



# Parents' Guide to the **CAO** Journey

Supporting your student as they  
prepare for third-level education





## How to Use this Guide

This guide is designed to be dipped into at different stages of the year.

You do not need to read it from start to finish.

Different sections will feel more relevant at different times, for example, when researching courses, submitting a CAO application, planning financially, or preparing for results and offers.

The aim of this guide is to help parents and guardians feel informed, reassured, and confident as they support their student through one of the biggest decisions of their lives.

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## Introduction

Beginning third-level education is a significant milestone, not only for students, but for families too.

While many students feel excited about new opportunities, parents and guardians often experience uncertainty of their own. The systems, terminology, and timelines around third-level education may feel unfamiliar, yet the desire to help and support your student is stronger than ever.

Being able to support your student starts with understanding the process. When parents feel informed and confident, they are better placed to offer reassurance, guidance, and practical help during what can be a demanding time.

Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) has developed this guide to help you feel prepared as your student takes this next step. It explains how the CAO works, explores how to approach course and college choices, and highlights academic, wellbeing, and campus supports that often become important once a student begins college.



You don't need to have all the answers. Staying informed and engaged makes a meaningful difference.





## Supporting Your Student

### **Navigating Change**

The transition from second level to third level education can feel overwhelming for students. Independence increases, but guidance and reassurance from home remain important.

For many families, this is the first time a young person is making decisions of this scale, often during a busy period that includes exams, deadlines, and large amounts of information.

It is normal for parents to feel unsure about how best to help, particularly if the education system looks very different from when you went through it yourself.

### **Staying Connected**

At this stage, support often begins with conversation. Taking time to listen to what interests your student, what concerns them, and what they are hoping for can be just as valuable as offering advice. Open discussion helps students feel supported as they explore options and reflect on what feels right for them.

### **Guiding Without Pressure**

While students are expected to take more responsibility, parents and guardians continue to play an important role.

Helpful support can include:

- Encouraging early research
- Helping your student stay organised with key dates
- Offering reassurance during stressful moments

Support does not mean directing decisions. Reassurance often comes from helping students see the process clearly and calmly, and reminding them they do not need to have everything figured out at once.

# Choosing the Right Course and College

## Researching Options Together

Gathering information from a range of sources can help students feel more confident and can make conversations at home more constructive.

Families may find it helpful to:

- Attend Open Days and campus visits.
- Speak to current students or graduates.
- Read prospectuses and course webpages.
- Explore college websites, videos, and student stories.
- Follow colleges on social media and sign up for newsletters.
- Attend careers fairs or information events.
- Contact colleges directly with specific questions.

Taking time to explore options gradually can reduce pressure and support more confident decision-making.

## Choosing a Course

Selecting a course is less about having everything figured out and more about exploring a direction that suits a student's interests, strengths, and motivation.



Courses that align with a student's interests and strengths often provide the best foundation for confidence, engagement, and long-term success.

## Choosing a College

Once a course area has been identified, the learning environment becomes equally important.




Families may wish to consider:

- Teaching approach and class sizes.
- Academic, wellbeing, and access supports.
- Campus environment and location.
- Opportunities beyond the classroom.

At TUS Athlone, students experience a close-knit campus environment with a strong emphasis on practical learning, accessible staff, and student support services working alongside academic study.







### When Reviewing Options Together, It Can Help to Consider:

-  **Course content:** modules, assessment methods, and practical elements.
-  **Learning style:** hands-on learning, projects, group work, or exams.
-  **Progression opportunities:** pathways to further study or employment.

### Looking Beyond the Course Title

Many courses offer features that are not immediately obvious from the title alone. These may include:

-  **Industry experience:** work placement or industry-led projects embedded into learning.
-  **Alternative pathways:** opportunities to progress through related programmes over time.
-  **Common entry routes:** broad first-year programmes that allow students to specialise later.
-  **Added value:** professional accreditation, certifications, or recognition.

Courses that align with a student's interests and strengths often provide the best foundation for confidence, engagement, and long-term success.



#1

TUS has the Highest **Graduate Employment** Rate in Ireland for Three Consecutive Years.

Source: (HEA) Graduate Outcomes Survey.

## Learning at TUS

Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) is a multi-campus technological university serving the Midlands and Midwest of Ireland.

Students benefit from practical learning in a supportive environment designed to build confidence alongside academic development.

With over 15,000 students across seven campuses, TUS offers programmes from Higher Certificate through to PhD level, built around practical learning and clear career pathways.

Courses are shaped with direct industry input to ensure learning remains relevant, applied, and future-focused. Work placement is an integral part of Level 8 programmes, providing students with paid industry experience and professional confidence before graduation.

Teaching combines lectures with labs, workshops, projects, and real-world problem-solving. Smaller class sizes support interaction, personalised feedback, and a supportive learning environment.

Through Erasmus+ and the RUN-EU European University network, students can also study or complete placement abroad, adding an international dimension to their qualification.



