

# Performance Agreement 2024–2028 between the HEA and University College Cork



**UCC**

University College Cork, Ireland  
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

**HEA** | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY  
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

## Preamble

This Performance Agreement is established between the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and University College Cork in accordance with the System Performance Framework 2023–28. The agreement identifies University College Cork’s performance objectives and the associated implementation, monitoring, assessment, and reporting processes.

This Performance Agreement will be used by the HEA to measure and assess the strategic performance of the institution via an annual cycle of reporting against the agreement and Strategy and Performance Dialogue. University College Cork should notify the HEA in writing of any proposed modifications to the Performance Agreement with a supporting rationale when submitting the annual report. Any agreed amendments to the Performance Agreement will be recorded by the HEA with the supporting rationale. This information may inform future monitoring and review processes and inform HEA reporting at a system level.

The HEA and University College Cork acknowledge that policy underlying some or all of this Performance Agreement is subject to review from time to time by the HEA or Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The HEA and University College Cork agree that if changes need to be made to the Performance Agreement because of such a review, the HEA will notify the institution in writing.

This Performance Agreement will be published on the HEA website in line with the HEA mandate to measure and assess institutions’ strategic performance with a view to strengthening the performance of the higher education and research system and of Higher Education Institutions, and to ensure institutions’ accountability. It is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that the information presented in the Performance Agreement (including qualitative and quantitative data) is accurate.

The term of this Performance Agreement is from September 2024 to August 2028 unless terminated earlier by agreement.

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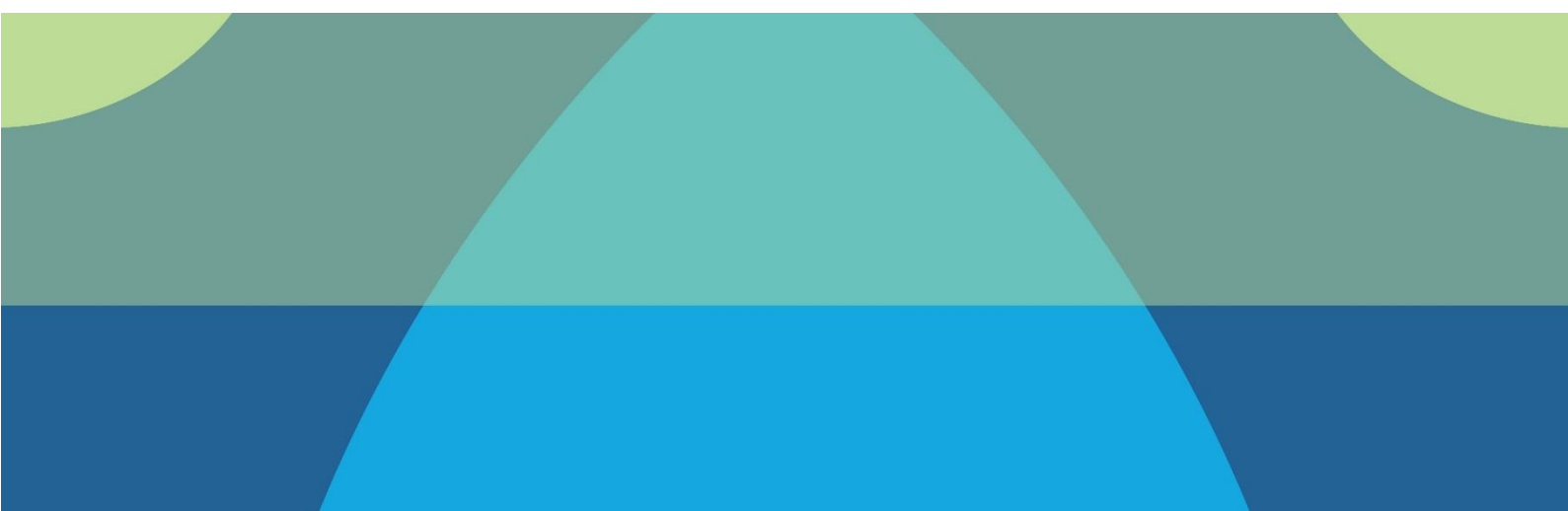
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# Performance Agreement 2024–2028

## Section 1: Context

### Overview of the institution and its context

Established in 1845 as Queen’s College Cork, University College Cork (UCC) has a tradition of excellent education and creative discovery spanning over 178 years. Since first opening its gates to welcome the original 115 students, UCC today is a comprehensive, research-based, globally oriented university with 24,385 students, 3,442 staff and over 220,000 alumni worldwide. The University’s mission is to create and sustain an inclusive environment and culture to enable transformative research and learning for the enrichment of society and stewardship of our planet.

Today, it is a comprehensive university committed to providing high-quality education across its portfolio of programmes at undergraduate, graduate taught and graduate research levels in the Arts, Business, Engineering, Science, Food Sciences, Mathematics, Healthcare, Law and Social Sciences. UCC’s academic structure for the delivery of its research and education consists of four Colleges: Arts, Celtic Studies and the Social Sciences; Business and Law; Science, Engineering and Food Science; and Medicine and Health. Within these Colleges, there are 27 Schools delivering a portfolio of programmes positioned on Ireland’s National Framework of Qualifications.

In addition to the portfolio of major awards offered, a wide range of lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities are available for students on a part-time, flexible or online basis. UCC’s signature Adult Continuing Education (ACE) Programme has students studying for undergraduate and postgraduate awards, as well as short courses, on an ongoing basis. UCC’s Centre for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provides credit and non-credit bearing CPD programmes to support academic and professional development of learners. UCC’s Irish Management Institute (IMI) has a primary focus on Executive Education. Furthermore, through the Human Capital Initiative, UCC is working alongside other national higher education institutions to develop a national framework for micro-credentials. These provide accredited, flexible learning programmes driving lifelong learning to a wide audience.

With research excellence, discovery, innovation and impact at its core, UCC has several world-leading research centres including Tyndall National Institute, APC Microbiome Ireland and the Sustainability Institute incorporating the Environmental Research Institute (ERI), and the Centre for Marine Renewable Energy Ireland (MaREI). Under its [Strategic Plan 2023–2028 Securing our Future](#), the University has established the [UCC Futures Framework](#) as a programme of research excellence in ten indicative areas including: Sustainability; Food, Microbiome and Health; Radical Humanities; Quantum and Photonics; Future Medicines; Future Pharma; Artificial Intelligence; Ageing and Brain Science; Collective Social Futures and Children.

As an organisation with a €450m budget, the university contributes enormously to the economic well-being of the city and region. UCC is a key attractor for investment and growth in the Munster region. Seven world-leading pharma, health and technology companies are based in Cork. Ready access to

UCC's talented students, staff and world-class research centres is a strong attractor for these companies.

UCC's current [Strategic Plan 2023–28, Securing Our Future](#) was launched in February 2023 following an extensive process of consultation with internal and external stakeholders. The Strategic Plan has five Strategic Goals: Research & Innovation; Student Success; Global Engagement; Our Staff, Our Culture; and Our Place, Our Footprint.

With delivery of the Strategic Plan, by 2028 UCC aims to be:

- globally recognised for its distinctive research in niche areas of excellence.
- a digitally enhanced learning environment delivering a research-based curriculum.
- the university of choice for postgraduate study in signature areas of excellence.
- an internationally engaged university, with global impact.
- a place of embedded fairness, equality and inclusivity.
- a connected university that is effectively engaged with all stakeholders.

Goal 4 of UCC's Strategic Plan is to implement a progressive and inclusive people and culture plan to attract, develop and retain our talent. This goal and its associated actions encompass UCC's entire community, underpin all its activities and shape the university's approach to strategy implementation including the Performance Agreement. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is recognised as a key enabler of the Strategic Plan and the University has committed to enhancing excellence and impact by integrating equality, diversity, inclusion and belonging into the design, execution and monitoring of university activities, including those identified in the Performance Agreement. The strategy sets out that UCC will continue to foster an environment which is fair, inclusive and diverse, creating a positive workplace and a culture of belonging. UCC currently holds 18 school and departmental Athena Swan awards and is due to submit its Silver Institutional Athena Swan award in November 2024. UCC will develop the university's first Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (EDIB) Framework (2024–2028) to further embed EDIB across all functions within the university.

Goal 5 of UCC's Strategic Plan is to radically reform practices and use of space and technology to meet the University's ambitious sustainability and climate action goals. UCC's new Office of Sustainability and Climate Action will ensure that this imperative of sustainability underpins all plans and actions to reimagine and reform UCC's operations and estate by 2028. [UCC's Sustainability and Climate Action Plan \(2023–2028\)](#) sets out how UCC will continue to embed sustainability goals and targets across all aspects of the University's educational, research, ancillary operations, infrastructural developments and interactions with the community, including across all objectives of this Performance Agreement.

UCC has historically high numbers of staff and students. The total number of staff, for the academic year 2023/24, by category of post is:

Staff Numbers	Headcount	FTE
Academic	1,011	950.03
Research	1,011	938.47
Support (Professional) Staff	1,509	1,352.39
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,531</b>	<b>3,240.89</b>

Table 1: Staff profile. Source: HRIS as of September 2023.

There are approximately another 1,500 part-time and other staff contributing to University activity on an ongoing basis.

The total number of students by enrolment type is:

	March 2023		March 2024	
	Headcount	FTE	Headcount	FTE
Undergraduate				
FT Undergraduate	14,854	13,941.58	14,946	14,135.27
PT Undergraduate	164	161.58	154	184.75
Distance Undergraduate	0	0.00	0	0.00
Visiting Undergraduate	1,224	600.69	1,351	637.76
Total Undergraduate (Excl. Visiting)	15,018	14,103.16	15,100	14,320.02
<b>Total Undergraduate</b>	<b>16,242</b>	<b>14,703.85</b>	<b>16,451</b>	<b>14,957.78</b>
Postgraduate				
FT Postgraduate	3,764	4,992.73	4,129	5,563.65
PT Postgraduate	2,493	1,550.39	2,677	1,551.15
Distance Postgraduate	158	58.75	157	56.83
Visiting Postgraduate	39	7.42	45	7.83
Total Postgraduate (Excl. Visiting)	6,415	6,601.86	6,963	7,171.64
<b>Total Postgraduate</b>	<b>6,454</b>	<b>6,609.28</b>	<b>7,008</b>	<b>7,179.47</b>
Total Undergraduate and Postgraduate (Excl. Visiting)	21,433	20,705.02	22,063	21,491.66
Total Undergraduate and Postgraduate	22,696	21,313.13	23,459	22,137.25
*Adult Continuing Education (Professional)	1,689		1,795	
<b>Overall Total</b>	<b>24,385</b>		<b>25,254</b>	

Table 2: Student profile. Source: UCC Data Warehouse as of March 2023 & March 2024

\*UCC's Adult Continuing Education Programme has c.2,800 learners studying for UG/PG Awards and short courses annually. 1,689 were studying for UG & PG awards in March 2023 (1,795 in March 2024) and are included in our overall student headcount.

