Affirming the vision, mission, identity, ethos and strategic priorities of St Mary’s

St Mary’s is a place with a vision for its future and a mission of service and excellence which is very clear, relevant and enduring. It is a mission which brings clarity and cohesion to the work of the people who constitute the College community. It is the mission of a Catholic higher education institution, inspired by Christian values, informed by academic, professional and civic values, and one which is confident of its identity, ethos and distinctiveness. In the first part of the plan we set out the main aspects of the culture of St Mary’s and present the seven strategic priorities which are designed to address the key challenges that face a small institution in the higher education sector today.
1.2 MISSION

Our purpose is to make a distinctive contribution of service and excellence, in the Catholic tradition, to higher education in Northern Ireland.

St Mary’s is an academic community committed to the search for meaning and value in the intellectual life, to academic excellence and to individual attention for students.

We work for the development of the whole person in a Christian, values-sensitive environment in preparation for a lifetime of learning, leadership and service.

We want the College to be a religious, educational, cultural and social resource for the local community and to show concern for the poor and powerless.

We provide teacher education programmes, in English and in Irish, as well as a Liberal Arts degree programme.

We offer our students high-quality teaching and high levels of support to facilitate effective learning.

We aim to reduce traditional impediments to the accessibility of higher education and to enable participation from across a wide spectrum of society.

We support economic regeneration and social development initiatives which facilitate conflict resolution and peace.

We are committed to a rich international dimension in the life of the College.

In order to promote our mission, we work with a wide range of partners and seek to build excellent relationships.

1.1 VISION

BACKGROUND

At St Mary’s University College, the trustees, governors, staff and students strive to work together to build an institution of excellence, focused on ethical and intellectual development and based on respect and concern for values-based education: Christian, academic, professional and civic values.

We believe that the institution, which was established in 1900 and which we are continuing to build today, is best served by an inspiring vision of higher education, a vision that brings coherence and interconnection to all our work.

Our vision is framed by two principles which are advanced in an apostolic constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae (Aug 15, 1990) and are key to the work of Catholic colleges and universities worldwide. Firstly, St Mary’s pursues the protection and advancement of human dignity and cultural heritage through teaching, research and services offered to the local, national and international communities. Secondly, the College aims to make its learning environment the site of a fruitful dialogue with people of diverse cultures. Further to these two general principles, the vision is also guided by the tradition of its founders, the Dominican Sisters, from over a century ago which prizes truth and the development of the intellectual virtues. Our vision statement therefore emerges from those sources.

VISION STATEMENT

To be an ever more effective instrument of educational progress for individuals as well as for society and to help advance the economic, cultural and social development of the local community and region.
1.3 IDENTITY

St Mary’s is a Catholic Higher Education Institution which specialises in the education of teachers and also offers a Liberal Arts degree programme.

Our academic community works within a framework of religious, academic, civic and professional values and seeks to facilitate the integration of Christian faith and learning. We place a great emphasis on respect for the dignity of the human person and on promoting excellence.

Christian Values
The Christian values at the heart of the College identity are the defining characteristic of over one thousand other Catholic universities and colleges as well as thousands of Catholic schools worldwide. The culture of the College is however one of openness, inclusion and collaboration, enabling it to interact very effectively with other institutions of higher education, particularly Queen’s University with whom St Mary’s is academically integrated. We seek to share our approach of having the Christian faith embedded in our identity with the wider community, for the common good.

Student Formation
The education we offer our students has a profound sense of the sacred dignity and value of every human person, made as we believe we are in the image and likeness of God. In our increasingly secular and materialistic world, St Mary’s believes it serves the common good by the quality of our testimony to this truth. Through hard work and commitment, we have gained a sterling reputation for pastoral care and for the intellectual, moral, social and spiritual development of our students. Our approach to education is therefore highly ambitious for the students.

Community
At St Mary’s we place great emphasis on a sense of community. The very nature of human beings is that we are communal creatures. We live and grow in community. We cannot survive and thrive without community. Therefore, to speak of the dignity of the person makes sense only if it is done in the context of the person’s relationships within the wider society. The College is therefore dedicated to building community.
1.4 ETHOS

Education in St Mary’s takes place in an ethos that is nurturing for students and welcoming to visitors, where values-education is actively promoted and respect is intrinsic.

