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Grade Inflation in The School of Real Estate and Construction Economics

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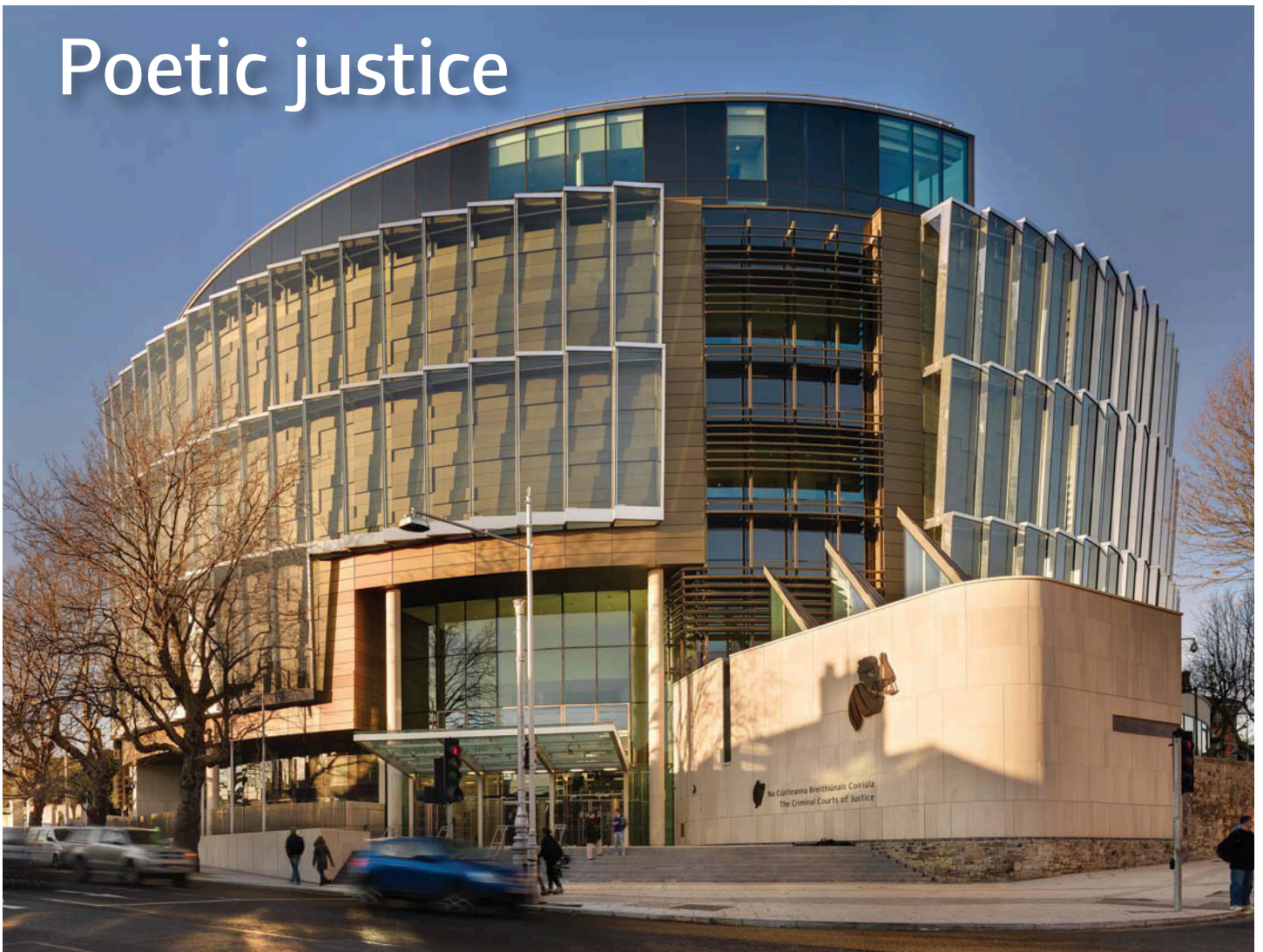
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Grade inflation in the SRECE

DERMOT KEHILY looks at the thorny issue of grade inflation, and asks how the School of Real Estate and Construction Economics at DIT is measuring up.



