

Outcome Agreement 2025/26

Department for the Economy and Queen's University Belfast

This document includes the Queen's evaluation of the 2024/25 Outcome Agreement and the 2025/26 Outcome Agreement.

July 2025

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1. Introduction

This year marks a major milestone for Queen’s University Belfast – our 180th anniversary. As an anchor institution, Queen’s has been at the heart of Northern Ireland for 180 years and has made a major contribution to the development of the city, this island and its people. We are proud to continue our longstanding commitment to the economic, social, and cultural development of Northern Ireland. As we enter the second year of the Outcome Agreements Framework with the Department for the Economy, we welcome the opportunity to build on the strong foundations laid in 2024/25 and to further align our institutional Strategy 2030 with the Department’s evolving priorities.

This Outcome Agreement for 2025/26 reflects our shared ambition to deliver good jobs, promote regional balance, raise productivity, and accelerate progress towards net zero. It also responds to the Department’s call for a greater focus on green upskilling and reskilling—an area where Queen’s is well positioned to lead, through our research, education, and civic engagement.

As Northern Ireland’s research-intensive university, we remain committed to delivering world-leading research, fostering innovation, and equipping our students with the skills and attributes needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Our work through the Belfast Region City Deal, our Innovation Centres, and our partnerships with industry and government continues to demonstrate the transformative potential of collaboration.

This document includes a self-evaluation of our 2024/25 commitments and sets out our intended contributions for 2025/26 across the Department’s strategic priorities. It also highlights the wider societal impact of our work and this year we work to achieve formal status as a civic university, reflecting that the university is accessible, agile, and responsive to the needs of our region and beyond.

We look forward to continuing our partnership with the Department for the Economy and to playing a central role in delivering a more prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable future.

2. Background

Queen’s University Belfast welcomed the introduction of Outcome Agreements in 2024/25 as a new and constructive mechanism for aligning institutional priorities with those of the Department for the Economy. We recognise the value of this framework in fostering open, transparent, and collaborative dialogue between the University and the Department, and in providing a platform to demonstrate the breadth and depth of our contribution to Northern Ireland’s economic and societal development.

As a research-intensive institution with a civic mission, Queen’s has long championed the integration of education, research, and innovation in service of the public good. The Outcome Agreement process has enabled us to articulate how our work supports the Department’s strategic priorities, while also reflecting the distinctiveness of our mission, values, and Strategy 2030.

We appreciate the Department's recognition that much of the University's activity extends beyond the immediate remit of the Department, and the Executive, and we welcome the flexibility to reflect this wider contribution within the Outcome Agreement. We also support the Department's intention to develop Outcome Agreements as an iterative, co-designed process, and we are committed to working in partnership to refine and strengthen this approach over time.

3. Self-Evaluation of 2024/25 Outcome Agreement

The 2024/25 academic year has marked a period of continued ambition, progress, and resilience for Queen's.

A major milestone was achieved with Queen's breaking into the top 200 universities worldwide in the QS World University Rankings 2026. Placing 199th out of more than 1,500 institutions, this result positions Queen's within the top 13.3% globally and reflects significant work to strengthen our international reputation.

Closer to home, the new Student Centre on our main campus is now open and fully operational. Designed to provide integrated, wraparound support, it offers a modern, student-focused hub that brings key services together under one roof. Within it, the newly reinvigorated Students' Union — named SU of the Year in the 2025 WhatUni Student Choice Awards — has redefined student representation and community engagement, creating a dynamic space led by students, for students.

Our commitment to providing students with the best possible accommodation experience has been consistently recognised through national and international awards in 2024/25:

- 2024 Investors in Students Gold Award – national accreditation based on student satisfaction; first UK university accommodation to achieve Gold.
- 2024 Class Foundation Award – Best in Class Residential Life Wellbeing Programme (international).
- Staff Excellence Award – Exceptional Contribution in Accommodation (Housekeeping Supervisor).
- 2024 Class Foundation Award – Best in Class finalist for Best Affordable Student Housing (international).
- 2025 ASRA Award – Residential Life Hero of the Year.
- 2025 CUBO Award – Residence Life Star awarded to a Residential Assistant team member.
- 2025 Irish Operating Excellence Awards – short-listed in the Higher Education category.
- 2025 Investors in Students Gold Award – national accreditation for a second consecutive year; top UKHE scores for staff engagement with residents and overall student experience.

Our commitment to widening participation continues to deepen. We were proud to be the first institution in Northern Ireland to receive the Quality Mark from the National Network

for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL), recognising our comprehensive support for care-experienced students.

Collaboration with business and industry has expanded, co-creating learning experiences that respond to the needs of priority sectors. These include work-based projects, guest-led modules, and innovation labs aligned with health, technology, sustainability, and advanced manufacturing. These partnerships enrich our students' learning and build pathways into high-value careers.

This year also saw Queen's achieve University of Sanctuary status, a significant milestone as we progress our journey towards becoming a truly Civic University – inclusive, outward-looking, and embedded in the needs of society.

We were delighted to welcome the first Copty scholars in September 2024. The Copty Scholarship, which aims to help transform lives through education, is a one-year funded programme open to applicants with Palestinian nationality who live in Gaza or the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and belong to a family normally resident there. In the academic year 2025-26 Queen's has welcomed two Palestinian students who have come to Belfast to take up the Copty Scholarship at the University.

In line with our commitment to ethical and responsible investment, Queen's committed in June 2024 to divest from companies blacklisted by the UN Human Rights Council. As a result, in the academic year 2024-25 the University no longer held direct investments in any Israeli companies or entities listed by the Council. We remain firmly committed to our Responsible Investment Policy, and, in partnership with our Students' Union, continue to work towards divesting from the small number of indirect holdings made through managed fund products.

Our contribution to the Executive's Programme for Government consultation exercise outlined the breadth of our contributions to Northern Ireland and the vital role we play as a partner to Government.

Like many institutions across the sector, we have had to navigate a challenging financial context. The rise in National Insurance contributions and uncertainty around the Department's budget have required careful planning and ongoing engagement with stakeholders.

We continue to play a leading role in driving inclusive economic growth across Northern Ireland. Through the Belfast Region City Deal, we are delivering innovation centres – AMIC, iREACH Health, and Momentum One Zero – that will shape the future economy. By convening partners across further education, local councils, and industry, we are helping to build talent pipelines, connect learners with emerging sectors, and ensure more people access good, future-focused employment. We hope to continue this work in the coming years.

Despite challenges, our University community continues to demonstrate resilience, creativity, and commitment. The progress of the past year provides a strong foundation for the future, and we remain focused on delivering for our students, partners, and wider society.

The full breakdown of the self-evaluation for 2024/25 can be seen below.

4. Strategic Priorities for 2025/26

In 2025/26, Queen's University Belfast marks a major milestone – our 180th anniversary. As an anchor institution, we are proud of our historic contribution to the development of Belfast, this island, and its people, and we remain committed to shaping its future as a dynamic, globally connected city. Our strategic priorities for the year reflect this commitment: advancing innovation through the Belfast Region City Deal, accelerating progress towards net zero, and investing in our students, staff, and infrastructure.

We pursue these ambitions in the context of significant local and global challenges. Public funding constraints, particularly in Northern Ireland, continue to place the higher education sector at a competitive disadvantage. At the same time, global uncertainty adds further complexity to our operating environment. Despite these pressures, Queen's remains focused on delivering impact – through research, education, and civic engagement – while taking decisive steps to ensure long-term financial sustainability. This year we will:

- Advance curriculum innovation and employer engagement to address skills imbalances by delivering a transformative student experience, providing an education for societal impact, broadening access to Higher Education, and through innovations in our Teaching and Learning – while supporting inclusive economic growth and the development of Northern Ireland's knowledge-based economy. We are proud to partner with the Executive, business and communities to help deliver shared priorities and ambitions.
- Build on the strong foundations laid in the previous year by scaling high-impact initiatives across research quality, international collaboration, knowledge exchange and commercialisation. We will intensify efforts in Innovation & R&D, targeting large-scale bids in Net Zero, AI, health and cybersecurity, while embedding AI tools to streamline research processes and enhance Productivity Growth. International and cross-border engagement will expand through ERC preparation, Horizon Europe consortia and all-island cluster development. Sectoral impact will be accelerated via BRCD Innovation Centres and deeper business-academic partnerships, supporting Skills, Collaboration, and regional economic growth. Commercialisation efforts will focus on AI-native operations, spin-out support and Net Zero ventures, contributing to the Minister's Economic Mission by creating good jobs, promoting regional balance, and advancing a globally connected, innovation-led economy.
- Advance our Net Zero Plan by embedding climate action across operations, research, teaching, and engagement. Green upskilling and reskilling will be integral to our workforce development strategy, with initiatives like SKILL UP offering free training in priority areas including Green Skills.
- Deepen our commitment to widening participation by scaling initiatives that support underrepresented groups from aspiration to graduate employment. Key priorities include enhancing support for care-experienced, mature, and access students,

expanding outreach, and promoting inclusive learning through open educational resources and the Micro-Credentials Project.

- Building on our legacy of accessible education, Queen's will expand flexible learning opportunities through short courses and micro-credentials. We aim to support learners at every stage of life with inclusive, career-responsive education, underpinned by sustainable funding models that remove financial barriers and promote regional resilience.
- Strengthen our role in a connected tertiary education sector by deepening university-college partnerships and expanding work-based learning routes. Our focus is on enabling seamless transitions for learners of all ages and backgrounds, ensuring inclusive and responsive pathways across Northern Ireland's education system.
- Build digital capability across the institution by expanding inclusive training pathways, piloting AI-driven educational innovations, and developing specialised resources such as an "AI for Teaching and Learning" course. We will continue to explore assessment optionality and integrate advanced digital solutions to support workforce upskilling. Operationally, we will refine our use of established frameworks like Jisc to enhance staff and graduate competencies, while driving AI innovation to improve pedagogy and operational efficiency through bespoke tools that enrich learning and save time.

We welcome the Department's focus on aligning university activity with the Minister's economic missions. However, we emphasise that Queen's is not only aligned to the Department but is a vital enabler for the whole of the Executive Programme for Government. Through our research, researchers, and skilled graduates, we actively deliver on all four pillars of the Minister's economic vision. Our work also contributes significantly to the Executive's broader priorities.

We are uniquely placed to identify and activate 'quick wins' – solutions that are already researched, validated, and ready for deployment. Our work spans multiple departments and policy areas, from decarbonisation to innovation, skills, and regional development. While we have outlined the most direct links between our actions and the Minister's missions, the true value of our contribution lies in its integrated, cross-cutting nature.

The full detail of our plans for 2025/26 can be found below.

5. Outcome Agreement Actions and Evaluation

This section provides a self-evaluation against the commitments made in the 2024/25 Outcome Agreement.

Addressing Skills Imbalances

Department for the Economy: Addressing skills imbalances, by increasing the number of graduates with qualifications in economically relevant (in particular STEM) subjects, is fundamental to the Minister's ambition of getting more people into better jobs in high value added industries that can drive forward our economic development. Successful delivery means ensuring that graduates have the modern qualifications and skills that businesses need to drive productivity and growth and support innovation.

In the 2024/25 Outcome Agreement we outlined how the *Education and Skills* strategic priority in the Queen's University Belfast Strategy 2030 aligned with *Addressing Skills Imbalances*.

The Education and Skills strategic priority of Queen's University Strategy 2030 will provide our students with a sense of purpose and the competencies to shape their own lives and to contribute to the lives of others.

We will develop our students as global citizens with the skills to work internationally, but the opportunity to build a career locally, meeting the needs of the economy in key sector areas and supporting the growth of the knowledge-based economy in Northern Ireland.

Goals:

- Deliver a transformative student experience
- Provide an education for societal impact
- Broaden access to Higher Education
- Innovate our Teaching and Learning

Deliver a transformative student experience

Through a strong and sustained partnership with our students, we are already delivering a **transformative student experience**, with wellbeing, inclusivity, and cultural diversity at its heart. We have made significant progress:

- Our new **Student Centre** on the main campus is now operational, acting as the hub for integrated, wraparound student support.
- Within it, the **Students' Union** — recently named **SU of the Year in the 2025 WhatUni Student Choice Awards**, voted for by our students — has redefined student representation, engagement, and community building.

- We have enhanced mental health and wellbeing provision through co-designed initiatives such as expanded in-person and digital counselling services, wellbeing campaigns, and inclusive spaces for reflection and support.
- A series of cultural programmes and inclusion-focused events have been embedded across the academic year, celebrating the diversity of our student body and promoting intercultural understanding.
- Many of our subjects are sector-leading for the quality of the the student experience (as measured by the National Student Survey) - Pharmacy, Planning, Dentistry, Learning disabilities nursing, Architecture, and French Studies are all in the top 5 of the UK
- For the third year in a row we have improved the overall positivity score in the National Student Survey, raising from 80% to 83%
- We have significantly increased student positivity around the Student Voice section of the National Student Survey, showing that students have been involved in University decision-making and that their feedback is valued and acted upon by staff.
- We continue to deliver purpose-built student accommodation and in September 2026 will open new student accommodation on Dublin Road, Belfast, that is inclusive, accessible and modern, designed to the highest standards of sustainability which will enhance the student experience.

We continue to strengthen our international connectivity: students benefit from a **vibrant, multicultural campus community**, and growing access to **global study, work, and research opportunities** through our expanding network of international partnerships. This progress underlines our commitment to delivering a student experience that is globally oriented, inclusive by design, and co-created with our students at every stage.

Provide an education for societal impact

We are actively preparing our students for **leadership and citizenship in a global society**, with a clear commitment to **sustainability and social responsibility**.

Significant progress has already been achieved:

- Our **educational programmes increasingly embed the ethos of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs)** across disciplines — from curriculum redesigns to new assessment methods that emphasise sustainability, equity, and impact.
- We have launched **new interdisciplinary modules and projects** that connect students with real-world sustainability challenges, fostering critical thinking, ethical leadership, and global citizenship.
- Students have taken part in **international SDG-focused initiatives**, including collaborative global classrooms, challenge-based learning, and community engagement projects, all designed to develop transdisciplinary skills and values.

- Across the institution, we are fostering a culture where sustainability is lived as well as learned — through **student-led climate action**, sustainable campus practices, and a growing network of SDG student champions.
- Looking ahead, we will continue to strengthen our focus on equipping students to act as **future leaders**, able to pre-empt and respond to local, national, and global challenges with creativity, collaboration, and purpose.
- Of those graduates who go into employment, 81% stay in Northern Ireland.

Broaden access to Higher Education

We are delivering on our commitment to ensuring that **Queen's is accessible to students from all backgrounds**, and that every learner is supported to realise their **full potential**.

Progress to date includes:

- The implementation of **revised and contextualised admissions criteria**, which are already widening access for under-represented groups, including those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and care-experienced students.
- We are proud to have been the first institution in Northern Ireland to be awarded the National Network for the Education of **Care Leavers** (NNECL), a **Quality Mark** in recognition of our comprehensive support for care experienced students.
- Expansion of **strategic partnerships with Further Education Colleges and Schools**, enabling seamless pathways into Queen's through enhanced outreach, curriculum alignment, and transition support.
- The provision of **targeted outreach and aspiration-raising programmes**, co-designed with schools, communities, and current students, to support learners across Northern Ireland and beyond in seeing Queen's as a place for them.
- Strengthened **transition and success support** — including bespoke induction programmes, peer mentoring, and academic skills development — to ensure that all students, once admitted, are empowered to thrive.

These initiatives are already **broadening the diversity of our student body**, while embedding a culture of inclusion, partnership, and support that enables all learners to succeed — not just in accessing higher education, but in shaping it.

Innovate our Teaching and Learning

We are actively innovating our **teaching and learning** approach, with a strong emphasis on **curriculum transformation, assessment redesign**, and the **integration of digital technologies** to enhance both the student experience and graduate outcomes.

We have made significant strides:

- Developed enablers for flexible and innovative module portfolios, creating enhanced systems and processes for new degree programmes architecture.
- New PGR submission models provide flexibility and real-world experience for PGR students, better enabling them to attain academic careers through evidence of peer-reviewed publications.
- Developed a comprehensive **Curriculum Enhancement Framework** which is being implemented across all Faculties, embedding programme level authentic assessment, inclusive design, and real-world learning experiences.
- Our investment in **digital education infrastructure and staff development** has accelerated the adoption of hybrid learning models, extended digital tools, and AI-enhanced pedagogies, providing students with flexible and engaging learning environments.
- We have launched new **skills-focused modules and co-curricular pathways** that embed **employability, innovation, and entrepreneurship**, equipping students with the capabilities required in an evolving global economy.
- **Collaborations with business and industry partners** have expanded, co-creating learning experiences such as work-based projects, guest-led modules, and challenge-led innovation labs, tailored to priority growth sectors including health, tech, sustainability, and advanced manufacturing.
- Our scalable, stackable and sustainable **modular curriculum architecture** will offer students increasing access to **cross-discipline and cross-Faculty educational opportunities**, including micro-credentials and interdisciplinary minors.
- The National Student Survey shows that our students are more satisfied with all aspects of their experience, but in particular the sections relating to academic support, organisation and management, and student voice. This indicates improvement in these areas of teaching and course delivery.
- At the subject-level, our teaching is rated top of the UK, with eight subjects in the top five and 17 in the top 10, notably Dentistry, Learning disability nursing, and French Studies being in first place.
- Our graduates go on to a wide ranges of jobs and further study. The HESA Graduate Outcomes survey for the 2022/23 cohort shows that 91.1% of full-time undergraduates were in employment and/or further study 15 months after completion. This places us at the top of the Russell Group for employment and/or further study and the lowest unemployment, despite an increasingly difficult employment market.

