# Aiming Higher

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

## A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

**Helping your teen make informed decisions about their higher education**





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# Foreword

Going to university is the next step in the lives of many Leaving Cert students. Part and parcel of this journey is deciding on what university course to study – and where to study it. The good news is that there has never been so much choice for students.

Research tells us that, as parents and guardians, your advice has a powerful influence on students who are making decisions about courses and universities. At the same time, feedback from parents and guardians shows that many of them feel that they do not have enough information and experience to guide their teen in making these choices about higher education. With this in mind, the Aiming Higher guide is designed to help you to support your child in making confident, informed decisions about this exciting step in their lives. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the Higher Education Authority's support of this guide.

The very best of luck to all concerned.



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# What is Higher Education?

Higher education, sometimes called third-level education, is the next step after the Leaving Cert. Higher education institutions are made up of universities and private independent colleges.

# A few Pointers to Begin

Helping your teen take the next step after school can be exciting but also overwhelming. Your teen may not

be ready for the conversation, but it's important for you as a parent to take that first step.

As a parent, you want to guide without pushing, listen without judging, and support without taking over. Knowing how to do this can be difficult.

**This guide will help you through that process.**

Research indicates that parents have a significant influence on a child's career path. This guide will look at some of the options available and how you can find out more information about them. It aims to give you guidance on how to best support your child, helping them to evaluate their strengths, interests, and career goals. It will also look at some practical considerations that have to be made, for example, the cost of higher education.

**As parents you have a significant influence on your child's career decision-making.**

For this guide, we have interviewed parents and guardians who have been through the process and those who haven't. We have spoken to career guidance professionals and have taken on board their experience and feedback.



# Understanding the Jargon

College life comes with a new vocabulary.

The following are some commonly used terms that your child will come across when researching courses and preparing to apply to the CAO.

**BA: Bachelor of Arts**
This degree is traditionally awarded in arts, humanities and social sciences subjects, such as political science, international relations, English, art, history, sociology and languages.

**BBS/BComm: Bachelor of Business Studies/ Bachelor of Commerce**
This degree is traditionally awarded in business subjects, such as accounting, economics, marketing and human resources.

**BEd: Bachelor of Education**
This degree is an undergraduate professional degree that qualifies students to teach in primary or secondary schools.

**BEng: Bachelor of Engineering**
This degree is traditionally awarded in engineering subjects, such as mechanical, computer, electronic, chemical, process and environmental engineering.

**BSc: Bachelor of Science**
This degree is traditionally awarded in science, applied science and life sciences subjects, such as biology, industrial chemistry, maths, information and communications technology, environmental studies and mathematical science.

**BTech: Bachelor of Technology**
This degree is traditionally awarded in computer and technology subjects, such as management and information technology.

**CAO: Central Applications Office**
The CAO is responsible for processing applications for undergraduate courses in Irish higher education institutions.

**CAO course code**
A unique code, made up of letters and numbers, that is given to each course available through the CAO.

**Colleges of Further Education**
Colleges of Further Education offer PLC (Post Leaving Cert) courses that have a more hands-on, practical orientation.

**Core module**
A compulsory part of a course (a part that must be completed).

**Credit**
Credits are awarded to students as they progress through a programme. These are also called ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System).

**Elective module**
Is any optional module that students can choose to study.

**Erasmus**
Erasmus is an EU programme that provides financial support to students if they undertake a study semester, or a work placement in another country.

**Major**
A main area of study.

**Minimum entry/Matriculation requirements**
The minimum requirements for entry to a higher education institution. Students must meet these minimum standards before they can be considered for a higher education programme. The minimum requirements can change from institution to institution. You can find out more about minimum requirements on the websites of the individual higher education institutions.

**Minor**
A secondary area of study.

**Module**
Modules are independent units of study. As such they can be viewed as building blocks of a degree.

**Programme structure/outline**
This is an overview of a degree programme by semester. It includes useful information on core modules, electives, study periods abroad and work placement (if applicable).

**Semester**
A university teaching term, usually 15 weeks long.

**Study abroad**
An opportunity to study at a university abroad for a semester or a full year. Depending on the course, this may be optional or compulsory.