## Approach to the development of the Performance Agreement

Learning from previous iterations of Performance Compact development, UCC's strategic planning process in 2022 was conducted with the anticipated UCC–HEA Performance Agreement foremost in mind. This Performance Agreement and its objectives are thus strongly aligned with the Strategic Plan, its five goals (Research and Innovation, Student Success, Global Engagement, Our People, Our Culture and Our Place, Our Footprint) and its actions. UCC's Strategic Plan also spans the same 2023 to 2028 period and its 14 Measures of Success (Key Performance Indicators) align closely with the HEA System Performance Dashboard.

UCC consulted extensively with internal and external stakeholders between May 2022 and December 2022 to inform the development of the goals, objectives, actions, KPIs and targets of the Strategic Plan and of the Performance Agreement. Consultation included an extensive external stakeholder reputation survey, multiple staff and student consultation sessions, and Governing Body and University Leadership Team (ULT) workshops. The planning process culminated in the formal approval of the Strategic Plan by ULT, Academic Council and Governing Body.

Learning from other institutional review and evaluation processes has been incorporated. These processes include previous rounds of Strategy and Performance Dialogue, Strategic Plan development, QQI CINTE Reviews, QQI Annual Quality Reviews (AQRs), Athena Swan Ireland self-assessment, HEInnovate and other benchmarking and consultation exercises. Central to the development and identification of Strategic Plan goals and Performance Agreement objectives has been the consideration of climate, environment and sustainability and of equality, diversity, and inclusion, including approaches to assessing and mitigating any negative effects or impacts. These principles also inform our Global Engagement Plan, currently being delivered under University strategy, which is designed to maximise our global impact.

UCC's approach to selecting indicators of success for this Performance Agreement has been considered, strategic and practical. There is strong overlap between the indicators identified as part of the Performance Agreement and the Measures of Success that the University is monitoring and proactively managing as part of the University's Strategic Plan. Delivery of these indicators over the lifetime of the Performance Agreement will therefore bring UCC closer to the delivery of the five goals of our Strategy.

The indicators chosen are primarily impact- and outcome-focused. We have avoided operational metrics and focused on key strategic deliverables. Some of the indicators are inter-connected insofar as the delivery of one will aid the probability of delivering on another. The metrics chosen are primarily from robust, deep and comparable datasets which are all highly likely to remain in place for the duration of the Performance Agreement. We have used the HEA System Performance Dashboard, HEA Institutional Profiles, Student Survey, and European Commission data to inform the indicators, in addition to our internal dashboard and data. In doing so, we are endeavouring to better utilise and leverage the sector data that is available, in line with the CINTE Review recommendation in 2023.

The indicators reflect the current national policy context. Due consideration has been given to climate, environment and sustainable development, in accordance with UCC’s strategic direction and public sector obligations. The indicators reflect all three missions of higher education institutions in Ireland. They reflect engagement with stakeholders across academia but also business and enterprise, government, and civil society. They are in line with UCC’s mission and in keeping with the values of UCC.

## Structures in place for evaluation

UCC’s leadership team (University Leadership Team — ULT) provides leadership on all areas of University activity across its four Colleges, with responsibility for academic programmes and access and admissions falling within the remit of the Deputy President & Registrar, teaching and learning falling with the Vice President for Learning & Teaching, responsibility for research and innovation lying with the Vice President for Research & Innovation, and internationalisation lying with the Vice President for Global Engagement.

ULT and its subcommittees were devised and structured to deliver on its Strategic Plan and in anticipation of the need to develop, monitor and implement the Performance Agreement. In December 2022, UCC established a Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee of ULT to oversee, monitor and review the implementation of UCC’s Strategic Plan, with a focus on outputs, outcomes and impacts. Given the coherence of UCC’s approach to strategy development and to the development of the Performance Agreement, the development, implementation and monitoring of the Performance Agreement was also included in the Sub-Committee’s terms of reference. Student representatives are included on the ULT Strategy Implementation Sub-Committee.

The ULT Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee meets quarterly to report on and monitor strategy implementation and to monitor and report on performance against UCC’s Strategic Plan Measures of Success (Key Performance Indicators) and the indicators and targets of this Performance Agreement. An Annual Plan and KPI report are prepared and reviewed, with recommendations implemented and tracked. When required, the Sub-Committee will recommend measures to ULT, which has the authority to make informed decisions on resourcing and to remove barriers that may be impeding progress and implementation of the Strategy and Performance Agreement. Progress reports on the delivery of the Strategy Annual Implementation Plan and KPIs are considered by both ULT and Governing Authority. Progress is reported to the Governing Authority bi-annually. Once the Performance Agreement is agreed, progress reports on the delivery of the Performance Agreement will also be considered by the ULT, the ULT Strategy Implementation Sub-Committee and by Governing Authority.

UCC has developed a Power BI-based KPI ‘Measures of Success’ dashboard for monitoring and communicating progress towards achieving the annual and cumulative targets. The key metrics of this Performance Agreement are drawn from UCC’s Measures of Success. UCC’s processes for data collection, KPI monitoring, and dissemination will continuously improve over the lifetime of the

Strategic Plan and Performance Agreement as circumstances change and as technology develops.

In preparing the first draft Performance Agreement, ULT, at its meeting of 9<sup>th</sup> October 2023, considered and discussed the HEA documentation and template and approved an approach to the development of the draft Performance Agreement. The ULT Strategy Implementation Sub-Committee discussed the Performance Agreement at its meeting of 8<sup>th</sup> October 2023 and the first draft Performance Agreement was subsequently discussed and approved at the ULT meeting of 7<sup>th</sup> November 2023. This second draft Performance Agreement was informed by feedback from the UCC–HEA meeting of 26<sup>th</sup> January 2024 and subsequent discussions at subgroup level and at the ULT meetings of 20<sup>th</sup> February and 5<sup>th</sup> March 2024. The final draft Performance Agreement was approved for submission by ULT at its meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2024. Feedback was received from the HEA on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024. This feedback was considered and approved by ULT on 27<sup>th</sup> August. The Governing Authority approved a final version of the Performance Agreement on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2024, subject to any further feedback from the HEA. Further feedback was subsequently received from the HEA on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2024. Amendments, arising from this feedback, have been incorporated into the document. The revised version will be circulated to the Governing Authority for approval by email.

## Section 2: Performance Objectives

### Performance Objective 1

To achieve a Student Survey Student–Faculty Interaction Indicator Score of 13.5 for 2028.

**Pillar:** Teaching and Learning

**Transversals:** Flexibility, Upskilling & Lifelong Learning; Student Success.

#### Rationale for Performance Objective 1

Student–Faculty Interaction explores the extent to which students interact with academic staff. Interactions with academic staff can positively influence students’ cognitive growth, development, and persistence.

A high Indicator Score for Student–Faculty Interaction is a key indicator of a student-centred, inclusive, and digitally enhanced learning environment, a Connected Curriculum and an outstanding student experience. This is in line with [Embedding Student Success: A Guiding Framework](#) (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2021).

Whilst some indicators, such as Quality of Interaction Score and Collaborative Learning Score, show significant improvements in trend over time, the Student–Faculty Interaction Score continues to emerge longitudinally as an area for development. For example, the UCC scores have been consistently lower than the average mean score for other universities (see Table 3). Nevertheless, the stability of this score over several years indicates that the student experience at UCC is consistent year on year, according to this element of the annual survey.

<b>Student–Faculty Interaction</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
UCC (University College Cork)	11	11.3	10.9	8.1	11	11.5
TCD (Trinity College Dublin)	12.3	12.4	12.5	7.88	13.1	12.6
UCD (University College Dublin)	13.2	13.6	13.3	9.5	13.1	13.1
UG (University of Galway)	14	14.1	13.5	9.4	11.9	12.8
UL (University of Limerick)	12.8	13.3	13.8	9.04	11.9	12.6
DCU (Dublin City University)	12.8	12.9	11.1	9.02	12.6	13.4
<b>University Sector Average</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>12.9</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>12.3</b>	<b>12.6</b>

Table 3: UCC score versus benchmark (other universities).

The selection of this Performance Objective is aligned with the University Strategic Plan, Goal Two: Student Success. The key action called out is:

- 2.4 Support student success, health, and wellbeing, informed by the student voice.

Furthermore, the ULT Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee took a decision in March 2023 that the Student Survey Student–Faculty Interaction Score would form part of the University Strategic Plan Measures of Success (Key Performance Indicators) for the next five years. UCC has identified this aspect of the survey as an area for improvement.

### Implementation, monitoring, assessment, and reporting on Performance Objective 1

Consulting widely across all levels of the organisation, communicating the benefits of continued participation in StudentSurvey.ie and maximising the outcomes on foot of the survey results are key focuses of our institutional strategy. The ways in which we use the responses, optimise key findings for maximum reach and visibility and showcase enhancements are part of a larger cycle of activity in achieving impact. The ability to capture and analyse data on the student experience is a key requirement for achieving our commitment to quality. Responses are analysed at institutional, College, School, and programme level, serving as a guide for continued enhancement of teaching and learning and encouraging local dialogue on quality priorities.

Data are accessed via the i-graduate In Touch dashboard, a Power BI-driven data analysis and visualisation tool which is available to analyse the results of StudentSurvey.ie. Using the In Touch dashboard, results are available for every fieldwork period since 2017, allowing us to track changes across the years. For each indicator, this tool enables us to compare the indicator score for respondents in any given programme, college, or School with relevant comparators within the institution and nationally. Depending on the chosen dashboard filter, different data perspectives can be retrieved to visualize the data of most interest by Academic Unit or by Year of Study, and/or the individual questions relating to this indicator can be further examined.

Related to the Student Survey ‘Student–Faculty Interaction’ Score, we saw an improvement in the overall score in 2023, moving from **11.00** in 2022 to **11.5** in 2023, although this is still below the national average for universities (**12.87**). Comparison of indicator scores for various disciplines illustrates the variation that exists between fields of study, as outlined below. The proportion of students studying disciplines also influences the overall results (see Table 4).

Academic Unit	Headcount 2023	Indicator Scores (Mean)
Adult Continuing Education	1,139	10.4
Arts, Celtic Studies, and Social Sciences	4,031	12.3
Business and Law	3,290	11.3
Medicine and Health	2,983	11.1
Science, Engineering and Food Science	2,584	10.7

Table 4: Student–Faculty Interaction indicator scores — by Academic Unit.

