

Access UCC PLUS Programme

Impact Report

April 2026

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Cork University Foundation
Fondúireacht Ollscoile Chorcaí

Executive Summary

The Access UCC PLUS Programme is a cornerstone of UCC's commitment to widening participation and ensuring that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds can enter, thrive in, and complete higher education. Through targeted outreach, holistic supports, and philanthropic bursaries, the programme enables students to progress through university with confidence, belonging, and stability.

In 2025–2026, Access UCC PLUS supported 714 students, welcomed an intake of 202, and had an increased retention rate of 94.8%. These outcomes highlight the transformative impact of sustained academic, financial, and personal supports on student success.

About the Programme

The Access UCC PLUS Programme engages directly with 33 DEIS schools and 3 Further Education colleges, providing long-term educational and motivational support to students who face structural barriers to higher education

Working collaboratively with schools, families, teachers, and community partners, the programme:

- Encourages progression to Leaving Certificate
- Builds academic confidence
- Supports applications through the HEAR scheme
- Prepares students for the transition to university

At UCC, Access students receive tailored academic, social, and financial supports to help them fully participate in university life.

Year in Numbers: 2025-26 at a Glance



714
Students supported.



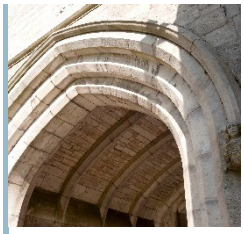
202
New entrants.



94.8%
Retention rate.



73.5%
Achieving a 1H or 2H1 classification.



6,000+
Prospective second-level students engaged through outreach initiatives.

These figures reflect the programme's long-term impact, growing from only **2 Access students in 1998 to 714 students supported today.**



Our Support Framework

A holistic model of support underpins the Access UCC PLUS student experience:



Academic Supports

- Orientation Connection programmes
- Extra academic tuition and grinds
- Laptop loan scheme
- Resource Room and subsidised printing

Personal Supports

- Dedicated Support Officers
- One to one guidance
- Drop in support
- Referrals and well-being support
- Peer connection opportunities

Financial Supports

- Access UCC PLUS bursary
- Support for essential course costs
- Cost of living offsets that reduce pressure on families

Each element works together to reduce barriers and promote student success.

Student Impact Stories

Student impact is most powerfully demonstrated through student voices. The experiences shared by Access UCC PLUS students consistently highlight how financial stability, personalised academic guidance, and sustained personal support work together to enable persistence, confidence, and success in higher education.

Across disciplines and stages of study, students describe the programme as essential to their ability to remain in college and fully engage with university life.

I. Reducing Financial Pressure and Enabling Participation

Financial support remains a critical factor in student retention. The PLUS bursary and associated financial supports alleviate the burden of essential costs such as accommodation, transport, books, equipment, and placement expenses. For many students, this support determines whether continuation in higher education is possible.

> "The financial assistance was the only reason I am able to attend college. Without it, I know I would have dropped out by now—financial support prevents the stress that causes those bad days in the first place."
>
> **Corey - 2nd Year Arts**

Students undertaking unpaid or travel-intensive placements emphasised the importance of the bursary in managing unavoidable costs, allowing them to focus on learning rather than financial survival.

> "During unpaid placements, the bursary helped cover transport and placement expenses and gave me a sense of security when unexpected costs arose."
>
> **Tiegan - 4th Year Early Years & Childhood Studies**

For students facing crisis situations, financial flexibility proved vital in sustaining accommodation and educational continuity during difficult periods.

> "The PLUS programme helped me with different financial supports at a time when I could not have continued without them. It allowed me to stay in accommodation and keep progressing during an incredibly difficult year."
>
> **Lavie - 2nd Year Social Science**

II. Personalised Academic Guidance and Confidence Building

Students repeatedly highlighted the value of one-to-one academic guidance, tutoring, and referrals to learning supports. Support Officers play a central role in helping students manage workload, navigate academic expectations, and reduce anxiety around assessments.

> "The academic guidance made a significant difference to my ability to manage my workload and adjust to university life. I feel more confident and capable in my studies."
>
> **Hellen - 1st Year Social Science**

Timely advice and referrals to services such as the Skills Centre were frequently referenced as both practical and reassuring.

> "I came away from meetings feeling much more relaxed about my assignments. Having someone explain my options clearly made challenging periods manageable."
>
> **Sadhbh - 2nd Year Nursing**

These supports contribute directly to improved engagement, academic performance, and student progression.

III. Belonging, Wellbeing, and Personal Support

Beyond academic and financial assistance, students consistently emphasised the importance of feeling understood, welcomed, and supported as individuals. The availability of approachable staff, peer connection, and a non-judgemental environment reduces feelings of isolation, particularly for first-generation students.

> "For once, I didn't feel like an outsider or an imposter when I asked a question."
>
> **Ger - 2nd Year Arts**

Knowing that support is available—academically, financially, and personally—provides reassurance during high-pressure periods and strengthens students' sense of belonging.

> "It puts me at ease knowing there are friendly faces in the programme who will help me. It made me feel that someone like me deserves to be in university."
>
> **Eto – 1st Year Law**

Community-building events and peer connections further reinforce this sense of inclusion, helping students remain connected throughout their university journey.

Together, these wraparound supports create the conditions in which students from underrepresented backgrounds can not only access higher education—but thrive and complete their studies.



Programme Impact

The Access UCC PLUS model delivers demonstrable impact:

1

Improved Retention and Progression

Consistent mentorship, academic supports, and bursaries directly contribute to strong retention rates and academic success.

2

Enhanced Educational Mobility

Students from DEIS schools and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds gain access to transformative life opportunities.

3

Strengthened Community Partnerships

Through outreach, the programme empowers schools and communities to imagine higher education as a realistic, achievable pathway.

4

Evidence of Sustainable Change

Long-term growth—from 2 students to 714—illustrates the enduring value of early intervention and sustained support.

Strategic Importance & Future Direction

UCC continues to champion equity of access by:

- Enhancing outreach to underserved communities
- Strengthening academic and pastoral support systems
- Growing philanthropic partnerships to sustain bursary provision
- Ensuring data-informed planning to support widening participation
- Continuing to address the cost-of-living challenges impacting Access students

The programme remains central to UCC's mission of creating a more inclusive, equitable higher education landscape.

Cork University Foundation

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