**Undergraduate programme**
Undergraduate education includes all programmes of study up to and including a bachelor's degree.

**Work placement/Cooperative Education/ Internship/Intra**
These are terms used to describe opportunities for students to gain experience in a workplace setting during their degree. Depending on the course, this may be optional or compulsory.



# Supporting your Child in their Decision-making

Most school-leavers don't have a clear idea of the course they would like to study. This isn't a cause for panic! Some may have identified a general area of interest to them. But, in reality, only a small percentage of students are certain about their future career. Your role in the decision-making process is to guide them in narrowing their search and in making informed choices.

Reassure your child that people will change jobs an average of 12 times during their career – regardless of their higher education qualification. So, they should focus on the next few years, rather than on the rest of their lives.

# Where to Start?

A good starting point is to help your child to figure out what motivates them.

This will allow them to identify their natural talents, interests, and strengths. These can include areas like:

- problem-solving
- creativity
- communication
- connecting with people
- writing
- organising
- working with numbers
- ease with technology

Remember that this can be a sensitive time for your child. Of course they want some control over this next phase of their lives. You're not there to make decisions for them. So, think of your role as that of a guide and let them take the lead. Be conscious of when it's appropriate to step in and step back. Above all, listen. This is harder than you may think!

It's a good idea to get your child to think about their school subjects – in particular what they like and dislike about them. Their favourite subject may give good clues, not just about what they enjoy learning, but also why they enjoy it. Instead of focusing on what grade they achieved try asking why do they think they did so well in a particular subject(s).

You can take the same approach with extra-curricular activities, events, and projects. This will help them to identify their strengths and interests outside of the school environment.

Some questions to start with:

- **What do you enjoy most in school and outside of school?**
- **What is it about these that you enjoy?**
- **What makes you proud?**
- **How do you like to learn?**
- **What's most important to you?**

There are lots of online tools that can help your child to develop a deeper understanding of their interests and aptitudes. Careersportal.ie has an excellent careers interest inventory and personality profiler.

**Remember:**
**It's not your job to have all of the answers.**

# Researching Courses with your Child

→ As a parent or guardian, it's not your responsibility to answer all of your child's course-related questions. Your role is to be their 'guide-on-the-side' when they are researching courses.

→ There are lots of useful websites that provide information on courses in Ireland.

→ The CAO (Central Applications Office) website allows students to search by course and by higher education institution.

Similarly, **Qualifax.ie** is a "one-stop shop" for information on higher education courses. All higher level institutions produce a prospectus, giving detailed information on the courses on offer and about the institution itself. Remember, when guiding your child, all of the evidence shows that students perform best in courses to which they are most suited. This should be a key driver in any decision-making process.

Some questions to help your child reflect:

- → **Do you think the course content matches the title?**
- → **Does the course content interest you?**
- → **What do you think of the modules?**
- → **Do you think that the course matches your strengths?**
- → **What is involved in the course? Is there a work placement, study abroad, lab work, lots of reading etc.? How do you feel about these elements?**

☆ **Education qualifications are a gateway to future career opportunities, not something that defines your child's future!**

# Understanding CAO Points

CAO points are determined by the supply and demand in any one year. They are not a reflection of quality of the individual course or higher education institution.

Points are calculated on the basis of students' best results in six Leaving Cert subjects.

Students may feel a pressure to apply for high points courses, rather than applying for courses that are aligned to their talents and interests. They may even feel that their points may be "wasted" if they opt for a lower points course. This is a mistake. Reassure them that the evidence shows that students tend to thrive in courses that have a genuine appeal for them. Bear in mind too that points can rise and fall each year. So, students should list courses on the CAO in order of preference rather than any points prediction.

