

November, 2025.

Institutional response to the Thematic Review of Doctoral Education – Panel Report.

The Deputy President (DPR), the Vice President for Research and Innovation (VPRI) and the Dean of Doctoral Studies (DDS) welcome the 2025 Thematic Review of Doctoral Learning Experience peer review panel report. They would like to thank the Chair, Professor Rosalind Prichard for guiding the panel through the review, and the panel for their rich and thoughtful engagement. The panel, with the support of the Quality Enhancement Unit and Elena Firnges of the Dean of Doctoral Studies Office, achieved substantial participation from staff and students, and we are grateful for the facilitation of these engagements, but also the willingness of stakeholders to participate in this review. The commendations noted in the report are welcome, and testament to the commitment of staff to developing and improving Doctoral education at UCC.

The recommendations, outlined below, have been discussed at Academic Council, the Academic Council Graduate Studies Committee (ACGSC), the Deans' Strategic Group and at RISI (a University Leadership Team sub-committee). The Deputy President (DPR), the Vice President for Research and Innovation (VPRI) and the Dean of Doctoral Studies (DDS) have responded to the eleven recommendations individually below.

1. The University should establish a Doctoral College.

The DPR, VPRI and DDS support the recommendation to establish a Doctoral College. With a view to achieving this, a staffing and space proposal has been shared with the Academic Leadership Forum, the University Leadership Team, the Deans' Strategic Group and Academic Council Graduate Studies Committee. A provisional structure for the proposed Doctoral College has been developed and will go for university wide consultation in January

2026. To date a new Doctoral College Manager and a full-time executive assistant have been approved, alongside an increase in the Dean of Doctoral Studies role from a part-time to a full-time position. A commitment to fund a training manager in the 2026/2027 academic year has been secured. A provisional launch date for the Doctoral College, subject to recruitment timelines, is currently set for June 2026.

2. All relevant administrative and support structures around doctoral education should be re-examined to optimise efficiency and effectiveness.

The Graduate Studies Office (GSO), (administrative function for admissions and post registration management and support) is the core unit for Doctoral Education at UCC. Many of the functions of the GSO operate outside of the administrative systems currently in place for UG and PG taught programmes. This means that much of the Doctoral processes are manual, using piecemeal systems. This situation resulted from the organic evolution of Doctoral education over several years both in terms of policy complexity, but also in terms of student numbers. As a result, a number of existing processes and aligned systems need review. Considering this, and as recommended by the panel report, we are currently preparing to launch a 'PGR Modules project.' The aim of this project is to better incorporate PGR modules administration into existing University processes and systems to allow a more positive student experience, but also to ensure academic oversight and appropriate record keeping for all PGR modules by ensuring examination boards can be held for all PGR modules. This project is anticipated to commence in November 2025. In addition, the University introduced the Graduate Education Manager (GEM) in September 2024; in November 2025 the GSO team will undertake an annual review of the software, and the related impact on Doctoral Education. It is anticipated that a report of this review will be presented to Academic Board and Academic Council in January 2026.

As part of the Doctoral College proposal, several changes to the governance of Doctoral Education will be rolled out. Firstly, the Dean role will become full time and the Dean will also take over as Chair of the Academic Council Graduate Studies Committee (ACGSC) from November 2025. This committee is the decision-making body for Doctoral Education in UCC, and this change will allow the strategic and operational planning and decision making to be aligned.

Finally, the launch of the Doctoral College will bring together key units of relevance to Doctoral Education, who have in the past not traditionally worked together in a coherent manner. In order to facilitate this, new members will be co-opted onto ACGSC to ensure both the academic and strategic missions of the University can be addressed comprehensively in this committee.

3. There should be a concerted university effort to foster an inclusive, supportive, and reflective culture of supervision within the institution.