Furthermore, we would not expect a uniformity of scores across colleges; the differing profiles represent the strengths of disciplines within these Colleges, and the Colleges themselves are best placed to interpret these profiles against their expectations. Looking at the indicator score to explore the experiences of different groups of respondents when compared to other Irish Universities, we see — first-year cohort (Y1: UCC **8.1**, Irish Universities **9.5**), final-year respondents (YF: UCC **13.0**, Irish

Universities **14.2**) and finally postgraduate respondents (PGT: **16.0**, Irish Universities **16.9**).

A frequent concern highlighted in our results is interaction with academic teaching staff. A fundamental aspect of student engagement is the student identifying with their discipline, and this happens largely by observing and interacting with academic staff. Furthermore, the results indicate that positive outcomes associated with Student–Faculty interaction inside the classroom and laboratory have been reported for students of all types and that frequency and quality of interaction with faculty can influence various student outcomes. A cluster analysis has revealed three areas that will act as a guide for this project. Those are as follows:

- 1) Engagement
- 2) Awareness
- 3) Enhancing student outcomes.

A consultative process will be initiated with Heads of Colleges, Teaching and Learning representatives and other key stakeholders and it is hoped that these exercises will encourage staff to find solutions to create an enhanced environment for teaching and learning within their respective areas.

The Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee of the University Leadership Team, as referenced above in Section 1, Part 3, will continuously monitor the indicators and targets of this Performance Objective.

Working collaboratively, the Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee, the Office of the Deputy President and Registrar, and the Office of Academic Affairs and Governance will advise on specific strategic actions to be taken that will support success. These include but are not limited to:

- **Identifying a culture of authentic engagement.** University leaders are uniquely positioned to empower faculty members with the right tools to help them be proactive.
- **Developing a toolkit for mapping student–staff partnerships** at UCC.
- **Ensuring that student engagement and partnership are actioned through practical opportunities** for students and staff to work together in meaningful ways.
- **Creating an informal communication channel to extend interactions** with students. University leaders can spread awareness of this resource from the top and encourage students to reach out to faculty members.
- **Empowering classroom engagement** by listening to the feedback and expertise of faculty members to ensure they have the tools they need to help students succeed.

This performance objective is aligned with the mission of the organisation to provide an outstanding student experience for all students. Engaging with academic teaching staff will be a critical activity on the part of this project, heightening awareness of the proposed target and partnering in support of growth initiatives at a local level.

To support this Performance Objective, a Measures of Success (MoS) dashboard has been developed to evaluate and monitor progress effectively. Underpinned by Student Survey data, the MoS are output- and impact-focused. The MoS are driven by targets and baseline analysis utilising institution-level data in the first instance. The Student–Faculty Interaction Score will have a stepped target approach, increasing by 0.5 annually. This will provide a benchmark for measuring progress and reflect accurate performance over time. Based on current scoring trends, a score of 13.5 is predicted to be achieved by 2028.

#### **Alternative arrangements in 2024**

As the Student Survey National Steering Group took the decision in November 2023 that fieldwork for StudentSurvey.ie 2024 will not proceed, UCC will deploy a placeholder survey using those questions from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement that relate to UCC’s performance objectives. A working group has been established with members drawn from Quality Enhancement, UCC Students’ Union, Systems Administration, and those engaged in teaching and learning activities across the University. This group will ensure a consistency of approach and effective collection of data locally in the absence of the national survey.

#### **Selection of Replacement Indicator(s) Aligned with the StudentSurvey.ie 2026 Questionnaire**

In line with the introduction of the revised national *StudentSurvey.ie* instrument, Indicator 1.1 has been updated to reflect the new survey question set replacing items previously used in the Taught Student Survey. The revised indicator draws on questions that most closely align with the **Student–Faculty Interaction** construct measured in the UCC Voices Student Survey. These items capture key aspects of student engagement with academic staff, including discussion of course topics, opportunities to discuss academic performance, and teaching practices that support student learning, such as clarity of learning outcomes and teaching approaches that facilitate understanding.

Although the national survey does not include direct measures relating to discussion of career goals with staff or collaboration beyond coursework, the selected questions represent the closest validated proxies available within the updated instrument and provide an appropriate basis for measuring student–staff academic engagement. The indicator therefore draws on the following survey items: discussion of course topics with academic staff; opportunities to discuss academic performance with academic staff; clarity of learning outcomes; and teaching practices that support learning.

Indicator 1.1, referred to as **Student Survey Student–Faculty Interaction Score** in 2024/25, is referred to as **“Average score for Student–Staff Engagement”** from 2026 onwards. This metric focuses specifically on the frequency and quality of interactions between students and academic staff. This approach provides a clear, focused measure of student–staff engagement, closely reflecting the intent of the original Student–Faculty Interaction Score.

## Indicator and targets for Performance Objective 1

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
1.1	<b>Average score for Student-Staff Engagement in Student Survey<sup>1</sup></b>	<a href="#">Student Survey.ie</a> ; UCC Voices Student Survey <sup>2</sup>	Quantitative	2023: 11.5	Attain university sector average (12.6)	<b>12.0</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>13.0</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>13.5</b> <b>(+2.0 on baseline)</b>

<sup>1</sup> Average score from Section B, Questions 1, (Have you discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with academic staff?) 2 (Have academic staff clearly explained the learning outcomes or objectives for their module?) and 3 (Have academic staff taught in a way that helps you to learn?), and Section D, question 1 (How often have you taken opportunities to discuss your academic performance with academic staff?).

<sup>2</sup> For continuity, the UCC Voices Student Survey will most likely be used to report a score in 2026/27 when national Student Survey results are not available. The score will be calculated using the same syntax applied to the Student Survey. It is expected to utilise the same core questions outlined above to ensure consistency and allow for comparable benchmarking.

## Performance Objective 2

**To achieve a student–staff ratio of 17:1 by 2028 in accordance with the University’s Strategic Plan.**

**Pillar:** Teaching & Learning

**Transversals:** Flexibility, Upskilling & Lifelong Learning; Student Success; Enterprise; International; Digital Transformation.

### Rationale for Performance Objective 2

[Funding the Future](#) (DFHERIS, 2022) states that the ratio of students to academic staff in Irish higher education institutions is now an outlier relative to European counterparts. It notes that current student–staff ratios challenge quality and have contributed to deterioration in the position of Irish institutions in international rankings. The adoption of a sustainable funding model is essential to enable steps to be taken to move back towards European and OECD norms in terms of staffing ratios.

[Securing Our Future UCC Strategic Plan 2023–2028](#) sets a target of achieving a student-to-staff ratio of 17:1 by 2028. It is an ambitious target focused on positive student outcomes in education and employability. Achieving this target would bring UCC closer to many of the Irish institutions in the sector and closer to OECD norms of 15/16:1 for tertiary institutions across the OECD countries, while further enhancing our students’ educational experience. Reduction in the student-to-staff ratio is also widely accepted as integral to a quality learning and teaching environment. It is particularly important in a comprehensive university where many disciplines, such as the health sciences, require significant individual student engagement. As well as its strategic importance to UCC as a measure of success, student-to-staff ratio is routinely used as an indicator of quality in UCC’s systematic quality enhancement process of academic units.

The HEA System Performance Dashboard provides a benchmark datapoint of 18:1, being a sector average for the year 2022/23. Separately, 2019/20 is the year of the most recent standardised data for individual institutions available for bespoke benchmarking purposes. [Higher Education System Performance Institutional Profiles 2019/20](#) data have been used to benchmark nationally as follows:

<b>Student FTE/Academic Staff Ratio</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
UCC	21
TCD	17
UCD	20
NUIG	20
UL	22

*Table 5: Student–Staff ratio. Source: HEA Institutional and System Profile Data.*

Baseline data is more recent in UCC, and we have included two baseline years: the 2021/22 academic year and the 2022/23 academic year. Baseline student–staff ratio is calculated as 21.8:1 and 20.49:1, respectively, for these years.

Notes on the indicator table:

*The mean or median (or both) for the 8 universities, from the HEA institutional profiles, is potentially a more comparable benchmark than the 18:1 ratio from the HEA System Performance Dashboard. The latter includes all HEIs and, as has been referenced, the Technological Universities and former Institutes of Technology would traditionally have had lower class sizes than the universities. That said, we have used the HEA System Performance Dashboard metric for benchmarking purposes as it is more recent data and is reflective of the entire sector in Ireland.*

*Many issues exist with regard to benchmarking student–staff ratio, e.g. the non-standard approach taken by the universities, the inability to use ranking agency data as the agencies do not have a set definition, the fact that OECD data looks at 'tertiary education institutions' (which could include a variety of types of third-level institutions and is not specific to universities, etc.).*

*Furthermore, looking at (core) 'academic staff' FTE versus student FTE could be viewed as being oversimplistic as cohorts of 'research academic staff', for example, also contribute academically on a daily basis.*

## **Implementation, monitoring, assessment, and reporting on Performance Objective 2**

The Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee of the University Leadership Team, as referenced above in Section 1, Part 3, will continuously monitor the indicators and targets of this Performance Objective.

There is a commitment by UCC to prioritise the recruitment of academic posts and to improve planned staff recruitment through the introduction of more formal workforce planning processes. Workforce planning is a practical activity and can be defined as 'having the right people in the right place, at the right time, and at the right cost'. In its basic form, it is about estimating workforce demand and comparing it with current supply to identify the gaps and establish appropriate actions. Planning timeframes can be from very short term (hours, days and weeks) to the familiar annual planning horizon linked to budgets and anticipating recruitment and training needs, to the longer-term planning for highly skilled people that may take many years to develop and achieve. There are many benefits of workforce planning, not only from a financial perspective but also from a talent perspective. Organisations that execute workforce planning well can attract and retain the best talent.

UCC is currently developing a Strategic Workforce Planning Approach where Finance and People data are integrated, and which forecasts people-demand aligned to affordability and delivery of UCC strategic objectives. The longer-term approach is to identify the critical workforce groups and skillsets required to inform our specific resourcing activities to attract, hire and retain key staff.

## Indicator and targets for Performance Objective 2

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
2.1	<b>Student-Staff Ratio</b>  <b>Total Student FTE (March 1st) divided by Academic FTE (Sept 30th)</b>	Student Data: HEA SRS and System Performance Dashboard  Staff Data: HRIS	Quantitative	2021/22: 21.8:1  2022/23: 20.49:1	Sector Average (18:1 in 2022/23)	<b>20</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>17:1</b>

## Performance Objective 3

**To achieve twenty (20) new European Research Council (ERC) awards by 2028.**

**Pillar:** Research & Innovation

**Transversals:** Society; International; Institutional Leadership & Culture.

### Rationale for Performance Objective 3

The [European Research Council](#) (ERC), established in 2007, is the premier European funding agency for frontier research. It has a mission to ‘encourage the highest quality research in Europe through competitive funding and to support investigator-driven frontier research across all fields, on the basis of scientific excellence’. It is investigator-driven in nature, allowing researchers of any nationality and any age to identify novel focus in any field of research. From 2021 to 2027, the ERC will distribute funds of ~€16 billion, equating to 17% of the total Horizon Europe budget, across four core funding schemes: Starting, Consolidator, Advanced and Synergy grants. To date, ERC projects have led to more than 200,000 scientific journal publications and over 2,000 patents and other intellectual property applications, in addition to founding or co-founding more than 400 start-ups.