**Your child should list the courses in order of preference... not their points prediction.**



**Calculate your points:**

# Leaving Cert Students

Firstly, find out your grades from your marks:

| Grades | % Marks |
|---|---|
| H1 / O1 | 90 - 100 |
| H2 / O2 | 80 < 90 |
| H3 / O3 | 70 < 80 |
| H4 / O4 | 60 < 70 |
| H5 / O5 | 50 < 60 |
| H6 / O6 | 40 < 50 |
| H7 / O8 | 30 < 40 |
| H8 / O8 | 0 < 30 |

Next, find out your points from your grades:

| Higher | | Ordinary | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grade | Points | Grade | Points |
| H1 | 100 | | |
| H2 | 88 | | |
| H3 | 77 | | |
| H4 | 66 | | |
| H5 | 56 | O1 | 56 |
| H6 | 46 | O2 | 46 |
| H7 | 37 | O3 | 37 |
| H8 | 0 | O4 | 28 |
| | | O5 | 20 |
| | | O6 | 12 |
| | | O7 | 0 |
| | | O8 | 0 |

## Leaving Cert Points Online Calculator

www.careersportal.ie/courses/calculator/pointsCalculator.html

# Refining Course Choices

Once your child has come up with a list of courses they may be interested in, the next step is to get them to start refining the list. Here are some questions that they can use to prompt practical thinking.

- [ ] **Do I understand the course structure and modules?**
- [ ] **Is the course a fit with my interests and what I am good at?**
- [ ] **Does it involve a work placement or study abroad?**
- [ ] **What are the recent trends in CAO points for the course?**
- [ ] **Are there any specific application/entry requirements – e.g., points count, portfolio, minimum grade requirements in particular Leaving Certificate subjects?**

# Making the Most of Open Days

Most higher education institutions run open days for prospective students.

You can find dates and details of open days on individual institutions' websites and in the 'Student Resources' section of **www.cao.ie**

Open days are an important opportunity to ask questions about courses. They are also a very helpful way of getting the look, feel and atmosphere of a particular institution and its campus.

To make the most of these opportunities, it's important that students go well-prepared. Get them to write down the questions they want to ask about the course or institution. Encourage them to talk to current students, who often work as guides at open days. Talking to someone their own age is often much easier.

**Try to find peers to talk to at open days.**



# Preparing for College Life

The experience of moving to higher education is not just about choosing a course and a particular higher education institution.

It's a chance for your child to learn in a different way, make new friends, develop new interests, and become actively involved in student life.

For many students, it will be their first real experience of things like living away from home, budgeting, cooking, and managing their time.

The shift in scale from school to college campus can be challenging. Every student responds differently to change. Some enjoy the experience of being part of a larger student population, while others can feel overwhelmed by it, at least for starters. Moving from a very structured school curriculum to an environment where they are expected to manage their own learning is a big change for most students. So, now is a good time to chat with them about their expectations and possible concerns about this switch.

**Big excitement and big changes, but encourage them to think practically.**

The following questions may be useful as a guide:

- [ ] **What do you think are the biggest differences between school and college?**
- [ ] **What do you imagine the first three weeks will be like?**
- [ ] **Would you prefer to study in an institution closer to home?**
- [ ] **What do you think will be the biggest challenge if you decide to move away?**
- [ ] **How do you feel about living away from home?**




# Applying for Places through the CAO System

# CAO Timeline

The following diagram gives an overview of the CAO timeline and application process. This is based on a standard online application.

## 5 November

**Online Application Opens**

### 5 November to 1 February

- Complete CAO application form online
- Restricted courses must be included at this stage
- Online applicants receive initial acknowledgement email

## 1 February

**Online Application Closes**

### 5 February to 1 March

- Online facility to amend course choices becomes available

### 1 March

- Closing date for amending course choices
- Closing date for completion of mature section of application form
- Closing date for final completion of online HEAR/DARE forms

## 5 March

**Late Application Form Opens**

## 1 May

**Closing Date for Late Applications**

### May

- All applicants receive Statement of Application Record before the end of May.

# Application Process for School Leavers

## 5 May to 1 July

→ Online change of mind facility opens

→ Add, remove or amend order of CAO course choices

→ Cannot add restricted courses

## 1 July

**Online Change of Mind Closes**

Online applicants receive acknowledgement email confirming amended course choice list

**Round 1** offers issued in mid-August
**Round 2** offers issued in late August, early September
**Later offers** issued in October

Offer received

No offer received - Applicants receive a 'Statement of Application' e-mail

Accept

Defer

Available and vacant places facility opens

Applicants receive email of acknowledgement

# CAO (Central Applications Office)

→ The CAO is responsible for processing applications to courses in higher education institutions in Ireland (both public and private[1]).

