

## WIDENING ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION PLAN 2025/26 – 2027/28

**Institutions are required to submit information under each of the headings below. Please see the guidance notes for help in completing this return.**

**1.1** Please provide a high-level outline of your institution's Widening Participation policy in Higher Education and how this fits in with the institution's strategic direction.

St Mary's University College is committed to widening access and participation in higher education. The fundamental principle underpinning this Widening Access and Participation Plan is that it should, first and foremost, reflect our distinctive mission and contribute to social justice in our society. Creating inclusive opportunities for the development of the whole person through access to higher education is central to our mission and informs our approach to the selection, recruitment, and retention of students. Furthermore, the WAPP is one of the College's four programmes that contribute to and support the vision of the Department.

*St Mary's '...believes in the power of education to transform lives, overcome disadvantage and contribute positively to humanity.'*

(page 5, Strategy 21: Charting the Course - An Institutional Plan for St Mary's University College 2024-27)

Widening access and participation is embedded within the College's overall corporate management plan. It informs policies and actions and is evident in the admissions criteria, quality assured teaching and learning, student support services, financial advice and guidance, careers and employability provision, marketing and recruitment, estates management and equality adherence.

St Mary's is committed to an Agenda for Institutional Sustainability based around eight strategic priorities. In the area described as Academic Profile and Positioning, the College aims to continue to excel in Widening Access and Participation and has a target of reaching a 20% participation rate of students from the lowest quintile/MDM.

St Mary's commitment is clear:

*" We aim to widen access to higher education and to enable participation from a broad spectrum of society. "* (Page 4, Strategy 21: Charting the Course - An Institutional Plan for St Mary's University College 2024-27)

The strategic aim of St Mary's for widening access is to ensure high levels of participation on College courses from two target groups in particular, students from the lowest socio-economic brackets, and students with a disability/Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs). Financial and other assistance will be provided to students from lower income families using additional funds generated from variable fees.

The College will ensure provision of a range of outreach programmes focusing on raising aspiration and attainment in under-represented groups. Activities and commitments that promote access and participation are focused on raising aspiration & attainment as well as encouraging, recruiting, and supporting students from under-represented groups as they progress towards, and through, higher education.

The College has a high level of success in recruiting students from lower socio-economic groups.

St Mary's are committed to raising the awareness of widening access and participation among our student teachers. During their time at the College, students are made aware of the Widening Access & Participation plan of St Mary's and are given opportunities to become involved in the various aspiration raising and attainment raising activities with school pupils, school staff, adult returners, disabled students, care leavers and others. A proportion of St Mary's students work as ambassadors on The STAR Project and St Mary's Achieving More Projects. The aim of this is to instil in all student teachers a knowledge, understanding and respect of the need for widening access in their future classrooms and schools. We want student teachers to be champions of Widening Access and to be aware of all the opportunities and help available for prospective students in higher education.

**1.2** What is your view of the success record of your institution in relation to recruitment, retention and progression for Widening Participation students?

Due to its distinctive pastoral care ethos, St Mary's University College has always had a very good success record in terms of the recruitment, retention, and progression of Widening Participation students.

The College attracts students from all corners of Northern Ireland. There are very few enrolments from the Republic of Ireland or beyond, however we are observing an increase in the number of attendees from the Republic of Ireland at our College Open Days. The number of undergraduate enrolments from the Republic of Ireland was 56 in September 2024, an increase from 23 in September 2023. There is clear evidence of recruitment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds with approximately 17.7% of the undergraduate population for 2022/23 from Quintile 1 of the Multiple Deprivation Measure indices. Retention in relation to this group of students is particularly difficult. The College offers strong pastoral support with systems in place to address retention issues, either for the individual or for each student cohort. There was a 95% progression rate of students from 2022/23 into 2023/24 in this regard.

The number of students on the disability support register has required dedicated resources in terms of providing advice, guidance, and support. 115 students (13.3%) declared a disability/SpLDs for 2022/23 with 53 students (6.1%) claiming Disability Support Allowance (DSA). The number of students declaring a disability/SpLDs has increased steadily over the past few years, and we expect this high level to continue.

The number of adult learners entering the College as new undergraduates aged 21 or over in September 2024 was 17, a decrease from 24 in September 2023. Students in this category are inducted fully into the College and supported academically and financially. Therefore, adult learners at St Mary's usually stay on course and progress well.