The DPR, VPRI and DDS welcome this recommendation and are launching new initiatives to support staff in their supervisory roles. The DDS launched a Staff Supervision Clinic for new and potential supervisors dealing with policy, practice, and pedagogy. These monthly sessions are well attended and receive positive feedback. In addition, the DDS has developed a new micro-credential for supervisors that will be launched in September 2026, subject to the appointment of a training coordinator. This course is for new and existing staff and will focus on the practice of supervision, mentoring and peer engagement. It is hoped, subject to consultation, that this course will become a mandatory undertaking for all new supervisors and serve as a mechanism to support staff and improve student experience. In addition to these offerings, the Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL) offer several relevant modules for new supervisors, and it is hoped that supervision training can become a core element in their well-established Postgraduate Certificate in the Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Other measures (including a shared micro-credential and

in person workshops) are currently being discussed with colleagues in CIRTl with a view to forming a graduate research community of practice.

As recommended in the Panel Report, the Supervision of Research Students Policy will be reviewed, with a specific focus on supervisor responsibilities.

- 4. The University Leadership Team (ULT) should review resources and ensure that sufficient budget is available for the successful development of the Doctoral College.**

Staff and space funding has been secured for the initial phase of the Doctoral College development. This includes a manager/team lead, a full time Executive Assistant for the Dean, and a full time Dean. Some funding has also been secured from UCC philanthropy to furnish the PhD common space (lounge).

In stage two, the focus is on training and mentoring (peer to peer). The next position to be approved is a training/mentoring coordinator (Grade V) to manage the GEM training function, compulsory training for students, and the Micro-credential for staff and mentoring programme for staff and students.

As part of a broader restructuring, it is planned for the Doctoral College to incorporate international and EU students across all processes (admissions – graduation). In order to achieve this, resources will need to be re/allocated to the Doctoral College.

- 5. The University Leadership Team (ULT) should continue to explore ways of increasing student funding and access to infrastructure; it should scrutinise and address inequities of resources that exist across disciplinary areas.**

UCC does not have an institutional scholarship scheme. In UCC, Doctoral scholarships are predominantly provided by Research Ireland, with several other organisations providing awards (e.g. Teagasc, Industry, Horizon Europe, MCDN etc). UCC is the Chair of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) in 2026, and a key agenda item for their tenure is to focus on both improving the existing stipend for Doctoral students but also lobbying for an expansion of Doctoral funding across all disciplines nationally.

6. The Graduate Education Manager system (GEM) requires appropriate administrative and IT support to attain full functionality. This should be provided.

GEM has had a significant transformative impact on the postgraduate research student experience since it launched in September 2024. The platform provides a unified, transparent, and auditable system for managing registration, supervisory teams, milestones, annual progress reviews, research learning plans, and examinations. Key outcomes to date include, improved data quality, process standardisation, enhanced transparency and accountability, and operational insights. Despite the successes several challenges remain. Some of these challenges should be addressed by the provision of additional posts as detailed above. However, to consolidate the benefits of GEM and address outstanding challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

Enhance overall support team efficiency

- Expand GSO staffing to manage Level 1 support, internal system maintenance, and system developments. The Team Lead post already approved should positively impact this.
- Assign additional resource hours for Level 2 support to assist in vendor liaison, ensuring timely resolution of system, integration, and technical issues and work appropriately on system developments.
- Establish a formal point of contact in IT Services, Level 3 support, to streamline escalation and improve issue resolution.

The approval of a GEM Operations Working Group by Academic Board (September 2025), which has representation from all support levels, should help with the evolution of the support model.

Data Integration and Quality Assurance

Explore the feasibility of a return feed from GEM to ITS or other methods of automated reconciliation to reduce manual interventions that are currently required, due to the absence of a two-way integration, which introduces human error and increases data irregularities.

Optimisation and System Refinement

- Engage with the vendor to address functionality improvements, including workflow refinements, interface usability, and reporting capabilities.
- Prioritise development of key features that enhance efficiencies.
- Assign a dedicated resource to maintain, curate, and link PGR modules, workshops, and events to the GEM Skills Analysis and Events sections to utilise the benefits of the system in this area. The appointment in 2026 or a training coordinator/manager will achieve this aim.

