



SAGE Cygnet Award Application

Name of Institution	University of the Sunshine Coast
Date of Application	31 October 2025
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Acknowledgement of Country

UniSC acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water, and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. UniSC deeply values and seeks to uplift, empower, and give a voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and perspectives.

Acknowledgement of Country

UniSC is a place where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's perspectives, culture and knowledge is acknowledged, valued, and respected. We share deep pride in, and seek to uplift, empower, and give a voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and perspectives.

If you are an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, we encourage you to join the long tradition of trailblazers at UniSC, impacting our University and our world.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water, and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



Artwork

Knowledge is Sacred
Lyndon Davis





UniSC

Australia

UniSC: SAGE Cygnet 3

Word limit – 2500 words (excluding the institutional context and excluding the action plan)

	✓ Current Cygnet	Barrier • List the Barrier addressed in this Cygnet • List the Barrier for Cygnets already submitted
Institution-wide barrier		Academic Promotion
Institution-wide barrier		Parents & Carers (under review)
Institution-wide barrier	✓	Career Support & Development
Institution-wide barrier		
Sub-group barrier		

A note on data

The University's current data systems categorise gender as 'F', 'M', and 'X'. In instances where data relating to non-binary or gender-diverse individuals has not been captured, either due to system constraints or the absence of respondents identifying as such, the 'X' category has been excluded from analysis. In recognition of gender diversity, this report uses the terms 'women' and 'men' rather than 'female' and 'male' throughout.

Glossary

5R	Leadership development program for people who have established fundamental leadership skills who want to increase their leadership influence, team cohesion and performance. Program focuses on: Readyng – Why does ‘we’ matter? Reflecting – Who are we? Representing – What are we about and what do we want to be? Realising – How do we become what we want to be? Reinforcing – How can we be better?
AS	Athena Swan
ASIC	Athena Swan Implementation Committee
AS Survey	UniSC Athena Swan staff opinion survey 2018
AS Consultations	UniSC Athena Swan staff consultations held 2022 and 2025
Aurora Program	Aurora is run by Advance HE and aims to inspire women to achieve their leadership career goals in higher education. An early to mid-career leadership ignition journey for women academics (B and C) and professional staff (HEW7 and 8) who are new to leading.
Culture Amp	A cloud based employee feedback and analytics system.
DEI Survey	UniSC Diversity, Equity Inclusion Survey 2025
DiSC Profile assessment	A behavioural tool that identifies a person's four main behavioural traits: Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Conscientiousness.
DVC (A)	Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)
DVC (R&I)	Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research & Innovation)
Engaging Leader Program	Designed for frontline leaders at UniSC, the program focuses on developing foundational knowledge and skills that will enable them to navigate the challenges and opportunities of leadership and create an engaging employee experience
Essence of Research Leadership	Designed specifically for early and mid-career researchers, this program focusses on developing the influence of research leaders at the individual, team, discipline and university level.
HEW	Higher Education Worker, a classification system for professional university staff
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer
MyUniSC	UniSC staff intranet
PageUp	A cloud-based platform that offers recruitment marketing, Applicant Tracking System (ATS), onboarding, analytics, learning and succession solutions.
PDC	Performance and Development Cycle
PDP	Professional Development Program. Enables UniSC staff to pursue a significant project not otherwise available, either by immersing at another university or organisation in Australia or overseas. Participants are released from regular duties, continue to receive their UniSC salary, may access funding for travel, accommodation and eligible caring costs,
P&C	People & Culture
PPR	Performance Planning and Review (former system)
SAGE	Science in Australia Gender Equality
UniSC	University of the Sunshine Coast
VCP	Vice-Chancellor and President
WATTLE	(Women ATTaining LEadership) Program is an intensive leadership development initiative designed to empower women in the university sector to attain senior leadership roles
WG	Working Group

1. KEY BARRIER

At the time of UniSC's Athena Swan Bronze Award, career development across the University was fragmented and inconsistently supported. Opportunities for staff to plan, discuss, and progress their careers were highly variable across Schools and functions, often depending on individual supervisors, and informal practices rather than a coordinated institutional framework. This created inequities in access to professional development, mentoring, and leadership opportunities, disproportionately affecting women. The following sub-barriers were identified:

1.1 Limited visibility and alignment of career development in performance planning system

Career planning discussions were inconsistent and often dependent on individual supervisors rather than guided by a structured, University-wide process. The former Performance Planning and Review (PPR) system lacked clear links between individual goals, development pathways, and organisational priorities. As a result, staff experiences varied considerably, and many reported limited opportunities for constructive feedback and long-term career planning.

1.2 Inequitable access to relevant training and development

Staff reported limited awareness of available training opportunities, and offerings were not consistently aligned with identified needs or career stages. There were few mechanisms for staff input or co-design, resulting in low engagement and variable uptake across employment groups.

1.3 Exclusionary structures in the Professional Development Program (PDP)

While the PDP was designed to support professional growth, the eligibility criteria, particularly the requirement for extended periods away from UniSC campuses created unintended barriers for staff with caring responsibilities, disabilities, or other personal circumstances that constrained travel. This limited equitable access.

1.4 Inconsistent access to mentoring

Mentoring opportunities were fragmented, largely ad hoc, operating within individual work areas, or reliant on local champions. Staff, particularly early- and mid-career academics and professional staff, reported limited access to visible, structured, or institutionally supported mentoring. Without coordinated oversight, inequities persisted in who received guidance, networking, and feedback critical to career progression.

2. EVIDENCE OF BARRIER



Evidence draws on the 2018 Athena Swan Staff Survey (AS Survey 2018), and institutional workforce analysis conducted during UniSC's Bronze Award period. The AS survey 2018, with a 28% response rate, had balanced participation across professional (49.6%) and academic (50.4%) staff. Of respondents, 73% identified as women (compared with 63% of staff overall), 23% as men, and 4% preferred not to disclose their gender. The survey was actively promoted across the University through digital and print channels (Figure 1). Findings confirmed systemic gaps in career support and development across the University.

Figure 1. AS Survey Promotional Poster

2.1 Limited visibility and alignment of career development in performance planning system

During the Bronze Award application period, UniSC's former Performance Planning and Review (PPR) system was widely perceived as transactional rather than developmental. The AS Survey 2018 revealed low satisfaction with the process, particularly among academic staff. Only 52% of women and 36% of men academics agreed that their PPR included meaningful discussion of career development. Feedback highlighted the lack of a clear, structured process to align individual goals with development pathways, resulting in variable staff experiences.

Staff reflections from the AS Survey (2018) on how we could improve the process illustrate these issues (Figure 2). The comments highlighted the PPR process that did not effectively foster career growth, professional development, or long-term planning. Feedback underscored the need for a structured, equitable, and future-focused approach to performance and development, that enables meaningful goal setting, periodic reviews, and alignment with capability frameworks and career pathways.



Figure 2. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) highlighting how PPR could be improved

2.2 Inequitable access to relevant training and development

During the Bronze Award reference period (2015–2017), participation in centrally delivered training led by People & Culture (P&C) was low across the University, particularly among academic staff. Only 9% of academic women and 4% of academic men engaged in centrally offered training. In contrast, 29% of professional women and 9% of professional men participated, indicating both gendered and role-based disparities in participation (Table 1).

Only 30% of AS Survey 2018 respondents agreed that training opportunities met their needs, with many describing the training as not relevant or poorly targeted. Staff also noted the absence of a consistent mechanism to identify and address capability needs across the University. Participation in professional development depended heavily on local supervisors, available funding, and awareness of opportunities, factors that contributed to inequitable and inconsistent access.

Table 1. Staff training coordinated by P&C, attendances 2015-2017

2015-2017	Women		Men	
	Academic	Professional	Academic	Professional
% All staff undertaking training	9%	29%	4%	9%
Attendance numbers	480	1709	254	516

2.3 Exclusionary structures in the Professional Development Program (PDP)

During the Bronze Award reference period (2015–2017), four women (36%) and seven men (64%) participated in the PDP. Indicating uneven participation patterns across gender. Feedback from the AS Survey 2018 identified the PDP as a major source of inequity. Eligibility criteria requiring extended periods away from UniSC created significant barriers for staff with young children, caring responsibilities, or disabilities. Participants described the process as opaque and exclusionary (Figure 3).