**1.3 Please outline the Widening Participation aims, objectives and targets for the next 3 years for your institution.**

*You will need to provide details on key target groups within Access to Success, anticipated expenditure and the measures of success – your response should include a description of your approach to targeting, as well as the areas targeted for improvement over the next 3 years. You may wish to add to the projection tables below to report on your own institution's specified target groups if not already included in Access to Success.*

**The College aims to:**

- Contribute to the overall raising of aspiration, attainment and participation in higher education
- Provide prospective applicants with the information they require about life as a student at the College e.g. courses, costs, financial and personal support
- Attract students from backgrounds that are currently underrepresented at the College
- Engage positively and meaningfully with schools and colleges and ensure that applications are fairly assessed and that there is equality of access opportunity
- Facilitate the transition of students into tertiary level education
- Provide each student with the appropriate guidance and support that will enable them to reach the highest levels of achievement
- Promote a diverse and inclusive environment.
- Inform St Mary's undergraduates about the importance of and our commitment to widening access & participation in HE.
- Celebrate our work in Widening Access and Participation.

**Key Target Groups**

St Mary's will focus on the following underrepresented groups:

- Students from lower income families
- Students with Disabilities/SpLDs
- Students from Quintile 1
- Adult Learners
- Young Males from lower income families

- Care Experienced Young People.

### **Approach to Targeting**

The College has a focused approach in terms of targeting and is, for example, holding specific events to raise aspirations such as an Open Days, Information Sessions for Mature Students and tailored sessions for WAP students. This will continue over the next 3 years. The College continues to target students from lower income families across all six counties in Northern Ireland including some border counties in the Republic of Ireland and fosters strong links with schools serving students from areas of high deprivation across the various sectors. College staff engage with numerous schools and students during the year.

The College, in co-operation with its partners, will continue to focus on aspiration raising and attainment raising projects for both primary and post-primary schools through its Young News Reader Project (previously called the Critical Literacy project) and the Easter School. This is to help ensure that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds do not attain lower grades than their more advantaged peers.

The College is exploring the option of Taster Days specifically for students from local post primary schools, who are studying Technology and Design. This activity will give local pupils the opportunity to experience a university environment in the subject of Technology and Design, with the aim of raising the aspiration of these pupils to consider pursuing a higher education course related to this subject or indeed teaching as a career pathway.

In terms of students with a disability and/or SpLDs, the College Undergraduate Prospectus, various information leaflets, College Disability Support Booklet and information on the website provide clear details of all the help pre-entry and the retention and progression support offered to students with a disability.

For the last six years, the College has been reaching out to a new group - care experienced young people. This has led to the development of a special Care Leaver's Bursary award in addition to personalised and specific support (pre and post entry) to this target group of students.

### 1.3 (a) TARGETS

You will note that the tables numbered (i) to (vi) below have been prepopulated with your institution's average enrolment for the last 3 years. You are now required to insert numerical targets for each of the groups identified across the **3 years 2025/26 – 2027/28**. These groups are regarded as being underrepresented in Access to Success.

- (i) Group: **MDM Quintile 1**

Outcome: **To increase participation of those from NI MDM Q1**

AVERAGE (based on 4 years 2019- 2023)	Targets/Outcome			
	4 Year Average	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
152	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	158	159	160

- (ii) Group: **Students with a Disability**

Outcome: **To increase the number of students who declare a disability**

AVERAGE (based on 4 years 2019- 2023)	Targets/Outcome			
	4 Year Average	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
109	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	106	108	110

- (iii) Group: **Students with a Disability**

Outcome: **To increase the number of students in receipt of DSA**

AVERAGE (based on 4 years 2019- 2023)	Targets/Outcome
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4 Year Average	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
<b>63</b>		<b>68</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>70</b>

(iv) Group: **Young Males from Quintile 1**

Outcome: **To increase participation of young males from NI MDM Quintile 1**

<b>AVERAGE</b> (based on 4 years 2019-2023)	Targets/Outcome			
4 Year Average	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
<b>39</b>		<b>35</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>37</b>

(v) Group: **Adult Learners**

Outcome: **To increase the number of adult learners participating in HE**

<b>AVERAGE</b> (based on 4 years 2019-2023)	Targets/Outcome			
4 Year Average	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
<b>17</b>		<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>

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As HESA data is largely incomplete for the following area, the figure that you provided in a previous WAPP for 2020/21 has been inserted as a base line.

- (vi) Group: **Number of Care Experienced enrolments**  
Outcome: **To increase the number of enrolments for those from a care background**

BASE YEAR	Targets/Outcome			
		2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
0.75	Number	1	1	1

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**1.3(b)** The following tables have been provided for you to now insert any other '**specific**' institutional targets. These may be different to those groups identified in 1.3(a) or may relate to targets other than enrolments. In all cases you will need to identify the group and highlight what the target outcome will be e.g. outreach, retention etc.