As the most prestigious source of frontier research funding, the ERC attracts the very best of established and emerging research leaders. Their research effects change in disciplines spanning the sciences, technologies and humanities, and has real-world, broad-ranging impacts. UCC has not, to date, performed well across the suite of ERC grant offerings. Goal 1 of the [Strategic Plan 2023–2028](#) states that we will: ‘Deliver impactful research and innovation that addresses global grand challenges in signature areas of excellence through the [UCC Futures](#) framework, resulting in a distinctive research reputation’.

Specifically, under Strategic Approach 1.2, we are:

- (i) ‘Us[ing] a strategic hiring approach under the UCC Futures thematic areas where all new academic hires demonstrate the potential to achieve prestigious funding awards such as European Research Council (ERC) or equivalent’
- (ii) ‘Supporting the enhanced excellence agenda, increas[ing] the number of ERC awards secured by UCC researchers’.

The process of identifying candidates for ERC application (at all levels) and providing preparatory training programmes and full application supports, including in-depth interview preparation, is providing uplift for all those involved, whether the ERC application is ultimately successful or not. Support structures are in place where an application is eligible for redevelopment for a future ERC call. In addition, each application is also evaluated for submission to other funding opportunities that will maximise both the potential for success and the resultant impact of the research undertaken.

Further supporting the enhanced research excellence agenda, UCC is committed (Strategic Approach 1.4) to: ‘Transform[ing] UCC’s research culture through the implementation of engaged research and open research, underpinned by academic integrity, and ethical and responsible practice’.

These approaches support the objectives of the [European Strategy for Universities](#) and underpin a target of at least 20 ERC grants achieved by UCC researchers, across all ERC funding programmes, by 2028. Achieving this target in such a prestigious programme will be a significant success for the UCC research community. The target underpins our strategic ambitions to develop a distinctive research reputation, with students taught by international research leaders across the cohesive UCC research and innovation ecosystem. This is further underpinned by our ambition, as set out in our Global Engagement Plan, to take a strategic approach to all research partnerships and collaborations to maximise our global impact.

### Implementation, monitoring, assessment, and reporting on Performance Objective 3

The Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation (OVPRI) supports the introduction of new academics to the research community through advice, guidance, training and development programmes, in addition to its monthly Principal Investigator (PI) Forum. There are specific ERC training programmes and workshops for identified potential ERC candidates, tailored mentorship, development pipelines and preparatory moot interviews with expert international reviewers. The UCC Futures’ *‘Ways’* initiative also provides international expertise in the development of an EU Research Plan for each researcher. This identifies and develops potential to ensure competitiveness in ERC programme submissions. Recent investment in the OVPRI EU development team includes specific support for ERC application development.

The success of initiatives to increase success in ERC programmes across the lifetime of the Performance Agreement is carefully monitored, from submission to outcome, including final rankings. This extends to the redevelopment of submissions that are rated highly but not funded.

The Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee of the University Leadership Team, as referenced above in Section 1, Part 3, will continuously monitor the indicators and targets of this Performance Objective.

Given the prestige of the ERC programme, it attracts the very brightest and best researchers from across the globe. It also supports mobility, with ERC researchers sought by all institutions. There is a risk to the retention of researchers given the capacity of some other institutions to offer more favourable conditions or from the desire for a researcher to move to an institution closer to home. Where there are potentially restrictive processes and procedures which may impede agility to respond to opportunity, there is a risk that researchers may decline to align with UCC, either as a potential candidate or award holder. Careful evaluation of the ERC programme, its outcomes and potential forms a core part in learning and improving on the potential to attract, retain and enhance the success of researchers of ERC calibre.

Indicators and targets for Performance Objective 3

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
3.1	<b>Number of ERC grants – at all levels – achieved</b>	<a href="#">ERC dashboard*</a>  *Does not include awards secured by UCC but which were subsequently moved to another institution	Quantitative	2022: 2  6% of Irish successes were attributed to UCC  2023: 1  4.5% of Irish successes were attributed to UCC	Match or exceed the average ERC success rate (%) for comparable HEIs in Ireland/ Europe	<b>3 in 2024</b>	<b>4 in 2025</b>	<b>6 in 2026</b>	<b>7 in 2027</b>	<b>20 grants over 4 years of ERC Work programmes</b>  <b>Average of 5 awards per annum</b>  <b>Average success rate across all ERC programmes of 20%</b>
3.2	<b>Number of ERC grant submissions for: Starter (Stg)</b>	Centralised institutional Strategic Plan reporting repository	Quantitative	2022: 3  2023: 10	Not available	<b>10 in 2024</b>	<b>10 in 2025</b>	<b>10 in 2026</b>	<b>10 in 2027</b>	<b>ERC Stg: 40 submissions over 4 years</b>
3.3	<b>Number of ERC grant successes (success rate %): Starter (Stg)</b>	<a href="#">ERC dashboard</a>	Quantitative	2022: 0 (0%)  2023: 1 (10%)	Match or exceed the ERC Starter Grant success rate (%) for comparable HEIs in Ireland/ Europe	<b>2 in 2024</b>  <b>(20%)</b>	<b>2 in 2025</b>  <b>(20%)</b>	<b>2 in 2026</b>  <b>(20%)</b>	<b>2 in 2027</b>  <b>(20%)</b>	<b>8 ERC Stg grants over 4 years</b>  <b>20% success rate</b>

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
3.4	<b>Number of ERC grant submissions for: Consolidator/Advanced/Synergy (CoG, Adv, Syn)</b>	Centralised institutional Strategic Plan reporting repository	Quantitative	2022: 19 2023: 16	Not available	<b>6 in 2024</b>	<b>10 in 2025</b>	<b>20 in 2026</b>	<b>24 in 2027</b>	<b>ERC CoG/Adv/Syn: 60 submissions over 4 years</b>
3.5	<b>Number of ERC grant successes (success rate %): Consolidator/Advanced/Synergy (CoG, Adv, Syn)</b>	<a href="#">ERC dashboard</a>	Quantitative	2022: 2 (11%) 2023: 0 (0%)	Match or exceed the combined ERC Consolidator/Advanced/Synergy Grant success rate (%) for comparable HEIs in Ireland/ Europe	<b>1 in 2024</b> <b>(17%)</b>	<b>2 in 2025</b> <b>(20%)</b>	<b>4 in 2026</b> <b>(20%)</b>	<b>5 in 2027</b> <b>(21%)</b>	<b>12 ERC CoG/Adv/Syn grants over 4 years</b> <b>20% success rate</b>

## Performance Objective 4

**To increase annual intake of new doctoral students by 100 students by 2028.**

**Pillar:** Research and Innovation

**Transversals:** Flexibility, Upskilling & Lifelong Learning; Student Success; Society; Region; International; Equality, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging; Sectoral & Tertiary Cohesion.

### Rationale for Performance Objective 4

Goal 1 of the [UCC Strategic Plan 2023–2028, \*Securing our Future\*](#) states that by 2028, annual intake of new doctoral students will increase by 100. Successful delivery of this goal is directly linked to the success of the ten strategically important UCC Futures thematic areas. To firmly establish these thematic areas and to develop a sustainable pipeline of postdoctoral researchers and academics, an increase in doctoral student numbers is essential across all disciplines. UCC’s doctoral candidates are situated at the centre of the research ecosystem, supported by the structures of the Schools, Colleges and wider University. Doctoral students are key contributors to the lifecycle of the University, driving the national and international knowledge economy. UCC’s activities and ambitions in this space are in line with the objectives of both the [National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030](#) and the [National Framework for Doctoral Education](#). In addition, there is critical alignment with the strategies of [Science Foundation Ireland](#) and the [Irish Research Council](#).

An increase in doctoral student numbers will focus on cohort intakes, in cohorts aligned with the priorities of one or more of the ten *UCC Futures* thematic areas. This approach is aligned with national strategy (*Impact 2023*, Pillar 4 — Talent at the Heart of the Research and Innovation Ecosystem, 4.1 — Students) as it enables the delivery of a consistent standard of research student expertise. It also strengthens the appeal of UCC as an internationally recognised research institution, providing incoming doctoral students the experience of being taught by and working with established and innovative research leaders (Pillar 4, 4.2 — Inclusion).

Across the Irish Universities Association (IUA) members, the doctoral student population represents approximately 5% of the overall student body (HEA System Performance Dashboard). UCC is in line with this statistic, and for AY 23/24, doctoral students represent 4.8% of the UCC student population (1,218 students against total student body of 25,254). UCC’s annual intake of doctoral students was 272 in 22/23 (with the intake for 23/24 not yet completed and finalised).

There is significant variation across IUA institutions, with doctoral student levels ranging from 2.2% to 9% of the student population. Across the OECD countries, an increase in doctoral student numbers is in line with Doctoral Educational attainment goals. The specific increase in doctoral student numbers required within each UCC College to achieve our stated goal has been calculated, with consideration of disciplinary norms and the relevant funding environment applied. It is UCC’s intention to increase the proportion of doctoral students within the student body as a whole. On 17th September 2024, UCC will launch Post-Graduate Research (PGR) Education Manager software which will allow the analysis

of PGR student data in a way not previously possible. Time to submission for all PGR students will be monitored, providing a mechanism not previously available for the evaluation of student experience through their programme of study.

#### **Implementation, monitoring, assessment, and reporting on Performance Objective 4**

The Dean of Doctoral Studies and each College Vice Dean are responsible for delivery of the local and University-level doctoral student strategic plans. The approaches supporting increased doctoral student numbers include:

- Philanthropic donations supporting new PhD stipends and bursaries
- Increasing student applications for national funding awards
- Development of new cohort PhD programmes in signature areas of excellence, as defined by the UCC Futures thematic areas
- Increased cotutelle arrangements with international academic partners
- Industry and enterprise collaborative employment-based PhD programmes
- Development of lifelong learning pathways to doctoral education
- Improvement in doctoral student retention
- Increased international collaboration around doctoral education.

The Dean of Doctoral Studies, a newly established post, is specifically tasked with the strategic development of doctoral education. This is a joint position between the offices of the Deputy President and Registrar and the Vice President for Research and Innovation. Quarterly reporting on student numbers will inform the progress of specific activities and initiatives. While there are specific year-on-year target numbers identified, there is flexibility inbuilt, with success measured across the entirety of the timeframe. Regular monitoring of progress allows for any necessary course correction in approach, with successful actions amplified.