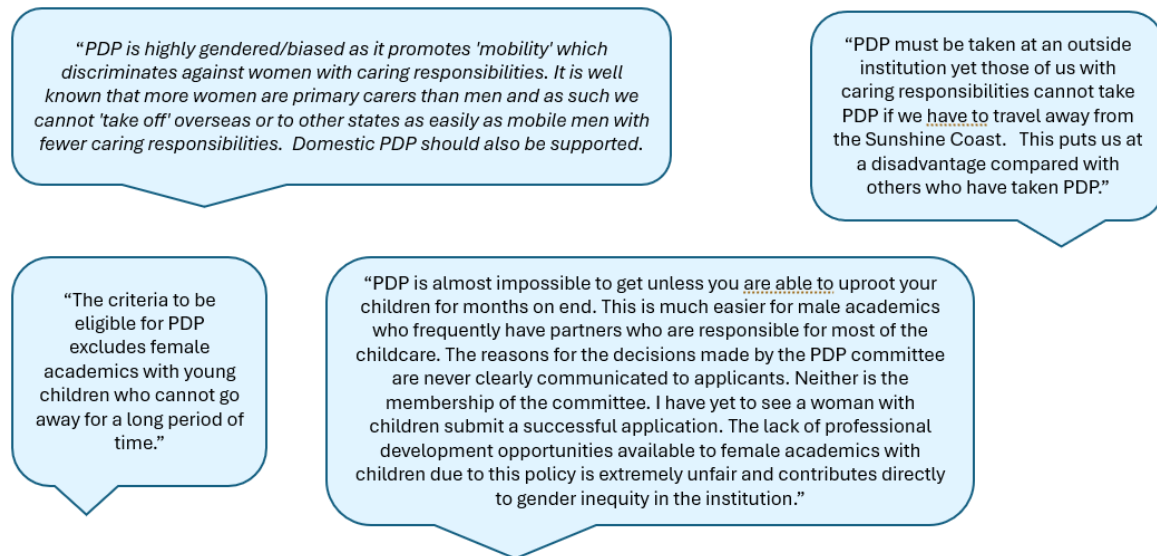


Figure 3. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) highlighting inequity of the Professional Development Program

These findings highlighted that PDP design unintentionally privileged staff with fewer caring responsibilities, reinforcing gendered patterns in access to career-advancing opportunities (Figure 3).

2.4 Inconsistent access to mentoring

Mentoring opportunities were fragmented and largely dependent on local champions. While some work areas offered informal arrangements, others provided none. The AS Survey 2018 confirmed widespread calls for improved mentoring, particularly among early-career academics and professional staff. Figure 4 illustrates that mentoring was neither consistently available nor institutionally supported, limiting equitable access to developmental guidance and professional networks.

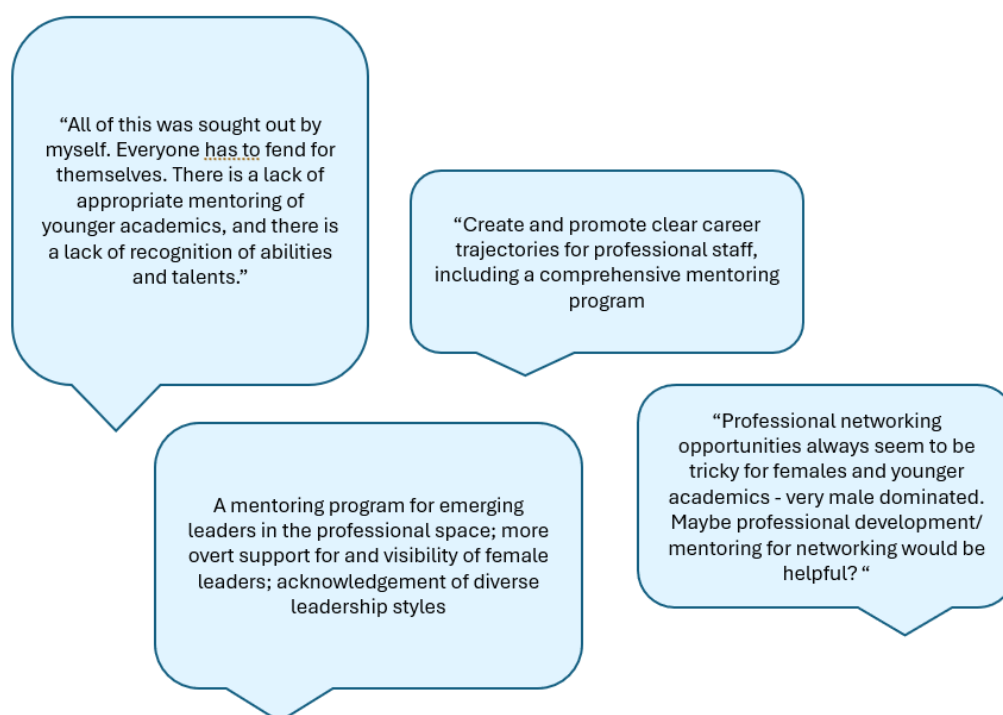


Figure 4. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) regarding access to career development activities such as mentoring

Findings from the 2022 Athena Swan (AS) staff consultations reinforced the findings from the 2018 AS Staff Survey, which identified limited alignment between performance planning and career progression, low participation in professional development (including barriers to accessing the PDP), and inconsistent mentoring opportunities. The 2022 consultation sessions were conducted online via Zoom to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for staff across all campuses. In total, 56 staff participated, with engagement strongly weighted towards women (50 women (89%); 6 men (11%).

The 2022 AS consultations confirmed that barriers persisted and provided further evidence that reform was necessary. Staff emphasised the need for a structured, competency-based performance framework, equitable and flexible access to professional development, consistent mentoring opportunities, and stronger supervisor capability. Feedback also highlighted the importance of clearer career pathways for professional staff, improved feedback mechanisms within performance discussions, and greater institutional visibility of learning and development opportunities.

3. PROGRESS (ACTIONS AND OUTPUTS)

Since 2022, UniSC has implemented reforms to build an equitable, institution-wide framework for career development. Actions addressed policy, culture, systems, and capability, and were underpinned by co-design with staff, alignment to strategic priorities, and an intersectional consideration of gender, caring, and disability factors (see Table 4).

The establishment of the Culture & Capability Team in 2022, provided centralised leadership for career development, offering strategic advice and delivering targeted initiatives to strengthen organisational culture, enhance individual and team performance, and build leadership capability. The team also leads University-wide learning and development planning, employee engagement initiatives, and organisational change management, ensuring that capability building is embedded across all areas of UniSC.

3.1 Limited visibility and alignment of career development in performance planning

The former Performance Planning and Review (PPR) system, widely perceived as transactional, was replaced following an extensive co-design process. Over 200 staff contributed through workshops, pilots, and feedback sessions.

The resulting Performance and Development Cycle (PDC) was launched in November 2023 and integrated into PageUp in 2024. The new framework introduced and embedded structured annual career discussions and transparent tracking of goals, training needs, and feedback, enabling institutional visibility of development patterns for the first time.

The resulting PDC model ensures that staff can now identify and record their training and development needs within a formalised system, with information visible beyond line managers and schools, supporting consistent and strategic workforce capability planning across the University (Figure 5).

Supervisors receive targeted training to ensure consistency, equity, and developmental focus in PDC conversations. By 2025, 239 leaders had completed workshops on feedback and equitable performance discussions, laying the foundation for sustainable cultural change.

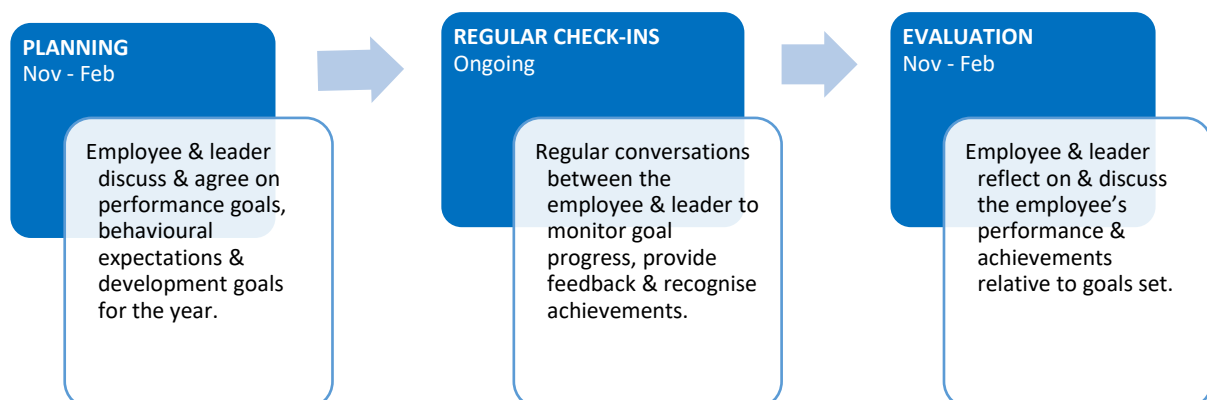


Figure 5. UniSC's Performance and Development Cycle (launched 2023)

3.2 Inequitable access to relevant training and development

The AS Survey 2018 and 2022 AS consultations both identified inequities in access to professional development opportunities and limited awareness of existing programs. Staff requested greater access to and visibility of learning options. Integration through the PageUp learning system has improved transparency and professional development participation. Between 2024 and 2025, 1,579 staff completed a PDC response, with 99% identifying at least one skill or knowledge area for development and corresponding activity. The most frequently nominated areas included mental health and wellbeing, inclusive leadership, and cross-cultural capability.