- (i) Group: MDM Decile 1
- (ii) Outcome: To maintain & increase participation of those from NI MDM Decile 1.

Baseline (statistical or % participation last year monitored)	Targets/Outcome			
		2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
8%	Number	84	84	84
	Percentage	9.9%	9.9%	9.9%

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**1.3(c)** Please now outline the estimated 'direct' expenditure required to meet the identified objectives in the table below. You may wish to refer to Part 2 of the guidance notes in "How to Complete your Widening Access and Participation Plan" for a definition of direct spend. Whilst we appreciate that figures for later years are only indicative, we do require estimations inserted in each of the categories.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Estimated Spend 2025/26 (£)</b>	<b>Estimated Spend 2026/27 (£)</b>	<b>Estimated Spend 2027/28 (£)</b>
Bursaries	95,760	99,000	99,000
Scholarships	3,000	3,000	3000
Other financial Support			
Outreach	92,763	99,713	102,206
Retention	145,671	157,224	161,155
Research Activity			
Staffing/ Administration	10,424	10,747	11015
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>347,619</b>	<b>369,684</b>	<b>376,376</b>

- 1.4** List below the key programmes/projects financed from additional student fees that will contribute towards your institution's performance.  
(Please refer to the appropriate section of the guidance notes before completing.)

**PROJECT 1 The STAR Project** (St Mary's Targeting and Aspiration Raising) involves the following activities:

Developing School Links for WP Groups, Dissemination of Information for WP Groups, College Open Day for WP students, Mature Students Evening, tailored sessions for WAP students, Technology & Design Taster Day, 'Tick the Box' event for Care Leavers.

The project addresses the following target groups: students from lower income families; students from Quintile 1; students with a disability/SpLDs; adult learners; young males from lower income families and care experienced young people.

**Participants were identified as follows:** pupils from non-grammar, post-primary schools with a low number of applications to St Mary's, students with a disability/SpLDs, adult learners, care experienced young people, and young males. Evaluation will include consideration of the following outcomes: degree of positive feedback from school principals, career teachers and students; offering of at least 20 activities/events per year; maintenance of numbers of applications from non-selective post-primary schools; maintenance of numbers of applications from young males and the maintenance of the current level of applications from adult learners.

**School Links for WP Groups:** As part of the school links and outreach work, the St Mary's Outreach Team will directly engage with a minimum of 20 selected schools/colleges across Northern Ireland to raise aspirations towards HE, in addition to regional events in the R.O.I. College staff will offer information on HE and course choice, application support and/or interview skills training. Support available for students with disabilities or additional educational needs will also be highlighted. In addition, St Mary's staff will attend specifically selected Careers Fairs to reach more WP students, including collaboration with and attendance at events organised by various ALC (Area Learning Community) groups. School outreach can be facilitated remotely via Microsoft Teams or another platform, as necessary.

**Dissemination of Information for WP Groups:** To positively promote aspiration to HE, the College has invested in a new website which will host all undergraduate application information such as: a summary Entry Guidelines Brochure, the College Undergraduate Prospectus, Degree Programme Information, Subject Study Information, Applications and Admissions Advice. In addition to this, information on finance and accommodation will also be accessible from the College website. Hard copies of the Entry Guidelines and various leaflets are distributed at Open Days,

tailored sessions, Careers Fairs, or during School Visits. These documents provide a variety of information including course outlines, course requirements, application procedures, opportunities associated with the different programmes, financial advice, and information on student support. The information is directed at applicants with a disability/specific learning need, mature (adult) learners, and care leavers.

**College Open Day for WP students:** This annual event normally takes place in September. Its purpose is to give post-primary school students (Years 13 & 14), and FE College students from underrepresented groups, the opportunity to visit the College and gain wide-ranging information on all aspects of Higher Education. All secondary and grammar schools in Northern Ireland are invited and in recent times schools attending have included: St Mary's, Glen Road, St Genevieve's College Belfast, Blessed Trinity College Belfast, All Saints, St Louise's Comprehensive College, Coláiste Feirste, Wallace High School, Lagan College, Holy Cross College Strabane, Sacred Heart College Omagh, St Kevin's College, Lisnaskea, Holy Trinity College Cookstown, St Paul's High School Bessbrook, St Patrick's High School Keady and Hunterhouse College. We provide a high degree of flexibility to prospective students who cannot attend our Open Day and offer Campus visits as well as information regarding degree courses, financial information as well as advice on the application process.