The main sources from which the ethos emerges are:

- The guiding philosophy and principles of Catholic education
- The relatively small size of the institution, and its location in West Belfast
- The people who study and work here and those who support its mission

St Mary’s is inspired and invigorated by these sources. The ethos therefore has a variety of interrelated characteristics as set out below, with a Catholic education identity at the core. It is this which provides for coherence and interconnectedness which in turn contribute to excellence. We want all who come to St Mary’s to experience a higher education institution which:

- Believes in the power of education to transform lives, overcome disadvantage and contribute positively to humanity
- Is focused on the holistic development of its students
- Was founded and continues to develop in the worldwide Christian Catholic tradition of faith-based education
- Promotes the development of academic, civic, professional and religious values in addition to knowledge, understanding and skills

Is a warm and friendly place where people display a positive disposition to others

Has a specialist focus on teacher education and the formation of its students for a vocation of service in the profession

Is highly respectful of the work undertaken by our partners in the education service

Places significance on promoting the Irish language and Irish-medium Education

Is continually learning from the Liberal Arts tradition

Is committed to ongoing improvement and is striving for excellence

Enjoys good relationships with its partner schools and placement learning providers

Has a vibrant student life and culture

Has a rich heritage and tradition which inspires confidence in the future

Displays a strong commitment to engagement with the local community and others who wish to use its facilities and services

Promotes an international dimension

Encourages harmonious and cooperative working relationships

Inspires loyalty and support from its alumni

Has a strong sense of vitality and dynamism
1.5 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The overarching goal of the College centres on the fulfilment of its mission to make a distinctive contribution of service and excellence, in the Catholic tradition, to higher education in Northern Ireland. St Mary’s seeks to achieve this goal through a high level plan which has seven strategic priorities: Mission Effectiveness; Sustainability; Academic Quality; The Student Experience; Admissions, Access and Participation; Staff in Community and Partnerships. These priorities provide leadership and management in the College with a framework for effective decision making as well as a trajectory for ongoing institutional development.

Mission Effectiveness
St Mary’s has a very clear purpose to promote a form of higher education which emphasises coherence and interconnectedness and that reflects the core values of the Christian faith.

Sustainability
Rationalisation of academic provision is now common practice in the higher education sector. St Mary’s recognises that it is increasingly difficult for small institutions to maintain high levels of autonomy in the present financial climate, but that is precisely our goal.

Academic Quality
Maintaining the excellent quality of St Mary’s academic provision is the central concern of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with Queen’s University. The College is committed to this model of academic partnership. St Mary’s seeks to maintain, and where appropriate enhance, the high quality of its academic provision in the four programmes: BEd, BA, PGCE and Masters.

The Student Experience
The College’s educational provision places great emphasis on the holistic development of our students. A highly satisfactory experience at St Mary’s starts with a warm welcome and respect for each individual student. College life for students includes the invitation to participate in a community of learners that seeks the highest academic standards, explores the integration of faith and reason and provides pastoral care when it is required.

Admissions, Access and Participation
St Mary’s seeks to work collaboratively with the Department for the Economy (DfE) and the Department of Education (DE) with a view to ensuring that our approved student entry numbers are at a sufficiently high level to enable sustainability and continuous improvement. In addition, a Widening Access and Participation Plan is in place to promote equality by offering opportunities to groups within the population who are under-represented in Higher Education.

Staff in Community
The College believes that continued success depends to a large extent on the dedication and professionalism of all its staff and on a commitment by the institution to their ongoing development and their well-being. We also seek to ensure that a collegial and participatory approach to the management of the College is maintained.

Partnerships
The College has an intensive academic partnership with Queen’s University through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). St Mary’s places great emphasis on continuing to build and develop a strong relationship with the University in the context of the MOA. Very important partnerships also exist with the schools that facilitate the recruitment of new students to our College and engage with us in providing practical classroom experience. Work Related Learning for Liberal Arts students is also facilitated by a range of partner organisations, and international student mobility is dependent on agreements with universities and colleges in many parts of the world. In taking forward the College mission, special emphasis is placed on providing facilities and services for the local community. Through community engagement, St Mary’s seeks to facilitate cultural, economic and social regeneration.
Building for the Future of St Mary’s

From the position of having a strong institutional culture and acute self-awareness of our corporate risks, St Mary's seeks to build for the future with ambition and aspiration, yet also with realistic strategic direction.