→ Students can apply through the CAO online system or by paper-based application. Most students apply online.

→ Details of all courses can be found on the CAO website and handbook.

Courses are typically fulltime and are of a 3 to 4-year duration. The website and handbook provide details of deadlines, fees, restrictions, and application guidelines. Demonstration videos are also available on the website. Do encourage your child to browse these resources before filling in their online application.

Bearing in mind that the Leaving Cert year is a hectic one, it's a good idea for students to plan for their CAO application well before the 1 February deadline. Support your child by checking that their application is on schedule.

In filling in the CAO form, be aware that applicants can enter up to twenty courses – ten courses at Level 8 (Honours Bachelor's Degree) and ten at Level 6/7 (Ordinary Bachelor's Degree or Higher Certificate). To maximise their opportunities, students should fill out both lists fully.

Top Tips for Filling out the CAO Form:

→ **List courses in order of preference.**

→ **Put down all preferred courses - even if they think they may not get the points for a particular course(s).**

→ **Ensure that the course is a good fit – research the details on the individual university websites.**

→ **In filling out their CAO form your teen should fill out 10 courses on both Level 6/7 and Level 8 lists.**

→ **Check and recheck that the course codes are correctly entered.**

1 See www.heca.ie for more information on independent colleges

# Other Routes to Higher Education

The CAO is not the only way of gaining entry to higher education.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of Leaving Certificate students opting to study in universities outside of Ireland.

Other students opt to undertake Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses in colleges of further education all over Ireland.

## Studying Abroad

The UK uses a central application process called UCAS **www.ucas.com**. It operates slightly differently to the CAO system. For example, students are required to write a personal statement as part of their application. It is important to note that, in the UK, almost all higher education students must pay fees.

For students interested in studying within the EU, EUNiCAS is a central application support service provided by a network of over 250 European universities. It helps students from Ireland (and other EU countries) to secure a place in the university course of their choice. The EUNiCAS website guides students through their application journey. It also provides a useful list of courses taught through English. **www.eunicas.ie**

In the USA, there is no single application system for higher education courses. Students normally have to apply directly to each institution. The exception is the common application system that supports a network of public and private universities in the US. Details are available on **www.commonapp.org**

## Post Leaving Certificate Courses

Over 200 colleges of further education and schools offer Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs). These 1-2 year programmes offer a wide range of subject areas. Most of them are fulltime. Students must apply directly to the relevant college of further education for entry to a PLC course. Many higher education institutions partner with colleges of further education to facilitate students in transferring to a university course on successful completion of a PLC. Students who complete a PLC can apply through the CAO the following year. Over 1,500 courses in the CAO system accept PLC qualifications for entry.

**Did you know there are over 1,900 PLCs in Ireland!**

# Access Routes for Underrepresented Student Groups

The purpose of supported access routes is to raise higher education participation rates among people from underrepresented groups. Two such initiatives for school-leavers who are applying through the CAO system are the DARE and HEAR schemes.

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme supports school-leavers with disabilities who are under the age of 23. Specifically, it offers university places on a reduced points basis to students who, as a result of their disability, have experienced additional educational challenges in their second level education. **www.accesscollege.ie/dare/**

The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme is an admissions route for school leavers who, for social, financial or cultural reasons, are under-represented in higher education. Participating higher education institutions have a quota of places with reduced points for eligible students. **www.accesscollege.ie/hear/**





# Financing College

Check out
studentfinance.ie

# Calculating the Cost

Costs associated with higher education can be significant and may include fees, public transport, car costs, accommodation, subsistence, utilities, college materials, medical, and basic social costs. In planning for these costs, you may find this calculator helpful.