**Mature Students Evening:** This event normally takes place in November and can happen remotely via Microsoft Teams or via a different platform as required. Mature students from all the Regional College's & Regional College staff are invited to find out more about undergraduate courses, entry requirements and indeed all aspects of life at St Mary's. We provide a high degree of flexibility to prospective mature students who cannot attend this event, facilitating campus visits and communication at a time of their convenience.

**Tailored Session for WAP Students:** This activity is flexible and available all year round upon request by students who have specific learning needs and can be facilitated in collaboration with College Support Staff. This provision is tailored to the needs and requests of the individual, with support provided in terms of familiarisation of the College campus, detailed one-to-one advice and guidance on the degree programmes, application form and BEd Interview where appropriate. Upon request, taster classes in the College can be facilitated.

**Technology & Design Taster Day:** This activity is designed to welcome students from local post primary schools in the West Belfast area to visit the College and engage in a workshop that provide the opportunity to learn from our current students and participate in guided interactive activities in our T&D workshop. This will provide pupils with an insight to what St Mary's can offer them as a pathway beyond post

primary level education. Pupils will be able to familiarise themselves with the campus, enjoy refreshments and find out more about the support and provision available to students at the College.

**Raising Awareness of Student Teachers:** Final year student teachers will be made aware of the College's Widening Access & Participation plan and be given an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the various aspiration raising and attainment raising activities carried out with school pupils, school staff, adult returners, disabled/SpLDs students, care leavers and others. The aim is to instil in student teachers some knowledge, understanding and respect of the need for widening participation in their future classrooms and schools.

### **PROJECT 2 St Mary's Achieving More Project**

This project focusses on attainment-raising for two particular groups – (a) primary school pupils from lower income families who have been identified as slow progress readers or who may have difficulty in dealing with the transition from primary to post-primary school; and (b) post-primary students from less advantaged backgrounds who are not performing well in Maths and English. There are currently two programmes in the project – the Easter School which aims to help the selected students achieve better results in GCSE Maths and English and the Young News Readers Project, which is an initiative to help children and young people to improve their essential literacy skills and to raise outcomes for pupils in their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. The project will address the following target groups; pupils/students from lower income families, pupils/students from Quintile 1, students with a disability/SpLDs; young males from lower income families and care experienced young people.

**Participants** will be identified as follows:

Easter School - pupils with a predicted GCSE grade in English and/or Maths below grade 'C' from non-grammar, post-primary schools with a record of few applications to St Mary's.

Young News Readers Project – school pupils aged between 8-12 years who require extra literacy support.

**Evaluation** will include consideration of the following outcomes: degree of positive feedback from school principals and careers teachers, degree of positive student/adult engagement, extent of demand for places on the programme and the

number of students obtaining grade 'C' or above in GCSE Maths and English (target greater than 65%).

**Easter School:** The College GCSE Examinations Workshops are held in co-operation with the WBPB and involve approximately 100-150 pupils from 12 West Belfast post-primary schools. They are normally held on the St Mary's campus during the Easter holidays although this can also be achieved virtually. GCSE Mathematics and English Language are a core subject requirement for entry into all under-graduate programmes. Many students, while capable at other subjects, find Mathematics and written English challenging. The College, in co-operation with our local partners (WBPB), works with post-primary schools in low participation areas to help improve the success rate of low-income students in GCSE Mathematics and English Language. The programme is offered in both English and Irish and combines practical workshops with formal tuition. The College will monitor the success of this project in terms of numbers of pupils attending and the proportion of pupils who obtain a grade 'C' or above in GCSE Mathematics and GCSE English Language.

**Young News Readers: Critical Literacy Project:** The Young News Readers project is a collaboration between St Mary's University College and The Irish News. The project provides a literacy-based programme that draws on Freebody and Luke's Four Resources Model to teach essential critical literacy skills that include code breaking, meaning making, text using, and text analysing. The teaching resource, which is written by Donna Hazzard, Principal Lecturer and Literacy Team leader at St Mary's, is for teachers of pupils in Key Stages Two and Three. Thousands of pupils in schools across Northern Ireland have successfully participated. This included a significant number of primary and post-primary schools in areas of high social deprivation. The resource is underpinned by three foundational principles.

Firstly, the Literacy Changes Lives reports (2008; 2014) explore the link between Literacy and economic instability. The reports highlight the relationship that poor literacy has with a range of health inequalities, employment outcomes and criminal offending. They conclude that poor literacy has a profound social and economic impact on the most vulnerable individuals in our communities and is a barrier to social justice.

