

# System Performance Framework 2023- 2028: Glossary

## Purpose and scope

This glossary is provided to support mutual understanding of terminology used in the System Performance Framework 2023-2028. Many of the terms listed are in use in a variety of higher education contexts and can be understood and applied differently. The descriptions provided below are designed to aid institutions' understanding of how the terms apply in the System Performance Framework.<sup>1</sup> The glossary will be updated as needed throughout the framework period, to reflect the evolving understanding of terminology.

## Glossary

### Performance Objective

A Performance Objective is a succinct statement of a specific goal for performance that the institution will achieve or attain within the four-year period of the performance agreement. The rationale for selecting the Performance Objective or how the Performance Objective will be achieved need not be captured within the Performance Objective itself. This information will be outlined under rationale and implementation.

### Evidence-based

Performance objectives and targets should be evidence-based. This means that they should reflect a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound) picture of the current and potential performance in a given area. This will require the analysis of available data to ascertain baselines and recent trends, to identify the contributing factors, and to project the potential trajectory over the four-year period with reference to suitable benchmarks.

Institutions' reporting on performance objectives will also be evidence-based. An evidence base is ensured at the outset of the four-year period by selecting indicators and setting targets and by setting out a plan for the monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of those indicators against the agreed annual targets.

Not all outcomes and impacts will be anticipated (including unintended negative impacts) and it is recognised that there are some benefits and impacts that are difficult to measure. The annual self evaluation will provide institutions with opportunities to reflect on such results and comment on how any learning will be implemented.

### Activities

Activities make up the everyday work of the institution. These are often measured in terms of volume, reach or scale, e.g., number of grant applications, students enrolled, staff participants, certificates awarded, square metres of campus developed, energy savings projects completed, events or workshops held.

### Actions<sup>2</sup>

These are the initiatives undertaken as a result of the strategic decision made in response to an identified challenge or opportunity. When the action relates to an activity or process, it may be innovative or tried and tested, but should represent an attempt to improve a way of working to produce a better outcome, whether to meet a benchmark, or to build on an existing strength. Actions may change or be adapted over the short term in response to external factors or in response to learnings.

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1 In composing this glossary, the HEA has drawn on a number of sources. Where relevant, these sources are noted after the glossary entry and a link to the material has been provided.

2 The description and guidance provided on Actions, Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts draws from the Athena Swan Ireland 'Topic guide 4: Developing and implementing a targeted action plan' (Advance HE, 2021)

## Outputs

Outputs are the products of activities and actions and are sometimes referred to as ‘deliverables.’ An output is generally straightforward to report on as you should be able to easily identify whether or not it exists or has happened. The delivery of an output within a certain timeframe may provide a milestone of progress in the implementation of a Performance Objective but it does not provide a suitable indicator or target as it does not measure the results of the action or its effect.

Examples:

- Published policies or reports, e.g., new Strategic Plan or student success policy published.
- New programmes or routes, e.g., 3 new ITE programmes created, 5 new FE to HE entry routes created.
- Newly developed resources, e.g., guides to embedding SDG in curriculum developed and made available on website.
- New/additional amenities, e.g., built and opened 2 new audio editing suites.

Engagement with outputs can also be measured. Engagement or participation levels can be used to provide evidence of reach when talking about outcomes and impact, but these counts, amounts, or frequencies are not outcomes in themselves. For example, the statement ‘50 mature students from low DIS score communities in the region will complete the outreach programmes and receive a certificate’ demonstrates the reach of the activity and may act as a milestone of progress.

## Outcomes

Outcomes are the results of actions or activities. They reflect the changes that will contribute towards impact. They enable institutions to evaluate whether actions supporting Performance Objectives are working appropriately. The outcome of an action or activity is an indicator of whether or not it will be impactful over time.

Outcomes may be evaluated in terms of measurable improvement (or sustained performance) in efficiency or effectiveness of activities or actions, e.g., % of grant applications that were successful, % of students from a target group that progress to year 2, % increase in staff participating year on year, etc.