As part of Goal 2 of the UCC Strategic Plan (Student Success), and as referenced above, a new software system supporting postgraduate student activity will launch in September 2024. This will enable live tracking and reporting of our doctoral students, from registration, through progression and on to completion. As a result, reliable data on student retention rates and completion times will be accessible. However, amongst the IUA universities there is no agreed methodology to determine completion measures and calculation of retention rates. At UCC, we review PGR student data based on 1) time to completion and 2) completion rates. Calculation of completion rates has a significant time lag because students can undertake their studies on a part-time basis, therefore a completion time can extend beyond the traditional timeframe for these studies.

For the purpose of this report, and subject to re-evaluation once more nuanced data becomes available with the implementation of new PGR management software from September 2024, the following criteria will be used to determine completion rates for PGR students:

1. Time to graduation (start date to graduation date)
2. Number of students who complete their studies as a proportion of all students who commenced a PGR programme.

The Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee of the University Leadership Team, as referenced above in Section 1, Part 3, will continuously monitor the indicators and targets of this Performance Objective.

There are internal and external factors that may influence the successful achievement of targets. The influence of national employment rates, industry needs, funding opportunities and the success of philanthropic endeavours will have a direct impact on student numbers. Internally, the movement of staff, the success of existing initiatives (e.g. [UNIC](#)) and the availability of internal bursaries will also impact on student numbers. The implementation of IUA initiatives such as the decoupling strategy will also have an impact on the availability of stipend funding internally. The national doctoral funding landscape has a significant impact on the intake and retention of Level 10 students. In an effort to mitigate these risks, a multifaceted strategy has been developed to ensure that there is not an over-reliance on any one intake option. The confluence of integrated approaches will provide for more robust exploitation of opportunity as it arises.

The increase in PhD numbers is a core part of the University's overall Global Engagement Plan. The cohort approach to doctoral growth at UCC is aimed at both the local (EU) and the international markets. For example, the potential to deliver PhD programmes in a hybrid manner or onsite to international audiences is part of the overall strategy to enhance PhD enrolment numbers. In addition, the delivery of bespoke doctoral programmes for international audiences is also a fundamental element of the strategy. Finally, engagement with funding bodies and philanthropic donors regarding sustainable financing of PhD programmes is an integrated element of our strategic approach.

## Indicators and targets for Performance Objective 4

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
4.1	<b>Number of new doctoral entrants p.a. – excluding visiting PhD students (full/proportion of a year)</b>	ITS (Student record system) and HEA SRS	Quantitative	2022/23: 272	Not available	<b>297</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>347</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>1,338 doctoral students over 4 years</b> <b>37% increase on baseline in 27/28</b>
4.2	<b>PhD completion rate (%)</b>	New UCC software system	Quantitative	No baseline available – new monitoring system in place from September 2024	Attain a completion rate of 70% for PGR students as a proportion of all students who commenced a PGR programme	<b>60</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>Average completion rate of 70%</b>

## Performance Objective 5

**To launch 5 spin-out companies annually by 2028.**

**Pillar:** Research and Innovation

**Transversals:** Enterprise; Society; Region; Institutional Leadership & Culture; Sectoral & Tertiary Cohesion.

### Rationale for Performance Objective 5

UCC aims to launch 22 spin-out companies in the four years to 2028, with 50% being High Potential Start-Ups (HPSU). As outlined in the [National IP Protocol](#), the state encourages Research Performing Organisations and industry to work together to define an exemplary ecosystem that creates tangible economic and societal benefits. Critical to the achievement of this aim is the commercialisation of all forms of intellectual property (IP) arising from publicly funded research ([Enterprise Ireland – Strategy 2022](#)). Specifically, the *National IP Protocol* supports the growth and development of both research excellence and expertise across Ireland’s academic research community. It aims to increase the rate and success of High Potential Start-Ups (HPSU) arising from spin-out activities. Coupled with a collaborative academic ecosystem and funding schemes that specifically support start-up activities, Ireland is in a very strong position to maximise its return on research activity.

The [Enterprise Ireland \(EI\) KT Boost programme](#) is a new four-year €33.4 million programme directed at Irish universities and technological universities (TU). It provides funding for people and skills training that will support an increase in research commercialisation outcomes across the university and TU sector regionally and nationally, developing a consistent operational quality across these sectors. Specifically, it is designed to boost the number and calibre of Irish spin-out companies derived from research activity. This investment is expected to enhance knowledge and technology transfer activities and accelerate the rate and success of High Potential Start-Ups (HPSU).

[UCC’s Strategic Plan, 2023–2028 Securing our Future](#) aims to ‘create an innovation culture and entrepreneurial campus, underpinned by an ethos of creativity and discovery’ (Goal 1, Strategic Priority 1.5). UCC is inclusive of a broad range of creative contributions, strengthening knowledge exchange and the potential arising from cross-disciplinary research collaboration, particularly that emerging from the UCC Futures thematic areas. Specifically, UCC is committed to significantly increasing the number of spin-out companies arising from UCC research. As per [Annual Knowledge Transfer Survey](#) (AKTS) data from [Knowledge Transfer Ireland](#), shown in Table 6 below, UCC has averaged 3.8 spin-outs from research per annum over the last 5 years (2018–2022), compared to an average of 5.4 in each of TCD and UCD. UCC aims to increase the number of spin-outs to an average of 5.2 per annum by 2028 (6 spin-outs in 2028), thereby creating employment, engaging enterprise and driving investment in the sector. This ambition to increase spin-outs from research directly aligns with the strategies of [Enterprise Ireland](#), [Knowledge Transfer Ireland’s KT Boost programme](#), [Science Foundation Ireland](#), the [Irish Research Council](#) and [Impact 2030 – Ireland’s Research and Innovation Strategy](#).

Number of spin-outs	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	5-yr total/ HEI	Average/ yr/ HEI
UCC	3	5	5	4	2	19	3.8
UCD	5	5	6	5	6	27	5.4
TCD	6	6	5	5	5	27	5.4
UoG	2	1	4	5	4	16	3.2
UL	2	2	2	1	0	7	1.4
<b>Total spin-outs for all 23 Irish HEIs</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>1.23</b>

Table 6: Historic comparator data on the number of spin-outs per annum for some of the Irish universities, from AKTS.

## Implementation, monitoring, assessment, and reporting on Performance Objective 5

Within UCC, the Finance Committee of the Governing Authority oversees spin-out company approvals. There is additional annual reporting on all innovation, entrepreneurship and commercialisation activities from the OVPRI to ULT and Governing Authority.

The Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee of the University Leadership Team, as referenced above in Section 1, Part 3, will continuously monitor the indicators and targets of this Performance Objective. Metrics on spin-out activities are reported quarterly to [Knowledge Transfer Ireland](#) (KTI) with annual reporting on High Potential Start-Up activities.

UCC and KTI have provided investment in activities that directly support the development of more spin-outs arising from the research community. UCC has appointed a Spin-Out Manager, a New Ventures Manager at Tyndall National Institute and a Director of Business Engagement to support activities. The University's highly successful spin-out training programme [SPRINT](#) has been further revised and enhanced to increase the pipeline from research to spin-out. UCC's investment in the Atlantic Bridge University Bridge Fund II — a venture capital fund specifically for spin-out activity arising from research — will also further support achievement of our stated goals.

There are risks associated with the generation of a spin-out company, thus it is incumbent on the University to minimise risk and ensure that intellectual property development and spin-out activity is developed for economic and public good. There is significant opportunity for commercial activity arising from the UCC research community. UCC currently hosts the Tyndall National Institute (TNI), MaREI, the SFI Research Centre for Energy, Climate & Marine research and innovation, and has further significant research activities in AI, the microbiome, food and life science research across the institution. The UCC Innovation team has staff dedicated to these research activities to capture, protect and commercialise opportunities that arise from this research, supporting the creation of products and services that can positively benefit the University's ambition to be a 'campus that is a

place and educational space for sustainability’ (PO8). It provides the foundation for continued recognition for our leadership in this area, similar to the STARS Gold rating from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education and the Sustainability Institution of the Year at Green Gown, as outlined in PO8.

The robust governance and oversight of activities ensure due diligence is undertaken and progression staged to minimise these risks and ensure activities align with defined strategic objectives. Mitigating actions are in place, from investment in education, such as new IP/entrepreneurship modules, showcase events, and an Entrepreneur-in-Residence programme, to enhancement of existing initiatives to ensure they are fit for purpose and support a broad pipeline of future founders. To ensure continual progression and enhancement of activities, performance and trend analysis are undertaken and interrogated, with reference to year-on-year activities and analysis of national and international comparator institutions, norms and best practice. This includes ongoing feedback from participants captured as part of this performance analysis and linking participation in education activities to entrepreneurship outcomes. UCC will also assess the linkage between participation in these programmes and engagement at the academia-to-industry interface, supporting the innovation efforts of nascent and established companies.

## Indicator and targets for Performance Objective 5

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
5.1	<b>Number of spin-outs established p.a.</b>	Internal databases and KTI Annual Knowledge Transfer Survey	Quantitative	2022: 24 (Average of 4 p.a. over the 5-year period, 2018–2022)	Improve performance relative to selected comparator HEIs (See Table 6 above)	<b>5 in 2024</b> <b>(5-year rolling average 4.0)</b>	<b>5 in 2025</b> <b>(5-year rolling average 4.0)</b>	<b>6 in 2026</b> <b>(5-year rolling average 4.24)</b>	<b>6 in 2027</b> <b>(5-year rolling average 5.2)</b>	<b>22 newly established spin-out companies by 2028 (2024–2027)</b>

## Performance Objective 6

**To ensure that the student population (at all levels) is representative of the diversity of the community served by UCC and that students are enabled to succeed through the provision of an accessible and inclusive teaching, learning and support infrastructure.**

**Pillar:** Access & Participation

**Transversals:** Flexibility, Upskilling & Lifelong Learning; Student Success; Society; Region; Digital Transformation; Equality, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging; Institutional Leadership & Culture; Sectoral & Tertiary Cohesion.

### Rationale for Performance Objective 6

University College Cork (UCC) has a strong record in its commitment to widening access and participation. UCC celebrates the diversity of its students and staff and is committed to embedding a culture of equality, diversity, inclusion and belonging. UCC's commitment and ambitions for an inclusive and diverse student population are reflective of the targets set out in the *National Access Plan 2022–2028* (NAP) and they are called out explicitly in our Strategic Plan — Securing our Future 2023–2028, as set out below.

#### Strategic Plan — Goal Two: Student Success

Be the university of choice for postgraduate study in signature areas of excellence and develop pathways to widen access into programmes at all levels.

- Further develop collaborative pathways, embedding routes from further education through to higher education in collaboration with partner institutions, in line with national funding and policy developments.