Secondly, the demands of living in a media-saturated world mean that the need for high level literacy skills is ever increasing. We live in unprecedented times. Never have we had so much information (and disinformation) available to us. Children and young people need to develop critical capabilities to help them to navigate this complex terrain. Luke (2009) refers to these skills as “the new basic” in literacy.

Thirdly, research by the National Literacy Trust (2015) found that parents reading newspapers with their children led to significant progression in reading skills and improvements in wider attitudes towards the news and towards reading. Many of the resource tasks have been planned so that they can be completed at home with parental support and involvement. With these principles in mind the aims of the Creating Young News Readers project are to:

1. Raise outcomes for children and young people in reading, writing, speaking and listening.
2. Develop children and young people as critical thinkers, who question information, conclusions and viewpoints; who strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant; and who seek to be logical and fair.
3. Promote family Literacy by powerfully reinforcing the good Literacy work done in school.

### **PROJECT 3 Working to Succeed Programme**

St Mary's has a dedicated Student Support Team consisting of a full-time member of staff, the Co-ordinator of Student Guidance and Support and a full-time Student Support Officer. Together they have responsibility for assisting students in a range of ways. The Working to Succeed project is a retention and support programme for WP groups. It aims to offer support to these students to assist them to successfully complete their studies and thus increase the retention rate amongst such students. The project involves the following activities:

- WP Induction/Stepping Stones Programme
- Attendance and Progression Monitoring & Follow-up programmes
- Tuition in College Writing Centre

- Access to a Study Skills Tutor
- Access to Academic Mental Health Tutor
- Access to bespoke Support Tutors and Mentors

The project will address the following **target groups**: students from lower income families, students from Quintile 1, students with a disability, adult learners and young males from lower income families. Participants will be identified as follows: students in receipt of College Bursaries, mature (over 21 on entry) students, young males from lower income families.

**Evaluation** will include consideration of the following outcomes: Year to Year Progression Rates with targets of over 90% for WP identified groups.

**WP Induction/Stepping Stones Programme:**

This is offered to all Year 1 students in receipt of WP support and includes an induction meeting to discuss individual needs and to ensure the student has access to all available support and information from the very beginning of their College programme.

This programme has been carefully designed to assist first year students (and particularly WAP students) in making the transition from school to university. It is scheduled to run for the first four weeks of term and include the following sessions:

- a) Time and Place: understanding a university timetable/designing a work schedule/finding my way around college/using the IT resources.
- b) Study: Reading a course outline/using the library/taking notes/study strategies and skills.
- c) Settling In: Establishing good relationships/College Code of Practice/developing good study habits/combating plagiarism/accessing support services.
- d) Looking Forward: Setting goals/planning for assessment/engaging with the Personal Development Process and/or College as the next step to a career.

e) Individual Meetings with Personal Tutor to discuss individual needs or concerns.

**Attendance and Progression Monitoring & Follow-up programmes:** The College's Student Services Team, in co-operation with Programme Leaders, will actively monitor the attendance of all students in receipt of WP support and follow up where necessary. Each student is assigned a tutor who assists and advises the student in the development of knowledge, understanding and skills. Students are provided with a clear explanation of the structure of courses and how they will be taught and assessed. The Support Team and College Counsellor are available to help in matters of an academic, personal or pastoral nature. This service is normally available in person but can also be accessed remotely as required.

**College Writing Centre:** St Mary's operates a first-class writing centre which has been designated as a national Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Priority is given to students from low-income backgrounds and/or those without a family history of higher education since such students may struggle with the demands of academic writing. These students receive assistance from other students— "peer tutors" —who help the students to develop as university-level writers. The Writing Centre additionally offers seminars in written communications and provides writing classes to students on the Liberal Arts Degree programme. This service is normally available in person but can also be accessed remotely as required.

**Study Skills Tutor:** This includes one-to-one mentoring to assist struggling WP students to catch up with missed work, with reading and understanding questions, effective note-taking, and useful study strategies. This service is normally available in person but can also be accessed remotely as required.

**Support Tutors and Mentors:** This service offers help to WP students in terms of recognising and putting in place strategies and mechanisms to cope with stress and pressure during the academic year and particularly in the run up to examinations. Time management skills are often addressed. This service is normally available in person but can also be accessed remotely as required.

#### **PROJECT 4 St Mary's Disability Support Programme**

This project is a retention and support programme for students with disabilities. It offers support to these students to assist them to successfully complete their studies and thus increasing the retention rate amongst such students. The project involves the following activities:

- Work of the Co-ordinator of Student Guidance and Support and the Student Support Officer
- Provision of a Disability Support Booklet
- Orientation Visits & Meetings
- Attendance Monitoring
- Specialist bespoke Provision (Support Tutors and Mentors)
- Exam Support
- Dyslexia Coaching
- Campus Assistance

**Participants will be identified as follows:** students in receipt of DSA and those identified as having a disability/additional support needs (as coded within the HESA return).