These developments are ensuring that Queen’s graduates are not only **work-ready**, but **world-ready** — adaptable, entrepreneurial, and equipped with the skills, confidence and experience to lead in a dynamic, interconnected world.

Through our **2024–25 Actions**, we are focused on **sustaining and strengthening our sector-leading employability outcomes** — with Queen’s currently ranked in the **top ten in the UK** for graduate employability.

We are also advancing our commitment to **inclusive economic growth** by working in partnership to ensure that our flagship **Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) Innovation Centres** — including **AMIC, iREACH Health, and Momentum One Zero** — play a central role in developing the **next generation of talent**. Convening our expertise in translating research into innovation that benefits business and society, and anchoring key partnerships across FE and local Councils, skills partnerships and pathways will connect learners with emerging sectors, **create high-quality employment opportunities**, and contribute to increasing the **proportion of the working-age population in good, future-focused jobs**.

By aligning our education and innovation strategies, we are not only preparing our students for the jobs of tomorrow — we are **helping shape the economy of the future**.

Table 1: Addressing Skills Imbalances

What we said we would do	Evaluation of impact	What we did	What Still Needs to Be Done - Actions Rolling Forward
<p>Transforming Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme level assessment review and curriculum evolution projects informing development of Queen's programme level assessment tool • Develop Assessment Tool Kit with case studies, living examples and content to support students' skills development • Assessment Support Hub with revised policies and roll out of digital exceptional circumstances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of core skills for Queen's students that addressed graduate attributes and skills gaps. • All students developed core skills, including enacting civic and social responsibility, embracing innovation and enterprise, and enhancing research capabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilots of TESTA evaluation toolkit completed (8 groups), with evaluations, and advisory group formed to develop next phase • Highly successful launch of Assessment Support Hub (ASH), with 63,130 site visits and 11,003 unique visitors, (approximately 40% of the entire Queen's community) • A digital Assessment and Feedback Toolkit was developed and implemented across the institution, with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles embedded • Development of work-integrated learning and assessment, for example portfolio building via work placement for Psychology students, and integrated entrepreneurship modules in final year Biological Sciences linked to UN SDG goals. Thesis with Publications submission model providing flexibility and real-world experience for PGR students, better enabling them to attain academic careers through evidence of peer-reviewed publications • Participation in the Jisc Beyond Blended pilot (24/25) initiated a comprehensive programme design process focused on Universal Design for Learning principles. This work has been key to rethinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop next phase of toolkit

		programme design, improving staff skills, and fostering a culture of reflection and innovation.	
<p>Education for the Future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedding Education for Sustainable development within the curriculum • Integration of collaborative online international learning (COIL) • Future Ready Graduates – Professional Skills Programme • Future Ready Skills pilots across a range of Schools in the three faculties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthened staff capacity to embed sustainability in teaching through accredited professional development and cross-disciplinary peer (SEDA: ‘Leading ESD in the Curriculum’) • Increased student engagement with sustainability and global challenges through interdisciplinary, project-based, and international learning experiences • Established a robust baseline for ESD integration across 15 Schools, enabling targeted curriculum enhancement and system-wide improvements • Created replicable models of sustainability-focused teaching through COIL and Living Labs, supporting curriculum innovation and future-ready graduate skills • In addition to the graduate attributes and technical skills aligned with their programmes: • Resources designed to be externally accessible to all learners across NI (promoted in terms of FE and school usage) • Courses designed to be delivered flexibly, distance first and designed around the needs non- traditional learners, directly supporting underrepresented groups and wider regional skills provision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieved GOLD standard for Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS) from The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, recognising institutional excellence at a global level • Completed university-wide curriculum review: 2,173 modules mapped across 15 Schools, with 1,755 identified as sustainability-focused, inclusive, or supportive • Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Framework developed and formally approved, providing a structure for curriculum enhancement, staff development, student engagement, and Living Labs activity from 2025-26 • Launched SEDA-accredited Leading in ESD programme: 22 Programme Leads from 8 Schools completed training since October 2023 • Delivered Carbon Literacy training to nearly 1,000 staff and students, building foundational sustainability knowledge across the institution • Established cross-institutional ESD Community of Practice to support peer-led curriculum development, with 25+ active members and regular engagement sessions • Developed and delivered COIL and global challenge modules with four international partners, and student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue rollout of university systems (QGIS) for sustainability classification in 2025-26 to support curriculum tracking and institutional reporting. • Continue delivery of Future Ready Skills course with updated content following student feedback.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BRCD Innovation Centres supporting city/region partners in developing upskilling and Reskilling provision for Level 6 +, which may include content development or accreditation of lower level programmes. 	<p>engagement through Engineers Without Borders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepared university systems (QSIS) for rollout of sustainability classification in 2025-26 to support curriculum tracking and institutional reporting • Future Ready Skills course rolled-out to UG students across 9 schools. Over 8000 students enrolled, 1859 assignments completed this year compared to 1458 in the previous year. Very positive student evaluations received (96% would recommend the course). New content created following student feedback. 	
<p>Building AI Capability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of AI Hub and Toolkit for staff and students 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sector-leading, externally-accessible AI-Hub and DigiHub launched in Spring 2025 with 24,165 page views for AI Hub. And strong engagements statistics for DigiHub, including total pageviews: 456,488 views (from site setup in 2018 to May 2025). • These platforms provide centralised access to policy, toolkits, guidance, and support for students and staff, as well as being accessible to external individuals and groups (including all education institutions) • More than just repositories, the AI Hub and DigiHub are enablers of culture change — empowering staff and students to experiment confidently with new tools, and equipping students with the digital fluency and critical AI literacy they 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to embed and accelerate digital transformation.

		<p>need to thrive in a rapidly evolving global landscape.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As we continue to embed digital transformation across teaching, learning, and assessment, these platforms will remain at the heart of our strategy — bridging innovation and practice, and ensuring Queen’s remains at the forefront of educational excellence in the AI era. 	
<p>Upskilling and reskilling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build on SkillUp success to offer a wide range of economically relevant upskilling and reskilling courses, targeting those seeking employment as well as those underemployed in key areas of economic growth/need, including health care, green economy, digital (including AI/cyber/data and creative arts), and advanced manufacturing. Courses also include increased productivity through management and leadership provision. Each of the City and Growth Deals Skills Assessments will identify potential opportunities for upskilling and reskilling – this could involve upscaling provision of existing programmes in Construction, Virtual production, Advanced Manufacturing etc. – such as Skill Up or working with other partners like FE colleges or Councils through Labour Market Partnerships to identify pathways. 	<p>In addition to the graduate attributes and technical skills aligned with their programmes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources were designed to be externally accessible to all learners across Northern Ireland and were promoted for use in further education and schools. Courses were designed to be delivered flexibly, with a distance-first approach, and were structured around the needs of non-traditional learners. These courses directly supported underrepresented groups and contributed to wider regional skills provision. 	<p>We have made significant progress in expanding flexible, economically relevant upskilling and reskilling provision, particularly for those seeking employment or underemployed in key growth sectors such as healthcare, the green economy, digital (including AI, cyber, data and creative arts), and advanced manufacturing.</p> <p>In 2024–25, we delivered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30 flexible programmes, with 718 enrolments, including 21 Level 7, 1 Level 6, and 8 non-credit-bearing short courses. Over £1.6 million in funding secured from the Department for the Economy (DfE) to support course delivery across priority areas including advanced manufacturing, green skills, health and social care, software, and transversal skills. Courses designed with a “distance-first” approach, accessible across Northern Ireland and directly supporting non-traditional learners and underrepresented groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to deliver high-impact provision despite a reduction in regional funding. Continue core work supporting future researchers and partnership work.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible delivery enabled participation by those in employment or with other life commitments — most courses were delivered fully or mostly online, supporting inclusive access and learner retention. <p>These offerings were underpinned by a commitment to graduate attributes, technical skills, and increasing productivity through leadership and management training.</p> <p>DfE also funded Career Boost during 24/25 - a Career Skills Development programme for QUB Skill-Up Students – a 10-week career programme designed to enhance participants employability skills and strengths, and to help them reach their career goals. The inclusive approach of the programme (both online & in-person) was informed by student voice and takes into consideration the diverse learning needs of our students, ensuring a supportive, accessible learning environment and promoting equitable access.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned to iREACH Health, a new training module: Clinical Trials – From Protocol to Patient, was developed and welcomed its first intake of 15 students in April 2024 at Queen’s University, Belfast. Following this success, a second intake of 19 students joined in January 2025 and a third intake of 	
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		<p>20 in March 2025 (supported by DfE).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMIC has implemented actions designed to support and enhance the development of a skills pathway for Advanced Manufacturing. This has included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ providing work experience, placement opportunities and internships ○ supporting the delivery of an All-Island Industry 4.0 Future Skills Report ○ contributing to a Workforce Foresighting cycle to determine future workforce requirements for the design and use of cryogenic hydrogen storage for aircraft by 2035. ○ Providing opportunities through the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre's 'Pathways School Project' for local pupils to access demonstrations of cutting-edge technologies and high-end manufacturing equipment. • Momentum One Zero launch projects have included 'Smart City-zens', led by Queen's Communities and Place, supporting young people in local communities to build capabilities to tackle urban challenges such as pollution, biodiversity and climate change. 	
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What we will do	What success will look like and what the impact will be	Links to Minister's Economic Mission ¹
<p>Transforming Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refinement of evaluation toolkit and recruitment of further academic groups to undertake Programme Level Assessment evaluation. Capture student feedback on assessment to inform practice Development of assessment reform, underpinned by UDL principles Work with Jisc on AI in assessment pilot 25/26 to embed AI-enhanced learning Development of curriculum and assessment enhancement frameworks, creating a vibrant educational ecosystem for work integrated learning We will embed AI and digital skills within and across our programmes using a scaffolded approach to build authentic, future-relevant student expertise. This skill development will be underpinned by innovative assessments, specifically designed to safeguard academic integrity and rigorously measure student capability in the age of AI. Phase two of Programme Design will collaborate with Jisc on their second phase pilot programme, participating in a sector-supported review and reform of 	<p>Success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broader academic engagement with consistent use of evaluation tools. Student-informed, inclusive assessment practices. Effective integration of AI to support learning and feedback. Clear, adaptable frameworks supporting innovation in curriculum and assessment. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More inclusive, authentic, and future-ready assessment. Enhanced student experience and outcomes. Stronger alignment between learning, assessment, and employability. 	<p>As the Department outlines clearly, addressing skills imbalances is a key component in the delivery of “good jobs”. Higher education plays a unique and pivotal role in supporting the pipeline of highly skilled graduates and researchers needed to meet Northern Ireland’s economic goals.</p> <p>Through Queen’s relationship with the business community across Northern Ireland there is a clear demand for skilled graduates.</p> <p>Queen’s welcomes the expansion of higher education provision in Northern Ireland. By expanding the provision of higher education we are creating the incentive and the means for retaining young people in Northern Ireland who otherwise would leave to pay higher costs – fees, travel, and accommodation – for higher education elsewhere.</p> <p>As with the Outcome Agreements, a co-designed, partnership approach for the future planned review of higher education would ensure a strong link between the Minister’s mission of regional balance and the University’s work on addressing skills imbalances – indeed, the University has proposed</p>

¹ Please include a brief, high level narrative about which of the Minister’s 4 economic pillars each action relates to and in what way.

<p>curriculum design. This initiative will concentrate on Universal Design for Learning, AI- and digitally enhanced education, as well as transnational education.</p>		<p>a wider conversation not only on undergraduate provision in the North West but postgraduate and research provision across the region, with a triple helix partnership between Government, Business and Universities to supercharge the economic priorities of the Department and the Executive for every part of Northern Ireland over the next decade.</p>
<p>Education for the Future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the ESD Framework across curriculum, staff development, student engagement, and Living Labs activity • Launch new collaborative development programme to broaden staff engagement with sustainability in teaching • Increase participation in the ESD Community of Practice and expand peer-led support for curriculum enhancement • Launch staff- and student-facing sustainability training and literacy modules as core engagement tools • Roll out sustainability classification system (QIS) to support curriculum tracking, reporting, and enhancement • Support continued development of COIL and global challenge modules across disciplines • Future Ready Skills course: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be rolled-out to a further 2 schools School of Biological Sciences & School of Nursing & Midwifery. • Testing and roll-out of new course content. • Promotional work to further increase engagement and course completion 	<p>Success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ESD Framework is fully embedded across the curriculum, staff development, student engagement, and Living Labs, guiding consistent and impactful sustainability education. • A collaborative development programme is actively engaging staff across disciplines, fostering a culture of sustainability in teaching practice. • The ESD Community of Practice has grown in membership and influence, with regular peer-led sessions driving curriculum enhancement. • Sustainability training and literacy modules are widely accessed by staff and students, becoming core tools for engagement and awareness. • The QIS sustainability classification system is operational and integrated into curriculum tracking and reporting, enabling data-driven improvements. • COIL and global challenge modules are embedded across disciplines, offering students international, interdisciplinary learning experiences. • The Future Ready Skills course is successfully expanded to additional schools, with new content tested and rolled out, and promotional efforts increasing student engagement and completion rates. • All programmes are demonstrably aligned with industry needs, equipping graduates with relevant, future-ready skills. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students graduate with a strong foundation in sustainability, global citizenship, and professional skills, prepared to address complex societal challenges. • Staff are empowered to lead sustainability-focused teaching, supported by professional development and peer networks. • Curriculum innovation is accelerated through Living Labs and COIL, fostering experiential and globally connected learning. • Institutional reporting and planning are strengthened by robust data from QIS, enabling strategic enhancements and accountability. • Regional and societal impact is amplified through flexible, inclusive course design and external accessibility, supporting lifelong learning and skills development. • The university's reputation for sustainability excellence is reinforced, contributing to global leadership in education for sustainable development. 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our future-ready programmes are shaped by industry needs, equipping graduates with skills that match current social and economic demands. 		
<p>Building AI Capability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the year ahead, we will accelerate the integration of AI and digital fluency across every dimension of the Queen’s learning experience. Building upon the strong foundation of our AI Hub and Toolkit, we will expand our practical guidance on the effective and responsible use of AI for all students and staff. This strategic focus is designed to improve educational outcomes by using AI to foster greater inclusion and deliver a more personalised learning journey. Furthermore, it will enhance efficiency by saving valuable time for both students and staff on routine tasks. To deliver this, we will continuously develop and refine content on our AI Hub, creating policies, guides, resources, and specific AI tools tailored to our community’s needs. By embedding these capabilities as core enablers of curriculum transformation and assessment innovation, we are also ensuring our students are equipped with the essential AI skills that will prepare them for future employment in an AI-rich workplace. 	<p>Success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> AI and digital fluency are fully integrated across all aspects of the Queen’s learning experience. The AI Hub is a dynamic, regularly updated resource, offering tailored policies, guides, and tools that are widely used by staff and students. All students and educators are confident and competent in using AI responsibly and effectively, with clear understanding of ethical considerations. AI is used to personalise learning, improve inclusion, and streamline routine tasks, enhancing both teaching and learning efficiency. Curriculum and assessment practices are transformed through AI-enabled innovation. Students graduate with industry-relevant AI skills, ready to thrive in digitally driven workplaces. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A new generation of graduates enters the workforce with critical, creative, and ethical AI capabilities, contributing to responsible innovation across sectors. Educational equity is improved, as AI tools help personalise learning for diverse student needs, including those from underrepresented backgrounds. The university becomes a regional and national leader in AI education, influencing policy and practice beyond the institution. Workforce readiness is enhanced, supporting economic development and digital transformation across Northern Ireland and beyond. The responsible use of AI in education sets a global benchmark, promoting thoughtful integration of emerging technologies in society. 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our vision is to ensure that every student and educator at Queen’s is empowered to thrive in a digitally driven world, with the confidence, creativity, and critical skills to lead in the age of AI. 		
<p>Upskilling and reskilling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2025–26, despite a reduction in regional funding, we are continuing to deliver high-impact provision: • 19 Level 7 programmes are now in delivery across the same strategic priority sectors. • £1 million in funding has been secured to support delivery, with applications underway and final enrolments due after confirmation from exam boards. • The flexible, online nature of delivery remains core — supporting learners who are employed, have caring responsibilities, or who live in rural and underserved areas. • We are working across the BRCD Innovation Centres, FE colleges, local councils, and Labour Market Partnerships to scale provision and align future courses with regional labour market intelligence and City and Growth Deal Skills Assessments. • These assessments will guide further opportunities for expansion in areas such as construction, virtual production, digital, life and health sciences and advanced manufacturing, with potential for co-delivery or 	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-impact upskilling and reskilling provision delivered effectively. • 19 Level 7 programmes actively running. • Sustained programme delivery, with final enrolments. • Learners who are employed, have caring responsibilities, or live in rural and underserved areas are supported. • Strong collaboration across BRCD Innovation Centres, FE colleges, local councils, and Labour Market Partnerships, guiding the scaling of provision. • Future courses are strategically aligned with regional labour market intelligence and City and Growth Deal Skills Assessments, ensuring relevance and responsiveness. • Expansion opportunities are explored in key growth sectors such as construction, virtual production, digital, life and health sciences, and advanced manufacturing. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased access to advanced education and training for individuals across Northern Ireland, particularly those in underserved or rural communities. • Enhanced workforce readiness, with learners gaining skills that directly support regional economic growth and innovation. • Greater social mobility, as flexible learning pathways open opportunities for those returning to work, employed learners, and individuals from marginalised sectors. • Stronger regional collaboration, fostering a joined-up approach to skills development and economic planning. • Reduction in skills imbalances, contributing to a more resilient and inclusive labour market. • A culture of lifelong learning and adaptability is reinforced, supporting individuals and communities in navigating technological and economic change. 	