# Understanding the CAO

## The CAO at a Glance

For many parents and guardians, the CAO can feel unfamiliar at first. While the process has its own language and timelines, it is designed to be structured and fair.

The CAO (Central Applications Office) is the system used by students in Ireland to apply for full-time undergraduate courses. Students submit one application and list course choices in order of preference.

## How the CAO Works

Students may list:

- Up to 10 Level 8 (Honours Degree) courses.
- Up to 10 Level 6/7 (Higher Certificate/ Ordinary Degree) courses.

These lists operate independently. Students should list courses in genuine order of preference rather than based on predicted points.

CAO points are calculated from a student's six best Leaving Certificate subjects. Points change from year to year depending on demand and results.

Meeting entry requirements is just as important as points. These vary by course and should always be checked carefully.

The National Framework of Qualifications allows students to progress between levels over time, often within the same institution.



# Key CAO dates

- **November:** CAO applications open
- **20 January:** Closing date for discounted application fee
- **1 February:** CAO closing date and most restricted courses
- **March:** HEAR / DARE deadlines
- **May – July:** Change of Mind period
- **August:** CAO offers issued

Submitting a CAO application on time helps keep options open.

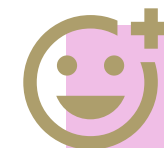
## Offers and Next Steps

Offers are issued in rounds following the release of Leaving Certificate results.

## Key Points for Parents:

- Offers are made in rounds, not all at once.
- Accepting an offer does not affect eligibility for higher preferences.
- Response deadlines are strict.

Once an offer is accepted, communication moves from the CAO to the college.



### The CAO is about preference, not prediction.

Students should list courses in the order they genuinely want them, rather than based on guessed points.



# Planning Your Finances

## **Planning Your Finances**

Planning financially is an important part of preparing for third-level education. Understanding how fees work, and what supports are available, can help families plan with greater clarity and confidence.

## **Fees at a Glance**

- Student contribution fee: typically €3,000 per year (subject to annual Budget decisions).
- Tuition fees: often covered under the Free Fees Initiative, subject to eligibility.

## **Grants and Financial Supports**

- SUSI: Ireland's national student grant scheme, which may help with fees and living costs.
- Student Assistance Fund (SAF): supports students who experience significant or unexpected financial difficulty during their studies.
- Scholarships and sporting supports: may be available depending on criteria and area of involvement.



# Life as a College Student

## Athlone: Your University Town

Athlone is centrally located with strong transport links, supporting both commuting and residential students.

The town offers a range of amenities that support student life, including accommodation options, green spaces, and social opportunities.



[View accommodation listings](#)



### Accommodation

Accommodation is an important consideration when preparing for college. Even for students who plan to commute initially, it can be reassuring to know that options are available should they choose to live with friends in later years.

Athlone provides a variety of accommodation types, including student villages, apartments, houses, and digs. Beginning the search early can help reduce pressure closer to the start of term.

The Students' Union provides practical advice and guidance on accommodation, tenants' rights, and navigating the local rental market.

### Moving Forward

Supporting a young person through the transition to third-level education can feel both exciting and challenging.

There is no single 'right' route into higher education. By staying informed, encouraging exploration, and keeping communication open, parents and guardians can help students approach decisions with confidence.

With the right supports in place, third-level education can be a positive and formative experience. You and your student are not expected to navigate this journey alone.

### Staying Connected

As the year progresses, staying informed can help parents and students feel supported and confident.

- Visit the TUS website for up-to-date information on courses, supports, and student life.
- Attend Open Days and campus visits to experience the campus first-hand.
- Follow TUS online for reminders, events, and key dates.
- Know where to find support and guidance when questions arise.

# Student Supports at TUS



A wide range of supports are available at TUS from application through to graduation.

Explore the resources below for more detailed information and supports relevant to your student's journey.

## **Courses at TUS** →

Explore the range of undergraduate courses available to help guide decisions around interests, strengths, and future career paths. Particularly useful if your student is still deciding what to study.

## **Admissions at TUS** →

Understand the application process, including key dates, entry routes, and what happens after applying. Helpful if you want clarity on how your student secures their place.

## **Open Days, Taster Days and Campus Visits** →

Attend an open day, book a visit, or take part in a taster day where students can experience classes, facilities, and campus life firsthand. Ideal for students who want to get a real feel for the environment before making a decision.

## **Students' Union** →

Get a sense of student life beyond lectures, including clubs, societies, events, and practical supports such as accommodation advice. Useful for understanding the day-to-day student experience.

## **Student Resource Centre** →

Learn about the supports available to help students settle in, stay on track, and succeed academically throughout their studies. Especially relevant during the transition into college life.

## **Access Services** →

Explore additional supports available for students who may need them, including disability supports, financial assistance, and learning supports. Important if your student may benefit from tailored support.

## **Student Health & Wellbeing** →

Find out about on-campus supports including medical care, counselling, and wellbeing services, ensuring students are supported both physically and mentally throughout their time at TUS.