**Evaluation will include consideration of the following outcomes:** Year to Year Progression Rates with a target drop-out rate of less than 10% and/or 5 students.

**Work of the Student Support Officer:** St Mary's has a dedicated Student Support Officer who has special responsibility for assisting students with disabilities. This assistance includes guidance in applying for government funding and other support, provision of assistive equipment, signposting to appropriate support and the making of all reasonable adjustments to ensure equal access. This service is normally available in person but can also be accessed remotely as required.

**Disability Support Booklet:** This is a College specific booklet offering support details and guidance for students with a disability. It is available online or in hard copy upon request.

**Orientation Visits & Meetings:** These are available to students with a disability to offer them a chance to become familiar with the College Campus and to meet with the Support Officer to discuss individual needs and to offer information and support in applying for DSA and FSD. This service is normally available in person but can also be accessed remotely as required.

**Attendance Monitoring:** Members of the College Support Team in co-operation with individual Programme Leaders will actively monitor the attendance of all disabled students in receipt of DSA and WAP support. Attendance is monitored to identify WP students who are frequent non-attenders. In cooperation with academic staff, the student support officer will ensure that there is appropriate follow-up in cases of absence or under-achievement. Staff meet with the students to review current support and, if necessary, increase the support offered to ensure equal access and participation.

**Specialist Provision and Support:** Where DSA is not available, the College currently provides specialist technology, equipment and, where necessary, support personnel to students with additional support needs. Equipment and services such as dictaphones, laptops, furniture, academic or personal assistants, proofreaders, personal note takers during lectures, specialist tuition for students with dyslexia, academic tuition for students with disabilities, mental health mentor, general study tutors, library support and flexible coursework deadlines.

**Exam Support:** Students with additional support needs can apply for any or all the following: alternative exam venue, extra time allowance, rest breaks, use of a scribe or a reader, and technological aids.

**Dyslexia Coaching:** All WP students who have a dyslexia diagnosis and who are waiting for DSA funded support to become available are allocated a Support Tutor to assist with written work.

**Campus Assistant:** This is offered based on need and the outcome of a Risk Assessment and it includes help getting around the campus as well as assistance on field trips and placement.

**1.5** Please provide a short summary of how your activities link to the key actions within Access to Success.

KA4: St Mary's positively promotes HE in their outreach work to schools and colleges and includes the agreed single brand identity for WP on all public materials.

KA5: Through our School Links and Outreach, Young News Reader Literacy Project, and Easter School, the College seeks to raise aspirations of young people and help raise attainment levels in both Literacy and Numeracy.

KA6: St Marys accepts BMC Foundation Degree in Physical Education and Sport, plus Sports Coaching and Performance students into Year 2 of the BA Liberal Arts programme.

KA8: The College's Student Services Team, Academic Registry and Programme Tutors actively monitor the attendance/progression of students in receipt of WP support.

KA9: The College's dedicated Student Support Services team offer guidance to students applying for government funding and support. Students can also avail of assistive equipment, help with academic writing and the making of all reasonable adjustments to ensure equal access and progression in HE.

KA11: The College's dedicated Widening Access & Participation Officer works with DfE, DE, other HEIs, the College SMT and Academic Registry to prepare and submit a WAP Plan on an annual basis.

**1.6** How do you plan to communicate information on the availability of financial and other assistance to students?

St Mary's will provide clear and accessible information to prospective and existing students about the fees they are liable to pay and the financial support they can expect to receive.

The College will provide the information in the College Undergraduate Prospectus and will also make it available on the College website. All relevant information regarding finance support and other support services is provided on the website and communicated by the WAP Officer to schools and prospective students during outreach activities. Alternatively, this information can be accessed through the Students Union Office, and the Student Services Office. The College launched a new website in February 2024, with improved navigation tools and clarity of information for prospective and current WP students on financial and other assistance.

**1.7** How do you plan to monitor progress against the targets and the achievement of outcomes?

Monitoring of the Access Agreement and WAP Plan will be the responsibility of the Widening Access & Participation Co-ordinator and the Academic Registry Team who will submit the WAP Plan to the Board of Governors in June for their consideration and approval. The College Senior Management Team will have overall responsibility. As part of the annual monitoring cycle, the Senior Management Team will receive bi-annual reports on the implementation of the College Access Agreement from the Widening Access & Participation Co-ordinator. The implementation of the measures set out in the agreement will be monitored and progress against milestones will be measured.

