



St Mary's  
University College  
Belfast  
A College of Queen's University

# STRATEGY21

AN INSTITUTIONAL PLAN FOR  
ST MARY'S UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE 2021-24



AN AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABILITY



St Mary's  
University College  
Coláiste Ollscoile  
Naomh Muire

*Faith in educational opportunity  
defines both our history and our future*



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# 1 Introduction

St Mary's University College faces the third decade of the twenty-first century with an Institutional Plan for 2021-2024, *Strategy 21*, which sets out an 'Agenda for Sustainability' in a period of uncertainty at the regional, national and international levels. The University College's strategic future starts, however, from a strong foundation which owes its origin to the wisdom and commitment of the Dominican Sisters as well as the Diocese of Down and Connor. Over the years, St Mary's has attained a reputation, both at home and abroad, for the excellence of its teacher education and liberal arts degree programmes and the pastoral care it provides for students. It has a highly relevant Mission Statement for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, adopted by the Board of Governors in 2011 which is emphatic in its fidelity to the founding traditions. St Mary's, with numerous other third-level Catholic institutions across the globe, continues the great challenge of conjoining reason and religious faith, knowledge and the probing of the ultimate mystery of existence, life and hope - explorations of vital importance today for the future of the human family.

With an enrolment of some one thousand learners, our campus is a dynamic community of talented students engaged by highly committed staff in teaching, research, practice and service. Our College is a collaborative partner with Queen's University, and it contributes significantly to the educational, economic and cultural life of both the local area and the region. St Mary's has demonstrated its resilience repeatedly in overcoming challenges to its rightful place in the higher education sector.

The College has three overarching and defining characteristics.

Firstly, it is a small institution in terms of both campus size and student population. This facilitates excellent student-staff working relationships and a close-knit, friendly community of learners. Secondly, it specialises in teacher education and the liberal arts, which gives rise to hundreds of partnerships

with schools and other placement providers as well as a close connection to the teaching profession. Thirdly, it is distinctive in both its Catholic identity and in its place in the community of west Belfast. These three characteristics combine to create the essential character of the institution.

The work of the College is managed with a cautious approach which recognises the risks involved in being a small institution with limited capacity. However, St Mary's will be ambitious in areas where it has recognised strengths. The outcome of our work will contribute to the draft Programme for Government of the Northern Ireland Executive, particularly in the following three areas:

- Everyone can reach their potential;
- Our children and young people have the best chance in life; and
- Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral.

Looking forward to a sustainable future as well as outward beyond its immediate environs, St Mary's is aware of the challenges that lie ahead in a world of uncertainty. The long-term impact of the coronavirus pandemic, a changing public health environment, an anticipated economic downturn, Brexit and climate change are five contributing factors to such uncertainty. We therefore believe that the pace and complexity of change in the contemporary world demands that St Mary's educates students to be a future generation of leaders and professionals who are particularly well-equipped to confront new and unforeseen challenges with the agility, insight, creativity and confidence that will be demanded of them.



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## 2 A Place with a Mission

**St Mary's is very clear about its mission, what its overall goals are and its place in society. Our Mission Statement is an expression of intent which we communicate confidently to our College community as well as our stakeholders and society in general. It sets out the ongoing purpose for our work, provides focus and cohesion and is a benchmark for evaluating the success of the College.**



### This is our mission, a work in progress.

- St Mary's makes a distinctive contribution of service and excellence, in the Catholic tradition, to higher education in Northern Ireland.
- The College is an academic community committed to the search for meaning and value in the intellectual life, to academic excellence and to individual attention for students.
- We work for the development of the whole person in a Christian, values-sensitive environment in preparation for a lifetime of learning, leadership and service.
- We want the College to be a religious, educational, cultural and social resource for the local community and to show concern for the poor and powerless.
- We provide teacher education programmes, in English and in Irish, as well as a Liberal Arts degree programme.
- We offer our students high-quality teaching and extensive support to foster effective learning.
- We aim to widen access to higher education and to enable participation from a broad spectrum of society.
- We support economic regeneration and social development initiatives which facilitate conflict resolution and peace.
- We are committed to a rich international dimension in the life of the College.
- We work with a wide range of partners and seek to build excellent relationships to promote our mission.

### 3 Institutional Values

**At St Mary's University College, we believe that values *do* matter. They add purpose, direction and benefit to organisations. They are a source of resilience for the challenge of sustainability in an uncertain world. St Mary's is a values-driven institution of higher education which consciously creates the future it desires and has a consistently ethical basis for decision-making. The work of St Mary's is informed by four sets of values which the College in turn seeks to disseminate in its educational and outreach activities. Furthermore, our values have been a principal source of our success in overcoming numerous challenges over one hundred and twenty years.**

At the core of our set of values is the Christian ideal of education. This is based on love, peace, the common good, truth and justice. In our view, true education is a moral activity which has at its

heart the fundamental worth of each person and the belief in a higher common good to which each belongs and through which each expresses her/his common God-given humanity. Catholic colleges and universities worldwide, rooted in Jesus Christ's own boundless love, strive to cultivate a deep sense of human dignity and to form engaged citizens who challenge all forms of injustice and effect positive change.