Leadership development offerings were expanded to create a multi-level pipeline. Engaging Leader, 5R, and Essence of Research Leadership collectively supporting over 170 participants, with a further 48 in progress. These programs aim to strengthen the leadership pipeline, support emerging leaders, and promote inclusive leadership practices across disciplines and campuses (Table 2). See section 4.2 Improved access to training and development, for insight into training availability and uptake.

Table 2. Summary of Leadership Development Offerings introduced 2023-2025

Level	Leadership role/s	Executive Coaching	WATTLE Program	5R Program	Engaging Leader Program	Research Leaders	Aurora Program	Leadership Forum	eLearning	LinkedIn Learning
1	Executive Leads Organisation	As needed						Bi-annual Leadership Forum	Variety of foundational courses	Curated learning pathways
2	Senior Management Leads Organisation									
3	Management Leads Leaders		WATTLE Program	5R						
4	Leader Leads others				The Engaging Leader					
NA	Early to mid-career					Essence of Research Leadership	Aurora Program			

3.3 Exclusionary structures in the Professional Development Program (PDP)

Both the AS Survey 2018 and AS 2022 consultations identified the PDP as a key area of inequity, with travel and time-away requirements limiting participation, particularly for staff with caring responsibilities or living with disability. Staff called for local or hybrid options and explicit recognition of caring costs. Informed by this feedback, UniSC undertook a comprehensive PDP redesign between 2022 and 2025. Key changes included removing mandatory travel, introducing local and hybrid participation, expanding eligibility to include dependent adults, and permitting caregiving expenses. The introduction of team applications further diversified participation.

Table 3. A chronological summary of changes PDP outlining the breadth of reform (2018-2025)

2018	Funding structure changed to maximum funding 10K for travel expenses and living supplement.
2019	Spouse and dependent children removed due to Fringe Benefit Tax costs.
2020 & 2021	PDP paused due to COVID.
2022	Costs of child minding can be included in the living supplement. Maximum funding increased from \$10K to \$12K. Requirement to return to work after PDP for a specified period changed from the length of the PDP to 1 year from return.
2023	Spouse and dependent children re-introduced in 2023. Removed the lump sum living supplement paid through payroll due to new tax implications. All expenses must go through travel requisition & reimbursement. Ability to claim for childcare expenses remains.
2024	Dependent was expanded to include dependent adults requiring care. Local PDP was introduced, removing the requirement to travel (childcare expenses not claimable for local PDP). Introduction of team applications.
2025	Timing of PDP changed from an end of year process to applications occurring in the first half of the year with programs to occur in the following financial year.

Updates from 2022, significantly broadened participation and embedded flexibility and inclusion within the PDP framework, ensuring career development opportunities are accessible to all staff regardless of gender, caring responsibilities, or personal circumstances.

3.4 Inconsistent access to mentoring

The AS Survey 2018 and AS consultations 2022 revealed that mentoring across UniSC was fragmented, and inconsistently available to professional staff and early-career academics. Participants called for a coordinated, University-wide program with visible access and recognition for mentors and mentees.

In response, UniSC implemented the ‘Unlocking Your Potential Mentoring Program’ in 2023, providing consistent, structured access to mentoring for academic and professional staff. The six-month program (May–November) begins with separate mentor and mentee orientation sessions, followed by a shared networking lunch. All participants complete a DiSC (Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Conscientiousness) Profile assessment and workshop, providing insights into personal behavioural preferences and how these influence communication, influence, and goal achievement. Midway through the program, mentees attend a Future Planning workshop to consolidate and apply their learnings. The program concludes with a final reflection from both mentors and mentees and a networking event where participants share key insights and outcomes from the mentoring partnership (Figure 6).

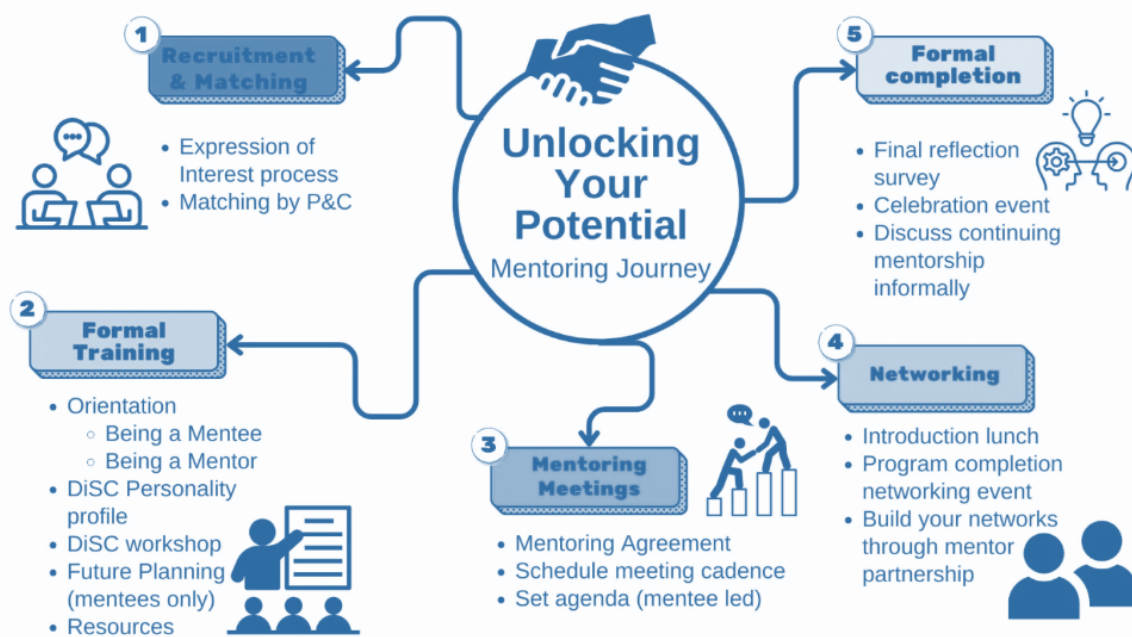


Figure 6. UniSC's 'Unlocking Your Potential Program' Mentoring Journey

UniSC has also strengthened mentoring through the expansion of the Early and Mid-Career Academic (EMCA) Network, established in 2018 to provide structured peer support for early-career researchers. Since 2022, EMCA has broadened its scope to include mid-career academics and expanded its activities to deliver cross-disciplinary professional development sessions in collaboration with the Office of Research, Library and invited experts. The EMCA also facilitates weekly 'Shut Up and Write' sessions that provide structured time for focused writing and peer connection and offers mentoring through both individual and peer to peer formats. EMCA maintains regular communication via the University intranet (MyUniSC) to promote development opportunities and events, and is supported by School and Institute representatives who drive local engagement and visibility across the University.