**1.8** Please provide an additional evaluation on how you think your institution is performing or provide us with relevant documents in line with section 1.8 of the guidance document.

*(Full details on how to complete this section are in the guidance notes)*

In order to ensure consistency across institutions we would ask that you use the Kirkpatrick Model for this exercise. The concept is that individual institutions will learn from this self-evaluation and obtain evidence to influence future widening participation activity and plans. You may evaluate the institution's widening participation activity as a whole, or evaluate individual projects.

The following sub headings should help focus your response. The Department expects that most institutions will be able to evaluate widening participation activity to at least Level 3 (as below).

### **Level 1 Evaluation – Reactions**

*What participants thought and felt about the programme*

<b>Project</b>	<b>Approach to Evaluation</b>
1.STAR Project 2.Achieving More Project 3.Working to Succeed Project 4.Disability Support Project	Whether the event is online (held remotely) or if participants visit the College, our approach to evaluation is threefold:  1. Felt reaction, (excited buzz on the day, smiling faces, numbers attending and engagement on the day in person or online, number of complaints).  2. Verbal evidence which includes casual conversations/chat activity with both school pupils, mature students, teachers, and parents/ guardians.  3. Written evidence (completed evaluation sheets).

#### **Project 1 STAR Project**

Summary: All our outreach aspiration activities have been received positively by all who have been involved. Participants report that they found the talks and presentations given on Open Days, information afternoons or evenings, and at Careers Fairs or in individual schools as well as the Adult Returner Events, engaging and relevant. Participants also report that the booklets and leaflets distributed as well as the information on the website is both

informative and up to date. Online evaluation forms for the Open Days found that participants rated the overall organisation and delivery of the day 4.76 out of 5.

### **Project 2 Achieving More Project**

Activities including the Easter School and Young News Reader Project were well received by all participants. Both verbal and written evidence suggest that these activities were relevant, worthwhile, and enjoyable.

### **Project 3 Working to Succeed Project**

Retention and support for WP students is something the College, and in particular, the Student Services team takes very seriously. The student body are aware of the pastoral ethos and culture of St Mary's. Many students have verbally expressed their satisfaction for the help they have received during the year. There was considerable positive reaction and verbal praise for the 'Stepping Stones' Programme, during the first few weeks of term. This programme helps to embed, at a very early stage, the pastoral ethos of the College into the minds of new students. It also helps to identify needs of WP students much earlier. For particular students, we were able to put in place tailored support mechanisms to ensure that such students knew who to turn to if they developed a problem, so that they didn't get into difficulty and, subsequently, drop out. This Project has contributed to the overall satisfaction rating of 81% for our Liberal Arts students.

### **Project 4 Disability Support Project**

Positive reactions were received from students with a disability or SpLDs who were assisted in terms of claiming DSA or obtaining on-going learning support and/or granted additional consideration during examinations. The anonymous nature of this support encourages students to come forward and not to be afraid or embarrassed to receive support. The positive verbal feedback received, as well as the growing number of students seeking out the service, is a good indication that this project is relevant and worthwhile.

## **Level 2 Evaluation - Learning**

*The resulting increase in knowledge or capability*

<b>Project</b>	<b>Approach to Evaluation</b>
1.STAR Project 2.Achieving More Project 3.Working to Succeed Project 4.Disability Support Project	Where practical, evaluation of participants' knowledge and understanding following specific programmes or activities will be carried out through questionnaires/surveys and face-to-face student interviews.

### **Project 1 STAR Project**

Open Days, information afternoons or evenings, school-based talks and presentations, and taster sessions are all designed to get information out to young people about the benefits of Higher Education, available courses or routes to be considered, as well as support offered to help achieve the dream of going to university. Again, all indications are that participants' knowledge and understanding concerning courses on offer and assistance available to them is greatly increased following attendance at one of our events, and their confidence and skills in terms of the application and interview process. From the online evaluation form for attendees at the Adult Returner Information Event, the written feedback was extremely positive and highlighted the knowledge they gained from the event. In addition to the information provided in hard copy form, all prospective students are also directed to the College website to further increase their knowledge. The effectiveness of our in-house and external outreach is currently measured in a variety of ways from verbal and written comments on evaluations forms, teacher feedback and in terms of an applicants' knowledge shown on their application form or at interview. Another measure is to record the number of people visiting the College website or contacting the College to make specific enquiries following an event.