<p>accreditation of lower-level programmes.</p>		
<p>Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) With innovation centres moving into operational delivery, and buildings underway, 2025-26 will see ongoing foundations and partnerships being developed to continue to realise the opportunity of the regional partnership and investment over coming years.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Momentum One Zero will continue to support administration of doctoral training and Master’s activities linked to its Hubs of Impact, which are providing the essential talent pipeline for industry. They will explore ways to capture and drive upskilling through their industry R&D&I projects, aiming to collaboratively increase and diversify the workforce in deep-tech. • iREACH Health is working to deepen the partnership between health, academia and industry, aiming to co-create a programme of education/training tailored to the needs of the clinical research community. • AMIC has been developing a skills strategy with input from key stakeholders, which it will roll out in 2025-26. It will launch the start of its portfolio of skills and workforce development projects and resources. 	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovation centres move into full operational delivery, with physical infrastructure progressing and partnerships deepening. • Momentum One Zero continues to deliver doctoral and Master’s-level training linked to its Hubs of Impact, strengthening the talent pipeline for deep-tech industries. • Upskilling through industry R&D&I projects is actively captured and expanded, contributing to workforce diversification in high-growth sectors. • iREACH Health successfully co-creates education and training programmes tailored to the clinical research community, deepening collaboration between health, academia, and industry. • AMIC launches its skills strategy, developed with stakeholder input, and begins delivering a portfolio of workforce development projects and resources. • BRCD partners work in alignment with regional labour market intelligence and City and Growth Deal Skills Assessments, ensuring future provision is responsive and strategically targeted. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A stronger regional innovation ecosystem, with Queen’s at the centre of collaborative efforts to drive economic growth and skills development. • Expanded access to advanced education and training, particularly in deep-tech, clinical research, and advanced manufacturing, supporting high-value job creation. • Improved alignment between education and industry needs, ensuring learners are equipped with relevant, future-facing skills. • Greater workforce diversity, as targeted upskilling initiatives open pathways for underrepresented groups in emerging sectors. • Enhanced regional competitiveness, with Northern Ireland positioned as a hub for innovation, research, and talent development. • Long-term societal resilience, as infrastructure and partnerships established through BRCD contribute to inclusive growth and sustainable economic transformation. 	

Research and Innovation

Department for the Economy: Research and innovation is pivotal to driving growth and improvement in a wide range of industries and is therefore fundamental to the delivery of the Minister's economic ambition for higher levels of productivity and the achievement of our net zero ambition. Within this, DfE would welcome a particular focus on how to develop economically relevant research and promote the innovation strengths of the university as part of wider policy to develop sectors, clusters and technology in NI, including the commercialisation of research and innovation.

Over 2024–25 Queen's has delivered substantial progress across the four thematic areas of the Outcome Agreement, with clear evidence of impact for Northern Ireland's economy, society and global reputation. Building on this momentum, our 2025–26 actions pivot towards scaling success, embedding innovation, and aligning even more closely to the Minister's Economic Mission.

1. Research Quality and Culture

In 2024–25 we enhanced research infrastructure, invested in thematic priority areas, and embedded Research Culture NI as a flagship all-island initiative. Key achievements include record levels of new research awards and UKRI drawdown, progress on BRCD Innovation Centres, sector-leading open research and research culture work, and increased engagement with early career researchers and professional staff networks.

For 2025–26, we are intensifying focus on large-scale collaborative bids in Net Zero, AI, health and cybersecurity, launching a new Grand Challenges programme, and embedding AI tools to reduce research bureaucracy. Measurable outcomes will include higher UKRI income, new infrastructure investments, growth in doctoral partnerships, and evidence of cultural change through published roadmaps and workforce data.

2. International and Cross-Border Opportunities

In 2024–25 we expanded NI's engagement in Horizon Europe, secured PeacePlus collaborations, and sustained US-Ireland research partnerships. Early groundwork for an ERC pipeline has been laid, with targeted support and senior leadership engagement.

For 2025–26, we are scaling this ambition: an ERC Working Group will prepare candidates for the 2026 call, supported by new training and pump-priming funds. Cross-border collaboration with new technological universities will strengthen all-island R&I clusters, while DSIT ISPF and US-Ireland programmes expand global reach. Success will be tracked through growth in funded bids, increased NI participation in consortia, and measurable ERC progress.

3. Impact, Engagement and Knowledge Exchange

2024–25 saw strong delivery through IUK, KTP, Connected Programme contributions, and early BRCD centre operations. UKRI IAAs funded a diverse pipeline of impact projects aligned

to Northern Ireland priorities. Partnerships with Invest NI advanced shared ambitions for regional economic growth.

In 2025–26, we will expand these gains by co-delivering the NI Innovate UK Action Plan, securing stronger NI participation in Innovate UK funding, and deepening business-academic connectivity. BRCD Innovation Centres will accelerate sectoral impact with major new initiatives in AI, cyber, clinical trials and advanced manufacturing. Evidence of impact will include growth in collaborative studentships, top-tier KTP performance, and sectoral outcomes delivered via operating plans.

4. Innovation and Commercialisation

In 2024–25 Queen’s strengthened QUBIS spin-outs, advanced the NetZero accelerator pipeline, and piloted AI-enabled commercialisation approaches. Partnerships with Techstars and Ulster University drove support for innovation-driven enterprises (IDEs).

For 2025–26, a sharper focus on AI-native operations, investment capability and an all-island deep tech fund will enhance the venture pipeline. Delivery of the iCure programme and NetZero accelerators will increase spin-out volume and quality. Evidence of impact will include higher investment per company, growth in IP disclosures and licences, and demonstrable productivity gains through adoption of AI and low-carbon technologies.

Queen’s has met or exceeded its 2024–25 commitments, embedding research culture, securing national and international collaborations, and translating research into impact. The 2025–26 programme goes further, scaling infrastructure, talent and commercialisation efforts to drive productivity, skills and innovation. Together, these actions place Queen’s at the heart of delivering the Minister’s Economic Mission and positioning Northern Ireland as a globally connected, innovation-driven economy.

Table 2: Research and Innovation

What we said we would do	Evaluation of impact	What we did	What Still Needs to Be Done - Actions Rolling Forward
Research Quality and Culture			
<p>Secure additional funding to enhance our research infrastructure, leverage DfE HERC funding, and build our connectivity to the rest of the UK to access critical infrastructure in other institutions nationally and across the island.</p>	<p>Increased research income to £124.6m in 2024-25, with UKRI awards at £76.9m (62% of total), strengthening Queen’s capacity in priority thematic areas.</p> <p>Improved global research reputation demonstrated by rising QS and THE rankings (QS from 345th to 304th; THE from 142nd to 117th).</p> <p>Delivered flagship projects including the Future Medicines Institute and Wellcome-funded NI Research Culture Network, meeting defined KPIs and regional priorities.</p> <p>Expanded doctoral training and early-career researcher support aligned to NI economic needs, enhancing workforce agility and skills pipeline.</p> <p>Elevated Queen’s national and all-island profile through leadership roles in cross-border networks such as the All-Island Research Culture Network and multiple Horizon Europe partnerships</p>	<p>Queen’s was awarded £400k EPSRC Core Equipment funding to purchase multiuser equipment across a range of subject areas including organic chemistry, photonics and human-environment relation research. A further £150k was awarded to enable equipment repair/maintenance, with 14 pieces of equipment benefitting from this. An EPSRC Strategic Equipment bid, establishing the UK’s first high-repetition laser facility was successful, leveraging £2M from EPSRC and £600k from the University. This facility will be open to both public and private users, with potential applications spanning manufacturing, healthcare and homeland security by enabling ultra-high resolution biological imaging, detection of strategically sensitive elements and radiography of thick objects.</p>	<p>Significant progress has been made in strengthening research quality and culture, with 2024-25 marking a year of record-breaking research awards, strategic investment in infrastructure and the embedding of Research Culture NI as a flagship initiative. However this is a long-term endeavour. Building on this momentum, 2025-26 will see a continued focus on deepening collaborative research, launching a new Grand Challenges programme, and embedding AI tools to streamline research processes. Sustained effort will be required to deliver measurable cultural change, grow doctoral partnerships and secure increased UKRI income. This work will evolve year on year, ensuring that research excellence and an inclusive, ambitious culture remain at the heart of institutional strategy.</p>
<p>Fully embed framework to support preparations for REF 2029, including initiatives to strategically optimise Queen’s eventual outcome in the exercise relative to UK peer institutions, including support world-</p>		<p>Queen’s has embedded a comprehensive REF 2029 framework, supported by dedicated governance. Through our Publication Quality and Dissemination Action Plan, we delivered advanced</p>	

<p>leading research outputs through a Publication Quality and Dissemination Action Plan, identifying and accelerating examples of research impact to be submitted as case studies, and delivering on institutional and regional initiatives to enhance research culture (including Wellcome funded NI Research Culture Network).</p>		<p>academic training and guidance, contributing to improved global rankings for research quality in Times Higher (up to 117th from 142nd) and QS (up to 304th from 345th) world rankings. We established a rich impact pipeline of potential case studies, with structured triage and support in place. We also led delivery of the Wellcome-funded NI Research Culture Network and launched a new institutional Research Culture Roadmap, aligning with emerging REF People, Culture and Environment expectations.</p>	
<p>Deliver an enhanced programme of support for research grant applications including targeting key funders (e.g. UKRI) and large programmatic grants with a focus on areas of strategic importance such as Net Zero, Health and Life Sciences, Manufacturing, AI, Cybersecurity, Food and Agriculture, Peace and Conflict, Human Rights. Linked to this – support delivery of flagship initiatives aligned to our research themes, including – Smart Nano NI, PMC, CASE, SFI Co-Centres, Cyber-NI, and FMI.</p>		<p>Continued year-on-year growth in new research awards of £124.6m for 2024-25 and associated contribution of £22.1m. UKRI funding is at its strongest level in recent years, including £76.9m in 2024-25, representing 61.7% of total awards. Queen’s advanced major strategic funding initiatives aligned to priorities including Net Zero, health, manufacturing, AI, and food systems. We secured a £31.6M Strength in Places Fund award for the Future Medicines Institute, continued delivery of flagship projects such as Smart Nano NI, Cyber-NI, and the Precision Medicine Centre, and act as NI lead on two SFI Co-Centre programmes.</p>	
<p>Develop a strategic framework to support recruitment and retention of high-calibre academic staff and researchers, across all levels and</p>		<p>Queen’s developed a strategic framework to support research talent, including internal recruitment and fellowship schemes, targeted mentoring, and enhanced bid</p>	

<p>disciplines within the University, including through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted internal recruitment programmes and fellowship schemes • Supporting academics and researchers to increase success in external fellowship schemes • Review of internal academic progression and pathways to recognise full range of contributions to R&I 		<p>support. The UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship support programme was relaunched, and institutional investment supported external fellowship success across all three Faculties, including two UKRI FLFs, six Leverhulme ECR Fellowships, and an NIHR EME Advanced Fellowship. We achieved and recruited 3x Daphne Jackson Fellows to support individuals returning to their research careers, and initiated a review of academic promotion and progression processes to better recognise contributions to research and innovation.</p>	
<p>Ongoing compliance with the UK Concordat to Support Research Integrity. In 2024/25 we will implement a robust framework for Trusted Research, i.e. research security, to support the integrity of international research collaborations.</p>		<p>Queen's maintained full compliance with the UK Concordat to Support Research Integrity, with a focus on authorship through the delivery of five workshops. Queen's also implemented a new institutional framework for Trusted Research. This included revised due diligence processes, strengthened international collaboration protocols, and new staff guidance to support secure and responsible research practices.</p>	
<p>Lead on the establishment and delivery of institutional, regional and all-island initiatives to support a positive and inclusive research culture, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development and delivery of a new institutional Research Culture Action Plan at Queen's, building on the first iteration that was delivered between 2021 and 2024. This will include 		<p>Queen's led the development of a new institutional Research Culture Roadmap, building on the 2021–2024 Action Plan, with a particular focus on EDI, open research, and responsible research assessment. We successfully delivered year one of the Wellcome Trust-funded NI Research Culture Network in partnership with Ulster University, including a comprehensive stakeholder</p>	

<p>a particular focus on priority areas including our EDI in Research Action Plan, Open Research Roadmap, and new Responsible Research Assessment Policy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment and delivery of year 1 of the Wellcome Trust funded NI Research Culture Network project, led by Queen's in partnership with Ulster University, including delivery of a landscape review and report of regional research culture. • Jointly lead the All-Island Research Culture Network (in collaboration with University College Dublin). 		<p>engagement process and publication of a regional landscape report. As co-lead of the All-Island Research Culture Network with University College Dublin, we hosted the 2025 annual conference in Belfast, welcoming 150 delegates from across Europe.</p>	
<p>Develop and support a diverse cohort of postgraduate research students equipped with advanced skills aligned with the needs of employers, including through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-quality training and development through the University's Graduate School. • Enhanced institutional capacity for excellence in externally-funded doctoral training programmes, e.g. UKRI, EU/Horizon Europe. • Harnessing the opportunities presented by the DfE PGA and CAST schemes, support recruitment of high-quality doctoral students with a particular focus on connectivity with business and other non-academic partners. 		<p>Queen's supported a diverse cohort of postgraduate researchers through the Graduate School, with high-impact, student-centred provision in 2024–25. Provision spanned academic and research skills, employability, leadership, writing retreats, and communication. Highlights included the introduction of a Pecha Kucha competition, leading to a postgraduate student presenting at TEDx Black Mountain, and Designing Your Life programme. Students were also supported through one-to-one academic skills and careers appointments. The Graduate School also ran regular social events and two postgraduate conferences to foster community and professional development. New initiatives included the Vacant to Vibrant social innovation challenge,</p>	