We believe that if, in practice, education is reduced to preparing individuals to compete in the labour market, it leaves people and communities unprepared for many of the major constituents of a well-balanced society and a fulfilling life, such as relationships, parenthood, vocation, community building, self-expression, and recreation. Education must not only prepare students for the world of work but for life in and for the society in which they settle.



**At the core of our set of values is the Christian ideal of education.**



# 3 Institutional Values

The goal of an education founded on Christian values is the formation and development of people as communal beings living in harmonious relationship with self, others, God and the environment. The true test of education is therefore how students use their gifts and talents, not falling prey to the possessiveness, individualism, fragmentation, consumerism and lack of caring that a purely secular, market-driven education can instil but becoming truly human and being socially responsible.



Secondly, the College is an academic community committed to the search for meaning and value in the intellectual life, to academic excellence and to individual attention for students. In this regard, St Mary's draws upon the fundamental values of academic integrity, which involve a commitment to honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. From these values emerge the educational priorities and the quality assurance processes of the College's academic provision.



Thirdly, in the fields of teacher education and educational research, St Mary's has a particular commitment to the teaching profession and its values. Our teacher education programmes are aligned to the mission and values of the General Teaching Council Northern Ireland: trust, respect, integrity, accountability, fairness and equality and a commitment to Service. In developing teacher education programmes and enabling the formation of teachers, the College actively promotes the values of the profession.



Our fourth set of values relate to the civic role of a university college. We believe that higher educational institutions have a responsibility to contribute to the public good through positive engagement with their local area and community. St Mary's therefore has a location-based imperative which connects it locally and is a positive force for development and change.



Specifically, the College supports the underpinning principles of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and it seeks to contribute to the Programme for Government as well as to promote the Irish language.



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## 4 The Ethos of the College

**Education at St Mary's takes place within an ethos that is nurturing for students, rewarding for staff and welcoming to visitors, where values-education is actively promoted and respect is intrinsic. The main sources from which the ethos emerges are the guiding philosophy and principles of Catholic education, the relatively small size of the institution and its location in west Belfast, as well as the people who study and work at the College.**



St Mary's is inspired and invigorated by these sources. Our ethos therefore has a variety of inter-related characteristics as set out below, with a Catholic educational identity at the core. It is this identity which provides for coherence and interconnectedness, which in turn contributes to excellence. We want all who work or study in the College, and those who visit us, to experience a higher education institution which

- believes in the power of education to transform lives, overcome disadvantage and contribute positively to humanity,
- is focused on the holistic development of its students,

- was founded and continues to develop in the worldwide Catholic tradition of faith-based education,
- is a values-driven institution,
- promotes the development of student competences and skills for employability,
- is a warm and friendly place where people display a positive disposition to others,
- promotes equality of opportunity,
- facilitates staff development,
- respects the work of all members of staff,
- has a specialist focus on teacher education and the formation of its students for a vocation of service in the profession,
- is highly respectful of the work undertaken by our partners in the education service,
- places significance on promoting the Irish language and Irish-medium Education,
- is continually learning from the Liberal Arts tradition,
- is committed to ongoing improvement and is striving for excellence,
- enjoys good relationships with its partner schools and placement learning providers,
- has a vibrant student life and culture,
- is recognised for high levels of student participation in physical recreation and success in team sports,
- has a rich heritage and tradition which inspires confidence in the future,
- displays a strong commitment to engagement with the local community and other groups that wish to use its facilities and services,
- promotes an international dimension,
- encourages harmonious and cooperative working relationships,
- inspires loyalty and support from its alumni,
- has a strong sense of vitality and dynamism and
- is relevant to the needs of contemporary society.

Since March 2020 the St Mary's campus has been 'silent' to a significant extent. The life which is brought to it by members of staff, students and visitors has been diminished by the coronavirus pandemic. The College has to rebuild its vitality. It will seek to do so 'together' and to achieve a return to a strong sense of community.



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# 5 Agenda for Sustainability

The vision of our strategic Agenda is to lead the College from a position of relative vulnerability and concern for its survival to the achievement of long-term sustainability. To realise such a vision, our approach takes account of the main corporate risks for the College in the years ahead. As of June 2021, these risks have been identified as follows.