Table 4. Summary of actions to support career development at UniSC (2018–2025)

Year	Action	Identified at Bronze or post-Bronze	Sub-barriers	Objectives	Activities/Outputs	Responsibility
2018	Formed in 2018 as the Early Career (ECR) Network, in 2022 the network became the UniSC Early and Mid-Career Academic (EMCA) Network.	Identified at Bronze	1.4 Inconsistent access to mentoring	Support staff as they navigate their journey into academia.	Professional Development Offerings Networking with other EMCAs at UniSC Initiatives to increase EMCA Productivity Mentorship Opportunities Grants and Funding workshops	Run by EMCAs for EMCAs, with the support of the DVC(R&I) and the DVC-A
2022	Establishment of Culture & Capability Team	Identified after Bronze – following internal review	All	Provide a coordinated, University-wide approach to capability building and career development Stronger organisational culture and leadership pipeline aligned with UniSC's strategy	Creation of team, annual Culture & Capability Plan, professional development calendar	P&C
2023	Launch of Performance & Development Cycle (PDC)	Identified after Bronze – following establishment Culture & Capability team	1.1 Limited visibility and alignment of career development in performance planning system	Embed structured, meaningful career development conversations. Competencies framework developed and embedded. Competencies required at each level, linked to professional development opportunities	Co-designed PDC and PageUp system, staff and leader training	Culture & Capability Team

Year	Action	Identified at Bronze or post-Bronze	Sub-barriers	Objectives	Activities/Outputs	Responsibility
2023	Providing training and support for leaders and managers	Identified after Bronze following establishment Culture & Capability team	1.1 Limited visibility and alignment of career development in performance planning system	To equip managers with the knowledge, skills and tools to effectively support staff through the PDC, enabling consistent, equitable and meaningful career development conversations.	Staff and leader training 239 supervisors trained	Culture & Capability P&C
2023	Training opportunities, incorporated into the Performance development cycle	Identified after Bronze following establishment Culture & Capability team	1.2 Inequitable access to relevant training and development	To ensure all staff have structured access to professional development that supports career growth and skill development.	PageUp system	Culture & Capability P&C
2024-2025	Leadership Development Programs (Engaging Leader, 5R, Essence of Research Leadership)	Identified after Bronze following establishment Culture & Capability team	1.2 Inequitable access to relevant training and development	Strengthen leadership pipeline and inclusivity	Multi-level programs 176 completions, ongoing evaluation	Culture & Capability P&C
2023-2025	Redesign the PDP to remove exclusionary barriers and enhance equitable access for all staff	Identified at Bronze	1.3 Exclusionary structures in the Professional Development Program (PDP)	To ensure the PDP is accessible and inclusive for all staff by removing exclusionary barriers.	Removed exclusionary barriers related to travel, relocation, and caregiving responsibilities, and by providing flexible participation options.	Executive
2023-2025	Launch University-wide mentoring program	Identified at Bronze	1.4 Inconsistent access to mentoring	To provide consistent, visible, and equitable access to mentoring for all staff	Unlocking Your Potential mentoring program , 116 staff participated to date	Culture & Capability P&C

4. OUTCOMES

Across the reforms, UniSC applied a co-design and intersectional approach, recognising that gender, caring responsibilities, cultural identity, and disability intersect to shape access to career development and progression. Staff were directly engaged in the design, testing, and refinement of initiatives through workshops, focus groups, pilots, and feedback surveys ensuring that reforms were grounded in lived experience and responsive to the needs of diverse staff cohorts. This approach fostered shared ownership and accountability across the University and ensured that new systems are not only equitable in design but sustainable in practice.

Policy redesign and program delivery explicitly considered equity and inclusion principles, ensuring flexibility in PDP participation (including local, hybrid, and team-based options), together with embedding inclusive leadership and cross-cultural capability into training content. Collectively, these measures have created transparency, accountability, and equity in career development at UniSC.

4.1 Career development visibility and alignment

The implementation of the Performance and Development Cycle (PDC) has reshaped UniSC's approach to performance and career planning, embedding structured annual discussions, goal setting, and tracking of development needs through the PageUp system.

The co-design process engaged over 200 staff through workshops, pilots, and focus groups, ensuring the model reflected the needs of both academic and professional staff (Figure 7).

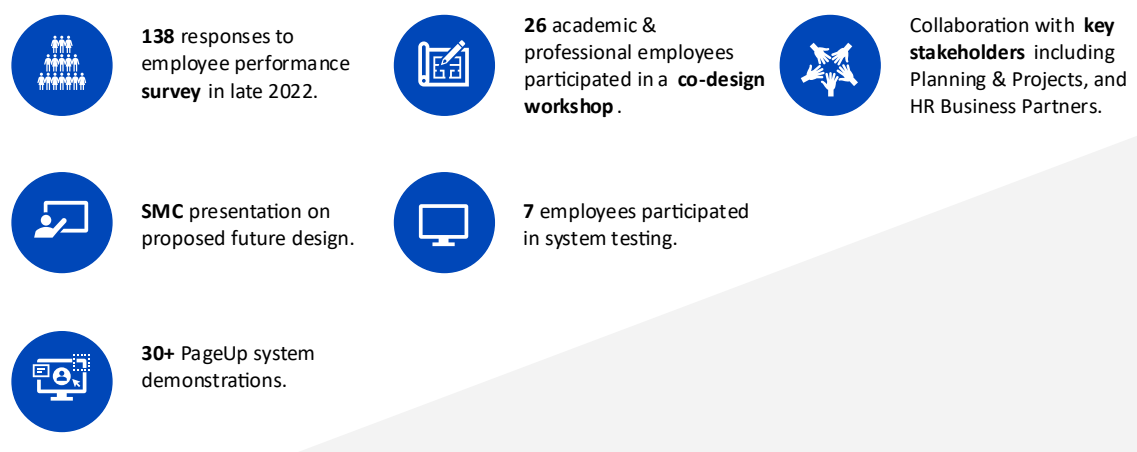


Figure 7. UniSC's Co-design of the new Performance and Development Cycle

Early evidence from the April 2024 Employee Engagement Survey indicates strengths in role clarity and supervisory feedback. Among women, 83% of academic staff and 86% of professional staff report they know what they need to do to be successful; 68% and 70% respectively report receiving useful feedback from their supervisor. Professional staff report higher overall satisfaction (Table 5).

UniSC's 2024 results are now broadly comparable with sector benchmarks compared to the Asia Pacific Higher Education (APAC) benchmark (Table 5), performing well on role clarity (84% vs 85%) and supervisor feedback (70% vs 72%) respectively. Remaining gaps include access to learning and development (58% vs 64%) and perceptions of career progression opportunities (40% vs 48%) and fairness, particularly among academic women (54% women vs 62% men). Professional staff reported higher overall satisfaction.

Table 5. 2024 Employee Engagement Survey, results percent favourable

Item	APAC	UniSC	Academic		Professional	
			W	M	W	M
I know what I need to do to be successful in my role.	85%	84%	83%	78%	86%	82%
My direct supervisor (or my performance and development leader) gives me useful feedback on how well I am performing.	72%	70%	68%	70%	70%	71%
My job performance is evaluated fairly.	63%	62%	54%	62%	64%	67%
I have access to the learning and development I need to do my job well.	64%	58%	62%	56%	57%	56%
I believe there are good career opportunities for me at UniSC.	48%	40%	38%	48%	38%	39%
UniSC is a great organisation for me to make a contribution to my development.	NA	52%	50%	53%	52%	53%

Employees are invited to respond to an anonymous feedback survey following completion of each step of the PDC process (Figure 8). Although the response rates to these surveys were low, feedback indicates opportunity for improvement still exists, including simplifying the complexity of employee Performance and Development Plans and further investment in leader capability to support meaningful, equitable performance and development conversations. Both areas are being addressed in the 2026 PDC cycle, plans will be simplified, and team-level results of the 2026 engagement survey will enable identification of leaders who require additional capability development (Further Action 1).

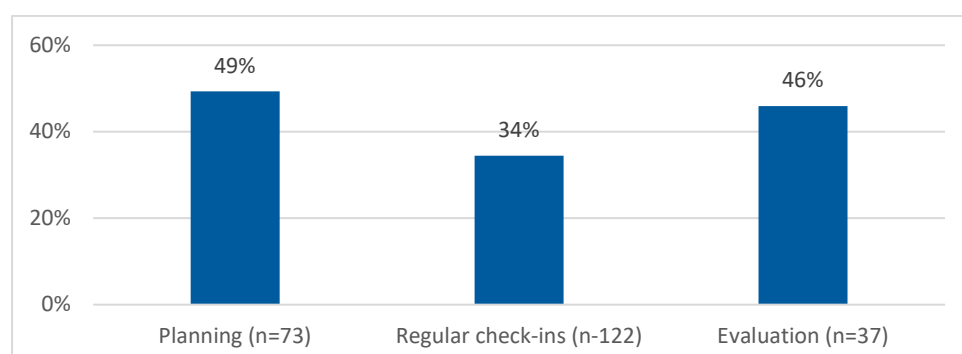


Figure 8. Percentage of respondents satisfied with each PDC stage

Overall, these findings highlight gaps continue in access to learning and development, career progression visibility, and perceptions of fairness, especially for academic women. With 52% of all staff agreeing that UniSC is a great organisation for their development, there is scope to continue to strengthen development pathways and visibility.

Staff feedback described performance conversations as more meaningful and forward-looking, noting improved role clarity and opportunities for career discussion. Leadership capability training for 239 supervisors strengthened both the quality and consistency of PDC conversations, with participants reporting increased confidence in supporting staff growth and clearer understanding of equity and capability expectations.