		<p>co-delivered with community organisations, and inclusion projects co-designed by ten postgraduate students which contributed to Queen's successful Sanctuary Award application. These activities enhanced the skills and employability of postgraduate researchers while promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and engagement with societal challenges. We secured a major £3.7M UKRI award for a new AI for Biosciences doctoral programme (NILAB) in partnership with Ulster, providing funding for 60 (40 at Queen's) PhD students. Queen's also partnered in several additional successful doctoral programme awards, FoodBioSystems, NorthWestBio, SUSTAIN and QUARTILES providing ~40 UKRI-funded studentships over the next 5 years. We delivered 42 CAST studentships, and contributed to Department for the Economy policy development on postgraduate awards. Our externally funded doctoral training portfolio continued to grow, with strong engagement across UKRI and Horizon Europe schemes. For example, The Centre for Doctoral Training in Future Open SecuRe NeTworks (CDT-FORT) is a groundbreaking initiative funded by EPSRC, bringing together the world-leading expertise of the University of Surrey and Queen's University Belfast</p>	
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<p>Continue to play a leading role in supporting new networks and initiatives to recognise and reward the contribution of non-academic staff to research and innovation activities, including through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery against the UK Technician Commitment (of which Queen’s is a founding signatory) through a new multi-year action plan. • Continue to embed new NI Research Professionals Network to connect research managers and administrators across NI. • Continue to play a leading role in the HEA-funded AllIsland Research Excellence Network (AIREN) which seeks to make north-south connections between research managers and administrators across the island. 		<p>Queen’s advanced its Technician Commitment Action Plan through initiatives focused on recognition, career development, and community-building. We hosted the inaugural All-Ireland Technical Staff Network Conference in June 2025, bringing together technical staff from across the island. We also continued to lead the NI Research Professionals Network and played a key role in delivering the HEA-funded AIREN programme, strengthening north-south collaboration among research support professionals.</p>	
<p>Continue to support the development of highly-skilled and engaged early-career researchers and postdoctoral research, including through our commitments as a signatory to the UK Researcher Development Concordat, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointment of a new Research Careers and Employability Officer (funded through the Wellcome Trust NI Research Culture Network project) to work across Queen’s and Ulster University, supporting researchers and employers to understand the opportunities that exist for diverse and varied 		<p>Queen’s strengthened support for early-career researchers through its commitments under the UK Researcher Development Concordat. A Research Careers and Employability Officer was appointed to deliver cross-institutional support via the Wellcome-funded NI Research Culture Network. We embedded a new PDR process tailored to ECRs and progressed development of a dedicated research career pathway. Professional development support for Fellowship Academy members was expanded, including delivery of the first interdisciplinary Crucible Programme focused on ECRs.</p>	

<p>career pathways with and beyond academia.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fully embedding internal initiatives to fully recognise, reward and support career development of ECRs, including a new annual PDR/ appraisal process tailored to ECRs and development of a dedicated career pathway for those on research contracts. Extending professional and career development support options for Fellowship Academy members, with a focus on interdisciplinary research and deliver the first Crucible Programme for IDR, with a focus on ECR participants. 			
<p>Develop an action plan to support compliance with UK Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice.</p>		<p>Queen's became a signatory to and developed an institutional action plan to support compliance with the UK Concordat for Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice, with cross-directorate input and alignment to wider university sustainability goals.</p>	
International and Cross-Border Research Opportunities			
<p>Further strengthen all-island collaborations to support research and innovation clusters, seeking to enhance engagement with existing partners and new technological universities, and supporting bids to key funding opportunities such as PeacePlus, HEA North-South, and DfE-SFI US-Ireland Programme.</p>	<p>Strengthened all-island collaborations with 34 joint partnerships under the DfE-SFI US-Ireland R&D Programme and 10 PEACE Plus awards totalling ~€20m.</p> <p>Increased European engagement with over 60 Horizon Europe awards worth approximately €30m, accounting for over 76% of NI's Horizon Europe funding.</p>	<p>Queen's advanced all-island collaboration through joint leadership of the All-Island Research Culture Network with UCD and expanded engagement with Technological Universities via initiatives such as AIREN. We contributed to successful HEA North-South and SFI Co-Centre bids, progressed joint work under the DfE-SFI US-Ireland R&D Programme with 34 partnerships, secured 10</p>	<p>Important strides have been made in expanding international and cross-border research opportunities, with 2024-25 seeing deeper engagement in Horizon Europe, new PeacePlus collaborations, and sustained US-Ireland partnerships. Foundational work has also begun to build an ERC pipeline. Looking ahead 2025-26 will focus on scaling this ambition through the establishment of an ERC Working Group, enhanced training</p>

	<p>Deepened international partnerships with strategic global players via DSIT ISPF, expanding research in agri-food, health, and AI, enhancing institutional links and contributing to UK diplomatic priorities.</p> <p>Supported all-Ireland cluster development in high-productivity sectors, increasing PGR student numbers and upskilling researchers to meet regional economic demands.</p>	<p>PEACE Plus awards worth ~€20m, and partnering across Europe with 28 Irish partners across 25 Horizon projects.</p>	<p>and pump-priming support and strengthened collaboration with new technological universities to grow all-island R&I clusters. Continued expansion of DSIT ISPF and US-Ireland programmes will further extend global reach. Progress will be measured through increased participation in international consortia, growth in funded bids and tangible movement towards ERC success.</p>
<p>Strengthen existing and build new collaborations with key international research partners, including: US universities and industry (enabled through DfE-SFI US Ireland R&D Programme), and other target markets (enabled through DSIT ISPF).</p>		<p>Queen’s strengthened international research partnerships through the DfE-SFI US-Ireland R&D Programme, with active projects in agri-food, health, and AI. We secured DSIT ISPF funding to build new collaborations with partners in India and the Global South, supporting joint research, institutional links, and UK science objectives.</p>	
<p>Through the DfE Collaborative Research Support Fund, support efforts to strengthen engagement with European partners to enable NI contribution to European challenge areas and enhance our portfolio of Horizon Europe funded projects, with key activities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build on Horizon 2020/ Horizon Europe success while improving NI capability and preparedness through raising awareness of Horizon Europe. • Further embed institutional European Strategy Group consisting of academics to drive forward engagement with key 		<p>Queen’s used DfE Collaborative Research Support funding to strengthen European research engagement and enhance Horizon Europe participation. We embedded our European Strategy Group, deepened academic links with European institutions, and worked closely with the NICP Network to support researcher readiness, mitigate Brexit-related barriers, and promote Northern Ireland’s research strengths internationally. Queen’s has now secured more than 60 Horizon awards totalling ~€30m, representing >76% of NI Horizon Europe drawdown.</p>	

<p>European higher education institutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to build upon strong engagement with the NICEP Network colleagues to boost participation in Horizon Europe, countering the negative aspects of Brexit, and raising the profile of the Northern Ireland research and innovation community to European partners, reinforcing an 'open for business' message. 			
Impact, Engagement and Knowledge Exchange			
<p>Strengthen our engagement in key national initiatives, consortia and networks to leverage the benefits for NI business and industry and more broadly for the economy, e.g. Catapult network.</p>	<p>Delivered £38.8m in industry-led awards (13.2% above the 3-year average), supporting NI business growth through enhanced connections with UK innovation networks including Catapults.</p> <p>Progressed and confirmed investment in three Belfast Region City Deal innovation centres, with construction progressing for iREACH Health, AMIC, and Momentum One Zero, projected to generate significant economic and workforce benefits.</p> <p>Fostered NI innovation ecosystem growth through investments such as the £55m Future Medicines Institute and £1.9m Project 4Ward at AMIC.</p> <p>Supported NI businesses through ongoing project work, including SIRI (AMIC), second phase of Impact Acceleration launch projects (M1.0).</p>	<p>Secured industry-led awards of £38.8m in 2024-25, 13.2% above 3-year average. Queen's deepened engagement with UK innovation networks, including the Catapult network, to connect NI businesses with national expertise in areas such as advanced manufacturing, digital technologies, and semiconductors. These partnerships supported innovation-led growth and enhanced regional competitiveness.</p> <p>Queen's response to the Enhanced Investment Zone plan is being drawn up to highlight how we will support the Investment Zone's interventions and wider objectives through activity and support in photonics and life and health sciences research and investment. This will enable Queen's to contribute to the region's ability to capitalise on its unique opportunities by providing £150 million to develop an Enhanced Investment Zone. Main aim is to boost jobs and investment in Northern Ireland</p>	<p>Strong foundations have been laid through delivery of Innovate UK and KTP projects, Connected Programme contributions and early BRCD centre operations. UKRI IAAs have supported a diverse pipeline of impact activity aligned to regional priorities, while partnerships with Invest NI have advanced shared economic goals. In 2025-26, we will build on this momentum by co-delivering the NI Innovate UK Action Plan, increasing NI participation in Innovate UK funding and strengthening business-academic connectivity. BRCD Innovation Centres will drive sectoral impact through major new initiatives in AI, cyber, clinical trials and advanced manufacturing</p>

	<p>Expanded Knowledge Transfer Partnerships with over 40 active collaborations spanning manufacturing, health, agri-food, and digital sectors, enhancing business innovation and productivity.</p> <p>Supported entrepreneurial culture via programmes like Scaling the Edge and InQUBate, backing 16 innovation teams and engaging students, graduates, and researchers in commercialisation.</p> <p>£33m in IUK funds were drawn down by the university including flagship initiatives such as the Future Medicines Institute and nascent initiatives such as the Belfast Community Research and Innovation Network through Queen’s Communities and Place which aims to bridge the gap between research, innovation, and underserved communities.</p> <p>Supported 94 projects to the value of £1.048 million. This included early stage partnership development through to later stage translational research with industry partners across many key sectors,</p>	<p>Local Innovation Partnership - £30M new investment announced as part of the new UK Industrial Strategy and preliminary discussions on Queen’s involvement underway.</p> <p>Construction underway at iREACH Health clinical research centre and the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre’s (AMIC) Factory of the Future at Newtownabbey; Momentum One Zero centre received full planning permission in November 2024 and construction expected to start by end of September 2025.</p> <p>Business cases for iREACH Health and Momentum One Zero centres approved by DfE Permanent Secretary, including detailed benefits plans outlining expected economic, research, and workforce impacts.</p> <p>iREACH Health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secured £300k Year 1 funding from the UK Government’s Voluntary Scheme for Branded Medicine Pricing, Access and Growth (VPAG) Investment Programme to expand workforce supporting commercial clinical trials growth. Obtained £160k from Northern Ireland Clinical Research Recovery, Resilience and Growth 	
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		<p>Fund (PHA HSC R&D) to sustain existing research posts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successfully won joint bid to co-host the 2026 UK Clinical Research Facility annual conference, reinforcing Queen's leadership in clinical trial innovation. <p>Momentum One Zero</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivered the Cyber AI Hub, positioning Northern Ireland as a leading region for safe and secure AI development. • Secured £6.25M RiSC+ Network Grant focused on reimagining supply chains in agri-food, critical minerals, and fashion sectors. • Partner in securing the ONEHEALTH PeacePlus project with Catalyst, ATU Galway, Tyndall, and HIRANI, applying AI to One Health challenges with industry collaborators. • Partner in the Laboratory for AI Security Research (LASR) alongside Oxford, ATI, and Plexel, advancing AI security research capacity. <p>Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre (AMIC)</p>	
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued strategic engagement with High Value Manufacturing Catapult (HVMC) and Satellite Applications Catapult, with AMIC staff actively participating in HVMC technology and skills leadership and strategy groups. Ongoing collaboration across multiple NI, all island and GB advanced manufacturing sector groups, enhancing AMIC's capabilities and integration within manufacturing innovation networks. 	
Work collaboratively with Invest NI to support delivery of shared ambitions for regional economic development and growth in NI.		Queen's worked closely with Invest NI to advance shared goals for regional economic growth, supporting start-up and scale-up activity and promoting research strengths in health, Net Zero, and digital technologies. Joint activity included support for FDI, innovation infrastructure, and aligned investment in commercialisation opportunities. Worked with DfE and Invest NI to support the launch of the Future Medicines Institute (FMI), a £55million industry-led collaborative initiative aimed at advancing NI's Precision Medicine sector. Queen's, through AMIC, also received £1.9m, in funding from Invest NI for Project 4Ward looking at materials handling.	
Support design and delivery of the NI Innovate UK Action Plan, including		Queen's contributed to the design and early delivery of the NI Innovate UK Action Plan, supporting efforts to	

enhancing the drawdown of IUK funds in NI.		boost NI's drawdown of IUK funding. We engaged in joint planning activity, promoted IUK opportunities to researchers and industry partners, and aligned institutional innovation programmes to key Action Plan themes including Net Zero, digital, and health.	
As a founder member and key stakeholder of DfE's Connected programme, Queen's will continue to work with HE and FE partners to contribute to the NI innovation ecosystem through the delivery of a range of KE activities.		As a founding member of the DfE Connected programme, Queen's continued to collaborate with HE and FE partners to strengthen the NI innovation ecosystem. We delivered a range of knowledge exchange activities, including SME engagement, sector-specific innovation support, and regional workshops that connected academia with industry needs.	
Continue to engage with business across NI through Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) to enable businesses to access academic research and resources to boost productivity and profitability.		Queen's remained one of the UK's leading KTP institutions, supporting over 40 active partnerships across NI in sectors such as manufacturing, health, agri-food, digital, and clean tech. These collaborations enabled businesses to access academic expertise, drive innovation, and improve productivity.	
Secure and allocate UKRI Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) funding to resource collaborations with industry and commercialisation.		Queen's managed and allocated UKRI Impact Acceleration Account funding to support early-stage commercialisation and industry partnerships. IAA resources facilitated proof-of-concept projects and innovation activities across priority sectors including health, engineering, and digital technologies.	
Harnessing the opportunities presented by the DfE PGA and CAST schemes, support recruitment of		Queen's continued to engage with the DfE Postgraduate Awards (PGA) and CAST schemes to recruit high-	

<p>high-quality doctoral students with a particular focus on connectivity with business and other non-academic partners.</p>		<p>quality doctoral students, with a strong emphasis on collaboration with business and non-academic partners. In 2024–25, we secured 42 new CAST awards, supporting co-designed research projects that enhanced doctoral training and strengthened our partnerships with external stakeholders. All students have full access to Graduate School development programme including transferable skills, leadership, and career-focused skills development alongside institutional engagement with employers.</p>	
Innovation and Commercialisation			
<p>Continue to deliver priority activities through the HEIF KE Strategy and QUBIS Business Plan, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage existing strengths in IP and commercialisation and maintain UK leading position • Engage local SMEs to solve industry challenges and increase competitiveness • Support the scaling of high-growth companies and maintain increased start-up rates • Continue leveraging HEIF funding to secure external translational funding • Support FDI projects by promoting Queen’s research capabilities and potential for collaboration • Increase collaborative research and technology outlicensing to enhance IP transfer to businesses 	<p>Maintained leadership in IP commercialisation and technology transfer through HEIF KE Strategy, supporting 9 Proof of Principle projects and over a dozen Net Zero innovation pilots.</p> <p>Facilitated translational funding leveraging HEIF, aiding scale-up of ventures such as Catagen and Nuada within the Scaling the Edge Net Zero programme.</p> <p>Advanced commercialisation and entrepreneurial pathways through ICURE, InQUBate, and Scaling the Edge initiatives, supporting graduate and researcher-led ventures and strengthening NI’s innovation pipeline.</p> <p>Promoted collaboration with SMEs and international partners,</p>	<p>Queen’s delivered priority innovation activity through its HEIF KE Strategy and QUBIS Business Plan, maintaining leadership in IP commercialisation and deep-tech spinouts. We funded 9 Proof of Principle projects and over a dozen Net Zero innovation pilots, leveraging HEIF to secure translational funding and strengthen licensing and investor engagement. Flagship ventures continued to scale through the Scaling the Edge Net Zero programme. We supported high-growth start-ups, advanced SME collaboration, and promoted Queen’s capabilities to international partners. We also progressed plans for an all-island Deep Tech Fund and supported the NI entrepreneurial ecosystem through Founder Labs and NI Start-Up Weekend.</p>	<p>Queen’s has strengthened its innovation and commercialisation platform, with 2024-25 delivering growth in QUBIS spin-outs, progress on the NetZero accelerator pipeline and early adoption of AI-enabled commercialisation tools. Strategic partnerships with Techstars and Ulster University have enhanced support for innovation-driven enterprises. In 2025-26, we will sharpen focus on AI-native operations, investment readiness and the development of an all-island deep tech fund to scale the venture pipeline. Delivery of the iCure programme and NetZero accelerators will increase both the volume and quality of spin-outs. Impact will be demonstrated through higher investment per company, growth in IP disclosures and licences and measurable productivity gains</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand investment impact in Northern Ireland through the creation of an all-Ireland Deep Tech Fund. Support the Entrepreneurial ecosystem in Northern Ireland through programmes such as Founder Labs and NI start up weekend. Continue to contribute towards net zero through the creation of globally competitive clean technology companies such as Catagen and Nuada, with our strong pipeline of new ventures in this space via Scaling the Edge NetZero programme. Spin out IP rich business to support job creation in Northern Ireland. 	<p>progressing plans for an all-island Deep Tech Fund to further stimulate regional innovation investment.</p> <p>Delivered a £400,000 Net Zero Accelerator project through HEIF to stimulate Net Zero related projects across the university in conjunction with industry</p> <p>Significantly expanded the pipeline of academic-led commercial ventures and licensing activity, positioning Queen's as the leading generator of IP income in Northern Ireland and number one in the Russell Group 8.</p> <p>Promoted regional collaboration through our partnership with Techstars, Ulster University, and Ormeau Baths, forging a significant contribution to Northern Ireland's entrepreneurial ecosystem.</p>		<p>through AI and low-carbon technology adoption.</p>
<p>Continue to deliver key programmes aimed at enabling and instilling a culture of enterprise and innovation amongst the research community and wider economy in NI, and work with NI business to support their transition between programmes, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ICURe programme funded by Innovate UK and supporting researchers on their journey from research to commercialisation InQUBate university wide alliance supporting student & graduate innovation & enterprise through programmes like QUest and networks like SFF (Start for Future, European Entrepreneurial Network) 		<p>Queen's advanced a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship across academia and the wider economy. Through the ICURe programme, researchers were supported to explore commercial potential and market fit. The university-wide InQUBate initiative engaged students and graduates via the QUest programme and European Start for Future network. Our Scaling the Edge programme backed 16 innovation teams, half from outside Belfast, helping local companies to scale high-potential ideas and expand NI's innovation ecosystem.</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scaling the Edge programme supporting NI companies to scale their ideas and helping to grow the local innovation ecosystem 			
What we will do	What the impact will be	What success looks like	Links to Minister's Economic Mission
Research Quality and Culture			
<p>Secure additional funding to enhance research infrastructure, leveraging DfE HERC funding and BRCD innovation centres, incl. NI Complementary Fund support (e.g. HyTech NI).</p>	<p>Expanded access to world-class research facilities, enabling growth in thematic priority areas (e.g. hydrogen economy, Net Zero). Improved competitiveness in securing major UK and EU awards.</p>	<p>New infrastructure investments secured; utilisation rates by researchers and industry partners increasing year-on-year.</p>	<p>Research and innovation are widely recognised as key drivers of productivity and long-term economic growth. Queen's University's work is closely aligned with these priorities, particularly in areas such as Net Zero, AI, and health. However, alignment alone is not sufficient. The current level of research funding in Northern Ireland presents challenges to growth and competitiveness, especially when compared with investment trends in neighbouring jurisdictions.</p> <p>To help inform and support policy development, Queen's has proposed the establishment of an independent Productivity Commission. This would provide evidence-based advice to the Executive, drawing on successful models such as Ireland's National Competitiveness and Productivity Council and Australia's Productivity Commission.</p> <p>Enhancing productivity also contributes to the creation of high-quality employment. Investment in Innovation & R&D and Skills is essential to enabling good jobs—those that offer autonomy, fair pay, and meaningful work.</p>