1. The impact of the pandemic on the safety of students, staff and visitors to the College.
2. A significant reduction in student applications and enrolments leading to a failure to meet recruitment targets.
3. Reductions in student intake allocations impacting on financial viability.
4. Failure to meet teaching quality expectations (due to pandemic).
5. Rising pension costs leading to financial deficits.
6. A major breach of cybersecurity.

Whilst St Mary's has significant strategic strengths, as demonstrated by the outcomes of recent external assessments as well as an excellent relationship with Queen's University and a strong financial profile, there are many challenges to be addressed. Our process of self-evaluation identifies one such challenge as a recent trend of reductions in student applications. This shall be addressed through improved marketing of our courses. The Institutional Plan for 2021-2024 will build on our strengths and address the major risks and areas requiring development. It will require a collective approach of common purpose from the staff and support from the student body as well as other stakeholders. Long-term sustainability also will require a clear focus on three enabling factors: (1) demonstrating relevance, (2) enhancing collaboration and (3) enabling high-quality provision.

Our strategic analysis of what is required for long-term sustainability points to ten high-level key actions and goals.

Key Actions	Goals
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will ensure that St Mary's retains its distinctive identity in the higher education sector.</li> <li>2. We will prioritise the well-being of students and staff.</li> <li>3. We will promote student-centred learning.</li> <li>4. We will maintain our full-time undergraduate student numbers with a focus on Widening Participation.</li> <li>5. We will expand into full-time postgraduate education to increase student numbers.</li> <li>6. We will ensure financial viability.</li> <li>7. We will invest in the modernisation and digital transformation of the College.</li> <li>8. We will collaborate further with Queen's University.</li> <li>9. We will engage constructively with government.</li> <li>10. We will improve our marketing and promotion activities.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1,200 undergraduate applications per year</li> <li>• At least 100% discretionary reserves as a percentage of income excluding pension deficits</li> <li>• £8 million in capital investment</li> <li>• 2 new full-time postgraduate degree programmes</li> <li>• A redeveloped library</li> <li>• A new Student Guidance and Support Centre</li> <li>• A new Information Technology Centre</li> <li>• A redeveloped Dining Hall</li> <li>• A new website</li> <li>• 95% student retention rate</li> </ul>

## 6 Strategic Aims

St Mary's is committed to an Agenda for Sustainability based around eight strategic aims. Success in achieving sustainability will require an institutional commitment to excellence and a culture of collaboration in the spirit of our Mission Statement. We will support our students and staff to attain excellence and work collaboratively based on our core values.

1	<b>Identity</b>	<b>Aim:</b> To commemorate, communicate and promote an explicit institutional identity reflective of a Catholic university college which demonstrates a responsibility to contribute to the common good.
2	<b>Academic Profile and Positioning</b>	<b>Aim:</b> To offer high-quality and distinctive educational provision which equips students with twenty-first century competencies and skills.
3	<b>Student Life</b>	<b>Aim:</b> To provide an excellent, holistic, student experience of higher education characterised by a high level of pastoral care, guidance and support.
4	<b>Partnerships</b>	<b>Aim:</b> To work in partnership with our stakeholders through collaboration and the sharing of expertise, resources and skills, and to demonstrate a material sense of civic responsibility.
5	<b>Financial Viability</b>	<b>Aim:</b> To preserve the financial strength of the College to enable it to be mission-effective.
6	<b>Estates and Campus Development</b>	<b>Aim:</b> To ensure that the campus is a safe and intellectually stimulating place with excellent facilities for students, staff and external user groups.
7	<b>Community of Staff</b>	<b>Aim:</b> To recruit, retain and develop staff to contribute to the College's mission in a friendly, inclusive and productive work environment where there is a commitment to equality of opportunity.
8	<b>Good Governance</b>	<b>Aim:</b> To have arrangements for governance which are effective and efficient, consensus-orientated, inclusive and responsive to the needs of both the College community and society at large.

## 7 Planning and Performance

During the period of the Institutional Plan (2021 - 2024), the College will seek to achieve its strategic aims through an annual Business Plan and delivering effectively on a series of actions for each strategic aim. It will also monitor its performance against related goals.