We know that our ability to plan ahead is constrained by two key factors. Firstly, there is a lack of clarity about government policy on the future funding of higher education institutions and teacher education in particular. Secondly, there is uncertainty about the general economic climate and public finances in the years ahead, particularly after Brexit. Therefore, St Mary’s will be challenged to be agile and flexible in the face of emergent and unpredictable change.

In this part of the plan, we set out the actions which will be taken to address the strategic priorities and to develop the College’s capacity and capability in navigating the future. Success in that regard will require an effective and distinctive College brand to be visible in the higher education sector and beyond, one which provides us with a competitive position. It will require the College to pay particular attention to three key building blocks for future success: the religious identity of the College, academic integration with Queen’s University and the quality of the student experience. St Mary’s will have to demonstrate a commitment to both building a united community and contributing to the Programme for Government.
Building blocks of competitive positioning

1. VALUES
2. EXCELLENCE
3. HERITAGE
4. TRANSFORMING
5. DYNAMIC
In the competitive world of higher education, St Mary’s will seek to promote a better understanding of the institution and its mission. We will continue to communicate the benefits for students of choosing to enrol at a College that is small, specialist, distinctive as well as high-performing. We will also demonstrate to government that the funding allocated to St Mary’s is contributing to the common good through skills development, social teachings and community engagement.

The College will promote a brand (including the use of corporate logos) with the following key characteristics.

1. VALUES
St Mary’s is explicit in the promotion of an interconnected set of values (Christian, academic, professional and civic) which define its identity and provide guidance for the educational work of the College community. In this way, St Mary’s is distinctive in Northern Ireland.

2. EXCELLENCE
St Mary’s has externally validated evidence of high performance in its core business of academic provision. It has a reputation for high standards of entry to degree programmes, a strong work ethic and a record of achievement. The College is academically integrated with Queen’s University, from which our students graduate, and Queen’s is a member of the prestigious Russell Group.

3. HERITAGE
St Mary’s was established in 1900 and it has a rich history and heritage, particularly as a specialist institution in the field of teacher education. The campus buildings, including the Chapel, adjacent to the Falls Road, clearly communicate a sense of heritage. Such heritage is highly valued by many people in our society.

4. TRANSFORMING
St Mary’s places its greatest emphasis on the students who enrol for its degree programmes and courses in Teacher Education as well as Liberal Arts. The College facilitates a holistic approach to their development and formation. We also promote a faith-based approach to education and a commitment to social justice. Therefore, what we seek is a transformative higher education experience. The transforming mission of the College extends to our engagement with the local community.

5. DYNAMIC
St Mary’s continues to demonstrate a capacity to evolve and adapt successfully to new and changing circumstances. The college develops in a spirit of continuity and openness that combines fond memories and future aspirations. Its small size provides for a flexibility and agility in addressing both opportunities and risks.
2.2 RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF THE COLLEGE

Catholic universities and colleges all over the world must work to strengthen the religious identity of their institutions and St Mary’s is no different. The College will continue to deliver the Certificate in Religious Education programme to BEd and PGCE students who wish to take it and seek to share our provision with Stranmillis University College. It will also promote Catholic Social Teaching as a powerful tool to prepare students for the ethical and moral dimension of professional practice and good citizenship. Strong connections will be maintained with the Commission for Catholic Education, CSTS and CCMS as well as Catholic schools. At the same time, St Mary’s will seek to deepen its understanding of diversity and inclusion on campus.

2.3 ACADEMIC INTEGRATION

The relationship of academic integration which St Mary’s enjoys with Queen’s University is the cornerstone of the College’s provision of four degree programmes: BEd, BA, PGCE and Masters. It provides for robust quality assurance procedures and enables College students to avail of many facilities and services offered by the University. In addition, it enhances the brand of St Mary’s through close association with a world class university. For those reasons, the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with Queen’s University will be renewed and the College will seek to further deepen collaboration between the two institutions.
St Mary’s University College 11

2.4 THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

St Mary’s competitive position requires that the students can expect an excellent academic experience of higher education, so existing capacity and capabilities have to be maintained at the same time as enabling efficiencies in the current public finances climate in the public sector. This will be challenging but the College will be required to continue investment in: staffing the existing number of subjects in the undergraduate programmes, maintaining relatively high levels of staff-student contact, having a very strong student guidance and support service, providing excellent IT services and matching peer provision for the library services.