<p>Deliver enhanced support for research grant applications, targeting UKRI and large programme grants in strategic areas (Net Zero, Health, AI, Cybersecurity, Agri-food, Peace & Human Rights). Support delivery of flagship initiatives (Smart Nano NI, CASE, SFI Co-Centres, Cyber-NI, FMI).</p>	<p>Increased research income from UKRI, EU and international funders. Stronger alignment of Queen's research strengths with NI economic needs.</p>	<p>Year-on-year growth in research income; successful bids for flagship initiatives; rise in proportion of large-scale collaborative awards.</p>	<p>By supporting large-scale research programmes in high-value sectors, this action drives innovation, attracts investment, and improves work-relevant skills, contributing to productivity growth.</p> <p>Flagship initiatives generate high-quality employment opportunities in research, technical and support roles, offering secure, meaningful work with long-term prospects.</p> <p>Strategic focus on Net Zero research supports the development of low-carbon technologies and sustainable practices, contributing to the green economy and decarbonisation targets.</p>
<p>Introduce new Grand Challenges Programme to enable cross-disciplinary collaborations, with training and seed-funding support.</p>	<p>Stimulates interdisciplinary research addressing major societal and economic challenges, increasing research visibility and external partnerships.</p>	<p>Pilot Grand Challenge projects underway with external partners; early outcomes shaping NI policy and industry engagement.</p>	<p>The Grand Challenges Programme supports Innovation & R&D by enabling cross-disciplinary collaboration on complex societal and technological issues, fostering novel approaches and accelerating research impact.</p> <p>By embedding training and seed-funding support, the programme builds Skills across academic and technical communities, equipping researchers to lead high-impact projects and engage with industry and policy partners.</p> <p>Its focus on strategic themes – including the Green Economy – supports the development of sustainable solutions and low-carbon technologies, contributing to Net Zero</p>

			<p>targets and the growth of the green innovation cluster.</p> <p>This initiative also contributes to raising Productivity by strengthening collaborative research capacity and enabling the adoption of advanced technologies and practices across sectors.</p>
<p>Develop framework to support recruitment and retention of high-calibre academic staff (internal programmes, external fellowships, progression and pathways).</p>	<p>Strengthened talent pipeline; improved retention and attraction of global research leaders.</p>	<p>Net increase in high-quality appointments and fellowships; improved staff retention and career progression metrics.</p>	<p>This action supports the development of Skills by attracting and retaining academic talent with expertise in priority areas, ensuring a strong pipeline of educators and researchers who can train the next generation and lead high-impact work.</p> <p>It strengthens Innovation & R&D by enabling continuity and excellence in research programmes, fostering long-term collaboration and increasing the capacity to secure competitive funding.</p> <p>By improving career pathways and progression, the framework contributes to the creation of Good Jobs, offering meaningful work, professional development, and secure employment within the academic sector.</p> <p>It also supports efforts to raise Productivity by embedding high-calibre expertise across disciplines, enhancing research outputs and knowledge exchange with industry and government.</p>
<p>Develop and support diverse cohort of PGRs equipped with advanced</p>	<p>Enhanced skills pipeline for NI economy; stronger doctoral training</p>	<p>Increase in DfE CAST partnerships; growth in interdisciplinary doctoral</p>	<p>This action strengthens Skills by equipping a diverse cohort of</p>

<p>skills, including through the Graduate School, new Doctoral Programmes, CAST partnerships, social innovation/enterprise training, and improved DTE coordination.</p>	<p>aligned to industry needs and global research collaborations.</p>	<p>training programmes; higher employability outcomes for graduates.</p>	<p>postgraduate researchers with advanced capabilities through structured training, interdisciplinary programmes and enterprise-focused development.</p> <p>It supports Innovation & R&D by fostering collaborative research across strategic areas, enhancing the capacity to generate new knowledge and translate it into societal and economic impact.</p> <p>By embedding sustainability-focused training and supporting doctoral work in areas such as climate, energy and food systems, the initiative contributes to the Green Economy and supports the development of solutions aligned with Net Zero goals.</p> <p>It also contributes to raising Productivity by developing a highly skilled research workforce capable of driving innovation and supporting high-value sectors across the region.</p>
<p>Continue to support development of early-career researchers and postdocs, incl. RCNI, Concordat actions, integrated approach to talent development.</p>	<p>More sustainable and diverse research workforce; improved career pathways within and beyond academia.</p>	<p>Growth in postdoc development opportunities; improved career progression data; increased participation in RCNI activities.</p>	<p>This action supports the development of Skills by providing structured support for early-career researchers and postdoctoral staff, helping them build expertise, leadership capability and career resilience across disciplines.</p> <p>It contributes to Innovation & R&D by nurturing emerging talent and enabling continuity in research programmes, strengthening the pipeline of researchers who can lead</p>

			<p>high-impact projects and secure competitive funding.</p> <p>By embedding a coordinated approach to talent development, the initiative also supports efforts to raise Productivity, ensuring that Northern Ireland retains and develops the research capacity needed to drive innovation and knowledge exchange across sectors.</p>
<p>Continue to support recognition of non-academic staff contributions (Technician Commitment, NI Research Professionals Network, AIREN).</p>	<p>Stronger professional workforce supporting R&I; enhanced staff retention and cross-sector collaboration.</p>	<p>Delivery of Technician Commitment action plan milestones; sustained participation in NI and all-island professional networks.</p>	<p>This action supports the development of Skills by recognising and investing in the expertise of non-academic staff, including technicians and research professionals, whose contributions are essential to the delivery of high-quality research and training.</p> <p>It strengthens research Infrastructure by promoting inclusive talent development and ensuring that technical and professional staff are supported through coordinated initiatives such as the Technician Commitment and AIREN.</p> <p>By embedding recognition and career development for these roles, the initiative contributes to raising Productivity, enabling more effective research delivery and fostering a collaborative environment for Innovation & R&D.</p>
<p>Lead delivery of inclusive research culture initiatives (QUB Research Culture Roadmap, Research Culture NI, All-Island Research Culture Network).</p>	<p>Improved research culture across NI HE sector; stronger external reputation for responsible, high-integrity research.</p>	<p>Publication of RCNI landscape review and action plan; new institutional roadmap embedded across schools.</p>	<p>The delivery of inclusive research culture initiatives – such as the QUB Research Culture Roadmap, Research Culture NI, and the All-Island Research Culture Network – directly supports the Minister’s Economic</p>

			Mission by fostering Innovation & R&D and enhancing Skills across the research ecosystem. By embedding inclusive practices and strengthening collaboration across institutions and regions, these initiatives contribute to raising productivity through improved research outputs and talent development. They also promote regional balance by ensuring equitable access to research opportunities and capacity-building across Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland, helping to create the conditions for good jobs in high-value sectors.
Harness AI tools to support researchers and reduce bureaucracy in research management.	More efficient research processes and increased researcher productivity; responsible adoption of AI.	Delivery of AI guidance for researchers; pilot AI-enabled research management tools in use.	Harnessing AI tools to support researchers and reduce bureaucracy in research management contributes to the Minister's objective of raising productivity. By streamlining administrative processes and freeing up time for high-value research activity, this approach enhances efficiency and supports the adoption of productivity-improving technologies. It also strengthens Innovation & R&D by enabling more agile and responsive research environments. In parallel, it builds Digital Skills across the research workforce, equipping individuals with the capabilities needed to engage with emerging technologies and contribute to a digitally enabled economy.
Advance preparations for REF 2029 to strategically optimise outcomes.	Higher-quality submission; stronger institutional positioning in UK league tables and funding allocations.	REF programme milestones met; evidence of quality improvement in outputs, impact and environment.	Harnessing AI tools to support researchers and reduce bureaucracy strengthens Innovation & R&D by enabling more efficient research

			processes. It also builds Digital Skills across the sector and contributes to raising productivity through smarter use of technology and improved management practices.
Build on initiatives to optimise dissemination and visibility of research outputs, with tailored researcher training.	Greater reach and influence of QUB research globally; improved uptake of findings by industry, policymakers and society.	Increased open access compliance; higher citation impact; expanded dissemination channels used.	Optimising the dissemination and visibility of research outputs, supported by tailored researcher training, strengthens Innovation & R&D by increasing the reach and impact of locally generated knowledge. It also builds Digital Skills across the research community, enabling more effective engagement with digital platforms and data-driven tools. This contributes to raising productivity and supports the creation of good jobs by equipping researchers with the capabilities needed in a modern, knowledge-based economy.
Implement new ethics management system and ensure compliance with research security (incl. Export Control).	Standardised ethics processes; stronger safeguarding of international collaborations.	Ethics system fully implemented; 100% compliance in audit reviews.	This supports Innovation & R&D by safeguarding high-value research and enabling secure collaboration across sectors. It also enhances Digital Skills through the adoption of secure digital systems and training, contributing to productivity and the creation of good jobs in a trusted, digitally enabled research ecosystem.
Deliver action plan to support UK Concordat for Environmental Sustainability of R&I Practice.	Reduced carbon footprint of research practice; stronger alignment with net zero policy.	Sustainability action plan milestones achieved; reduced emissions from research infrastructure.	Delivering an action plan to support the UK Concordat for Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice contributes directly to the development of a Green Economy. By embedding sustainable principles into research activity, it enables environmentally responsible Innovation & R&D. This approach supports the Minister's goal

			to reduce carbon emissions and creates good jobs in sectors aligned with net zero priorities, while enhancing institutional leadership in sustainable research practices.
International and Cross-Border Research Opportunities			
Strengthen all-island collaborations to support R&I clusters, enhancing engagement with new technological universities and supporting bids to PeacePlus, HEA North-South, and DfE-SFI US-Ireland Programme.	More coordinated all-island R&I ecosystem; increased success in collaborative funding; stronger contribution to regional economic priorities.	Growth in all-island bids submitted and funded; increased participation of NI researchers in cross-border consortia; new partnerships with TUs established.	Strengthening all-island collaborations enhances Innovation & R&D by building cross-border research capacity and supporting strategic bids to PeacePlus, HEA North-South, and the US-Ireland Programme. These efforts also develop Skills and foster Collaboration with new technological universities, contributing to regional balance and the creation of good jobs in high-value sectors.
Deepen collaborations with key international partners, particularly US universities and industry (via DfE-SFI US-Ireland R&D Programme), and expand into target markets through DSIT ISPF.	Enhanced global reputation and international reach; stronger inflow of research funding and talent.	New joint projects launched; increase in co-authored publications; growth in US-Ireland and ISPF awards.	Deepening partnerships with US universities and industry through the US-Ireland R&D Programme and expanding into target markets via DSIT ISPF drives Innovation & R&D and supports Skills development. These actions promote Internationalisation, positioning Northern Ireland as a globally connected research hub and enhancing productivity through high-impact collaboration.
Through the DfE Collaborative Research Support Fund, build NI engagement with European partners, reinforcing an 'open for business' message, incl.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising awareness of Horizon Europe and boosting NI capability. • Embedding European Strategy Group to drive forward engagement with European HEIs. 	Sustained NI participation in Horizon Europe despite Brexit challenges; improved institutional readiness and visibility in Europe.	Increased volume and success rate of Horizon Europe bids; stronger presence in NICP network; Queen's seen as a key EU research partner.	Engagement with European partners via Horizon Europe and the NICP Network strengthens Innovation & R&D and reinforces Northern Ireland's reputation as open for business. These initiatives build Skills and deepen Collaboration, supporting productivity and international competitiveness.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepening collaboration with NICP Network. 			
<p>Drive increased success in European Research Council (ERC) awards by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing an ERC Working Group and Task & Finish Group (PVC-R&E chaired) to prepare for 2026 calls. • Developing a comprehensive ERC support package (training, pump-priming, one-to-one guidance). • Launching an ERC Applicant Support Fund and promotional campaign. • Hosting ERC Scientific Council visit (June 2026). 	<p>Raised competitiveness of NI researchers for prestigious ERC awards; enhanced institutional profile in frontier research.</p>	<p>Cohort of ERC-ready candidates identified and supported; measurable growth in ERC applications and awards; visibility from ERC Council visit.</p>	<p>Targeted support for ERC applications, including training and funding, boosts Innovation & R&D and enhances researcher Skills. Hosting the ERC Scientific Council and expanding guidance mechanisms also promote Internationalisation, helping Northern Ireland secure a stronger position in global research excellence.</p>
<p>Advance Cluster Initiatives to support global competitiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AI-enabled mapping of Horizon Europe 2026 calls to Queen's researcher expertise. • Enhanced support for engagement in international networks (membership/association fees). 	<p>More targeted alignment of institutional expertise with global funding opportunities; improved access to international R&I networks.</p>	<p>Increased participation in Horizon Europe clusters; demonstrable ROI from network memberships.</p>	<p>Advancing cluster initiatives through AI-enabled mapping and international network engagement supports Innovation & R&D and builds Digital Skills. These actions foster strategic Collaboration, enabling researchers to compete globally and contribute to high-productivity sectors.</p>
Impact, Engagement and Knowledge Exchange			
<p>Strengthen engagement in national initiatives, consortia and networks (e.g. Catapult Network) to maximise benefits for NI business and industry.</p>	<p>Improved access for NI firms to national innovation infrastructure; stronger pipelines for commercialisation and sector growth.</p>	<p>More NI companies accessing Catapult expertise; new joint projects and demonstrable business-led R&D outcomes.</p>	<p>Engaging with national initiatives such as the Catapult Network enhances Innovation & R&D and drives Productivity Growth by connecting Northern Ireland researchers and businesses to cutting-edge expertise and infrastructure. This collaboration supports the creation of good jobs and promotes regional balance by ensuring local industry benefits from national investment and innovation opportunities.</p>

Work with Invest NI to deliver shared ambitions for regional economic growth.	Better alignment between academic research and NI's industrial priorities; accelerated inward investment.	Co-designed initiatives with Invest NI; stronger evidence of Queen's research driving regional economic development.	Collaborating with Invest NI strengthens Innovation & R&D and builds Skills for Growth, supporting the Minister's aim to promote regional balance and raise productivity. This partnership helps align research and enterprise activity with local economic priorities, creating pathways into high-value employment across Northern Ireland.
Support delivery of the NI Innovate UK Action Plan to increase drawdown of IUK funds.	Greater success rate of NI bids to Innovate UK; increased business participation in collaborative R&D.	Tangible growth in Innovate UK income and project numbers; NI represented in UK-wide innovation clusters.	Supporting the NI Innovate UK Action Plan boosts Innovation & R&D and encourages Collaboration across sectors, increasing access to national funding and driving Productivity Growth. This action helps Northern Ireland compete more effectively for innovation investment, contributing to the development of high-productivity clusters and good jobs.
Contribute as a founder member of DfE's Connected programme, working with HE/FE partners to deliver a strong NI innovation ecosystem.	Joined-up tertiary innovation system; wider opportunities for business engagement and KE.	Connected programme embedded as a core NI innovation mechanism; stronger QUB role in regional KE ecosystem.	Participation in the Connected programme fosters Collaboration, strengthens Skills, and advances Innovation & R&D by building a cohesive and inclusive innovation ecosystem across HE and FE institutions. This supports the Minister's goals to raise productivity, promote regional balance, and create good jobs through coordinated, place-based innovation.
Expand Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) to connect NI businesses with academic expertise.	Boosted business productivity, profitability and innovation capability.	Continued top-tier UK KTP performance; growth in business participation, especially SMEs.	Expanding KTPs strengthens Innovation & R&D and drives Productivity Growth by embedding academic expertise into business practice. It supports SME Engagement, helping smaller firms innovate and grow, and contributes to the creation of good jobs across Northern Ireland.

