

09/03/2026

CAO Press Release

**** Embargoed until 00:01 on 10 March****

CAO receives 88,817 applications by 1 February deadline

On its 50th year in operation, CAO releases 2026 course choices data accompanied by data on significant milestones in the organisation's history.

The 2026 data shows applications by course classification, course level and by applicant address. Most CAO applicants will be permitted to use the Change of Mind facility when it opens on 5 May to add, remove or re-order course choices, which will result in changes to the figures released today. Late applications are also being accepted up to 1 May at 5pm.

The mission of the CAO is to be the leading provider of centralised application processing services into higher education in Ireland; since it was established, over 1.5 million students have taken up places in third-level institutions.

Speaking about the organisation's establishment, General Manager of CAO, Joseph O'Grady noted that "CAO offers a high degree of convenience to applicants and their advisors. It also offers considerable economies and efficiencies to Higher Education Institutions in filling their course places. Fairness and transparency are the foundations of the system, as well as equality of treatment for both applicants and participating Higher Education Institutions".

For CAO's first intake in 1977, there were 14,845 applicants. Five HEIs were participating (UCC, UCD, UCG, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, and Trinity College Dublin), with 69 courses in total on offer.

The organisation has seen significant changes and technological advancements since 1976, with the 1990s seeing the addition of Regional Technical Colleges, Colleges of Education and Private Colleges, bringing the number of participating institutions to 45 at its highest point. The number of HEIs has reduced in recent years due to mergers, amalgamations and the recent establishment of technological universities.

In 1992, the HEI Common Points Scale was introduced by the participating Higher Education Institutions to provide a common approach to Leaving Certificate admissions. This was complemented by the CAO's central evaluation software which helped to further streamline the admissions process.

"All too often, CAO is incorrectly conflated with or used as shorthand for the Common Points Scale established by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to facilitate their admission decisions. The essence of the CAO is the fair and transparent way applications, offers and acceptances are processed, and the order of preference system" added Mr O'Grady.

In 2000, the CAO's application form went online, almost completely replacing the paper application process within the space of a few years.

As the CAO was initially developed with Irish Leaving Certificate applicants in mind, over the years the increasing demand from other cohorts of applicants has seen centralised scoring and resources developed for GCE and QQI Further Education applicants.

Over the last number of years, a significant increase has also been seen in applications from EU applicants wishing to study at an Irish Higher Education Institution.

CAO also processes applications for mature applicants aged 23 years and over, applicants presenting other further education qualifications, and applicants who wish to apply for the HEAR and DARE supplementary admissions schemes. So far this year, there have been 7,249 mature applicants applying, 13,870 applicants indicating that they wish to be considered for the DARE scheme and 8,107 applicants indicating that they wish to be considered for the HEAR scheme. These figures are subject to change when the supporting documents are received and processed by CAO.

The following **2025 end of season application figures** highlight the diversity of application-types received by CAO*:

- 89,960 applicants
- 8,434 mature applicants (over 23-years of age)
- 71,687 applicants presenting Leaving Certificate (LC) results from 1985 to 2025
- 51,480 applicants to CAO presented LC from 2025
- 3,691 Applicants indicating General Certificate of Education (GCE) Qualification
- 13,347 having a QQI FET qualification
- 2,813 presenting Further Education (FE) awards other than a QQI FET qualification
- 10,414 presenting other school leaving exams.
- 7,194 presenting with previous attendance at Higher Education
- 12,067 applicants to the DARE scheme
- 8,222 applicants to the HEAR scheme

*Some applicants may appear in more than one category if they have relevant qualifications, for example a mature applicant may also be counted under the Leaving Certificate category and further education, etc.).

-Ends-

Notes to the Editor:

- **The 2026 Course Choices Data Sheets are attached in Excel format**

- A '50 Years of Milestones' document is also attached

- (<https://www2.cao.ie/otherinfo/50yearsofCAO.pdf>)

- The CAO uses the International Standard Classification of Education for Fields of Education and Training 2013 (ISCED-F). All CAO courses have been assigned one ISCED-F code. In addition, to reflect previous subject categories and particular groups, the CAO has implemented a specialist group classification. This specialist group classification is separate to the ISCED-F classification, and not all courses will be in a specialist group; however, it is possible for a course to be in two specialist groups.

- There are limitations to the year-on-year data comparisons by course classification due to the introduction or cancellation of courses, and as a result of some courses being re-classified by the HEI. The statistical category for each course is given in the accompanying spreadsheet.

- The address data is broken down by the address given on the application – these are grouped: county in Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, British, Other EU countries and other non-EU countries.

- 236 of the 88,817 applicants were Advanced Entry applicants only. The CAO processes applications for entry to years 2, 3 and 4 of undergraduate courses in some Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This entry route is known as Advanced Entry.

- The final DARE/HEAR completed application numbers will not be known until after all the documents have been received (after 10 March) and the screening of that information is complete.