



No more summers spent stocking supermarket shelves

A new State funding scheme will pay third-level science students to stay at college over the summer, writes **Danielle Barron**

Science funders have devised a novel way of attracting the best science students from home and abroad towards a career in research - they're going to pay them. This summer science undergraduates are getting the chance to experience life in the laboratory before they graduate, and will receive a financial reward for their efforts.

In an initiative funded by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), €1.4m is being spent so that undergraduates can experience what it is like to work in a true research environment. The Undergraduate Research Experience & Knowledge Award (Ureka) scheme aims to provide students with the opportunity to work with some of Ireland's top researchers at third-level institutions around the State.

There are two strands to the programme, Ureka Supplements and Ureka Sites. The former allows students to work in a one-on-one capacity with a particular researcher, while the latter is essentially a science summer school for undergraduate students, explains Ruth McCaffrey, scientific programme officer at SFI.

"Last year we funded five sites, and we have funded an additional six this year," says McCaffrey. The 11 sites will host a total of 129 students this summer, while 93 students will partake in the Ureka Supplements scheme. Each student will be paid a stipend of €300 per week for the duration of the programme.

While the majority of students are Irish, last year the programme welcomed students from as far afield as Columbia, Australia and South Africa. McCaffrey sees this as an essential part of the programme.

"We opened it up to international students as we want students to think of Ireland as a place to pursue cutting-edge research," says McCaffrey.

UCD's school of biomedical and biomolecular science is just one of the Ureka sites, with 15 students arriving there next week to undertake the 12-week research programme.

Head of school Dr Paul Moynagh is enthusiastic about the scheme. "Real-

ly the idea behind it is to give undergraduate students a flavour of what research is all about, with the hope of exciting the students and making them consider a PhD after their degrees," he explains.

The students won't just be confined to the laboratory however. Other aspects of the programme include careers advice and social events.

"They will be exposed to a variety of different experiences, ranging from talks on careers to field trips, and there will be social aspects too," says Moynagh. "It's all an important part of making this a good all-round experience for the students."

SFI says this initiative aims to attract highly motivated undergraduates that may eventually become PhD candidates in Irish laboratories. "We are very much hoping to contribute to the growth of PhD numbers, and realise that national priority of doubling the number of PhD students by 2012," says Moynagh. "Fourth level is becoming crucially important, and we need to retain our best students."

Attracting high quality PhD students is a challenge for any Irish university. "Competition is not just national, it's international," he explains.

The success of the Ureka scheme so far means it looks set to expand even further. "It's been a phenomenal success," says McCaffrey. Visiting the different sites last year, she says there was obvious enthusiasm not only among students, but among researchers too.



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