### **Project 2 Achieving More Project**

In terms of attainment raising, increases in learning are measured by testing participants before and after a project, for example, the Young News Reader Literacy Project. In the case of the Easter School, we can compare the participants predicted grade before participation in the project, and the participant's actual grade achieved in the GCSE examination to ascertain whether there was an increase in learning and capability.

### **Project 3 Working to Succeed Project**

The Stepping Stones programme was particularly useful in dealing with queries and ensuring that individuals and groups of students were prepared for Higher Education and had the knowledge, confidence and skills to access available support.

### **Project 4 Disability Support Project**

The efforts of the Student Support team along with other staff members has meant that students who have specific support requirements have a clearer understanding of the funded and non-funded support arrangements available. This is measured by the increasing number of students applying for Disability Support Allowance and students declaring a disability or SpLD.

## **Level 3 Evaluation – Transfer**

*Behaviour - extent of behaviour and capability improvement and implementation/application*

<b>Project</b>	<b>Approach to Evaluation</b>
1.STAR Project 2.Achieving More Project 3.Working to Succeed Project 4.Disability Support Project	Outcomes of each programme to be analysed in relation to qualitative and quantitative data to establish uptake, improvement, and value.

### **Project 1 STAR Project**

Indications are that the College continues to perform well in attracting students from target groups, particularly those from disadvantaged areas measured through Multiple Deprivation Measures. There has been an increase in the range of schools with significant numbers of applicants coming from schools in the secondary (High) school sector.

### **Project 2 Achieving More Project**

In terms of transfer, the Young News Reader Project and the Easter School are good examples. All indications are that following their experience on these programmes, pupils/students increase in confidence and can put to good use what they have learned whether this is literacy skills, maths skills, or their ability to access further/higher education.

### **Project 3 Working to Succeed Project**

Thankfully the College has very low levels of withdrawals during the academic year. The College monitors attendance continuously and identifies students at risk of withdrawing. Uptake in terms of support measures is increasing showing a greater awareness and need from the student body. Figures showing the retention of students from target groups would indicate that, while Student Services is under increasing pressure, this project is mostly successful.

### **Project 4 Disability Support Project**

The increase in uptake of support for students with disability or SpLD is a good indication of the success of this programme. However, this service is under increasing pressure as the number of students accessing this service has significantly increased.

## **Level 4 Evaluation- Results**

*Results- the effects resulting from performance*

<b>Project</b>	<b>Approach to Evaluation</b>
1.STAR Project 2.Achieving More Project 3.Working to Succeed Project 4.Disability Support Project	Use of application data and enrolment information, GCSE grades and use of post and pretesting of participants. Analysis of year-on-year progression rates for each target group.

### **Project 1 STAR Project**

In terms of aspiration raising, it is difficult to measure the true success rate as many students may be inspired to pursue higher education because of College outreach activities but may choose to attend another institution. However, the College continues to attract students from all corners of Northern Ireland and there is clear evidence of recruitment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, with over 17.7% of the undergraduate population for 2022/23 coming from Quintile 1 of the Multiple Deprivation Measure indices. This is a fair indication that the College is being successful in terms of widening access and raising aspirations.

### **Project 2 Achieving More Project**

In terms of attainment raising, results can be verified for example, by examining the participants predicted grade before the Easter School and afterwards the participant's actual grade achieved in the GCSE examination. In the 2022 series of examinations: 74.5% of Easter School participants achieved grades A-C in GCSE English and 76.5% of Easter School participants achieved grades A-C in GCSE Mathematics. These were all students designated as 'at risk of achieving a Grade D or lower in the examination'. Without a grade 'C' in both GCSE English and Maths or equivalent, participants could not pursue a third level qualification. Only time will tell what percentage of these students go on to study at a HEI. A total of 133 students benefitted from the 2024 Easter School (*The GCSE grade results for 2024 were not available at the time of writing*).

### **Project 3 Working to Succeed Project**

Following the introduction of Multiple Deprivation Measures, retention, progression, and success in degree completion will be analysed as and when data becomes available. This will be used to identify trends and performance against benchmarks. The College is serious in its efforts to run effective initiatives for the induction of WP students. An assessment will be made of the performance of specific groups in relation to this.

### **Project 4 Disability Support Project**

The number of disabled students enrolled on courses at St Mary's and granted DSA was recorded as 53 (6.1%) in the academic year 2022-23, which is a slight decrease from 58 (6.8%) in 2021/22. This decrease is explained by several students graduating who were in receipt of DSA plus some students whose application for DSA was pending. The dedicated Student Services team ensure this cohort of students are adequately supported.