Support impact projects via UKRI IAAs and align to Grand Challenges, piloting scalable approaches, and secure and deploy further UKRI IAA funding to catalyse industry collaboration and commercialisation.	Accelerated pathways from research to real-world benefit. Faster translation of research into economic and societal benefits; increased spin-outs and licensing.	Stronger pipeline of impact case studies; embedded impact practices across disciplines. Higher ROI on IAA funds; demonstrable pipeline of industry collaborations and commercial outcomes.	Supporting UKRI IAA-funded impact projects enhances Innovation & R&D and accelerates Commercialisation by translating research into scalable solutions. This contributes to Societal Impact and supports the Minister's goal to raise productivity through industry collaboration and challenge-led innovation.
Harness DfE PGA and CAST schemes to recruit doctoral students linked to PfG, DfE priorities, industry and BRCD centres.	Growth of industry-connected doctoral talent base; alignment of skills with NI's economic priorities.	Higher proportion of PhDs with industrial partners; increased CAST student integration in BRCD centres.	Utilising DfE PGA and CAST schemes builds Skills and advances Innovation & R&D by aligning doctoral research with strategic priorities and industry needs. This supports the creation of good jobs and promotes regional balance through targeted investment in talent development.
Deliver integrated approach to engagement and impact support for researchers from early career stage.	More researchers embedding impact planning into projects; stronger non-academic reach.	Uptick in REF-quality impact case studies; wider portfolio of economic, civic, and policy impacts.	Providing integrated support for researcher engagement and impact strengthens Innovation & R&D, builds Skills, and enhances Societal Impact. This contributes to raising productivity and supports the development of a confident, impact-focused research workforce across all career stages.
Enhance programme of support for industrial collaboration, aligning with strategic partners and external opportunities (City/Growth Deals, EIZs, Local Innovation Partnerships).	Stronger strategic industry-university partnerships; new channels for innovation-led growth.	Increased number/value of formal strategic partnerships; integration of DfE-funded students into industrial training pathways.	Strengthening industrial collaboration through strategic partnerships and regional initiatives supports Innovation & R&D and drives Productivity Growth by connecting research expertise with business needs. This approach promotes regional balance by ensuring that innovation-led opportunities are distributed across Northern Ireland and contributes to the creation of good jobs through sustained, place-based economic development.

<p>Deliver BRCD Innovation Centres' Operating Plans 2025/26, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>iREACH Health</i>: secure capital equipment; address clinical trial skills gaps; expand micro-credentials/PG awards; co-host UKCRF 2026; launch industry-collaborative trials award. • <i>Momentum One Zero</i>: deliver/grow Hubs of Impact (Cyber AI, Digital One Health, FinTech, Space, Defence); align doctoral training; expand global collaborations; progress UK LASR; target Horizon Europe safe AI/cyber/PQT/social-good calls. • <i>AMIC</i>: strengthen Catapult links; launch operational Factory of the Future; secure extension of AMIC Harbour (NIACE) for aerospace innovation; launch sustainable manufacturing strategy; deliver Virtual Factory. 	<p>Direct impact on NI's priority sectors (health, advanced manufacturing, AI, cyber, fintech, defence); new R&D capability and global profile.</p>	<p>Operational innovation centres delivering measurable sectoral benefits; NI positioned as a hub for advanced R&D and industrial innovation.</p>	<p>iREACH Health Securing capital equipment and expanding clinical trial capacity through targeted skills development and micro-credentials strengthens Innovation & R&D and supports Productivity Growth in the health sector. Co-hosting UKCRF 2026 and launching industry-collaborative trials promote regional balance and create good jobs by positioning Northern Ireland as a leader in translational health research.</p> <p>Momentum One Zero Delivering and growing Hubs of Impact in areas such as Cyber AI, FinTech, and Digital One Health enhances Innovation & R&D and drives Productivity Growth through global collaboration and doctoral training alignment. Targeting Horizon Europe calls in safe AI and social-good technologies supports the development of Skills and contributes to the creation of high-value jobs in emerging sectors.</p> <p>AMIC Launching the Factory of the Future and strengthening Catapult links accelerates Innovation & R&D and supports Net Zero & Sustainability through advanced manufacturing and aerospace innovation. The Virtual Factory and sustainable manufacturing strategy build Skills and raise productivity, while promoting regional balance by</p>
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			anchoring high-tech industry in Northern Ireland.
Innovation and Commercialisation			
Drive AI-native operations – adopt advanced digital/AI tools, upskill staff, modernise processes, and lead in AI-enabled venture support across the commercialisation journey.	More efficient venture support pipeline; businesses enabled to adopt AI and digital solutions; NI positioned as an early adopter of AI-native innovation practices.	Queen’s recognised as a leader in AI-enabled commercialisation; faster spin-out times; measurable uptake of AI tools among supported ventures.	Adopting advanced digital and AI tools, upskilling staff, and modernising processes supports Digital Transformation and enhances Productivity Growth across the commercialisation journey. This strengthens Innovation & R&D and contributes to the creation of good jobs in high-tech, future-facing sectors.
Strengthen investment capability & connections – enhance QUBIS’s ability to attract funding and drive towards an all-island deep tech fund; grow connections with UK/Irish early-stage investors.	Increased flow of capital to NI innovation ecosystem; stronger investor networks; higher survival and growth rates of spin-outs.	Establishment/progress of all-island deep tech fund; measurable increase in venture capital attracted to QUB spin-outs; higher average investment per company.	Enhancing QUBIS’s ability to attract funding and build investor networks supports Innovation & R&D and drives Productivity Growth by accelerating the development of high-potential ventures. Strengthening Collaboration across the UK and Ireland also promotes regional balance through shared investment opportunities.
Drive NI productivity through IDEs – continue collaboration with Ulster University, Ormeau Baths and Techstars to strengthen entrepreneurial ecosystem.	Stronger NI IDE pipeline; improved entrepreneurial culture; higher business productivity.	Sustained growth in number of IDEs supported; NI ecosystem benchmarked against UK comparators; new accelerator partnerships secured.	Collaborating with Ulster University, Ormeau Baths and Techstars to support Inclusive Digital Enterprises (IDEs) boosts Innovation & R&D, builds Skills & Entrepreneurship, and drives Productivity Growth. This action supports the creation of good jobs and strengthens the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem.
Capitalise on NetZero Impact Accelerator pipeline – build on HEIF-funded programme and NetZero customer discovery insights.	Acceleration of NetZero ventures; more low-carbon solutions reaching market; growth in green enterprise sector.	Increase in NetZero spin-outs and start-ups; evidence of commercial adoption of NetZero solutions; strengthened NI reputation in climate innovation.	Building on HEIF-funded programmes and NetZero customer discovery insights advances Innovation & R&D and supports Net Zero & Sustainability. This contributes to reducing carbon emissions and developing Green

			Skills needed for the transition to a low-carbon economy.
Deliver iCure programme (to re-tender) and expand Queen's participation to support vibrant pipeline of spin-outs.	Increased number of early-stage, commercially relevant research ideas developed into ventures; stronger innovation culture among academics.	Growth in spin-out formation; increased conversion of iCure participants into IDEs; evidence of commercial licences and start-up creation.	Expanding Queen's involvement in the iCure programme supports Innovation & R&D and strengthens the pipeline of spin-outs, driving Productivity Growth and enhancing Commercialisation. This contributes to the creation of good jobs in knowledge-intensive sectors.
Increase proportion of commercially relevant research – embed commercialisation lens across research pipeline.	Higher proportion of QUB research generating IP, licences, and market-ready solutions; enhanced industry collaboration.	Clear year-on-year increase in disclosures, licences, and commercial projects; stronger balance of research portfolio with commercial outputs.	Embedding a commercialisation lens across the research pipeline enhances Innovation & R&D and supports Productivity Growth by aligning academic outputs with market needs. This strengthens Commercialisation and contributes to a more dynamic, impact-driven research environment.

Green Upskilling and Reskilling

Department for the Economy: Green upskilling and reskilling will be necessary to address the skills gap in low carbon and renewable energy technology and increase the necessary workforce in these key sectors consisting of individuals with the knowledge and skills to implement sustainable practices to deliver decarbonisation and progress the DfE-led Energy Strategy.

Queen’s University Belfast is committed to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2040. This section introduces a new strategic focus on green skilling and upskilling, and therefore does not reference the 2024/25 Outcome Agreement.

Table 3: Green Upskilling and Reskilling

What we will do	What success will look like and what the impact will be	Links to Minister’s Economic Mission
<p>Queen’s University Belfast is committed to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2040. This ambitious target reflects our recognition that climate change is one of the most pressing challenges facing society today, and that meaningful climate action must be embedded across all aspects of our institution.</p> <p>Our Net Zero Plan outlines the roadmap we will follow to reach this goal. It builds on the progress we have already made and sets out the steps we will take to further reduce our environmental impact. As a leading civic university, we are determined to play a central role in securing a sustainable future for our community and beyond.</p> <p>In the coming year, we will continue to integrate climate action into our operations, research, teaching, and engagement activities. We also recognise that addressing skills</p>	<p>Now in its fifth year, SKILL UP continues to deliver measurable outcomes. In the previous academic year, over 700 students enrolled at Queen’s, with early evidence of positive workforce impact. The programme is helping to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address regional skills gaps, including those emerging from the green transition; • Support career mobility and transitions, enabling individuals to adapt to changing labour market needs from climate change; • Strengthen economic resilience, by equipping the workforce with future-ready skills for the just transition; • Promote inclusive access to lifelong learning, ensuring opportunities are available to those who may not otherwise engage in formal education but will be disproportionately affected by climate change. 	<p>Queen’s University Belfast is committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2040, supported by a comprehensive roadmap to embed climate action across all areas of activity.</p> <p>We are actively reshaping what is within our control, while leveraging the expertise of our academic community and future graduates to support a just transition to net zero in Northern Ireland. Our work directly supports the Department’s priorities on addressing skills imbalances and building a green economy.</p> <p>Beyond institutional efforts, Queen’s engages across the Executive on green upskilling, reskilling, and wider decarbonisation initiatives. We have emphasised the need for an enabling ecosystem that fosters cross-community and interdisciplinary research, connecting institutions</p>

<p>imbalances is essential to a just transition. For us, green upskilling and reskilling are not separate endeavours but are integral to our broader approach to workforce development and capacity building. Therefore much of what we will do is covered in other sections of this document.</p> <p>Some specific examples of the green upskilling and reskilling include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SKILL UP, funded by the Department, provides free training opportunities across more than 250 subject areas. Delivered in partnership with local further and higher education institutions, the programme supports individuals to reskill, upskill, and transition into new career pathways. • The programme includes free postgraduate and short courses in priority areas including Green Skills. 		<p>across the UK, Ireland, and internationally.</p>
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Widening Access and Participation

Department for the Economy: Widening Access and Participation means realising the vision that any appropriately qualified individual in the region should be able to gain access to and strive for success in higher education, irrespective of their personal or social background or where they live.

At Queen's University Belfast, we are proud to combine a world-class educational experience with a firm commitment to equity of access. We believe that talent exists in every community, and we are determined that those who are from groups underrepresented in higher education are fully supported to access, succeed, and thrive at Queen's.

In 2024–25, we advanced this mission through a wide range of impactful initiatives:

- Continued support for those who are care-experienced, helping them build confidence, connections, and aspiration. In January 2025, Queen's celebrated achieving the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) Quality Mark. The Quality Mark Assessment Framework covers the student lifecycle from outreach through to graduation (and beyond); institutional culture and leadership; and commitment to continuous improvement and future plans. Queen's were awarded the highest rating of 'Exceptional' for Collaborative and Partnership Working. This recognition reflects the university's strategic engagement with a wide range of voluntary and statutory organisations, demonstrating a robust and inclusive approach to partnership development. These collaborations are instrumental in delivering tailored support services, enhancing student outcomes, and fostering a culture of care and belonging across the institution.
- Ongoing development of the Pathway Opportunity Programme (POP), which supports talented young people from underrepresented backgrounds to enter Queen's:
- The 2024-25 cohort included 310 participants exceeding recruitment targets across all subject areas.
- 277 students completed the programme, with 146 entering Queen's in September 2024. This represented a 53% conversion rate, exceeding the target 50%.
- Delivery of the Senior Academy Programme to Year 13/14 pupils from non-selective schools and colleges. Providing information, advice, and guidance alongside subject specific tuition and opportunity to attend a summer residential experience.
- Delivery of the Junior Academy, providing engaging, subject-focused activities to nominated pupils in Years 9 to 12, with a focus on early intervention and progression awareness.
- Piloting new GCSE interventions, designed to offer tailored, transitional support at key educational stages.
- Delivery of the Professor Fluffy Programme to 7 doorstep primary schools introducing the concept of Higher Education and raising awareness with Key Stage 2 pupils.

- These efforts reflect our commitment to widen participation across the student lifecycle — from outreach and aspiration to access, success, and progression into graduate employment.

Strategic Priorities for 2025-2026

In the year ahead, our focus will be on deepening and scaling impact through the following actions:

- Increase the number of Widening Participation students entering Queen’s and ensure they are supported to:
 - Succeed academically,
 - Graduate with strong outcomes, and
 - Access meaningful graduate employment.
- Continually develop and enhance provision for underrepresented groups with a particular focus on delivering the University’s National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) Action plan submitted as part of the Charter Mark accreditation process.
- Develop support for mature and access students, and carers through increased outreach activities and named Queen’s contact.
- Advance the Micro-Credentials Project, in collaboration with the Tertiary Senior Leaders Forum Working Group, to: Enable seamless transitions between Further and Higher Education,
 - Promote lifelong learning, and
 - Ensure all learners can fulfil their potential, regardless of their entry point.
- Expand and promote the use of externally accessible, open educational resources:
 - Designed for use by learners, schools, and FE colleges across Northern Ireland,
 - These resources are fully open access, ensuring that opportunities to learn and progress are available to anyone, anywhere.
- Through these efforts, we are building an educational environment that is inclusive by design, aspirational in spirit, and committed to unlocking potential across all parts of our society.

Table 4: Widening Access and Participation

What we said we would do	What we did	Evaluation of impact	What Still Needs to Be Done - Actions Rolling Forward
<p>Pathway to Queen’s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pathway opportunity programme to support WP students to access Queen’s. • Junior academy offers a range of focused interactive activities to nominated pupils in Years 9 to 12, with the aim of supporting their attainment and raising their aspirations to attend university. focusing on exam preparation. • The Senior Academy provides 2 yr. programme with subject specific tutoring for post 16 participants which will not only further develop their knowledge of the subject but also acquire exam skills and techniques that will stay with them in further study. • Programme of reading and maths support for care experience children to enhance their engagement with education and support their attainment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities and support were provided for students from widening participation (WP) areas to visit Queen’s early in their education, aspire to join, and be supported to reach their potential. • A diverse and inclusive student population was attracted to study at Queen’s across undergraduate (UG), postgraduate taught (PGT), postgraduate research (PGR), and micro-credentials/short courses. • Every student at Queen’s was enabled to thrive and reach their potential. • A more flexible and wider-reaching Queen’s education was delivered, alongside infrastructure development. • An underpinning infrastructure was established, supporting initiatives that directly contributed to a regionally balanced economy, fostered a culture of lifelong learning, addressed skills imbalances, and widened access and participation in tertiary education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pathway opportunity programme recruited 310 students in 2024/25. 146 students entered Queen’s in Sept 2024 representing 53% conversion rate. • Senior Academy programme delivered to 59 Year 13 in 2024/25 with residential element of the programme planned for July 25. Students availed of study skills support through tutorials and 1-1 tuition. • Additionally, the Junior Academy was delivered offering a range of focused interactive activities to nominated pupils in Years 9 to 12, with the aim of supporting attainment and raising aspirations to attend university, including the Junior Academy Sports Programme for males Year 8 –10. • The Reading and Numeracy Together programmes, and transition support programme – Steps to Success were delivered to an increased number of care experienced children in 2023/24 and 2024/25 due to additional funding through the DfE Step Up Programme. 96 Key Stage 2/3 pupils completed the programmes in 2024/25 and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to support students that have come through programmes and development of programmes.