4.2 Improved access to training and development

Integration of training and learning data through PageUp has enabled UniSC to systematically monitor participation, identify capability trends, and design more responsive professional development programs. Between 2024 and 2025, 1,579 staff completed a Performance and Development Cycle (PDC) response, with 99% identifying at least one skill or knowledge area for development. The most frequently requested training areas included mental health and wellbeing, inclusive leadership, and cross-cultural capability, reflecting both organisational priorities and staff interest in building inclusive workplace practices.

Participation in centrally delivered professional development has increased markedly compared to the Bronze reference period. During 2015–2017, only 9% of academic women and 4% of academic men engaged in P&C-delivered training. By 2024–2025, this had risen to 24% of women and 13% of men, with engagement split almost evenly between academic (44%) and professional (56%) staff. During 2024 and 2025, 49 centrally organised in-person or online, training courses were made available to staff. The most attended programs included LGBTQ+ Awareness, Unconscious Bias, Performance Coaching and Feedback, Leading Change, and Cross-Cultural Awareness, demonstrating clear alignment with UniSC’s Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) priorities.

The co-created PDC system now enables staff to directly identify and record their learning needs, providing a data-informed foundation for training design. This visibility allows UniSC to respond quickly to emerging themes. For example, requests for mental health and wellbeing programs led to the rollout of Mental Health First Aid training in 2025 and ongoing collaboration with Student Wellbeing to deliver campus-wide workshops.

The Women ATTaining Leadership Program (WATTLE) continues to play an important role in supporting women’s leadership development at UniSC. WATTLE provides structured leadership training, peer learning, and networking opportunities designed to strengthen participants’ confidence, visibility, and readiness for senior leadership roles. Between 2021 and 2025, 11 UniSC academic staff participated in the program. Of these, nine were eligible for promotion (Levels B–D) and two were already at Level E. Two participants applied for promotion following their WATTLE participation, with one successful promotion outcome recorded to date. A further two former participants have applied for promotion in the 2025 round.

The 2022 AS consultations identified a gap in leadership pathways for mid-career and aspiring leaders, noting that existing opportunities such as WATTLE, primarily serves senior women. In response, UniSC committed to broaden access by sponsoring staff into the external Aurora Leadership program designed for mid-career women. While the 2025 intake was deferred by the

external Auroa provider due to lack of interest in the sector, UniSC has retained two places and will send its first cohort in 2026, should the program go ahead (Further Action 3).

UniSC's also subsequently expanded leadership programs between 2023 and 2025, including the introduction of Engaging Leader, 5R, and Essence of Research Leadership programs (Table 6).

Table 6. Participation in UniSC Leadership Development Programs (2024-2025)

Program	Eligible	Completed	% women (of completed)
Engaging Leader Program	311	77 (54 women)	70%
5R	448	70 (51 women)	73%
Essence of Research Leadership	180	28 (19 women)	68%
TOTAL	NA	175 (124 women)	71%

NA* Data not available as counts cannot be aggregated — ERL participant eligibility overlaps with the ELP and 5R programs, so totals are not unique.

Together, these initiatives have extended the leadership pipeline beyond the senior cohort, creating more inclusive, multi-level opportunities for both academic and professional staff.

4.3 Equitable access to the Professional Development Program (PDP)

The PDP redesign (2022–2025) has significantly improved accessibility and equity. Key reforms included the removal of mandatory travel, the introduction of local and hybrid participation options, the expansion of eligibility to include dependent adults requiring care, and the inclusion of caregiving expenses. The addition of team-based applications further diversified participation and encouraged collaborative approaches to professional learning.

To strengthen implementation, managers received training to better support staff career development needs, including a focus on gender equity when promoting PDP and other career development opportunities.

From the Bronze Award reference period (2015–2017), PDP participation was 11 staff: four women (36%) and seven men (64%). Following the 2018–2025 reforms, participation shifted markedly towards women, 14 women and four men (78% women; see Table 7). Participants represented a mix of academic (Levels B–D) and professional staff (Levels 7–8), drawn primarily from Health (36%), Education and Tertiary Access (21%), and Business and Creative Industries (21%), with additional participants from Law and Society (14%) and Science, Technology and Engineering (14%). Only 2 of the 18 participants (11%) reported having dependent children, reinforcing the need to monitor whether post-2022 accessibility changes are translating into equitable uptake and outcomes for staff with caring responsibilities (Further Action 6).

Table 7. Participation in UniSC Professional Development Program (2018-2025)

	Women		Men		Total
Academic	11	79%	3	21%	14
2018	2	100%	0	0%	2
2019	2	100%	0	0%	2
2022	2	100%	0	0%	2
2023	1	33%	2	67%	3
2024	2	100%	0	0%	2
2025	2	67%	1	33%	3
Professional	3	75%	1	25%	4
2018	1	100%	0	0%	1
2019	1	100%	0	0%	1
2022	1	100%	0	0%	1
2025	0	0%	1	100%	1
Total (2018-2025)	14	78%	4	22%	18

These reforms have reduced structural inequities and positioned the PDP as an inclusive professional development mechanism aligned with UniSC's equity, diversity, and inclusion goals. Ongoing monitoring will assess participation by gender, employment type, and caring status to ensure equitable access remains embedded (Further Action 6)

4.4 Strengthened mentoring

Mentoring is now an established and visible component of UniSC's career development ecosystem, shifting from informal and ad hoc arrangements to institutionally supported, strategically coordinated programs.

The Unlocking Your Potential mentoring program, introduced in 2023, has delivered structured and equitable access to career development for both academic and professional staff. Between 2023 and 2025, 116 staff participated, with women comprising 82% of all participants and 91% of mentees, demonstrating strong engagement from women in development conversations. Among academic staff (n = 56), 77% were women, with women more frequently participating as mentees (84%) than mentors (67%). (Table 8) The fact that more women participated as mentees than as mentors suggests a gendered asymmetry in seniority and/or access to leadership roles.

Table 8. Participation in UniSC Unlocking Your Potential mentoring program (2023-2025)

	Total	Women	W%	Men	M %
Academic Staff Participants	56	43	77%	13	23%
Mentees	32	27	84%	5	16%
Mentors	24	16	67%	8	33%
Professional Staff Participants	60	52	87%	8	13%
Mentees	44	42	95%	2	5%
Mentors	16	10	63%	6	38%
Total Participants	116	95	82%	21	18%
Total Mentees	76	69	91%	7	9%
Total Mentors	40	26	65%	14	35%

Increasing the participation of men as both mentors and mentees is now a priority, to promote balanced engagement and shared responsibility for equity and professional development across genders (Further Action 5).

UniSC's mentoring model is further strengthened through the Early and Mid-Career Academic (EMCA) Network, which now has over 200 members ranging from PhD candidates to mid-career academics, research leaders, and interested support staff, with representation across almost all Schools and Institutes. The network provides cross-disciplinary peer connection, structured professional development sessions, mentoring opportunities, and regular forums to share practice and explore new ideas.

5. IMPACT

Career development is now embedded in UniSC's formal performance and development systems, with clearer accountability for leaders and improved visibility of participation in training, mentoring, and leadership programs. Collectively, these reforms have shifted career development from a fragmented, locally driven process to one that is consistently tracked, supported, and strategically aligned across the University. Feedback from AS consultation forums, 2024 Employee Engagement Survey, Unlocking Your Potential program survey demonstrate his shift.

Table 9: Disaggregated Headcount Data by Method and Sub-group

Method	Total n=	Women	Men	Non-binary or not disclosed	Academic Staff	Professional Staff
AS Consultations (2025)	51	100%	0%	0	16	35
AS Consultations (2022)	56	89%	11%	0	43	13
April 2024 Employee Engagement Survey	1186	70%	29%	1%	466	720
Unlocking Your Potential program 2024 cohort feedback	26	77%	23%	0	12	14

The AS Consultations (2025) were conducted through two online sessions, engaging 51 staff members (16 academic and 35 professional). Eleven Athena Swan Committee and Cygnet Work Group members supported and facilitated the process. All contributing participants (excluding facilitators) were women, demonstrating strong engagement from women across UniSC and indicating an ongoing need to encourage broader participation from men in gender-equity initiatives. Feedback was gathered through facilitated discussion and Padlet inputs, and thematically analysed across the key domains of career development, professional development access, leadership opportunities, supervisor capability, and promotion pathways.

Staff consistently described a notable cultural shift in how career development is approached, highlighting improved confidence in career planning and greater access to structured development opportunities, particularly since the introduction of the new Performance and Development Cycle (PDC).

