



Deadlines loom for college applicants

In the first article of a new monthly series, Roisin Diver, career guidance counsellor at Carndonagh Community School, lays out the dates students – and their parents – will need to know as they apply to third level universities and colleges in Ireland and Britain



By Roisin Diver

CAO

The Central Applications Office (CAO) processes applications for undergraduate courses in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland. The CAO opened for online college applications on 5 November, and students who wish to apply should do so before 5pm on January 20 in order to avail of the discounted registration fee of €35. After this date the cost will increase to the standard fee of €50.

The official closing date is 5pm on 1 February. However, late applications open on 5 March for a €65 fee and close on 1 May.

To apply to CAO, go to www.cao.ie and click on the green 'Apply' tab at the top of the page. It is important that applicants refer to the CAO handbook, which is available on the website, for all the necessary information and relevant course codes. This handbook contains valuable information about all aspects of applying to CAO as well as a useful timeline of events.

Students should note that they can register without inputting their course choices - courses can be added at a later stage. It is however very important to check if a course is listed as 'restricted' as certain courses need to be inputted before the 1 February deadline.

Restricted courses refer to areas such as Art and Music

as these courses will have additional entry requirements such as a portfolio or interview. Restricted application courses will not be included in the late application option.

Applicants can apply for up to 20 courses via CAO. That's up to ten Level 8 (Honours Degree) courses and up to ten Level 7/6 courses (Ordinary Degrees / Higher Certificates). It is ESSENTIAL that applicants list their courses in order of preference. An applicant will at most receive two offers, one from each of their lists.

FEES

In Budget 2026, the maximum college fee (called rate of student contribution) in the Republic of Ireland has been permanently reduced by €500. This means the maximum contribution any student will pay is €2,500 (previously €3,000).

If a student is eligible for a Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant they may have all or part of this student contribution paid. Details on applying for a SUSI grant will be discussed in a future article.

The CAO website contains a dedicated page with links to Further Education and Apprenticeships in order to increase awareness of the different options available to school leavers. Students should note however that these applications will not be processed by CAO, applicants will still have to apply via the usual channels of www.fetchcourses.ie and www.apprenticeship.ie.

These topics will be looked at in more detail in a future issue.

HEAR & DARE

The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is a scheme that offers places on reduced points, some financial assistance as well as extra college support to



Republic of Ireland resident students who are under-represented at higher education due to their socio-economic background.

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a third level alternative admissions scheme for school leavers whose disabilities have had a negative impact on their secondary education. Students can apply for both schemes, however, if eligible they will only be granted the points reduction once.

Full detailed information on both schemes can be found at www.accesscollege.ie.

To apply for either of these schemes a student must first register with CAO, they will be able to complete these forms via their CAO account. It is important to note that the deadline for the completion of both these online forms is 1 March at 5pm. Any supporting documentation needs to arrive in CAO by 10 March at 5pm.

HEAR/ DARE usually run information sessions, in colleges such as ATU Letterkenny and through online webinars. See www.accesscollege.ie for details of events as they are released.

UCAS

UCAS stands for 'Universities and Colleges Admissions Service' and it is the system which allows students to apply for up to five courses in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. (Limit of four out of five choices can be used for medicine).

The 2026 fee is £28.95 stg to apply for up to 5 course choices. Students apply online via the UCAS website. UCAS has been open for submitting applications since 2 Sept 2025 and the official closing date is 14 January 2026. The closing date for some courses was 15th October 2025 - Oxford, Cambridge and most courses in medicine, veterinary and dentistry.

To apply to UCAS a student will need to complete a personal statement, they will also need to get a reference from a teacher in their school as well as receiving a predicted grade from all their subject teachers. Students are advised to thoroughly research up to five course choices and to also check if there are any other requirements such as interviews, auditions or extra tests.

UNIVERSITY FEES IN THE UK

Fees for studying in the UK vary, approximately £9,535 (€11,000) in England, Scotland and Wales and £4,855 (€5,600) in Northern Ireland. Free university tuition fees for EU students in Scotland ended in 2020 as a consequence of Brexit.

It is worth nothing that Ulster University allow students to pay in instalment by monthly direct debits, fees do not have to be paid up front. This is something that can be checked with each individual University or College that a student is applying to.

Students who apply to the UK can qualify for maintenance grants through SUSI if eligible, but fees are not paid. Students can apply for a loan through Britain's Student Loans Company to cover their tuition fees; they will not have to pay the loan back until they start to earn a salary above €21,400 a year. Each month you will pay back 9% of your income above that amount and if the debt is not cleared 30 years after graduation, it will be wiped out.

A number of allied health profession courses in Ulster University currently have no fees - these include Diagnostic Radiography and Imaging, Dietetics, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Podiatry, Radiotherapy and Oncology, Speech and Language Therapy and Paramedic Science.

Nursing bursaries worth approximately £5,500 (€6,400) are payable to all students who obtain nursing places in a Northern Ireland university. It's not means tested and tuition fees are also automatically paid. There are no restrictions on students from the Republic: if you get accepted on the course, you get the bursary.

Applicants to many of the

School of Health Sciences programmes listed above are required to complete the computer-based Medical Selection Admissions Test (MSAT-Ulster) provided by ACER, which is new since 2025 entry. This test replaces online video interviews previously used. Full details available at <https://msat.acer.org/ulster/registration>

The MSAT exam will take place in March 2026. Standard registration closes at 5pm on 4 February. Registration opened November 2025. The cost of registration is £87 (€100).

FINAL THOUGHTS...

The Careers Portal website has lots of information on various career areas as well as details of all open days, (www.careersportal.ie).

Students should try to get as much information as they can about the courses they are interested in. Remember to check the minimum entry requirements for any course you are thinking of applying for, as students need to meet these as well as getting the points.

It is also really important to check the course content and ensure you are aware of what the course will involve each year of study. The more information you gather, the better decision you will be able to make. Do not leave it to the last minute. Remember there is always a way to get to where you want to go - even if it takes you a little longer.

Look out for future articles that will cover topics such as Apprenticeships, Tertiary degree options, Further Education, Scholarships, further information on Hear & Dare, SUSI grant, subject choice, studying in Europe and more! Also, feel free to follow the CCS Guidance and Counselling Facebook page which is regularly updated.