	Actions	Goals
<b>1. Identity</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will maintain fraternal relations with Catholic educational institutions and organisations at local, national and international levels.</li> <li>2. We will ensure that there is an annual calendar for liturgical events at the College.</li> <li>3. We will support the Student Newman Society and the Choir.</li> <li>4. We will welcome diocesan activities and events on campus.</li> <li>5. We will celebrate the history and traditions of St Mary's.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual production of <i>Le Chéile, A Catholic Schools Ethos Journal</i></li> <li>• Student participation in a range of voluntary organisations which assist the poor and powerless</li> <li>• Scholarly activities in the field of Catholic education</li> </ul>
<b>2. Academic Profile and Positioning</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will expand our relationship of collaborative provision with Queen's University.</li> <li>2. We will build our academic reputation as a small and specialist institution of higher education.</li> <li>3. We will enhance our marketing and recruit highly qualified students.</li> <li>4. We will develop a new College website.</li> <li>5. We will enhance the culture of research-informed teaching and develop digital learning.</li> <li>6. We will become a recognised centre of excellence in Irish-medium Teacher Education.</li> <li>7. We will continue to excel in Widening Access and Participation.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20% of students from the lowest quintile/MDM</li> <li>• 10% IME students in ITE</li> <li>• 320 average tariff entry points</li> <li>• 80% of students obtaining a good degree</li> <li>• Achievement of the academic requirements from Annual Provider Review (APR)</li> </ul>



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## 7 Planning and Performance

	Actions	Goals
<b>3. Student Life</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will facilitate a well-balanced student experience.</li> <li>2. We will encourage a commitment to environmental sustainability and social justice.</li> <li>3. We will introduce new initiatives to support student mental health.</li> <li>4. We will sharpen our focus on developing the employability of graduates and improvement of their skills and competences.</li> <li>5. We will continue to provide excellent guidance and support.</li> <li>6. We will encourage international mobility.</li> <li>7. We will improve student satisfaction with the College experience.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 90% student satisfaction (NSS and PTES)</li> <li>• 97% retention rate</li> <li>• 97% employment or further study</li> <li>• 20% international outward mobility per student entry cohort</li> <li>• 3,000 registered alumni</li> <li>• A high profile for Formative Profiling in Initial Teacher Education and PAR in Liberal Arts</li> </ul>
<b>4. Partnerships</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will align the College more closely with Queen's University through joint activities in the economic, educational and cultural spheres.</li> <li>2. We will develop further our strong relationship with partner schools and other placement providers.</li> <li>3. We will embed further St Mary's in the local community through collaborative work with the West Belfast Partnership Board, <i>Féile an Phobail</i>, and other similar organisations.</li> <li>4. We will maintain effective international partnerships.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a fully functioning collaborative partnership with Queen's University</li> <li>• Host an annual Easter school and Summer transition school</li> <li>• Host events of <i>Féile an Phobail</i></li> <li>• Strive for 10,000 person annual attendance at public events</li> <li>• Have a new website</li> </ul>
<b>5. Financial Viability</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will ensure financial strength.</li> <li>2. We will maintain our academic capacity.</li> <li>3. We will provide funding for investing in innovative capital projects.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No less than 1% annual surplus</li> <li>• Not more than 25:1 student/staff ratio</li> <li>• At least 100% Discretionary reserves as a percentage of income, excluding pension deficits</li> </ul>

# 7 Planning and Performance

	Actions	Goals
<b>6. Estates and Campus Development</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will invest in the modernisation of the campus and digital transformation.</li> <li>2. We will maintain the campus to the highest possible standard.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete the Library Redevelopment Project as a new learning hub</li> <li>• Establish a new Student Services Centre</li> <li>• Provide a new IT Centre for students</li> <li>• Ensure that the campus reaches at least 90% as new or sound condition</li> </ul>
<b>7. Community of Staff</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will recruit and retain high-quality staff.</li> <li>2. We will promote employee wellbeing.</li> <li>3. We will invest in staff development.</li> <li>4. We will promote equality of opportunity.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No more than 5% staff turnover</li> <li>• At least £350 expenditure per FTE staff member per annum in staff development</li> <li>• At least 60% of academic staff educated to doctorate level</li> <li>• At least 80% staff satisfaction</li> <li>• No more than 3% sickness absence rate</li> </ul>
<b>8. Good Governance</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We will respond effectively to audit recommendations and demonstrate accountability.</li> <li>2. We will maintain effective corporate and academic governance.</li> <li>3. We will ensure compliance with the relevant government regulations.</li> <li>4. We will plan for business continuity.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Satisfactory audit reports</li> <li>• Achievemnet of APR corporate requirements</li> <li>• Achieve very good outcomes from inspection by the ETI</li> </ul>



## 8 Strategies

We will have seven core strategies and six subsidiary strategies to direct the work of the College in achieving its key long-term goal of sustainability.

### CORE STRATEGIES

1. Learning and Teaching
2. Research
3. Estates
4. Finance
5. Human Resources
6. International Engagement
7. Student Guidance and Support

### SUBSIDIARY STRATEGIES

1. Careers and Employability
2. Community Engagement
3. Computing Services
4. Consumer Rights and Complaint Handling
5. Marketing, Promotion and Recruitment
6. Widening Access and Participation





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