7. **The University should establish a dedicated online portal that covers the entire doctoral lifecycle from prospective students to current students and relevant stakeholders.**

Phase one of this portal is currently in construction as part of a new Doctoral College website. The portal will host support materials for current students and current supervisors: it will also feature a 'find my supervisor' function for prospective students linked to the newly launched research portal 'PURE'. This portal will grow to encompass the entire student lifecycle, as well as staff support functions. The website and portal will be launched in June 2026.

- 8. The University Leadership Team (ULT) should review the available physical space across the institution and enact plans to provide doctoral students with access to adequate working and social space. The provision of the doctoral lounge should be supported.**

A proposal for space to house a Doctoral College was submitted to the Space Committee in September 2026. This was favourably received. It is proposed that the Doctoral College be located on the central campus, in the Student Hub building. A space has been identified which contains six separate rooms/offices, along with a social space and reception area. It is hoped this suite of rooms will host the Dean, Graduate Studies Office support staff, International Office support staff, bookable rooms for Doctoral Students and a social 'lounge' space for PGR students. As already mentioned above, it is hoped to launch this space in June 2026.

- 9. Peer support networks need to be improved to enhance the doctoral community, foster research culture and nurture a sense of belonging.**

See reference to the development of the Doctoral College above. In addition to the addition of a role linked to peer-to-peer mentoring, the Dean is seeking funding to develop a mentoring programme for ACCESS students at PGR level. This support will commence pre-application and follow the student through the PGR lifecycle.

- 10. While an increase in doctoral student numbers may be desirable, the University should ensure that sufficient resources and capacity are available to support it.**

PGR supervision at UCC is unequally spread across the disciplines, with significant variations amongst individual staff. An evaluation of the ratio of staff to students for PGR supervision

revealed that on average UCC academic staff supervise 2 PGR students. Approximately 20% of staff do not currently supervise any Doctoral student. From this perspective, and based on international disciplinary norms, there is supervision capacity available at UCC. From consultation with staff, funding limitations and flexibility are the fundamental issues facing staff when attempting to recruit PGR students. In recognition of this, UCC has launched a new programme for individuals seeking to undertake PGR research whilst remaining in full time education (PHD HEP), supports part time PGR enrolment, is actively working to support Distance Learning Doctoral research and lobbied for initiatives such as the disability supplement (Research Ireland) to support PGR students. From a professional services perspective, increase in level ten students must be matched by an increase in staffing for the admissions and post-registration services.

11. Special attention should be devoted to the specific needs of prospective and current international students, especially considering the continuing increase in their numbers. The University should review and address any deficiencies in the support provided to them. This includes timeliness in processing their applications.

International students make up a significant percentage of our Doctoral students. The ongoing issues with visas, including Irish visas are a significant issue for incoming students. The university has recently been awarded the TrustED mark which should improve student experience, but more local measures to support students in the initial visa application process have also been put in place (e.g. ILEP codes to ITS and UCCApply). Further to this, the Deans group of the IUA are active in working with government to improve the process for incoming students. The International Office supports students with visa issues during their registration, and each year, the Dean hosts a session for International Students as part of the new student orientation.

In terms of recruitment, the new Dean of Doctoral Studies website will host vacancies for all PhD posts across the University. This function will go live in June 2026.

Peer to peer mentoring is particularly important for international students, and as mentioned it is hoped subject to staff recruitment that this programme can be rolled out in Semester 1 2026-2027.

Signatures:

Deputy President and Registrar

Date

Prof Stephen Byrne

14th Nov 2025

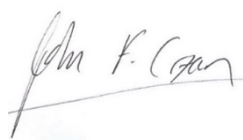


Vice President for Research and Innovation

Date

Prof John Cryan

14th Nov 2025



Dean of Doctoral Studies

Date

Prof Orla Lynch

14th Nov 2025