**https://www.zurichlife.ie/tools/cost-of-education-calculator/**

## Tuition Fees and Charges

Most undergraduate students attending public higher education institutions do not have to pay tuition fees. To qualify for free tuition fees, students must meet criteria based on residence, nationality and immigration status, and course requirements. (Note that the free tuition fees initiative does not apply to courses in private higher education institutions.) More information is available on these requirements on the Higher Education Authority's website **www.studentfinance.ie**

Most institutions also apply an annual 'student contribution charge', sometimes referred to as a 'registration fee', which covers student admissions and support services. The amount of the contribution can vary from one institution to another. Some institutions also apply an annual 'student levy' charge, which is not covered by the student grant.

## Student Grants

The student grant is the main source of financial support for higher education student. There are two categories of student grants, the tuition fees grant and the maintenance grant. The level of grant is based on several factors including family and personal income, and the distance between home and the higher education institution.
The tuition fees grant can cover all or part of a student's tuition fees, student contribution, and essential field trips (where applicable). The maintenance grant is a contribution towards living costs. In most instances, if a student qualifies for a maintenance grant, they will also qualify for a tuition fees grant. More information about student grants can be found on **www.studentfinance.ie**

## Tax Relief

It may be possible to claim tax relief on fees. Families who pay fees for more than one student in any one year can claim tax relief on the second and subsequent fees paid. You can find more information about this on **https://www.revenue.ie/en/personal-tax-credits-reliefs-and-exemptions/education/tuition-fees-paid-for-third-level-education/index.aspx**

## Scholarships and Other Sources of Funding

Many higher education institutions offer scholarships to support students in their studies. Some of these scholarships are awarded on the basis of the Leaving Certificate results. Others are awarded based on a student's performance in sport or the arts. The scholarships often include both financial funding and free access to specialist services and facilities. Another source of funding comes from companies or individuals who sponsor scholarships or cash prizes. This can be based on a student's Leaving Certificate results or on their academic performance in their university studies.

Unfortunately, there is no central source of information on scholarships and bursaries in Ireland. However, each institution's website has a section that provides details on scholarships and prizes specific to that institution.

### Example of Scholarship: 1916 Bursary Fund

www.1916.bursary.ie

Worth up to €5,000 per year, the fund is open to economically disadvantaged students from one of the following groups:

- → People from socio-economic backgrounds who have low participation in higher education
- → First-time mature students
- → Students with a disability
- → Irish Travellers
- → Students who have received a further education award
- → Lone parents receiving a social welfare payment
- → Ethnic minorities



# CAO Listing of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland

**American College**
www.acd.iamu.edu

**National College of Art and Design**
www.ncad.ie

**Atlantic Technological University**
www.atu.ie

**IBAT College Dublin**
www.ibat.ie

**University College Cork (NUI)**
www.ucc.ie/en/

**Marino Institute of Education**
www.mie.ie

**CCT College Dublin**
www.cct.ie

**Dublin Business School**
www.dbs.ie

**Dublin City University**
www.dcu.ie

**Dundalk Institute of Technology***
www.dkit.ie

**Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology**
www.iadt.ie

**University College Dublin**
www.ucd.ie

**Dorset College**
www.dorset.ie

**Galway Business School**
www.galwaybusinessschool.ie

**Griffith College**
www.griffith.ie

**University of Galway**
www.universityofgalway.ie

**ICD Business School**
www.icd.ie

**University of Limerick**
www.ul.ie

**Maynooth University**
www.maynoothuniversity.ie

**Mary Immaculate College**
www.mic.ul.ie

**Munster Technological University**
www.mtu.ie

**Pontifical University, St Patrick's College**
www.sppu.ie

**National College of Ireland (NCI)**
www.ncirl.ie

**Carlow College, St. Patrick's**
www.carlowcollege.ie

**RCSI University of Medicine & Health Sciences**
www.rcsi.com/dublin/about/faculty-of-medicine-and-health-sciences

**Setanta College**
www.setantacollege.com

**South East Technological University**
www.setu.ie

**Trinity College Dublin**
www.tcd.ie

**Technological University Dublin**
www.tudublin.ie

**Technological University of the Shannon**
www.tus.ie

* From September 2026, Dundalk Institute of Technology is being establish as University College of Queen's in Dundalk



# Aiming Higher

## A GUIDE FOR PARENTS