“Career development now feels like a shared responsibility, not something left to chance”
(AS Consultation 2025_woman).

5.1 Increased visibility and alignment of career development in performance planning system

While the specific item “In my last Performance Planning Review (PPR), opportunities for career progression were usefully discussed” (AS Survey, 2018) was not included in the April 2024 Employee Engagement Survey, two related items “I believe there are good career opportunities for me at UniSC” and “UniSC is a great organisation for me to make a contribution to my development” indicated that, at that time, further work was required to strengthen career development support (Table 5).

“There are zero career progression prospects within my department, will either have to change areas or leave the university to progress career.”

(2024 Engagement Survey verbatim comment against item ‘I believe there are good career opportunities for me at UniSC’)

“The professional development I've achieved while at UniSC has been well beyond my expectations.”

(2024 Engagement Survey verbatim comment against item ‘UniSC motivates me to go beyond what I would in a similar role elsewhere’)

Since the 2024 engagement survey was undertaken, there has been a significant increase in the provision of leadership development and professional development activities to UniSC employees. Coupled with the increased support for leaders to undertake Performance and Development related training (Further Action 1), it is anticipated that we will see a positive shift in employee career development sentiment in the 2026 engagement survey results.

Participants in the 2025 AS Consultations, acknowledged improvements in the visibility and structure of career development processes, particularly following the introduction of the PDC. Staff expressed that career planning conversations now occur more regularly and with clearer guidance. However, gaps remain, especially for professional staff, who sought stronger recognition and more structured progression and development options (Figure 9). A Recognition and Reward Plan is currently being considered by the University Executive, with a number of initiatives planned to be introduced in 2026, such as peer-based shout outs via the Culture Amp platform. Workforce Planning is a strategic priority of UniSC (goal 2.1 of current Strategic Plan), with a number of work area’s participating in a 2025 pilot program. This significant workforce development initiative will result in more structured career and development pathways for staff. (Further Action, 7)

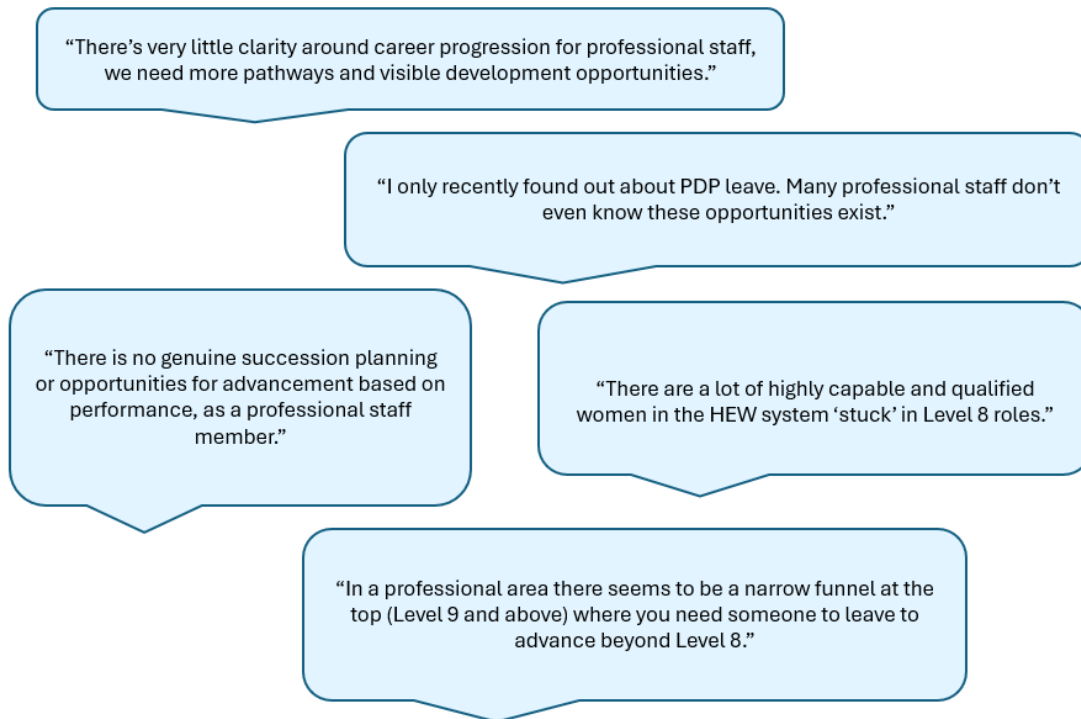


Figure 9. Selected feedback from the AS consultations (2022) regarding career planning and development

Feedback showcased in Figure 8 highlights persistent ambiguity and limited mobility pathways for professional staff. Respondents described unclear progression structures, limited visibility of development opportunities, and a lack of formal succession planning. The “funnel” at higher HEW levels and the perception that advancement relies on staff turnover demonstrate structural constraints. These comments collectively underscore that, while performance and development systems have improved, professional staff still perceive career progression as opaque and opportunity-limited, especially for women concentrated at HEW 8.

5.2 Improved Access to Training, Development and Leadership Pathways

Feedback from the 2025 AS consultations reported greater visibility of learning systems and professional development options now surfaced through the Page Up system, along with improved transparency in identifying available learning opportunities. However, staff emphasised the continued need for flexibility, financial support, and workload relief to enable participation. support, and workload relief to enable participation.

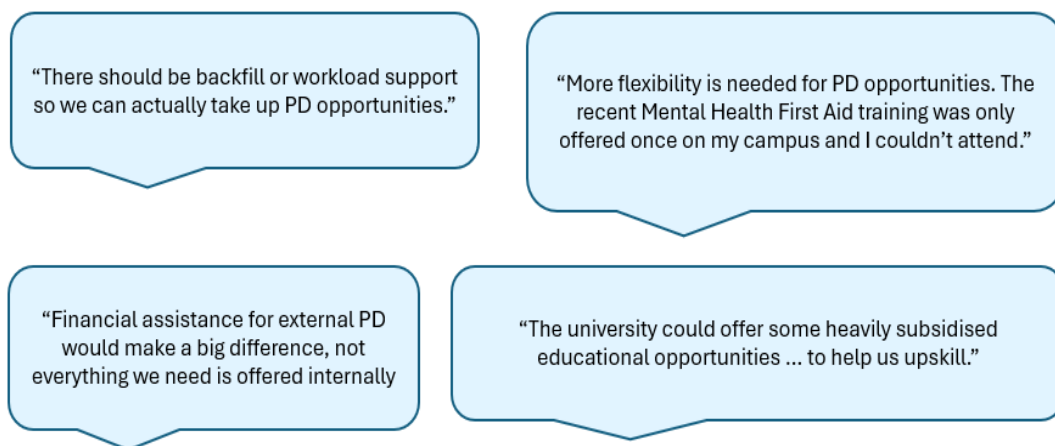


Figure 10. Selected feedback from the AS consultations (2025) regarding how career development and support could be improved at UniSC

Staff identified practical barriers - workload, scheduling, and funding, as major inhibitors of participation in development. Even when programs exist, access is uneven due to limited offerings, campus-specific delivery, or lack of financial assistance. This potentially indicates that equity in access depends not only on awareness but also on resourcing and flexibility. The feedback points to the need for structured backfill arrangements, online or multi-campus delivery, and subsidised external study to ensure inclusive participation across role types and locations.

AS consultation (2025) participants recognised the value of existing women’s leadership initiatives such as WATTLE but called for broader reach and time allowances to participate. (Further Action 3)

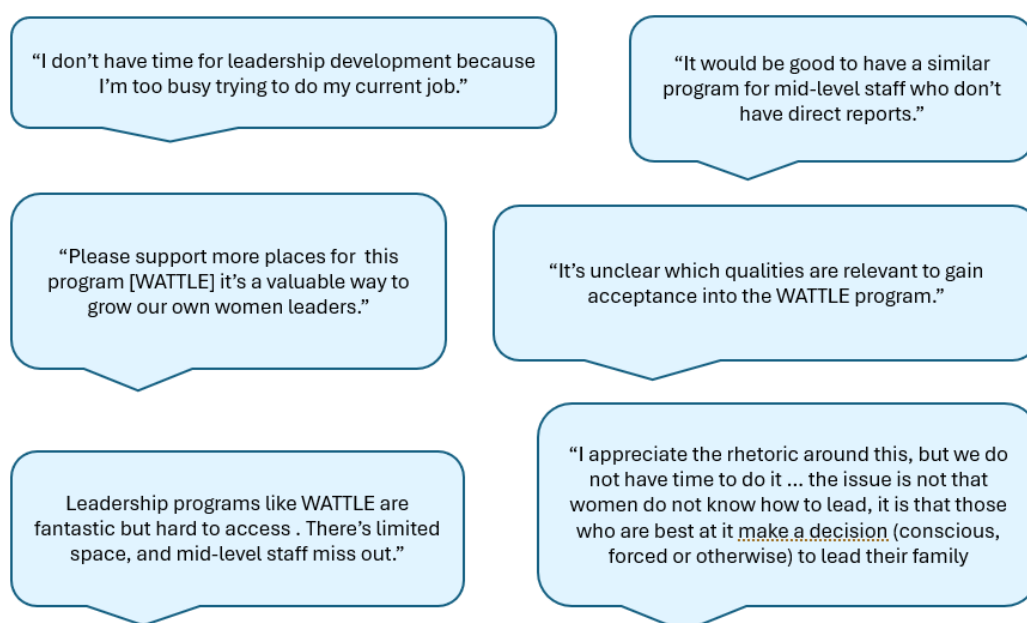


Figure 11. Selected feedback from the AS consultations (2025) regarding leadership development opportunities