When designing a Performance Objective for Access and Participation, for example, a mature student outreach programme targeting adults from low DIS score communities in the region might be a supporting action. To establish the outcome of this action, a target for the result of the action that will contribute towards impact should be set, e.g., the proportion of programme participants who subsequently enrol in the institution. A qualitative indicator for this outcome could be the proportion of participants who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with a statement relating to confidence or interest in progressing to HE. In this example, targets for this proportion would be set and then monitored via annual survey.

**Secondary or unintended outcomes** are not expected to be identified in Performance Agreements. However, where observed, secondary or unintended outcomes provide insights that may be valuable for improving institutional or system learning. Secondary or unintended outcomes may be captured in the narrative sections of subsequent annual self-evaluation reporting. In the above example, the survey of participants before and after the programme may provide other insights and learnings on challenges or barriers, or examples of effective interventions.

## Impact

Impact describes the positive effect or change that occurs as a result of a well-executed action and are usually medium to long term.

For the purposes of the Performance Agreement, impact should be understood to refer to medium-term benefits, effects, or changes within one or more of the 11 transversal areas, that contribute to the achievement of institutional and national strategy.

Impacts can be assessed in terms of their 'reach and significance.'<sup>3</sup>

**Reach** is defined as 'the extent and/or diversity of the beneficiaries of the impact, as relevant to the nature of the impact.'

**Significance** is defined as 'the degree to which the impact has enabled, enriched, influenced, informed or changed the performance, policies, practices, products, services, understanding, awareness or well-being of the beneficiaries.'

It may not be possible to project or demonstrate all the impacts that will stem from the achievement of a performance objective, or from the supporting actions for that objective, within the four-year timeframe of the Performance Agreement. However, institutions will be expected to outline the intended impact of a performance objective within the rationale for that performance objective, and to include indicators and targets at the outcome and, where possible, impact level.

Annual reporting will capture evidence of outcomes, which indicate a contribution or pathway towards the intended impact. Secondary or unintended long-term outcomes, whether positive or negative, may also be captured in annual self-evaluation reporting to contribute to learning and adaptation.

## Evaluation of impact

Effective evaluation of the impact of a performance objective goes beyond monitoring (i.e., the ongoing process of systematically collecting data on an outcome to check if an action has been implemented correctly). Evaluating impact involves the systematic assessment of a performance objective and its design, implementation, and results. Evaluation is concerned with an objective's effectiveness (i.e., did it do what it was intended to do?) and efficiency (i.e., did it do this well?) to assess its impact and sustainability. Therefore, achieving and evidencing impact requires measurable targets, well-managed implementation, and a strategic approach to gathering and evaluating quantitative or qualitative data.

## Indicator

The indicator is the data or metric that institutions will use to monitor progress and measure success. Indicators must be measurable (i.e., quantifiable) and, for the purposes of the Performance Agreement, should measure change at the outcome or impact level. That is, they should measure the results of actions rather than the completion or scale of actions or activities.

Outputs or other milestones that cannot be measured annually and are not comparable year to year may be used to monitor progress internally but are not appropriate as indicators. For example, 'draft dignity at work policy', 'publish dignity at work policy', 'implement key actions of dignity at work policy across all schools' are useful milestones but do not meet the criteria for indicators as they do not represent a change at the outcome level and are not measurable or comparable. Suitable indicators here might include 'x% increase in proportion of bullying and harassment reports made which are processed within 3 months,' or '# staff, x% of total staff agree with statement 'I have witnessed the use of discriminatory language by staff/colleagues in the past 6 months.'

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3 Definitions of reach and significance are drawn from the Research Excellence Framework (REF) UK, [Panel Criteria and Working methods](#). (REF, 2019/02)

## Target

A target is the value (number and proportion) for the given indicator that you are aiming to achieve in the period specified.