Support student success, health and wellbeing, informed by the student voice.

- Attract and retain a diverse community of students, in line with the National Access Plan (2022–2028) targets, using a data-informed approach.
- Increase accessibility and inclusivity of student services and supports.

Provide a digitally enabled learning and teaching experience, equitable to all, which incorporates Universal Design principles.

- Through the implementation of Universal Design (UD) principles, ensure an equitable experience for all, so that our campus provides an inclusive and respectful environment for students and staff.
- Embed a digitally progressive learning and teaching environment and enhance the digital literacy of staff and students.

In addition to aligning with the targets and ambitions of the NAP, the Access & Participation performance objective is also informed by other key national strategies:

- *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030*
- *The National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021*
- *Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015–2024*
- *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.*

This performance objective represents continuing development in this priority area for the University. At present, on the key System Performance Dashboard metrics, UCC is performing very highly, with achievements in line with or exceeding the national average in three out of four areas.

	National	UCC
% of new entrants who are socioeconomically disadvantaged	11%	7%
% of disadvantaged new entrants who are mature	10%	17%
% of new entrants who have a disability	13.9%	14%
% of new entrants who are Irish Travellers	0.1%	0.1%

Table 7: Benchmarking of National Access Plans indicators. Source: HEA System Performance Dashboard 2023–28.

UCC's catchment area is Munster, with the majority of students coming from the relatively affluent counties of Cork and Kerry, which have Deprivation Index Scores (DIS) of 2.69 and -1.89. This geographical profile presents practical limitations for increasing the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending UCC. Access UCC is very familiar with the areas of identified deprivation across Cork city and county and in Kerry and Waterford. DIS data guides our outreach efforts, prioritising DEIS schools and allocating resources to commencing outreach work in [primary schools](#) in Cork city's most deprived areas. UCC continues to invest in [DEIS schools](#) through various outreach interventions, such as the Homework Club initiative, Traveller mentoring programmes, and intensive study revision supports, to bridge the progression gap.

The funding of dedicated support staff in Further Education (FE) Colleges in Cork acknowledges the higher rates of progression to FE by students from disadvantaged areas and demonstrates UCC's commitment to supporting these students in progressing to higher education. Maintaining the intake of mature students from disadvantaged areas is challenging due to the age profile and population of the disadvantaged areas in our catchment area, coupled with the high education costs and strong labour market opportunities currently available.

Incorporating a university-wide emphasis on student success and universal design is essential for establishing UCC as an accessible and inclusive institution for all students. By providing digital tools that enhance accessibility and bolstering the digital literacy of faculty and students alike, UCC is taking significant steps towards realising its ambition of becoming a leading Digitally Inclusive University. Key metrics such as Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) content accessibility, Canvas (UCC's VLE) structural accessibility (assessing layout and support features), and website accessibility guide our efforts to identify and address accessibility gaps, creating a more inclusive environment.

## Implementation, monitoring, assessment, and reporting on Performance Objective 6

The Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee of the University Leadership Team, as referenced above in Section 1, Part 3, will continuously monitor the indicators and targets of this Performance Objective.

UCC places high value on collaboration with external partners, ensuring the effectiveness of our initiatives to broaden participation. Our SOAR project, operating under Path 3, actively involves community partners in advisory groups and all workstream committees. Regular updates are provided by our access team and feedback is received from various community structures such as the Cork City of Learning, Cork Travellers in Education Working Group, Cork Traveller Education Strategy Group (Traveller Led), and Cork Access Network.

Our commitment to maintaining strong relationships with these partners is unwavering, and we believe that success can be achieved through strategic partnerships with other agencies and groups. These groups, like us, are also focusing their efforts on areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

The use of DIS data is integral to our approach; it provides valuable insights into the socio-economic profiles of the communities we are working with. This data helps us tailor our initiatives to better meet the needs of these communities, ensuring the effectiveness of our widening participation initiatives.

UCC has demonstrated strong performance in the area of Access and Widening Participation, as evidenced by the above data. The University is dedicated to continuous improvement, and ongoing changes and enhancements are necessary to meet the changing and evolving needs of the diverse student population we serve. To ensure that the diverse student voice is at the centre of our work, a Student Ambassador/Advisory group has been established by Access UCC. A panel of 32 students, drawn from the four access pathways (HEAR, Disability, Mature, QQI/FET) is appointed to work collaboratively with the Access team to inform service improvement.

The Access team in UCC works across the student lifecycle, supporting the transition ‘in’, ‘through’ and ‘out’ of UCC. A dedicated outreach team works across the Munster region from primary school through to adult education, with DEIS schools, advocacy groups, SEN teachers and school management. The team delivers a comprehensive [outreach programme](#) which has been co-designed and developed with community partners.

Access UCC has a consistently high retention rate, which was 90% in 2022/23, comparing favourably to the University retention rate of 91%. This is achieved by offering dedicated student support services that are easily accessible to the diverse student body. After receiving a CAO offer, students are provided with a personalised support programme to ensure a smooth transition into UCC. Over 3,500 registered Access students are provided with an extensive range of support services that cover financial, social, academic, and technological needs.

Embedding a whole-of-university approach to student success and universal design is key to ensuring that UCC is an accessible and [inclusive](#) University for all our students. The provision of digital tools to enhance accessibility, in addition to the provision of enhanced digital literacy of staff and students, will enable UCC to work towards its goal of being a Digitally Inclusive University.

The cost of education is a significant barrier for many socio-economically disadvantaged students transitioning into and through higher education. UCC has responded to this growing need by expanding the range and value of bursaries available to students experiencing financial hardship, however, we must acknowledge that the ongoing cost of education challenges have a negative impact on Access targets.

A key challenge being faced by the third-level sector is the growth in volume and complexity of students with disabilities transitioning to third level. UCC welcomes this growth and is committed to ensuring that students are transitioning into an inclusive and responsive third-level institution. However, the pace of growth is a challenge and one that requires a whole-of-institution response.

Access UCC utilises data from a diverse range of sources to guide its operations. This includes information from the Equal Access Survey and the DIS data utilised by the HEA, along with admissions pathway data and student engagement data. However, we face challenges due to variations in data definitions and the availability of data. We welcome ongoing dialogue and discussions with the HEA regarding these issues. We are optimistic about building our evidence base to ensure that we have the necessary metrics to monitor and report on progression and graduation outcomes, thereby reducing our over-reliance on admissions data.

## Indicators and targets for Performance Objective 6

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
6.1	<b>Proportion (%) of undergraduate intake from underrepresented groups (HEAR, DARE, FE &amp; Mature Years Entry)</b>	HEA SRS and Key Facts and Figures Access Data by Entry Basis	Quantitative	2022/23: 22.1%	Exceed average, All HEIs. 17.7% in 2021/22	<b>23.5%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>24.5%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>25%</b> <b>(2.9 p.p. increase)</b>
6.2	<b>Proportion (%) of new entrants with a disability</b>	Equal Access Survey (EAS) reported on HEA System Performance Dashboard	Quantitative	2022/23: 13.2%	Exceed National Average; 13.9% in 2022/23	<b>13.5%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>14.5%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>15%</b> <b>(1.8 p.p. increase)</b>
6.3	<b>Proportion (%) of new entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas</b>	HEA SRS and System Performance Dashboard	Quantitative	2020/21: 7%	Work towards achieving National Average; 11% in 2022/23	<b>7.5%</b>	<b>7.5%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>8.5%</b>	<b>8.5%</b> <b>(1.5 p.p. increase)</b>
6.4	<b>Proportion (%) of disadvantaged new entrants who are mature</b>	HEA SRS and System Performance Dashboard	Quantitative	2020/21: 17%	Continue to exceed National Average; 10% in 2022/23	<b>17%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>17%</b> <b>(Maintain existing %)</b>
6.5	<b>Proportion (%) of new entrants who are Irish Travellers</b>	EAS reported on HEA System Performance Dashboard	Quantitative	2022/23: 0.0%	National Average 0.1%; work towards NAP target	<b>0.10%</b>	<b>0.15%</b>	<b>0.20%</b>	<b>0.20%</b>	<b>0.20%</b> <b>(0.2 p.p. increase)</b>

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
6.6	<b>Progression rate (%) – all Access categories</b>	HEA SRS	Quantitative	2022/23: 90%	Align with Progression rate for all UCC Students (91% in 2022/23)	<b>90%</b>	<b>90.5%</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>91%</b> <b>(1 p.p. increase)</b>
6.7	<b>VLE (Canvas) content accessibility score</b>	Anthology - Ally	Quantitative	2022/23: 57.9%	No benchmark data nationally	<b>62%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>76%</b> <b>(18.1 p.p. increase)</b>
6.8	<b>VLE (Canvas) structural accessibility score</b>	National Disability Authority and Ireland’s Monitoring Report for the EU Web Accessibility Directive	Quantitative	2023: 91.3%	Continue to lead on this score at the national level	<b>92%</b>	<b>94%</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>96%</b> <b>(4.7 p.p. increase)</b>
6.9	<b>Website accessibility score</b>	National Disability Authority and Ireland’s Monitoring Report for the EU Web Accessibility Directive	Quantitative	2022: 19.4%	Achieve score of highest scoring HEI in 2022 (65.7%) by 2028	<b>34%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>69%</b> <b>(49.6 p.p. increase)</b>

## Performance Objective 7

**To demonstrate substantive progress on enhancing gender equality within the institution through achieving an institutional Silver Athena Swan Ireland award and five new unit/departmental Bronze awards, and to address barriers that have inhibited engagement to date.**

**Pillar:** Engagement

**Transversals:** Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging; Institutional Leadership & Culture.

### Rationale for Performance Objective 7

There is a statutory requirement for Irish higher education institutions to promote gender balance among staff and students and for the HEA to promote the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education. To this end, a number of policy documents have been developed since 2016 to support the implementation of a gender equality framework in Irish higher education. The first of these was the *HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions* (2016), followed by the *Gender Action Plan* (2018) produced by the Gender Equality Taskforce, and most recently the *2<sup>nd</sup> HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions* (2022). UCC is also implementing the Framework for Consent, as set out in *Safe, Respective, Supportive and Positive: Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions* (2019) and *Race Equality Action Plan* (2023). The current national policy objectives require HEIs to build on actions already taken, to continue to effect culture change in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion issues, and to resource and incentivise initiatives that seek to effect change in a way that centralises an intersectional approach to equality issues.

