%
Construction	2.90%	4.20%	4.50%	3.90%
Computing	8.70%	3.60%	4.00%	3.50%
Science (non healthcare)	12.00%	10.50%	10.70%	9.40%
Total Technology	31.70%	23.00%	23.90%	21.40%
Agriculture and Veterinary	1.60%	1.10%	1.10%	1.20%
Nursing	0.00%	7.30%	7.30%	7.70%
Medicine	1.60%	1.20%	1.20%	1.60%
Dentistry	0.30%	0.30%	0.30%	0.25%
Other Healthcare	2.10%	4.40%	4.70%	4.80%
Total Health, Vet & Agriculture	5.60%	14.30%	14.60%	15.50%
Arts and Humanities	30.10%	30.10%	29.50%	30.10%
Education	7.30%	7.90%	8.30%	7.70%
Business and Law	23.40%	21.50%	21.10%	22.60%
Social Services	0.40%	1.00%	0.90%	1.50%
Services	1.50%	2.20%	1.60%	1.30%
Total All	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: CAO.

5.3 The acceptance figures show that the proportion of acceptances to technology courses has declined from 32% in 2000 to 21% in 2006. The proportion of computing acceptances has halved from 8.7% in 2000 to 3.5% in 2006. On the other hand, science acceptances have remained consistent, while the proportion of acceptances to construction courses has almost doubled in the time period.

Key Points:

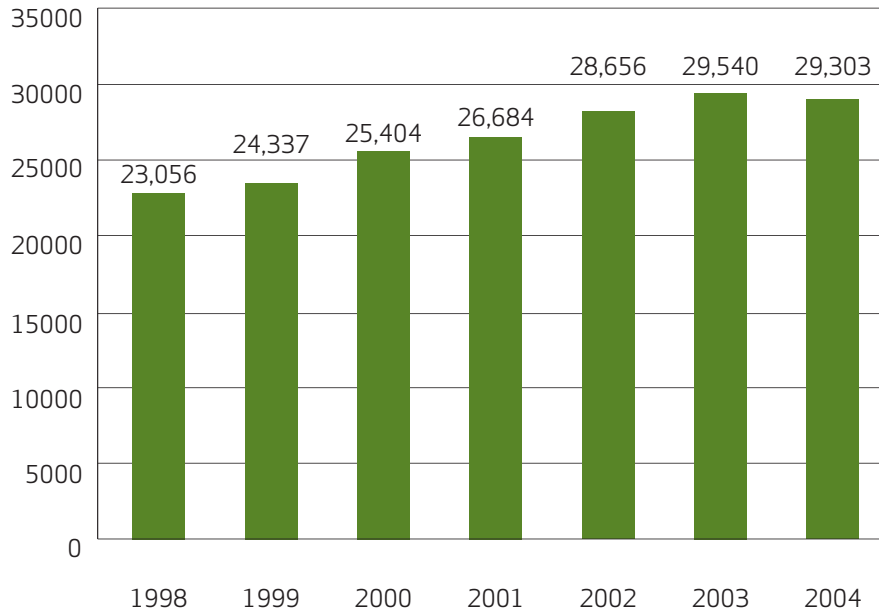
1. CAO acceptances rates vary greatly across disciplines.
2. Certain disciplines, engineering, technology and computing, are experiencing a downturn in student demand.

6 CONCLUSION

6.1 This paper has highlighted a number of emerging trends in higher education. Key issues arising out of this report include:

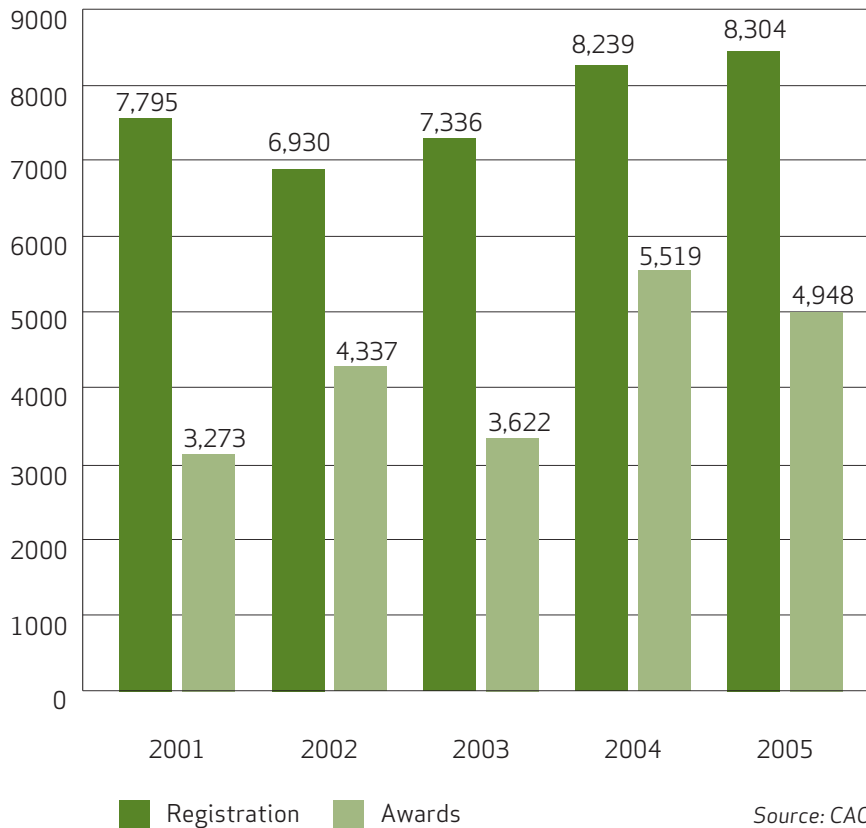
- The numbers of new entrants to higher education are increasing.
- The overall student enrolment stock in higher education is increasing.
- The school-leaver age cohort is stabilising and will start an upward trend in 2012, increasing to the 1998 rate by 2020.
- Participation rates in third level education are increasing.
- Participation rates of mature learners are increasing, though much progress is required.
- CAO applications declined in 2006, but acceptances reached their highest level yet.
- A large number of offers are made that are not accepted thus demonstrating that the system has not reached capacity.
- Increasing numbers of school leavers are entering PLC and further education courses.
- Computing and engineering disciplines are struggling to attract students.
- Construction related courses are doing well across the higher education sector.

FIGURE 1. PLC COURSE UPTAKE



Source: Monitoring Ireland Skill Supply: Trends in Education/Training Outputs, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs.

FIGURE 2. CRAFT APPRENTICESHIP 2001 – 2005



Source: CAO.

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