**Annual targets** in the indicator tables should be disaggregated where possible, i.e., where possible they should show the value to be achieved *within* that year, rather than *by* that year.

The **cumulative target** is the value that you aim to achieve within or over the four years, not including any value achieved prior to the start of the period. The proportion figure under cumulative target should be expressed as the difference in proportion (percentage point increase) relative to the baseline, or the average across the four-year period, as appropriate. Any observed or projected trends (relative change or rate of change) can be noted in the narrative sections.

## Baseline

This is the numeric starting point for a given performance indicator. Where the indicator selected does not have a baseline within the institution, for example where a new survey question will be monitored or the indicator relates to a new initiative without precedent that is being launched, this should be clearly explained in the implementation section for the Performance Objective.

## Benchmark

To support contextualisation of performance, indicator baselines and targets should be compared with relevant external benchmarking data. Benchmarking with appropriate comparators will support understanding of the scale of the challenge and/or opportunities for the institution. The benchmarks chosen will depend on the institution's context (e.g., mission; scale; disciplinary focus). Example benchmarks include:

- Sector-wide data from the Higher Education Authority.
- International data, for example from individual institutions or sub-units, or from sector agencies such as the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency.
- Discipline, region, or industry-specific data, such as those acquired from a professional body, society, or research organisation.
- Discipline or mission-specific benchmarks collected from similar institutions, departments or units in higher education institutions in Ireland or abroad.
- Data available through published institutional self-reporting for example, Athena Swan Applications or Action Plans, or Public Sector Duty reporting.
- Irish census data.
- Eurostat/European Commission data.

For some Performance Objectives it may be more challenging to identify appropriate external benchmarking data. In these cases, benchmarking should still be attempted. It should be explained in the 'Rationale' for the Performance Objective why particular benchmarks have been used.

## Data<sup>4</sup>

Data refers to the **inputs** which are collected, collated, and analysed to identify trends and insights, make projections, and inform strategy and decision-making. Data analysis will inform the selection of performance objectives and the setting of targets. Data analysis should also be used to evaluate, and provide evidence of, performance, including through the production of the indicator metrics.

Data may include raw counts such as student numbers or published papers; qualitative evidence such as testimonials, survey responses, or review findings; metrics such as progression rates or citation index scores.

Data comes in two forms or types, **quantitative and qualitative**.<sup>5</sup>

**Quantitative data** is made up of numbers such as head counts, proportions, ratings.

**Qualitative data** is made up of text, and deals with the expression of opinions, thoughts and feelings. Your institution may already gather qualitative data in the form of free-text sections of student evaluations, or student or staff surveys or consultation, and some qualitative data is gathered at a system level, for example via the National Student Survey.

While opinions and perceptions are often investigated using qualitative techniques, quantitative methods can be applied to assess strength of opinion. For example, a survey may ask participants to indicate how strongly they agree with a statement using a scale. An initial round of qualitative data gathering may be required when designing the survey in order to generate a set of statements for rating.

The **data controller** is the body or department/unit/function that collects, analyses, or verifies data.

The context section of the Performance Agreement asks for information on available data or existing **data collection systems**. This includes the processes (e.g., survey, registration, disclosure mechanisms), the infrastructures (e.g., student records systems, IT network) the tools (e.g., data processing and analytics software) and other capacity and resources (e.g., data analysts, GDPR expertise). It also asks for information on relevant data gaps and plans to address these gaps and improve data collection systems or processes.

The **Data Source** is the collection process (e.g., survey, registration), report, database or repository from which the data is sourced. For example, the national Student Survey, the HEA SRS, the Scopus Index, the record of testimonial accounts from the 'XXX Project'.

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4 The description and guidance provided on data draws from the Athena Swan Ireland '[Topic guide 2: collecting and analysing data](#)' (Advance HE, 2021).

5 The description of quantitative and qualitative data is drawn from Advance HE's '[Research and data briefing 1, Working with data](#)' (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016).





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