This national commitment to increasing gender equality in the sector is reflected in the UCC Strategic Plan 2023–2028 which, under Goal 4, priority action 4.2, commits UCC to ‘incorporating the Athena Swan values into our everyday practice and to have this recognised by achieving a Silver Institutional award, and five additional awards at unit/departmental level by 2028.’ Increasing the number of Athena Swan awards at school/unit level in the university, and achieving an institutional Silver award, demonstrates continuing development by UCC in a key strategic priority area. At present, UCC holds 18 Departmental Athena Swan awards, equating to 61% of all UCC's academic units holding Athena Swan awards. This represents a level of accreditation of 88% in our two STEM Colleges (Science, Engineering & Food Science; Medicine & Health) and 100% in the College of Business & Law (2 Schools). We are now focused on addressing barriers — some sector-wide, some local — that have inhibited engagement with Athena Swan in humanities disciplines, including, e.g. extensive recent restructuring in the College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences (CACSSS), distinct pandemic impacts, and demands from significant institutional projects including Quality Review. Nevertheless, one CACSSS School already holds an award (School of Applied Psychology), and all 9 other CACSSS Schools have expressed an interest in submitting applications within the next five years. Supports for CACSSS applicants include a €3,000 grant for first-time applicants to support School Self-Assessment

Teams (SATs) and relieve the burden of work on SAT Chairs. We will continue to work with and support schools in CACSSS to increase engagement with Athena Swan and to identify and address any other obstacles in place. In 2021/22, five awards were at unit/school level; 2 were first-time Bronze. In 2022/23, three awards were at unit/school level, and all were first-time Bronze.

Athena Swan Ireland accreditation is a clear, objective, and measurable indicator of progress in relation to enhancing gender equality that is recognised across the higher education sector in Ireland and internationally. This is complemented by a range of other targeted actions and initiatives underway in UCC to promote gender equality, and equality, diversity and inclusion, more broadly, within the institution, including the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI), the reform of promotion processes, and the implementation of the EDI Framework and UCC People and Culture Plan. The targets set out below were selected following a review of our existing Athena Swan commitments in respect of renewal applications and the timelines set down by Advance HE in relation to when accreditation must be sought and renewed. National benchmarking for Athena Swan awards is provided below:

Institution	Institutional Athena Swan Award	Departmental/School Athena Swan awards	Professional Unit Athena Swan awards
TCD	1 Silver	2 Silver, 16 Bronze	1 Bronze
UL	1 Silver	3 Silver, 13 Bronze	N/A
University of Galway	1 Bronze	1 Silver, 11 Bronze	N/A
UCC	1 Bronze	17 Bronze	N/A
UCD	1 Silver	2 Silver, 18 Bronze	N/A
DCU	1 Bronze	8 Bronze	N/A

Table 8: National Athena Swan Ireland Award Holders in 2024. Source: Advance HE.

### Implementation, monitoring, assessment, and reporting on Performance Objective 7

The Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee of the University Leadership Team, as referenced above in Section 1, Part 3, will continuously monitor the indicators and targets of this Performance Objective.

There is a commitment by UCC to prioritise the achievement of an institutional Athena Swan Silver award. In addition to the ULT Sub-Committee for EDI mentioned above, there is also an institutional Athena Swan Steering Group (ASSG), chaired by the Deputy President and Registrar, to oversee progress on all Athena Swan applications in the university, including the institutional Silver application. Led by the Director of EDI, there are a dedicated Athena Swan Project Officer and an EDI Data Analyst based in the EDI Unit to support Athena Swan applications and the University has committed to strengthening and developing the support network across Schools, Colleges, and Units for future applications.

**Target 7.1** (see Indicator Table below) to achieve Athena Swan Silver and five first-time Bronze awards will include a review and restructuring of Athena Swan governance and organisational structures to allow for improving the monitoring and evaluation of Athena Swan action plans across award-holding

schools/departments. A pilot scheme for grouped applications has been agreed with Advance HE which will make room in the pipeline for professional unit applications and for new schools and units to prepare/submit first-time Bronze award applications.

**Target 7.2** (see Indicator Table below) to increase the response rate of the student EDIB survey will include a review of survey issue dates to allow capturing of student data earlier in the academic year. The student survey question set will also be reviewed to ensure the survey is concise and requests the most pertinent data. A targeted communications campaign will be designed with the Student Union to help increase engagement. The staff survey question set will also be reviewed to increase maximum engagement, with focused campaigns for research staff, whose engagement rate in 2024 was 13%.

While the number of female professors has increased from 17% in 2018 to 30% in 2024, focused actions are needed to increase female representation at the most senior levels within UCC. Key strategies which will drive attainment of **Target 7.3** are set out in UCC’s Silver Athena Swan Action Plan. Five priority areas for gender equality (and five priority areas for wider equality grounds) have been identified in the UCC Silver Athena Swan Action Plan (due for submission end 2025). This includes initiatives to encourage and support senior female staff to apply for senior leadership roles in UCC including through formal routes (i.e. support for applications to promotions scheme) and informal routes (networking, profile building through public profiling/engagement etc, coaching). Focus groups with senior women leaders will be held in early 2025 ahead of the establishment of a dedicated UCC Women’s Senior Leadership Group. Building on the establishment of the Carers Network and launch of recent care-related policies, supports will be made to build and raise awareness of this Network and care-related policies across the institution. This includes training to ensure managers understand policies and can effectively support team members who are carers. Initiatives aimed at advancing the right to dignity and respect in the workplace and advancing mechanisms to address complaints related to bullying, harassment and discrimination will include the launch of a new Sexual Misconduct Policy and Procedure. There will also be targeted campaigns aimed at encouraging male colleagues to participate in EDI training and events and to advocate and role model EDI practices.

Potential challenges and risks identified include: (Target 7.1) data for professional units applying for Athena Swan will need to be added to the EDI Data Hub, a process that requires time and resources and may therefore impact the delivery timeline; (Target 7.2) survey fatigue among staff and students may have an impact on survey uptake; (Target 7.3) financial support for promotions, female mentorship and coaching schemes may be curtailed because of financial constraints within the institution.

	DCU	MU	TCD	UCD	UCC	University of Galway	UL
Professor	35%	36%	37%	29%	32%	25%	31%
Senior Lecturer	48%	49%	36%	40%	37%	46%	48%

Table 9: Proportion of professors and senior lecturers that are female. Source: HEA Higher Education Institutional Staff Profiles by Sex and Gender (31st December 2022)

Indicators and targets for Performance Objective 7

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
7.1	<b>Number of new Athena Swan awards achieved</b>	EDI Unit and Athena Swan Ireland	Quantitative	2022: Institutional Bronze, 16 School level Bronze awards	Achieve AS timelines: HEA 2022	<b>2</b> <b>(1 Institutional Silver, 1 first-time Bronze School)</b>	<b>1</b> <b>(1 first-time Bronze School)<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>2</b> <b>(2 first-time Bronze Schools)<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>1</b> <b>(1 first-time Bronze School)</b>	<b>6</b> <b>(1 Institutional Silver and 5 first-time Bronze awards; at least 2 of these to be Schools in humanities disciplines)</b>
7.2	<b>Response rate (%) to UCC Values and Culture/EDIB Staff and Student Surveys<sup>5</sup></b>	EDI Unit	Quantitative	Staff Values & Culture EDI Survey response rate: 2022: 42%; 2024: 46%.  Student Survey response rate 2022 & 2024: < 5%	Staff Survey: UCD (35% in 2023) and TCD (36% in 2024)  Student survey: No benchmark available	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>50% response rate (staff)</b>  <b>15% response rate (students)</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>4 p.p. increase (staff)</b>  <b>&gt;10 p.p. increase (students)</b>

<sup>3</sup> Applied Social Studies, CACSSS.

<sup>4</sup> Including School of Languages, Literature and Culture, CACSSS.

<sup>5</sup> Student survey to issue in Q2 2026 and 2028; Staff survey to issue in Q3 in 2026 and 2028.

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
7.3	<b>Proportion (%) Women at Professor Level &amp; Senior Lecturer Level<sup>6</sup></b>	DPR/EDI Unit/People & Culture and HEA Higher Education Institutional Staff Profiles by Sex and Gender	Quantitative	2022: 32% of Women at Full Professor Grade  37% of Women at Senior Lecturer Grade	Exceed HEI sector average (32% Full Professor and 43% Senior Lecturer in 2022)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	<b>37% Women at Full Professor Level by 2028.</b>  <b>45% Women on Senior Lecturer Level by 2028</b>

<sup>6</sup> Academic promotions for SL take place every 2 years and for Full Prof. every 3 Years.

## Performance Objective 8

**To reduce UCC’s Carbon Footprint (scope 1 & 2) and to continue to lead and improve on the STARS rating, the most comprehensive assessment of broad sustainability improvement, including scope 3 emissions.**

**Pillar:** Engagement

**Transversals:** Climate and Sustainable Development; Society; Institutional Leadership and Culture.

### Rationale for Performance Objective 8

In 2023, UCC set an ambitious target of being carbon neutral by 2040 across scope 1, scope 2 and scope 3 emissions. UCC’s Strategic Plan 2023–28 commits the University to develop innovative solutions and radically reform our practices in pursuit of this goal. UCC’s Sustainability and Climate Action Plan details 62 actions that will support this commitment. UCC has a strong history of leadership in environmental sustainability. In 2010, UCC was the first university in the world to be awarded a Green Flag from the Foundation for Environmental Education. In 2011, we were the first university to be certified to ISO 50001 for energy management and, in 2018, we were the first outside of North America to be awarded a STARS Gold rating from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. In 2023, UCC was named Sustainability Institution of the Year at the International Green Gown Awards.

Nationally, under the Government’s Climate Action Plan 2023, the public sector has been tasked with “leading by example” in delivering a reduction of 51% in absolute carbon emissions by 2030. All public bodies must comply with this legislation and develop a Climate Action Roadmap to outline the projects that will be undertaken in achieving this target. UCC’s roadmap details 27 projects that need to be completed in order to achieve this objective. The Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development also highlights the need to transform learning environments, taking “whole-institution approaches” to turn campuses into places and educational spaces for sustainability.

As part of its ISO 50001 programme, UCC has been undertaking annual energy reviews for more than a decade. In 2011, as part of the Green Campus programme, the University undertook its first comprehensive carbon footprint assessment, in line with the international Greenhouse Gas protocol. This exercise was repeated in 2013, 2017, 2019 and a 5<sup>th</sup> calculation is due to be completed in Q4 2024. There is therefore a wealth of data in UCC from which to baseline and assess improvement over time. In terms of national and international benchmarking, many universities have only completed carbon footprint measurements for their scope 1 and scope 2 emissions. In Ireland, the SEAI holds this data for all public sector bodies, within their online monitoring and reporting tool.