2.5 A UNITED COMMUNITY AND SHARED EDUCATION

St Mary’s is an autonomous institution of higher education. It possesses institutional autonomy to advance its mission and perform its functions effectively. Its future, however, will be built in partnership with others and through a shared approach to education and community development.

St Mary’s supports the government strategy ‘Together: Building a United Community’ (May 23, 2013) which reflects the Executive’s commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. This sets out a vision of ‘a united community, based on equality of opportunity, the desirability of good relations and reconciliation—one which is strengthened by its diversity, where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced and where everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance.”

The College also supports the advancement of shared education in Northern Ireland involving schools and other education providers of different ownership, sectoral identity and ethos, management type or governance arrangements. Our ITE programmes will enable students to understand and experience shared education as it is set out in The Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 which refers to the education together of:

(a) those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons; and

(b) those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not, which is secured by the working together and co-operation of two relevant providers.
2.6 THE PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

St Mary’s shall continue to contribute to the new Programme for Government. The College engaged in the first phase of public consultation and communicated its position that the focus on outcomes was appropriate.

Through academic provision in teacher education and liberal arts as well as very active community engagement, the work of St Mary’s is significantly aligned to three of the proposed Programme for Government outcomes in particular that:

- We have a more equal society
- We are an innovative, creative society where people can fulfil their potential and
- We have more people working in better jobs.

2.7 DEVELOPMENT ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

The College’s strategic priorities as well as its top five corporate risks (A) will be addressed by a plan which comprises a set of development actions and activities. This is set out in Table 1. How successful the College is in taking forward the Plan will be evaluated annually by reference to nine key performance indicators (B) and set out in a Performance Management Report.

Notes

(A) Corporate Risks

1. Reductions in government funding challenging sustainability
2. Failure to maintain adequate academic, support and administrative capacity
3. Reductions in student intake allocations impacting on financial viability
4. Failure to address Department of Education priorities in Literacy, Numeracy, SEN, UICT and Teacher Professional Learning
5. Failure to ensure effective academic governance and standards

(B) Key Performance Indicators

1. Institutional Sustainability
2. Academic Profile and Positioning
3. The Student Experience
4. Relationships
5. Financial Health
6. Estates and Infrastructure
7. Human Resources
8. Governance
9. College Developments
### TABLE 1 ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES PLAN

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secure the Core Business</th>
<th>Enable high performance and efficient operations</th>
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<td>2. Enable academic integration with Queen’s University and enhance collaboration.</td>
<td>2. Maintain capacity and capabilities to deliver the College's degree programmes.</td>
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<td>3. Comply with the revised operating model for quality assessment and strengthen academic governance.</td>
<td>3. Promote student health and well-being through enhanced support arrangements.</td>
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<td>4. Make the case for Initial Teacher Education intakes to remain at existing levels for both the BEd and PGCE programmes.</td>
<td>4. Promote equality of opportunity.</td>
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<td>5. Seek additional student numbers in the Liberal Arts programme and place greater emphasis on employability in the degree.</td>
<td>5. Develop the academic staff profile by ensuring rigorous recruitment practices and enhanced staff development opportunities.</td>
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<td>6. Ensure the safety of students and staff.</td>
<td>6. Attract and retain high quality students.</td>
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<td>7. Develop new ITE policies in literacy, numeracy, SEN and UICT and improve overall provision for student teachers.</td>
<td>7. Develop the use of e-learning by both academic staff and students.</td>
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<td>9. Facilitate community engagement through a partnership approach.</td>
<td>9. Improve the research output in the fields of education and international studies.</td>
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<td>10. Enable access to the College’s Religious Education Programme for student teachers at Stranmillis University College.</td>
<td>10. Introduce full-time postgraduate provision at Masters level.</td>
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<td>11. Encourage connections and partnership with both governmental and non-governmental organisations.</td>
<td>11. Contribute to the Department of Education Strategy on Teacher Professional Learning.</td>
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<td>12. Encourage wider access to higher education.</td>
<td>12. Enhance College communications through the website, social media and other channels.</td>
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