		<p>attended a graduation ceremony in January/June 2025 to celebrate their success.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additionally, the Professor Fluffy Primary School aspiration raising programme was delivered with 7 doorstep primary schools. • Pre Entry and on course support for Care Experienced students has also continued with students accessing the Queen's Care Experienced Bursary, DfE Step Up Bursary and Success Fund, to support incidental costs relating to study. Queen's continues to support Care Experienced students with 2 named contact staff within the Widening Participation Unit. 	
<p>Alternative routes to HE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FE partnership to identify articulation and progression opportunities for students onto university programmes through curriculum mapping; amendments of existing Level 4/5 programmes; and co-design of bridging modules. <p>Conversations ongoing with partners (e.g. through Belfast Region City Deal) to support work force supply for Innovation Centres and relevant sectors.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion of BA (Early Childhood Studies) in partnership with Stranmillis University College to include North West Regional College in addition to two other colleges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renewals of Articulation agreements and Memorandum of Understanding.
<p>Operational enablers for flexible pathways</p> <p>Programme Management Framework evolution project – enhancing flexibility in programme awards and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported distance-based learning • Support and training to develop AI skills and competencies 	<p>Designed and implemented several programme management framework projects including enabling a flexible and innovative portfolio (etc). Projects include</p>	<p>Further development of RDP submission models.</p>

<p>student choice, and drive student success. See also <i>Tertiary Education</i>.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approving Programme Changes which streamlines approach to enable rapid development and agile flexible pathways for graduate achievement. • Research Degree Programme (RDP) models and associated Programme Design Rules have been reimagined and innovated to underpin agile programme design • The Thesis with Publications submission model project has been key to providing flexibility and real-world experience for PGR students, better enabling them to attain academic careers through evidence of peer-reviewed publications. 	
<p>Student Voice and representation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launched Student Academic Representation Code of Practice; completed recruitment of 800 under-graduate representatives. • Reverse mentoring programme launched with 40 student mentors mentoring staff to enhance understanding and co-create effective working practices. • Established review of the experience of FE students on HE programmes, and Queen's student from FE pathways 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 700 academic student reps trained annually and over 12,673 students engaged with Tea with PVC. • Approved institutional code of practice for academic representation, established a community of practice, raising awareness of approach. • 1,752 students engage in mentoring annually. • Successful launch of Reverse Mentoring scheme, Staff Mentees: 64 (Professional Services: 50, Academic: 11) • Student Mentors: 76 (UG: 63, PG: 13). • Undertook a review of the PGR student voice across all Schools and Research Centres. 	<p>See <i>What we will do</i>.</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launched a resource Hub in Canvas for academic reps. 	
What we will do	What success will look like and what the impact will be		Links to Minister's Economic Mission
<p>Pathway to Queen's</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued delivery and enhancement of the Pathway Opportunity Programme, embedding further evidence base and monitoring of programme impact. Continued delivery of the Senior Academy programme, enhancing links with schools and FE Colleges. Continued delivery of Queen's Junior Academy providing a pipeline for learners from non-selective schools. Continued delivery of the Professor Fluffy Programme, with an increased focus on parental engagement. Investigate alternative funding sources, so that support can continue for the Reading and Numeracy Together programmes supporting literacy and numeracy skills for care experienced children. Enhance outreach and engagement with Mature and Access Students. Providing a named contact for Mature Students. Develop links with external agencies that support students Carers. Provide additional outreach and engagement 	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Pathway Opportunity Programme continues to be delivered and enhanced, with a robust evidence base and impact monitoring embedded. The Senior Academy programme strengthens links with schools and FE colleges, supporting progression and aspiration. The Queen's Junior Academy provides a consistent pipeline for learners from non-selective schools. The Professor Fluffy Programme continues with an expanded focus on parental engagement, supporting whole-family aspiration. Alternative funding sources are identified to sustain the Reading and Numeracy Together programmes, supporting care-experienced children. Outreach and engagement with Mature and Access Students are enhanced, including the provision of a named contact for mature learners. Links with external agencies supporting student carers are developed, with additional outreach opportunities provided for current Queen's student carers. The Queen's National Network for Care Leavers (NNECL) Quality Mark Action Plan continues to be delivered and refined. Ongoing input is provided to the DfE Regional Strategy for Widening Participation, shaping regional policy and practice. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater access to higher education for learners from underrepresented and non-traditional backgrounds, including care-experienced students and mature students. Improved educational outcomes and aspiration among school-age learners through early engagement and targeted support. Stronger progression pathways from FE to HE, contributing to a more inclusive and integrated tertiary education system. Enhanced literacy and numeracy skills among care-experienced children, supporting long-term educational attainment. Increased parental involvement in education, fostering a culture of aspiration and support within families. 	<p>Queen's University Belfast has made significant contributions to improving regional balance and supporting access to good jobs through its widening access and participation initiatives.</p> <p>In 2025, the University delivered targeted programmes such as Reading Together and Numeracy Together, which supported literacy and numeracy development for care-experienced children aged 9-11. These programmes provided weekly one-on-one mentoring by Queen's student volunteers, helping to build academic confidence and introduce children to positive role models for higher education.</p> <p>Despite these achievements, structural challenges remained. Access to higher education in Northern Ireland continued to be constrained by the current funding model, which limited the University's ability to expand its outreach and support.</p> <p>In response to financial pressures, the University will undertake in the coming year action to investigate and identify alternative funding sources. This will be essential to ensuring the sustainability of key programmes.</p>	

<p>opportunities for current Queen’s student carers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued delivery and refinement of the Queen’s National Network for Care Leavers (NNECL) Quality Mark Action Plan. Continued input to the development of the DfE Regional Strategy for Widening Participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More inclusive institutional practices, ensuring Queen’s is responsive to the needs of diverse learners and contributes to a fairer society. Regional policy development is informed by lived experience and institutional expertise, helping to shape a more equitable education system across Northern Ireland. 	
<p>Alternative routes to HE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Renewal of Articulation agreements in Music and computing Exploration of further potential Articulation routes for direct entry Renewal of Memorandum of Understanding with Belfast Met College (see section on Tertiary Education) 	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Articulation agreements in Music and Computing are renewed. New articulation routes for direct entry are identified and explored. The Memorandum of Understanding with Belfast Met College is renewed. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broader access to higher education, particularly for learners progressing from further education or non-traditional routes. Stronger alignment between FE and HE sectors, supporting a more integrated and flexible tertiary education system. Increased social mobility, as more learners from underrepresented or non-selective backgrounds are supported to progress into degree-level study. Enhanced regional skills development, as alternative pathways help meet labour market needs and support lifelong learning. Deeper institutional partnerships, fostering shared responsibility for widening participation and educational equity across Northern Ireland. 	
<p>Operational enablers for flexible pathways</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Further development of RDP submission models will enhance flexibility for students, thereby promoting higher levels of graduate achievement and supporting success associated with work-integrated and future-ready education. The development of a comprehensive Micro- 	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refined RDP (Research Degree Programme) submission models are in place, offering greater flexibility for students and supporting higher levels of graduate achievement. A comprehensive Micro-credentials framework is developed and operational <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modular, stackable curriculum architecture is supported by robust systems and processes, enabling learners to build qualifications over time. 	

<p>credentials framework will expand student choice, enhance access to Higher Education, and create additional avenues for work-integrated and employer-led workforce upskilling. Furthermore, it will facilitate the development of systems and processes supporting stackable and sustainable modular curriculum architecture. This initiative will also promote cross-disciplinary accomplishments, further increasing student options and improving graduate outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-disciplinary learning opportunities are embedded, increasing student options and improving graduate outcomes. • The framework supports employer-led upskilling, creating new pathways for workforce development and lifelong learning. 	
<p>Student Voice and representation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise Code of Practice for Academic Representation to incorporate the PGR student voice to be drafted and approved. • Undertake School based training in 100% of Schools for Academic Reps with a focus on how to use the Rep system to discuss strategic issues. • Roll out the new Partnership Framework with a number of pilot Schools and Professional Support Directorates. • Review the expectations and commitment of students involved in representative work. 	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Code of Practice for Academic Representation is revised and approved, with clear inclusion of the postgraduate research (PGR) student voice. • Academic Rep training is delivered in 100% of Schools, with a strategic focus on using the Rep system to engage with broader institutional issues. • The new Partnership Framework is rolled out across pilot Schools and Professional Support Directorates, strengthening collaboration between students and staff. • A review of student representative roles and expectations is completed, ensuring clarity, recognition, and support for those involved in representation. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger student representation structures empower learners to contribute meaningfully to institutional decision-making and strategic development. • Improved student engagement and satisfaction. • Enhanced leadership and advocacy skills among student representatives, contributing to civic participation and employability. • A culture of shared governance and partnership is fostered, modelling democratic engagement and accountability within higher education. 	

Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning

Department for the Economy: Creating a culture of lifelong learning entails supporting individuals throughout their adult lives to achieve higher level qualifications, whether upskilling or re-skilling. It involves extending opportunity and choice to those seeking qualifications and, in particular, qualifications which provide access to good quality jobs.

Queen's University Belfast has a distinguished legacy of providing **educational opportunities for all**, with our engagement in lifelong learning stretching back to **1845**, when we first began offering courses to the local community.

Today, this tradition continues and evolves through our **Open Learning team**, which leads a growing and dynamic hub of accessible education. We currently offer a rich and varied portfolio of short courses in areas such as **Creative Writing, Digital Photography, Law, Personal Finance, Media Studies, Drama**, and many others — enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to pursue personal and professional development in flexible, engaging formats.

In 2024–25, our actions are focused on expanding this culture of lifelong learning further by:

- **Increasing access to short courses and micro-credentials**, particularly in areas aligned with evolving labour market needs and learner demand.
- **Enabling seamless transitions across the tertiary education system in Northern Ireland**, allowing individuals to upskill and reskill throughout their lives — regardless of where they begin their educational journey.
- Supporting learners to engage with education in ways that are **flexible, inclusive, and tailored** to their stage of life, career goals, and responsibilities — ensuring that learning can take place **anytime, anywhere, and at the right pace**.

This ambition is underpinned by the need for **sustainable funding models** that remove financial barriers and recognise the value of lifelong, career-responsive learning — both for individual growth and for the economic resilience of Northern Ireland.

Table 5: Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning

What we said we would do	What we did	Evaluation of impact	What Still Needs to Be Done - Actions Rolling Forward
<p>Transforming the student experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-location of Student Services and Students' Union to promote transformative student experiences and embed Lifelong learning. • New Student Experience Team established to enhance transformative student experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-location continues to see a high volume of visits and enhances student experience and student support/wellbeing. • It continues to be a one stop shop for student support and development resulting in a transformative student experiences, enhanced student continuation, completion and progression. • Supports students to succeed and reach their potential. • Supports learners back into education and generate a pipeline of talent from UG through to doctoral level. • Reduction and removal of awarding gaps (based on intersectionality data). 	<p>These efforts are reducing barriers to engagement, enhancing continuation and completion rates, and nurturing a culture where every learner is seen, supported, and empowered — including those transitioning back into education or progressing to postgraduate study.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our students voted us No1 UK SU – Whatuni Student Choice Awards 2025 • Our students voted us the 3rd best University - Whatuni Student Choice Awards 2025 • Our students voted us the 3rd Best University for postgraduate education - Whatuni Student Choice Awards 2025 <p>We have expanded and co-designed our student study spaces on campus due to high demand and footfall.</p> <p>The Student Partnership framework, co-created with students, offers enhanced experiences and key skill development through major university projects.</p>	<p>See <i>What we will do</i>.</p>
<p>Culture of learning for student success</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 51,763 views on MyQueen's resources to support students 	<p>Continue to expand culture of learning through strategic</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MyQueen’s site relaunched to align to the student journey, providing a Pre-arrival tool kit – giving students the skills they need to get off to the best start and thrive at University (open access resource). • Welcome and orientation programme at the start of each semester with a programme of student-led community building events throughout the year. • Transition Skills for University rolled out to all Undergraduate (UG) Students supporting our diverse students to succeed. • Enhanced Academic English services delivered for international students, providing in programme support with 96% student satisfaction (Service survey). • Disability and well-being support expanded for students with community of practice established for School based Student Support Experience staff to support consistency of approach and practice. • Through the Belfast Region City Deal innovation centres and partnerships, support the promotion and delivery of lifelong learning especially with the emerging demand for upskilling and reskilling to support digital technology transformation and the 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8,481 views of ‘Getting Started at Queen’s’ - newly launched resources to support better transition to HE • 22,347 queries (in person and digital) managed by the Student Information Point in One Elmwood • Changed name of Disability Services to Accessible Learning Support. 3,691 students registered for support. Increase of 3% on previous year • 2,482 students had 10,735 interactions with Student Wellbeing Service • Learning Development Service academic skills modules accessed 19,889 and downloaded 1,111 to be embedded in course modules for use on academic programmes • 1,124 students accessed Academic English support on 60 different modules for students whose first language is not English. A further 461 attended generic programmes • Graduate School 1,941 students 185 workshops for PGT and PGR students. 1,941 students registered for these events. 	<p>innovations and collaborations with Belfast Region City Deal partners.</p>
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changing skill sets required to respond to net zero carbon.			
What we will do	What success will look like and what the impact will be		Links to Minister's Economic Mission
<p>Transforming the student experience Launch a student communications plan targeted at addressing issues of concern to students</p> <p>Roll out a Compassionate Communications Toolkit helping staff and students know that 'every contact matters'</p> <p>Review and re approve the framework for student support including a focus on student and graduate attributes development</p> <p>Expand engagement with the academic rep system, ensuring the student voice shapes strategic decisions across Schools and Directorates.</p> <p>Implementation of a Student Partnership framework and toolkit designed to facilitate effective, collaborative partnerships between students and staff.</p> <p>In 2025-26, we will build on this momentum with a continued focus on equity, voice, and success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and re-approve the framework for student support, with strengthened alignment to the 	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students feel heard, supported, and empowered through clear, compassionate communication and meaningful engagement with staff. The Compassionate Communications Toolkit is widely adopted, fostering a culture where every interaction contributes positively to the student experience. A re-approved student support framework is in place, clearly aligned with the development of graduate attributes such as resilience, leadership, and civic responsibility. Academic representation is thriving, with students actively shaping decisions at School and Directorate levels. The Student Partnership Framework is embedded across the institution, enabling collaborative initiatives that enhance learning, wellbeing, and community. Expanded study spaces meet student demand, improving access to conducive environments for learning and collaboration. The Graduate School Business Plan drives increased participation in skills development and postgraduate community-building. A reviewed pastoral support model ensures consistent, high-quality care across Schools. Innovation Centres are actively supporting lifelong learning, with students and graduates accessing upskilling opportunities in digital transformation and the net zero economy. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graduates emerge not only academically capable but socially conscious, equipped with the attributes to lead, collaborate, and innovate in diverse sectors. Improved student wellbeing and engagement contribute to lower attrition rates and stronger community ties within and beyond the university. Inclusive and equitable education practices foster a more just and resilient society, where diverse voices are valued and empowered. Partnerships with industry and regional initiatives (e.g. Belfast Region City Deal) ensure that Queen's graduates are ready to meet the evolving 		<p>Our legacy of providing educational opportunities for all – dating back to 1845 when we first began offering courses to the local community – reflects the deep value we place on lifelong learning.</p> <p>The ongoing work we do to support students in their studies, and to ensure that people from diverse backgrounds can access education through Queen's University, aligns closely with the missions of good jobs and enhanced productivity.</p> <p>By supporting learners to engage with education in ways that are flexible, inclusive, and responsive to their stage of life, career aspirations, and personal responsibilities, we help ensure that learning can take place anytime, anywhere, and at the right pace. This approach also contributes to improving regional balance across Northern Ireland.</p> <p>Our ambitions in this area are underpinned by the need for sustainable funding models – models that remove financial barriers and recognise the value of lifelong, career-responsive learning, both for individual development and for the economic resilience of Northern Ireland.</p>

<p>development of student and graduate attributes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue the rollout of expanded study spaces in response to high demand and footfall at One Elmwood. • Launch a revised Graduate School Business Plan to enhance participation in skills development and postgraduate community-building. • Undertake a scoping exercise of pastoral support models in Schools to drive consistency and effectiveness in local delivery. <p>Belfast Region City Deal Innovation Centres to champion lifelong learning, working in partnership to support upskilling and reskilling in emerging sectors such as digital transformation and the net zero economy</p> <p>This comprehensive approach ensures Queen’s students are not only supported — they are enabled: to succeed academically, to develop personally and professionally, and to shape the communities and careers they aspire to lead</p>	<p>needs of the workforce, particularly in areas critical to societal progress like sustainability and digital transformation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The university becomes a model for compassionate, student-centred education, influencing broader educational policy and practice. 	
<p>Culture of learning for student success In the year ahead, we will deepen and expand this culture of learning</p>	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students begin their journey with a strong sense of belonging, thanks to a revised Welcome Programme that prioritises community-building from day one. 	