In 2020, UCC surpassed its energy reduction target of 33% (against a 2005 baseline). UCC achieved a 51% reduction, demonstrating leadership in the public sector as a whole (which achieved a 34% energy efficiency improvement) and leadership in the Education sector (which achieved 49%,

excluding schools). We are on track to also surpass our 2030 target of a 50% improvement (on the 2016–18 baseline). We have already achieved a 32% reduction in absolute scope 1 and 2 emissions. Benchmarking data are currently only available for the year 2022. For 2022, the public sector achieved a total carbon emission reduction of just over 17%; UCC reduced its carbon emissions by 21%. Further benchmarking within the higher education sector, which is far more competitive than the public sector as a whole, is presented below. In 2021, UCC completed a refurbishment of the Tyndall National Institute Kiln Building, transforming it into the first protected structure in the country to achieve an A energy rating. We have received funding from the HEA for two Pathfinder projects, of which one was completed in 2021 (O’Rahilly Building Heat Pump) and the other is currently underway (Enterprise Centre Deep Retrofit).

HEI	Carbon emissions reduction from baseline (2016–18)	Energy consumption reduction since baseline (2016–18)
MU	-22%	-47%
UCC	-21%	-45%
UCD	-23%	-42%
UoG	-35%	-50%
UL	-19%	-31%

*Table 10: Carbon emissions and energy consumption reduction since baseline in comparator universities in 2022. Source: SEAI M&R Reporting*

STARS is a sustainability ranking system developed by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. The system is widely regarded as the most comprehensive assessment of sustainability for the sector, as it includes indicators on curriculum, research, operations and engagement. STARS is a completely transparent reporting tool; all data submitted are openly available to the public. In 2018, UCC was the first university outside of North America to be awarded a STARS Gold rating, with a score of 66.4 out of 100. In 2022, our Gold rating was renewed, with a score of 76.5. STARS ratings are valid for three years. Only University of Galway has also achieved a STARS rating in Ireland. In 2021, it was awarded a Gold rating, with a score of 65. STARS requires the submission of a full module inventory (assessing SDG inclusion); it also places significant emphasis on procurement emissions, with inventories submitted covering the sustainable sourcing of food, paper, cleaning and IT equipment.

UCC is seen as a leading University in relation to action on scope 3 emissions also. Following the publication of the University’s Sustainability and Climate Action Plan in 2023, a number of working groups have been established across the university to develop specific targets and projects with respect to procurement, academic and business travel, zero waste, and commuting. Green Public Procurement (GPP) is a core and integral component of national public procurement policy and strategy. In turn, UCC acknowledges the importance of GPP from a policy perspective but also views it as critical tool to help enable the ambitions set out in the University’s Sustainability and Climate Action Plan 2023–28. UCC has already systematically included GPP in its contracts that have a high environmental impact — including, but not limited to, catering services, cleaning services and managed print services. As part of our commitment to promoting greater use of GPP more widely across the public sector, UCC has recently published an open access research [paper](#) on “Greening

Procurement: Exploring evolving practices in an Irish University”. The objective of the next five years is to continue to embed GPP across all tenders for goods, services and works, where appropriate.

### **Implementation, monitoring, assessment, and reporting on Performance Objective 8**

The carbon footprint reduction objective is contained within both the University’s Sustainability and Climate Action Plans and is one of the Measures of Success called out in the University’s overall Strategic Plan. The University’s Head of Sustainability and Climate Action, Energy Performance Officer (Director of Buildings and Estates), and Associate VP for Sustainability report progress to the ULT Strategy Implementation Sub-Committee and the ULT Sub-Committee on Sustainability and Climate Action. The Energy Performance Officer (EPO) presents strategic actions and performance updates to the HEA in the University’s Climate Action Roadmap. UCC's energy management team is chaired by the Director of Buildings and Estates (EPO) and is made up of representatives from the Capital Projects Office, the Estates operational team and the academic community. The energy team provides resources and support to the utilities manager to implement the agreed energy action plans while also promoting energy efficient practices within their departments. The team convenes quarterly to review the energy performance and the progress made against the energy action plan. The utilities manager is responsible for promoting energy efficiency and conservation across the university community, as well as the management and implementation of UCC’s ISO 50001 energy management system.

The University has identified a programme that will need to be implemented to meet the 2030 climate targets. The programme should exceed UCC's 2030 goals and has been tailored to suit the short timeframe to 2030. The planned programmes can be grouped into:

#### 1. Energy Efficiency and Awareness

- Achieve a 2% annual reduction in energy use through awareness and rolling energy upgrades, i.e. lighting, Building Management System (BMS) optimisation and pump replacement programmes.
- Expand “Saver Saves” Scheme and Green Labs Programme.

#### 2. Decarbonisation of Heating Systems

- Change out of heat generation plant to heat pump technology without significant fabric upgrades.

#### 3. PV Installations

- Roll out PV installations from 2025 to 2028 to supply 500 MWh of on-site renewables.

#### 4. Building Retrofit Programmes

- Complete at least three building retrofit programmes as part of UCC's 2050 pathway to net zero.

## 5. Supply-Side Decarbonisation

- The planned decarbonisation of Ireland’s electrical grid will assist in decarbonising our remaining electrical loads.

The achievement of this target will be dependent on the availability of funding to undertake these significant retrofit and renewable energy projects. It will also depend on the decarbonisation of Ireland’s electricity grid. UCC will continue to work with the public and private sector to identify suitable funding mechanisms for the completion of these projects. UCC is also working with its counterparts in other universities to identify potential collaborative opportunities in respect of funding these activities. Progress will continually be measured through the SEAI reporting process and UCC’s own internal systems including the University’s ISO 50001 programme and the University’s Strategic Plan Measures of Success. The Strategic Planning Implementation Sub-Committee of the University Leadership Team, as referenced above in Section 1, Part 3, will continuously monitor the indicators and targets of this Performance Objective.

In relation to indicator 8.2, UCC has identified a number of actions within the University’s Sustainability and Climate Action Plan that will enable achievement of the target. These include:

- Continued support and development of the University campus as a “Living Laboratory” for sustainability.
- Development of an undergraduate programme in Sustainable Development and further CPD and micro-credential offerings for policy makers, business and communities.
- Establishment and continued support of an All-Island Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- A Green Shoots programme to support student engagement with sustainability.
- Implementation of ISO 46001 standard for water management and ISO 14001 for environmental management.
- Working with partner institutions to develop shared solutions for the support and promotion of active travel.

UCC Procurement will continue to show leadership by engaging with public forums and groups on the topic. UCC Procurement will also work with its critical suppliers to understand the carbon footprints associated with delivering goods/services to the University, so that scope 3 calculations may be made more reliable and accurate during the reporting period. In relation to academic and business travel emissions, UCC will develop a policy and procedure for carbon budgets, to be applied at School/Unit level, to reduce unnecessary flights. A working group has been established and includes the Vice President for Global Engagement and the Vice President for Research and Innovation amongst its membership. In the first instance, a code of conduct will be developed to ensure that the travel that takes place is of high value to the University. UCC has appointed a contractor to undertake a more detailed assessment of scope 3 emissions and a process for more regular measurements of same.

## Indicators and targets for Performance Objective 8

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
8.1	<b>Proportion (%) reduction in Scope 1 &amp; 2 Greenhouse Gas Emissions from 2016–18 baseline</b>	Internal database and SEAI Monitoring & Reporting (M&R) System	Quantitative	2023/24: reduction to date of 32%	National Climate Action Plan target, baseline 2016–18	<b>4.8%</b>	<b>6.5%</b>	<b>8.3%</b>	<b>8.3%</b>	<b>28% reduction on the 2016–18 baseline over 4 years</b>  <b>59.9% total reduction on 2016–18 baseline by 2028</b>
8.2	<b>AASHE STARS Score</b>	AASHE	Quantitative	2023: 76	AASHE Scoring System, international benchmark, University of Maryland (STARS Benchmarking Tool)	<b>76</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>77 (+1 on baseline)</b>

## Section 3: Matrix and Signatures

### Framework Matrix

		Pillars			
		Teaching & Learning	Research & Innovation	Access & Participation	Engagement
Transversal areas of impact	Flexibility, Upskilling & Lifelong Learning	PO 1, PO 2	PO 4	PO 6	
	Climate & Sustainable Development				PO 8
	Student Success	PO 1, PO 2	PO 4	PO 6	
	Enterprise	PO 2	PO 5		
	Society		PO 3, PO 4, PO 5	PO 6	PO 8
	Region		PO 4, PO 5	PO 6	
	International	PO 2	PO 3, PO 4		
	Digital Transformation	PO 2		PO 6	
	Equality, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging		PO 4	PO 6	PO 7
	Institutional Leadership & Culture		PO 3, PO 5	PO 6	PO 7, PO 8
	Sectoral & Tertiary Cohesion		PO 4, PO 5	PO 6	

## Modification log

Tables below present indicators agreed in 2024 that have since been revised, replaced or removed via the Performance Agreement modification process.

Provision is made for modifications to Performance Agreements in the Strategy and Performance Dialogue Process 2025-2028. Modifications to Performance Agreements may be requested where there is a significant change in an institution’s strategy or policy. Changes to, or developments in, national strategy or policy and its implementation may also necessitate modifications. Modifications may only apply at Performance Objective or indicator level (e.g. adding, revising, or removing an indicator). Modification requests related to targets are not within the scope of this process.

Modification of a Performance Agreement is agreed as part of Strategy and Performance Dialogue for the year indicated. Targets set for years prior to modification continue to apply; where subsequent annual or cumulative targets no longer apply, they are shown in grey text below. Where indicators below have been revised or replaced, the revised or replacement indicator or indicators will have the same or related numbering.

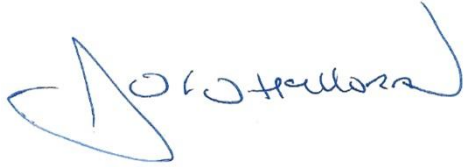
Relevant corresponding changes to the narrative are not recorded here, but earlier versions of the Performance Agreement are available on request from [systemperformance@hea.ie](mailto:systemperformance@hea.ie).

**Table 1: Indicators modified following the 2025 Strategy and Performance Dialogue process**

No.	Indicator	Data source	Data type	Baseline	Benchmark	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Cumulative target
1.1	<b>Student Survey Student-Faculty Interaction Score</b>	<a href="https://www.student-survey.ie">Student Survey.ie</a>	Quantitative	2023: 11.5	Attain university sector average (12.6)	12.0	12.5	13.0	13.5	13.5 (+2.0 on baseline)

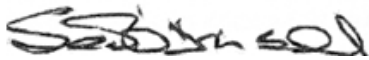
## Signatures

### On behalf of University College Cork



**Professor John O'Halloran**  
**President**

Friday, 24 April 2026



**Mr Sean O'Driscoll,**  
**Chair of the Governing Authority**

Monday, 27 April 2026

### On behalf of the Higher Education Authority



**Dr Alan Wall**  
**Chief Executive Officer**

Monday, 27 April 2026



**Higher Education Authority**

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