Figure 11 shows that participants valued existing leadership programs such as WATTLE but viewed access as restricted and exclusionary. The quotes reveal that time scarcity, eligibility criteria, and program capacity limit reach, particularly for mid-level women without staff reports. The perception that leadership programs favour senior staff potentially reinforces inequity in developmental access. Participants also expressed that rhetoric around women's leadership is not necessarily matched by structural support, signalling that workload relief and eligibility reform are desired to transform awareness into genuine accessibility and progression.

5.3 Exclusionary structures in the Professional Development Program (PDP)

Feedback from the AS consultations 2025 recognised the PDP as a valuable initiative supporting professional growth and collaboration and noted the positive impact of recent changes removing the requirement to relocate. However, staff also reported low awareness of the program, particularly among professional staff (Figure 12).

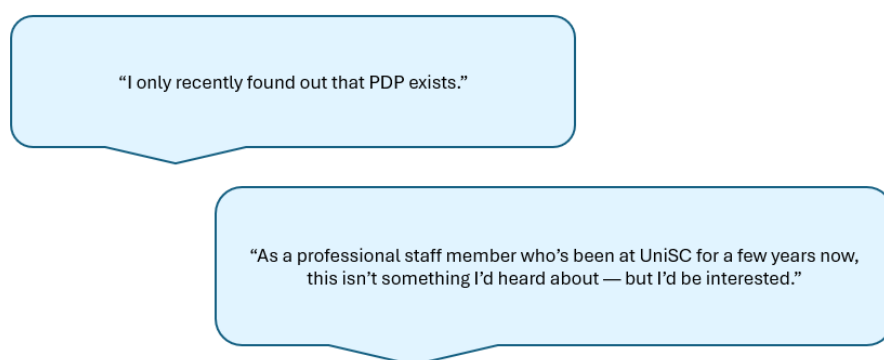


Figure 12. Selected feedback from professional staff during the AS consultations (2025) regarding Professional Development Program

Professional staff feedback reveals low awareness of the PDP, with some long-term employees unaware of its existence. This points to historical communication and visibility issues that restricted uptake and reinforced the perception that such opportunities are primarily for academic staff. The finding supports ongoing actions to improve promotion, information flow, and supervisor endorsement of professional-staff participation.

Feedback collected from staff surveyed (AS consultations 2025) who had previously participated in the PDP, indicated that age, life stage and caring responsibilities significantly influenced PDP experiences. They reflected on earlier program settings, which emphasised time spent away from UniSC, and challenges this presented for staff with family or other caring commitments (Figure 13). The AS consultations 2025 was undertaken prior to the removal of the relocation/off-site requirement and therefore, feedback is not reflective of post-change experiences.

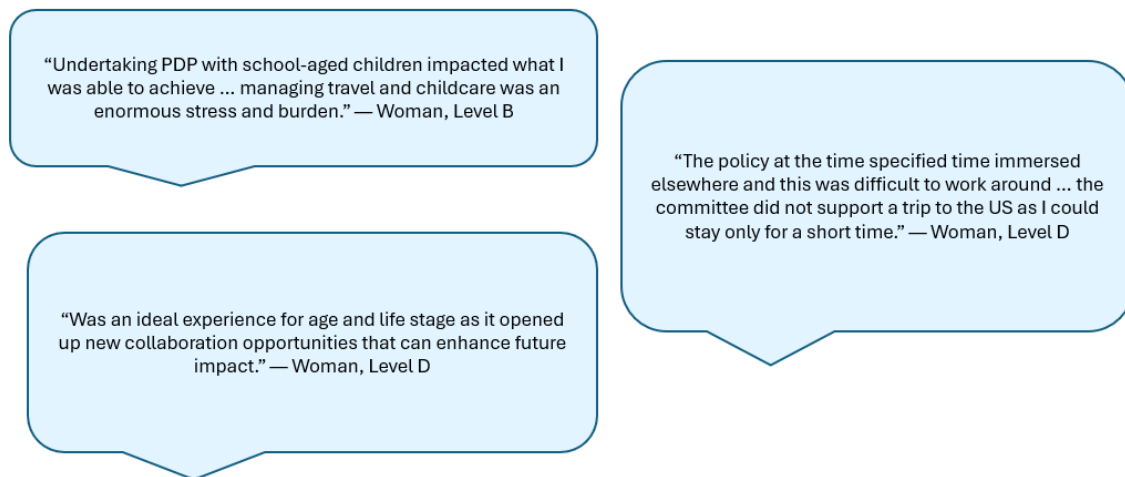


Figure 13. Feedback from AS consultation (2025) participants who had previously participated in the PDP

Figure 14 highlights that prior to reform, the PDP’s requirement for extended time away from UniSC created exclusionary conditions for staff with caring or mobility constraints. Women with school-aged children described significant stress associated with travel and childcare management. In addition, prior to changing requirements to relocate, participants reported the following challenges: travel planning, parenting logistics, workload management and meeting eligibility criteria under earlier program rules.

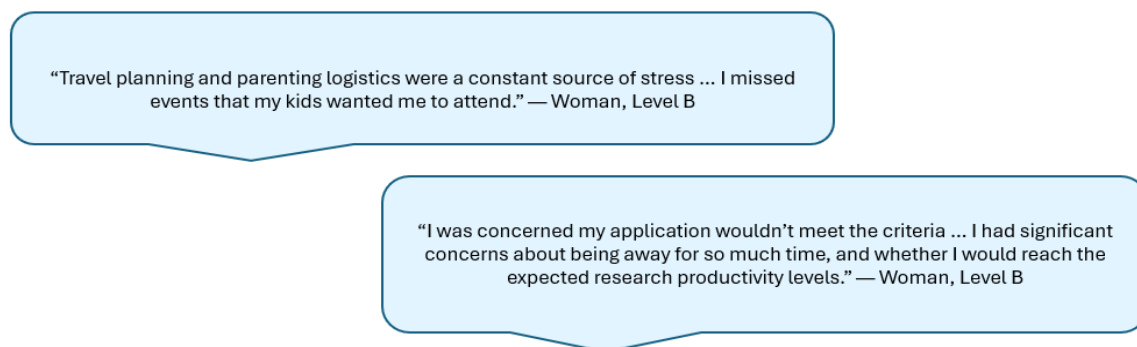


Figure 14. Feedback highlighting common challenges from staff surveyed (2025) who had previously participated in the Professional Development Program (PDP)

Staff reiterated the logistical and emotional burden of meeting earlier PDP eligibility requirements. Travel planning, parenting, and research-productivity expectations often conflicted with caring responsibilities. This feedback highlights how policy rigidity constrained equitable participation, especially for women. The experiences of participants demonstrate how program design, though well-intentioned can inadvertently privilege those without external responsibilities. This feedback directly informed subsequent policy reform removing the relocation requirement, exemplifying evidence-led structural change. This change is expected to improve accessibility for staff with caring responsibilities, disability, or personal circumstances that limit travel. Ongoing monitoring and consultation will determine the impact of these reforms on participation and outcomes across staff cohort. (Further Action 6)

Participants also identified factors that supported participation, including encouragement from leaders, early preparation, awareness of the program, and a supportive home environment.

“Encouragement from leaders in my school, a willingness to support a flexible program.” —
Woman, Level B

“Awareness of the program. Early start on the application. Supportive home environment.” — Woman, Level D

Figure 15. Feedback highlighting factors that supported participation from staff surveyed in (2025) who had previously participated in the Professional Development Program (PDP)

Positive experiences were linked to leadership encouragement, early preparation, and supportive environments. These factors reveal that participation is not solely dependent on policy but on the quality of supervisory support and local culture. Staff who were aware early and received encouragement were likely to be better positioned to apply successfully.

