

New survey to help third-level planning

By Eamon McGrane

A new study aiming to capture student information to help universities make more informed policy decisions has been launched by the Irish Universities Association (IUA).

The three-year project is funded by the HEA and the seven universities and is being carried out by the Geary Institute in UCD. Speaking at the launch, the director of UCD's Geary Institute, Professor Colm Harmon said the study is particularly important and timely. "It will produce a fine set of academic publications, will be the foundation for creating a new higher education research capacity at UCD, but will also be firmly embedded into the planning process for the Irish higher education system," he said.

According to Dr Conor O'Carroll, assistant director of research at the IUA, the genesis of the study came about due to the universities wanting to find out more about their students and researchers. Despite the fact that the third-level institutes would have stu-

dent records such information would rarely include student satisfaction surveys in relation to student services, as well as other issues such as health and well-being, lifestyles, background and demographics.

The survey will be carried out via the internet and the project is in the middle of the first module. "It's a live survey so when the student inputs the answers the central database gets updated at that point in time. It will run well into May before we have enough responses where we can start to make relative conclusions and can analyse the first set of data," said O'Carroll.

The survey will also be of interest to those wondering about the direction of Ireland as a knowledge economy. Questions will be directed at students, researchers and PhDs on salary expectations, career prospects and where and what they plan to do after leaving university. Another interesting factor will be the anticipated increase in the number of non-Irish students. "The question will be are they going to go back home or stay here," said O'Carroll.

Universities will also be looking forward to analysing the results because it

will be a chance for them to evaluate their services to the students and see if there are areas for improvement. "Demographics are changing with older students coming in and their needs are different so we hope that this survey will represent this. The students service bodies need to know what they should be concentrating on and what way they should be directing their services. And it should be able to inform policy," he said.

One of the more pronounced educational problems highlighted in the past few years has been the inequality of third-level education in relation to people from disadvantaged areas. According to O'Carroll, the survey will take note of this. "The survey will look at issues of access: be they students with disabilities or coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Access problems, however, do start a lot earlier. By the time someone has their Leaving Cert they've sometimes lost the battle because they've come through a system where they've been disadvantaged all the way up and it's difficult for them to make that progression. There are systems there to deal with that and this survey will capture that information," he said.

Financial services R&D boost

By John Kennedy

BANK of Ireland is to commit to sponsoring 50pc of a €500,000 technological research and development (R&D) alliance with UCC's Financial Services Innovation Centre (FSIC) in Cork.

The remainder of the funding will be provided by Enterprise Ireland, which funds and manages the national Innovation Partnership initiative. Bank of Ireland has agreed a number of research streams with the FSIC which will investigate how technology can be used to improve service in these areas; the secure delivery of financial services to bank customers, integrating self-service systems in bank branches, using

technology to increase operational effectiveness in branches and to manage document handling across the bank branch network.

"This is the first Irish collaborative project involving a financial services company," the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Micheál Martin TD said. "Bank of Ireland will benefit from tailored, researched solutions to its specific technological challenges while the researchers in the FSIC will build up their knowledge of the needs of companies in the banking sector and bring them to bear on future projects that will arise as a result of this collaboration."

Ritchie Boucher, chief executive of retail financial services at Bank of Ireland, said one of the bank's key differentiators in the market is its focus on

constantly improving services to customers. "We have always had strong connections with universities in Ireland and we believe that funding for innovation research, under the auspices of the FSIC, is an exciting and important initiative for building on and improving our service to customers and to the wider financial services marketplace."

The Enterprise Ireland Innovation Partnership is expected to create six new research posts at UCC's FSIC.

"The financial services industry has the highest proportion of spend on IT system and process projects globally and it is important it leverages this spend to provide new and enhanced services to customers while lowering internal costs," said Professor Ciaran Murphy, leader of the FSIC research team.