Grade inflation has been the subject of considerable media discussion in recent years. Grade inflation is a trend of better grades being awarded in educational qualifications that are not matched by real improvements in learning. A Department of Education & Science (DoES) inquiry published in March 2010 found evidence of significant grade inflation in higher education results in Ireland. The inquiry, and a subsequent paper, were published in response to concerns about the decline in the quality of some graduates raised by a number of influential voices in the employer community. Papers published in recent years by The Network for Irish Educational National Standards also raised the same concerns. From what follows, it will be seen that there has been a slight escalation in the proportion of students achieving 2.1 second-class honours in the School of Real Estate and Construction Economics (SRECE) at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). This slight increase could be explained by better CAO entry points, improvements in teaching methods, or even a change within DIT to semesterisation.

Department of Education and Science study into grade inflation

The paper outlines some of the research into grade inflation and summarises some of the findings suggesting a drift towards grade inflation. The study

investigated grade inflation between 1998 and 2008 in HETAC educational institutions (HETAC is the qualifications awarding body for institutes of technology and private colleges, not including DIT, outside the university sector) and HEA educational institutions (university institutions). The research focuses on grade inflation in the top level classification of awards, i.e., distinctions in level 6 and 7 and first class honours awards in level 8 of the National Framework of Qualifications. Data from the DoES's research, supplemented by analysis of data in a paper produced by HETAC on the issue, is outlined in the table below. As can be seen, the percentage of HETAC graduates earning first-class honours degree awards in level 8 programmes has increased from 11.2% in 1998 to 16.6% in 2008. The students were in institutes of technology excluding DIT. These figures represent a 48% increase in the number of such degrees over the 10-year observation period. The percentage of university (HEA) graduates who obtained first-class honours degrees over the same period increased from 8.3% to 16.2%, an overall increase of 95% on 1998 awards levels. Although slightly less in percentage terms than HETAC graduates, the increase in HEA first-class awards amounts to a significantly larger increase over the observation period. DIT has

Table 1: 'Quality of Graduates/Grade Inflation', Department of Education and Science, March 2010.

Percentage of graduates achieving first-class award level in NFQ level 8.

Year/ institution	HETAC	HEA	UK	DIT	UCD	NUIG	CIT	Eng., Maufact. & Const.
1998	11.2%	8.3%	8.4%	-	*9.9%	*10.4%	9.9%	-
2002	14.2%	9.5%	10.4%	-	*11.3%	*10.2%	14.3%	-
2008	16.6%	16.2%	13.3%	14.2%	18.0%	15.3%	22.6%	21.9%

*UCD & NUIG statistics included in 1998 and 2002 columns are for 1997 and 2000. No statistics available for DIT in 1998 and 2002

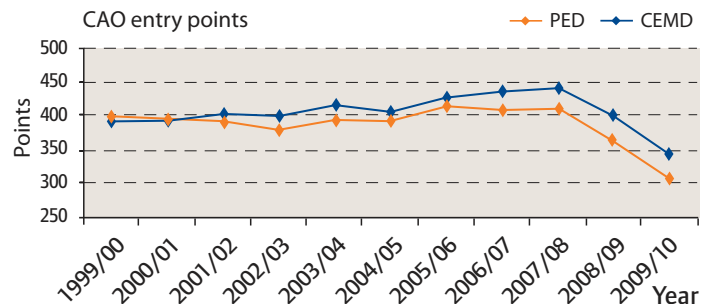


FIGURE 1: CAO entry points from 1999/'00 to 2009/'10.

included for comparative purposes their available statistics for the 2008 academic year. DIT's overall percentage of first-class honours awards throughout the institute of 14.2%, is both below those of the HETAC and the HEA but, it should be noted, is significantly lower than the engineering, manufacturing and construction discipline average of 21.86%.

School of Real Estate and Construction Economics

In light of the recent attention on grade inflation, the SRECE was keen to find out how its awards compared with the findings outlined in the study above. The courses reviewed were the Construction Economics and Management Degree (CEMD) DT111, and the Property Economics Degree (PED) DT110. The School was also keen to track grade inflation in conjunction with the CAO entry points of our graduates.

Figure 1 illustrates the trend of CAO points over the previous decade. CAO entry points on the two courses escalated from 395 points in 1999/'00 to 440 points at its peak in 2007/'08 for CEMD, and from 400 points in 1999/'00 to 410 points in 2007/'08 for PED. Over the last number of years, especially in the last academic intake, points levels have dramatically reduced on both courses.

In the period from 1999/'00 to 2008/'09, the proportions of award levels in CEMD and PED in the School have been relatively stable, as illustrated in **Figures 2 and 3**.