5.4 Visible and equitable access to mentoring

Mentoring at UniSC has evolved from isolated arrangements into a coordinated, institution-wide framework that fosters connection and professional growth for both academic and professional staff. The Unlocking Your Potential program, introduced in 2023, together with initiatives such as the Early and Mid-Career Academics (EMCA) Network, has embedded mentoring as a visible and accessible component of UniSC’s career development ecosystem.

Participant reflections from the Unlocking Your Potential program 2024–2025 cohorts (Figure 16) highlight the program’s impact in building confidence, fostering cross-disciplinary networks, and normalising developmental conversations. Mentees described the experience as “a great opportunity to grow professionally and personally” and valued the “connection with colleagues we may not normally meet,” noting that it “validated that our goals are worthy.” Feedback also emphasised appreciation for the program’s structure and the opportunity to engage beyond immediate work areas.

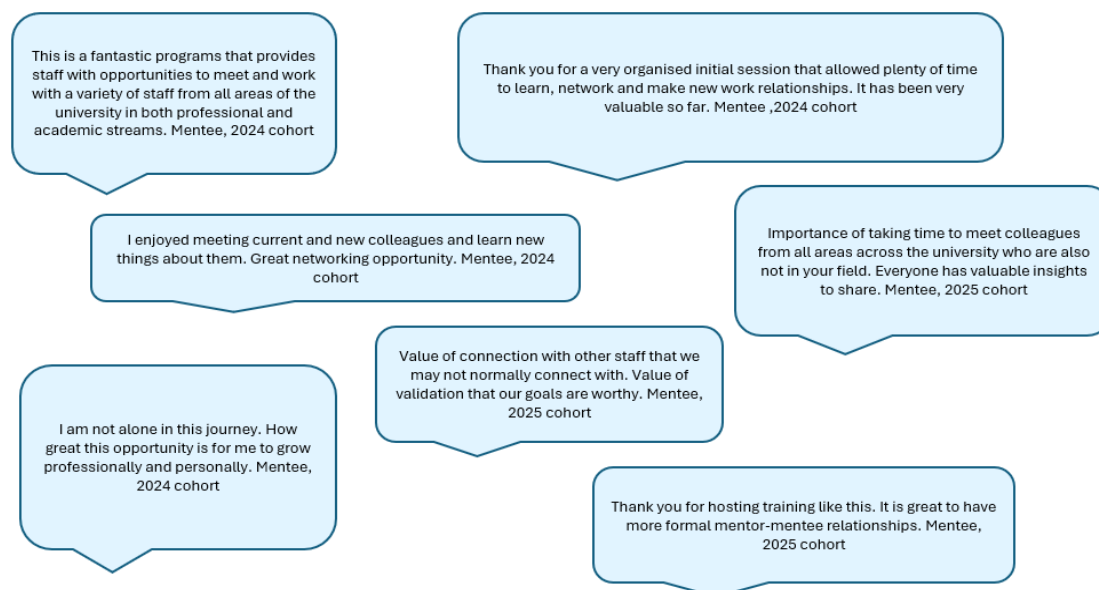


Figure 16. The Unlocking Your Potential program, mentee reflections (2024-2025)

Mentee reflections (Figure 15) show strong positive impact on confidence, connection, and belonging. The quotes demonstrate how visible, institution-wide mentoring builds both individual capability and organisational culture, shifting mentoring from *ad-hoc* to embedded practice. The high level of women’s participation further indicates progress in gender-equity outcomes, though the lower number of women mentors (see earlier quantitative data) highlights the continuing need to strengthen senior-level representation and mentoring capacity.

5.5 Overarching analysis

Evidence from the 2025 Athena Swan consultations confirms that UniSC’s approach to career development has matured. Reforms to the PDC, the PDP, and mentoring and leadership initiatives have transformed a previously disconnected system into one that is structured, visible, and strategically aligned. Staff now describe clearer expectations, more frequent development discussions, and stronger support from leaders, indicating cultural as well as procedural change.

However, inequities remain. Professional staff, particularly women concentrated at HEW 8, continue to experience limited progression opportunities and barriers linked to workload, time, and funding. While awareness of professional development and leadership programs has improved, access is not yet consistent across staff cohorts or campuses. These findings emphasise the need to move from policy design to implementation equity, ensuring that opportunity is both visible and attainable.

The PDP reforms illustrate progress towards inclusive practice. Removing the relocation requirement has eliminated a major barrier for staff with caring or accessibility constraints and demonstrates a growing institutional responsiveness to evidence. Similarly, mentoring outcomes show increased confidence, connection, and belonging among participants, though women remain under-represented as mentors, signalling the need to further strengthen senior-level gender balance.

Overall, UniSC’s trajectory is positive. Equity and development principles are increasingly embedded in organisational systems, and staff experience a more consistent and supportive environment for growth. Continued evaluation and feedback implementation will ensure this momentum translates into sustainable, sector-leading practice.

6. FURTHER ACTION

Since 2022, UniSC has transitioned from fragmented, inconsistent career-development practices to a more integrated, transparent, and inclusive framework. Early evidence shows marked improvements in role clarity, leadership capability, and training participation, alongside more equitable access to PDP and mentoring.

Through co-design, data transparency, and sustained leadership commitment, UniSC has established a culture where career development is visible, equitable, and institutionally supported, laying the foundation for long-term gender equity and inclusion across the University

The 2025 Athena Swan consultations confirmed these improvements and identified continuing gaps, particularly for professional staff and mid-career academics. Building on this, further actions will: (1) streamline PDC templates and target leader capability where survey data indicate need; (2) strengthen promotion/awareness, of PDP particularly for professional staff; (3) expand leadership offerings for mid-career and professional cohorts; (4) consolidate mentoring visibility and recognition across Schools/Institutes; (5) encourage men's participation in mentoring, as mentors and mentees to support balanced engagement and (6) conduct ongoing monitoring of PDP to assess whether post-2022 changes (local/hybrid options, broadened eligibility and caregiving support) are improving accessibility and equity of uptake and outcomes across staff groups (gender, career stage, academic/professional, part-time status, caring responsibilities). (7) Establish clear, structured career and development pathways established across all work areas.

Ref	Rationale / Evidence	Actions & Outputs	Timeframe (Start–End)	Responsible	Desired Outcome / Success Indicators
1	Staff feedback indicated complexity in PDC templates and inconsistent leader capability in facilitating performance discussions.	Simplify PDC templates and provide targeted training for leaders identified via engagement-survey data (2026) and PDC feedback.	2026	People & Culture (Culture & Capability)	Streamlined process; increased staff satisfaction with PDC usability; measurable uplift in leader confidence (2026 survey).
2	Consultation feedback highlighted limited awareness of PDP among professional staff	Enhance PDP communication and promotion to increase awareness and participation across professional staff.	2026	People & Culture (Culture & Capability)	Improved awareness measured via PDC feedback.
3	Leadership programs such as WATTLE, have limited capacity for mid-level staff.	Sponsor annual places in mid-level leadership programs, (such as Aurora if available), or expand 5R opportunities for mid-career staff.	2026–2027	People & Culture (Culture & Capability)	Places sponsored in 2026, participation mix includes professional and academic staff.
4	Consultation feedback and 2025 staff forums identified low visibility of school based mentoring programs	Create a single MyUniSC ‘Mentoring Hub’ that maps School/Institute programs	2025-2026	People & Culture (Culture & Capability) Athena Swan work group	Hub live by Q1 2026; program pages for all Schools/Institutes
5	Mentoring participation skews towards women; opportunity to broaden engagement.	Targeted outreach for men and under-represented groups as mentors/mentees across Unlocking Your Potential.	2026-2027	People & Culture (Culture & Capability)	Increase in men participation as mentors/mentees
6	Pre-2024 PDP settings (relocation/off-site) privileged staff without caring responsibilities, or not living with disability	Monitor and evaluate the impact of removing the relocation/off-site requirement in PDP on accessibility and outcomes.	2026 onwards	People & Culture (Culture & Capability) Athena Swan Committee	Increase in participation and approval rates for carers, people with disability, part-time staff and decreased reported barriers via survey and consultations
7	Staff feedback highlighted the need for visible recognition and clearer development pathways, particular for professional staff	Implement the Recognition and Reward Plan (subject to Executive approval) and scale up the 2025 Workforce Planning pilot	2026	Executive People & Culture (Culture & Capability)	Clear, structured career and development pathways established across all work areas and functions.