<p>through strategic innovations, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launching a revised Welcome Programme focused on fostering belonging and building community from day one. • Introducing a new Transition Support module, with tailored content for students undertaking placements, addressing real-world preparation and continuity. • Preparing for the implementation of a revised academic year, with built-in enhancements to student experience and wellbeing. • Sustaining and scaling engagement across all Student Support Services, ensuring visibility, accessibility, and continuous improvement. <p>We will also continue to collaborate with our Belfast Region City Deal i partners to support lifelong learning — especially in the context of digital transformation and green economy transition — helping students and alumni adapt to rapidly evolving career landscapes and respond to the changing skills demands of a net-zero future.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Transition Support module is embedded across programmes, equipping students with the confidence and skills to navigate placements and real-world challenges. • The revised academic year structure is implemented smoothly, with demonstrable improvements in student wellbeing, engagement, and academic outcomes. • Student Support Services are highly visible and accessible, with increased uptake and satisfaction across diverse student groups. • Collaboration with Belfast Region City Deal partners is delivering tangible opportunities for lifelong learning, with students and alumni actively engaging in upskilling for emerging sectors. • A culture of learning is evident not only in classrooms but across the entire student experience — from orientation to graduation and beyond. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduates are better prepared for the complexities of modern life and work, having experienced a holistic, supportive, and future-focused education. • Placement-ready students contribute meaningfully to industry and community settings, bringing fresh perspectives and practical skills. • Improved student wellbeing and retention lead to a more resilient and capable graduate population. • Lifelong learning becomes a norm, with Queen’s acting as a hub for continuous development in areas critical to societal progress, such as digital transformation and the green economy. • The university’s approach helps shape a more inclusive and adaptive society, where education is not a one-time event but a sustained, evolving partnership between individuals and institutions. 	
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Enhancing Digital Skills

DfE: Enhancing digital skills means keeping pace with the rapid technological change in the global economy and will require transformation in the digital capabilities of our population.

Table 6: Enhancing Digital Skills

What we said we would do	Evaluation of impact	What we did	What Still Needs to Be Done - Actions Rolling Forward
<p>Building Digital Capability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed sector leading AI Hub (open access) of training resources for staff and students Digital Learning @ Queen's site under redevelopment to provide staff and students with a one-stop-shop for access to the latest training Jisc Discovery Tool used to help staff and students to understand where they are in their digital skills development and link to skills development programmes. Video enhanced Teaching and Learning (T&L) project produced guidance and training to support staff integrating video into teaching and learning to transform student experience and encouraging more opportunities for active participation Centre for Digital Innovation and Technology (CDIT) Technical Working Group established for CDIT – QUB Stranmillis College and Belfast Met to identify range of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students and learners were digitally enabled with the skills needed to be transformative. Students were supported and received training to develop AI skills and competencies. Students became proficient in working with big data. Resources were designed to be externally accessible to all learners across Northern Ireland and were promoted for use in further education and schools. CDIT identified potential cohorts within QUB Computer Science students and graduates to develop upskilling and employability projects. These included vendor certifications such as cyber security, leadership and management skills, project-based scenarios around IT, CV and interview sessions. This programme and relevant partnerships began development in 2024–25. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AI-Hub and DigiHub (see in <i>Building AI Capability</i>) Training in AI delivered to 363 staff in 2024- 2025 across 10 AI sessions to provide the foundation for staff and student skill development <p>Our collaborative AI innovation projects, linking educators with technology experts, have progressed from concept to successful live trials that enhance educational efficiency. These trials include an Advisor of Studies chatbot (Computer Science), a virtual patient avatar (Dentistry), an AI-enhanced feedback tool (Psychology), and automated email generation, all showing a positive impact on staff and students.</p> <p>This work is complemented by school-led initiatives like the 'AI as a Study Buddy' programme in Biomedical Sciences, which supports students' research projects while also training staff in responsible AI use and pedagogy. Following these</p>	<p>See <i>What we will do</i>.</p>

<p>activities which can be enveloped under the CDIT collaborative approach. CDIT has been integrated into the DfE 10X Action Plan and is listed as Action 4.5, with Belfast Metropolitan College recruiting a CDIT Project manager to lead on these activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QUB working with BRCD team to lead on Digital Skills Assessment on cross City and Growth Deal basis and findings will feed into the CDIT approach. 		<p>successes, we are now exploring wider institutional rollouts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An institutional lecture capture policy and associated training resources will be made available to academic teams in Autumn 2025. • NI-wide City and Growth Deal Skills Assessment in Digital Skills completed with strong support from Queen’s academic Schools and City Deal team. 	
<p>Education for the Future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital assessment and feedback toolkits embedded into T&L • Integration of AI within Quality Assurance/Quality Education (QA/QE) processes and updates to assessment hub to include AI coverage. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital assessment and feedback toolkit (see in <i>Transforming Assessment</i>) • AI hub includes guidance on policy, practice and ethical use of AI in education • Digitisation and automation have been embedded in our QAE processes 	<p>The ongoing development and exploration of assessment optionality, including the integration of AI-driven and digitally advanced solutions, will continue.</p>
<p>Operational enablers for Digital</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jisc Digital Maturity Framework pilot involvement for AI. • Enhanced VLE (Virtual learning environment) pilot programmes launched, with review and evaluation of pilots. Jisc commissioned to report on VLE content quality/consistency. • Four proof of concept AI projects running on enhancing education effectiveness and efficiency. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our involvement in the Jisc Digital Maturity Framework Pilot generated national recognition, receiving the UCISA award for Supporting Excellence in Learning, Teaching and Research (2025) for our innovative AI in education strategy and sector-leading approach to AI-enhanced education. • This was also featured in a keynote at Jisc Digifest • AI innovation projects within education have delivered an Assessment Virtual Assistant 	<p>See <i>What we will do</i>.</p>

		chatbot designed to support staff with assessment policy (with 217 active users and 406 views), as well as avatar-based tools to assist dentistry students.	
What we will do	What success will look like and what the impact will be		Links to Minister's Economic Mission
Building Digital Capability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a collaborative training pathway and pipeline to support colleagues in using inclusive technologies (e.g. Microsoft stack) for teaching and learning, and facilitate participation in global communities of practice. Expand AI-driven educational innovation through pilot projects coordinated with the Institute of Teaching and Learning. Design and offer a specialised "AI for Teaching and Learning" training course and associated AI tools. Create and distribute guidance, resources, and support materials for staff to incorporate video-enhanced teaching and learning practices. 	Success: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A collaborative training pathway is established and actively used by staff, enhancing confidence and competence in inclusive digital technologies such as the Microsoft stack. AI-driven educational innovation is embedded across pilot projects, with measurable improvements in student engagement, feedback, and learning outcomes. Video-enhanced teaching practices are mainstreamed, supported by accessible guidance and resources that improve the quality and inclusivity of digital learning environments. Digital capability is no longer a niche skill but a core component of professional practice across the institution. Impact: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educators are digitally fluent and able to respond to evolving technologies and student needs with confidence and creativity. Students benefit from more inclusive, engaging, and personalised learning experiences, preparing them for digitally mediated workplaces and communities. The university contributes to a more equitable digital future, where technology enhances access rather than deepening divides. AI literacy among educators and graduates supports ethical innovation and responsible leadership in sectors increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence. Queen's becomes a leader in digital education, influencing national and international standards for technology-enhanced learning. 		<p>Not only does Queen's educate students with the digital skills that will be needed in the immediate future, but digital technologies and innovations embed much of the work and research that is done across the University.</p> <p>One example is the Belfast Region City Deal – a key collaboration between the University and the Department. Momentum One Zero (M1.0) is embedding the integration of digital skills across businesses and sectors through projects such as the significant project underway with Moy Park and McDonalds to bring an AI-powered video analytics solution to animal welfare in chicken farming.</p> <p>iREACH Health will provide infrastructure that has been lacking in the past to facilitate trials that are quick to set up and digitally integrated. A focus on digital integration of trials will allow remote participation in relevant trials.</p>
Education for the Future <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ongoing development and exploration of assessment optionality, including the integration of AI-driven and digitally advanced solutions, 	Success: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive, flexible assessment options are available across programmes including AI-enhanced tools. Staff are confident in using innovative assessment methods. Assessment practices support both academic achievement and workforce readiness. 		

<p>will continue. These forward-looking and inclusive assessment practices are designed to address sector skills gaps and support workforce upskilling (see earlier section on <i>Assessment</i> for more detail).</p>	<p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduates are better prepared for evolving careers, with relevant, demonstrable skills. • Queen’s helps shape a future-focused assessment culture that supports lifelong learning and economic resilience. 	<p>These interdisciplinary, cross-departmental projects show how digital skills can be utilized for the future but also how the work of the University cuts across government.</p>
<p>Operational enablers for Digital</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To guide our digital evolution, we will make more refined use of established frameworks, expanding our application of the Jisc digital transformation framework to improve resources and delivery training to boost the skills, productivity, and competencies of our staff and graduates. • Drive AI innovation focused on enhancing both pedagogy and operational efficiency (see earlier section). This will result in the development of a bespoke suite of AI tools, designed to enrich educational outcomes while delivering significant time-saving efficiencies for our entire community. 	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Jisc digital transformation framework is actively guiding training and resource development, boosting staff and graduate digital skills. • A bespoke suite of AI tools is developed and adopted, enhancing teaching, learning, and operational efficiency. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A digitally skilled workforce emerges, ready to lead and adapt in tech-driven sectors. • AI innovation improves educational outcomes and institutional productivity, setting a benchmark for responsible digital transformation in higher education. 	

Tertiary Education

Department for the Economy: Tertiary education as a sector will thrive best where the HE institutions continue to work with each other and with the FE sector and contribute to the development of a collaborative approach to achieving the outcomes of the Programme for Government in addition to tackling issues which affect the sector as a whole.

The importance of a connected and porous tertiary education sector across all providers in Northern Ireland is key to delivering our educational, social, and economic priorities. In 2024- 25 our initiatives in this area aim to support:

- Further development of university college partnerships to provide a thriving collaborative 'ecosystem' of tertiary education opportunities within Northern Ireland to meet the needs of students, of all ages and backgrounds, and employers.
- Strong engagement with clear uptake of learners, moving seamlessly from the post-primary sector and Further Education (FE) into Higher Education (HE) including HE in FE, and work-based learning programmes such as apprenticeships.

Table 7: Tertiary Education

What we said we would do	Evaluation of impact	What we did	What Still Needs to Be Done - Actions Rolling Forward
<p>Transforming the student experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further development of the current microsite to create a stand-alone single dedicated admissions portal to signpost schools, parents and applicants about the “ecosystem of opportunities”, including mobility between FE and HE. • Collaboration in and promotion of widening access pathways between universities and colleges to encourage and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate and progress through the educational ecosystem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported distance-based learning, part-time learning, and transitions through and between further education (FE) and higher education (HE). • Provided a dynamic and relevant portfolio of programmes to meet regional social and economic mobility requirements — including driving economic growth and addressing the skills imbalance. • Introduced new flexible approaches to delivery to increase the diversity of uptake, including among those in employment, returning to work, and marginalised sectors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portfolio of 302 courses represented across 11 subject areas and 6 Further Education colleges • 15k visitors in the last 12 months • Courses on the website updated weekly based on updates provided FE colleges via the master portfolio document • Continued support for University validated Access programmes including two Periodic Reviews in Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) and South Eastern Regional College (SERC). 	<p>See <i>What we will do</i>.</p>
<p>Education for the future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of a suite of micro-credential modules across the NI tertiary sector to support students to gain qualifications at their own pace through attainment of “stackable modules.” • Employer engagement through City and Growth Deals Skills Assessments have identified the need for short courses and micro credentials – especially SME’s who lack trainers to upskill employees. The value of 		<p>Creation of a dedicated Short Courses Directory showcasing and inviting applications for short courses/self-contained modules which do not exist within the usual Course Finder environment. The purpose is CPD and as a gateway to further postgraduate study.</p> <p>Achieved in 2024-2025</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and build of a searchable directory (https://www.qub.ac.uk/courses/short-courses/) • 67 courses displayed across Law, Nursing, Midwifery and Medicine 	<p>See <i>What we will do</i>.</p>

<p>these courses to employees can support recruitment.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enquiries and applications go directly to the relevant School • 66k visitors in the last 12 months <p>Shaped and contributed to regional skills assessments in virtual production and digital / deep-tech as part of Belfast Region City Deal partnership.</p> <p>Established the Centre for Digital & Information Technologies (CDIT) partnership with Belfast Metropolitan College and Stranmillis University College.</p>	
<p>Programme Management Framework</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of exit awards to enable those unable to complete their studies to exit with an award • Prior learning review project to support a diverse group of learners to join the university • Development and roll out of a micro credentials framework; 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration of exit awards framework and prior learning review. • Micro-credentials framework in planning stage. 	<p>See <i>What we will do</i>.</p>
<p>What we will do</p>	<p>What success will look like and what the impact will be</p>	<p>Links to Minister’s Economic Mission</p>	
<p>Transforming the student experience</p> <p>Reapproval of existing provision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Periodic Review – Access NWRC • Periodic Review of two Foundation Degrees (BMC) • Periodic Review of a Foundation Degree across 6 Colleges via Stranmillis University College (SUC) and the Periodic Review of a franchised BA via SUC. <p>Reapproval of the Memorandum of Understanding with BMC.</p>	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reapproval of NWRC, BMC, and SUC-linked programmes are completed, ensuring quality, relevance, and alignment with institutional standards. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner organisations and Students across partner colleges benefit from consistency and high-quality, future-focused programmes that meet regional and sectoral needs. • Strengthened partnerships support educational access, progression, and workforce development across Northern Ireland. 	<p>In our response to the draft Programme for Government, we emphasised our strong commitment to collaboration and integration across the tertiary education sector.</p> <p>We highlighted that a thriving tertiary education system is essential to building a strong and regionally balanced economy in Northern Ireland. Achieving meaningful, long-term change across Further and Higher Education requires policy that not only addresses the skills gap in</p>	

<p>Education for the future Further modules to be provided by the Leadership Institute and Language Centre.</p> <p>Development of Micro-credentials framework (see section on <i>Programme Management Framework</i>) will enable greater support to realise the benefits of the BRCD investments.</p> <p>Lead completion of Life and Health Sciences regional skills assessment.</p>	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New modules from the Leadership Institute and Language Centre provided. • A micro-credentials framework is in place, supporting flexible learning and alignment with Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) priorities. • The Life and Health Sciences regional skills assessment is completed. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners gain targeted skills for emerging sectors, enhancing employability and adaptability. • Micro-credentials support lifelong learning and inclusive access to education. • Regional skills data informs strategic investment and helps address workforce gaps in life and health sciences. 	<p>our local economy but also tackles the persistent inequality in access to local Higher Education institutions for young people from Northern Ireland. Within this context, we reiterated that the current funding model for Higher Education is no longer fit for purpose and does not meet the evolving needs of our economy.</p> <p>We are committed to supporting the development of clear and coherent pathways between Further and Higher Education. By creating an integrated tertiary education system, we can maximise the assets available in Northern Ireland, expand opportunities for individuals, and more effectively address the skills needs of the economy. We believe there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to engage in a meaningful discussion about the structure, functions, and resourcing of Higher Education as part of a broader tertiary education ecosystem.</p> <p>However, this cannot be achieved in isolation – either by the University or by the Department alone. We depend on collaboration across the Executive. For example, without progress on delivering more affordable childcare, a significant cohort of people – particularly women – will continue to face barriers to upskilling and accessing educational opportunities.</p>
<p>Programme Management Framework Development of micro-credentials framework and roadmap for service changes across the University to effectively enable micro-credentials. (see section on <i>Micro-credentials above</i>).</p>	<p>Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A university-wide micro-credentials framework and roadmap is implemented, enabling flexible, modular learning across disciplines, enabled by the Executive. • Service changes are aligned to support delivery, recognition, and scalability of micro-credentials. <p>Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners can upskill and reskill efficiently, accessing targeted education that meets evolving industry needs. • Queen's, with Executive and Departmental to support, contributes to a more agile, inclusive education system that supports lifelong learning and regional economic growth. 	

Signatories

The University and the Department for the Economy agree to work in partnership with each other in line with the arrangements set out in this Outcome Agreement.

Signed: 

Name: Professor Sir Ian Greer

Position: Vice-Chancellor and President, Queen's University
Belfast

Date: 13.11.25



Signed:

Name: Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA

Position: Minister for the Economy

Date: 04 November 2025

For further information please contact James Dillon, Assistant Director and Head of Government Affairs and Civic Engagement, Queen's University Belfast (j.dillon@qub.ac.uk).