The proportion of first-class honours awards in CEMD increased from 4% in 1999/'00 to 7% in 2008/'09. This increase does not indicate an overall trend upwards, as first-class awards accounted for only 2% of graduates in

2007/'08. There is, however, slight evidence of a creep in 2.1 grades. The proportion of second-class honours awards in both classes 2.1 and 2.2 fluctuates significantly over the observation period and grade inflation is not obvious taken year on year due to the oscillations. On closer examination, it is evident that the proportion of 2.1 awards has increased in the latter half of the decade from an average of 51% from 1999/'00 to 2003/'04, to an average of 56% from 2004/'05 to 2008/'09. A mirrored decrease is evident in 2.2 awards, suggesting that slight grade inflation has occurred in 2.1 awards at the expense of 2.2 awards and pass awards. The proportion of first-class honours awards in PED fluctuates between a high of 14% in 2001/'02 and 16% in 2007/'08, to a low of 2% in 2008/'09 over the 10-year observation period. If anything this suggests grade deflation in first-class awards. Similar to CEMD, both 2.1 and 2.2 awards vary significantly over the observation period, with no obvious evidence of a trend. On closer examination, however, 2.1 awards have increased by 4% over the latter half of the decade, with a consequent decrease evident in 2.2 and pass awards.

An interesting feature of the School's analysis shows that there doesn't seem to be a correlation between the student's CAO points entering the courses and the overall grade performance of students in their graduation year. CAO points levels have increased over the observation period, but this does not bring about a corresponding inflation in grades, although it could explain the slight increase in 2.1 awards on both courses. It will, however, be interesting to track performance over the coming years on both courses, as CAO points levels have dramatically dropped with the 2009/'10 academic intake.

Conclusion

The DoES's recent study into grade inflation indicates significant grade escalation in higher education in Ireland. Although figures for DIT results have not been published in the report for previous years, DIT's proportion of students achieving first-class awards was below the national average in 2008. The SRECE conducted its own review of grade inflation. The average first-class award over the observation period in CEMD is 5% and in PED is 8%, both significantly lower than the 2008 DIT average of 14.2% and the National HEA average of 16.2%. There has been a slight escalation in the proportion of students achieving 2.1 second-class honours. This slight increase could be explained by better CAO entry points, improvements in teaching methods, or even a change within DIT to semesterisation. The study is limited to the period 1999 to 2009, a period selected to mirror the DoES's study. Further study is recommended, both nationally and locally in DIT to address the incidence of grade inflation over a longer period. It would also be necessary to carry out a survey within the surveying profession to assess employers' views on the quality of graduates over the years from the courses in the School, and compare this against the standard of awards.



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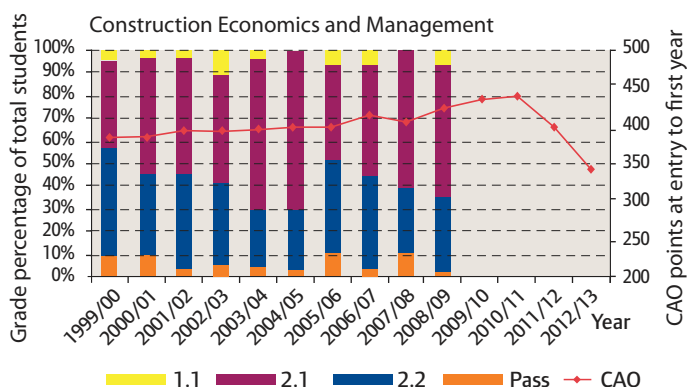


FIGURE 2: Proportion of degree awards in each class relative to entry points.

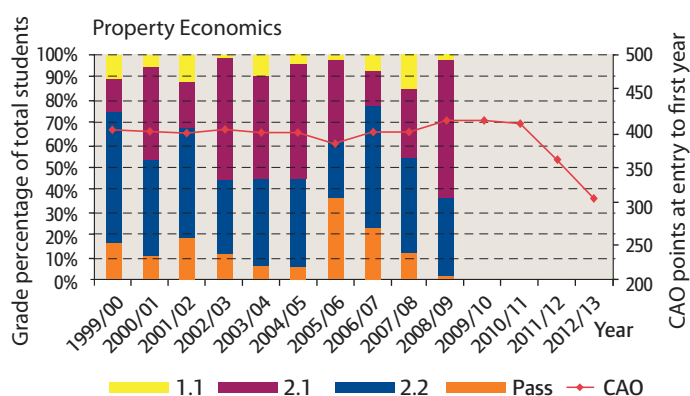


FIGURE 3: Proportion of degree awards in each class relative to entry points.