

# UCD 150

Celebrating the past, creating the future



A SPECIAL REPORT

## Changing to secure the future



Students on campus in Belfield. Photograph: Matt Kavanagh



— and UCD president Hugh Brady. Photograph: Bryan O'Brien

### Contents

**PAGE 2:**

UCD and the State – Conor Brady looks at a close and fruitful relationship

The L&H, behemoth of UCD's societies

**PAGE 3:**

Alumni memories

— and Dick Ahlstrom on UCD's engineering pedigree

**PAGE 4,5:**

The year at Belfield – how the 150th anniversary was celebrated

— and UCD's Timeline

**PAGE 6:**

The Newman Scholars

The Biomed dividend

— and Celtic Studies

**PAGE 7:**

Declan Kiberd on Thomas MacDonagh, teacher, poet and rebel leader

**PAGE 8:**

Upping the game: UCD's sportiung strategy

— and advancing medical research

.....  
THIS supplement was edited by Michael McAleer, Editor, Special Reports & Supplements

SALES: Media Partners  
046.9070436  
pat@mediapartners.ie



**At the helm of Ireland's largest university, Hugh Brady tells Kathy Sheridan why change is vital to the future of UCD – and Ireland**

FOR those who cherish the notion that universities still operate from ivory towers, a quick spin around Hugh Brady's type-A personality will set them straight. At 44, trailing clouds of glory from Harvard and a set of nine-year-old triplets, he holds responsibility for an institution about the size of Kilkenny, speaks quietly, accessibly and with feeling, radiates unspeakably good health, and probably – though we're guessing here – has a short, sharp morning mantra that goes: Compete, Win or Die.

To judge by how often it crops up in discussion, the word "collaborate" may well be in there too. It's Hugh Brady's bedrock.

He is not here to bury the old model of the lone scholar in his ivory tower, aka bunkers or silos. Not quite. They should merely give collaboration a chance, says the UCD's president with deceptive mildness.

He accepts that some – duly "encouraged or incentivised" – may emerge, take a look, recoil and retreat. "We're not saying that you have to work in multi-disciplinary groups but what we do say, is at least have a look, give it a try..."

At its simplest, the Brady view is

that a research/learning institution is not operating to its potential if its smartest people are not interacting across the disciplines, bumping into each other in a common tearoom, sparking off each other in open, multi-disciplinary work spaces. And this is the theory – fast becoming practice – that has generated the most heat in UCD.

In an institution with 86 departments, some with only two or three people and very own tearoom, each regarding itself as an entity in its own right with its own status and authority and often seeing little need to communicate with other departments, this was a fairly revolutionary demand, made flesh in the plan to reduce the number of departments by at least half. It generated much anger, some rather unacademic language and even a threat of legal action in an atmosphere rife with anxiety and uncertainty.

It is, however, a crucial part of a highly ambitious, larger plan. That plan, in short, is to make UCD the top research university in Ireland and place it among the top 30 in Europe – a tall order given that Trinity was the only Irish university to make *The Times* Higher Education Supple-

ment's list of the world's top 200 (it came 87th).

Brady's only concession, however, is that it will take "at least" 10 years to materialise. Behind that ambition is the conviction that the university and Ireland Inc must change or die.

The leading UK universities, he points out, have suddenly awakened to the meaning of a 600-point Leaving Cert, and are "actively head-hunting" the cream of Irish second-level students with scholarships and creative packages.

At PhD level, "more Irish PhDs are now working in Britain than in the whole of Ireland – at a time when it's a national objective to double our PhD numbers. That will have devastating effects unless it's addressed. All government policy statements identify the knowledge economy as critical to the nation's success".

At staffing level, UCD has had to turn away international stars because of the lack of flexibility in the packages it can offer. Salaries in the context of Dublin house prices are just one issue. "The initial recruitment package can cost half a million – and that's not even for the superstars."

Likewise, the machinery by which it can make a swift counter-offer for home-grown stars brandishing offers from what UCD considers its true competition – "Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Manchester, Warwick, Surrey, those types of universities" – is unwieldy by any standard. Most British and US universities have a mechanism to make a counter-offer within 24 hours. Only by virtue of some very swift footwork was UCD able to make counter-offers in two to three weeks last summer and manage to keep some of its brightest stars.

Under-funding is the constant bug-

bear, a fact of life borne out by independent experts ranging from the OECD to the Washington Advisory Group, which bench-marked UCD with two US and two British (Purdue, Florida, Edinburgh and Manchester) universities.

"We produce about 60 per cent more graduates per euro invested than those universities," says Brady, "so the taxpayer is already getting fantastic value for money. But to play in the big leagues, we would need right now about another €50m a year."

The price to be paid meanwhile, is a degrading infrastructure, a 33 per cent higher staff-student ratio (compared to overseas counterparts) and a critical dearth of counsellors, career guidance and health care staff.

But much has been achieved in the drive for reform. Despite the heat over restructuring, what Brady terms "by far the flagship initiative" of his tenure so far is "the restructuring of the entire curriculum into the UCD Horizons curriculum" – or what is known as modularisation. Under this system, a degree course is divided into "small building blocks", enabling students to pick up "credits" towards a degree.

"At the moment, you expect the 18-year-old from Blackrock and a 24-year-old single parent who has to hold down a job to go through at the same rate in a three- or four-year degree. But this allows them to pick up credits as they go along, so that ultimately, whether in three or six years, they get the same result."

Modularisation also allows more choice – a medical student can now take a course in philosophy or a science student a course in intellectual property – and enables Irish students to sample the best of what is available

internationally from within the structures of their degree, by slotting into a US university, say, for certain credits.

First-year students will be coming into UCD's new Horizons this September. The fact that staff threw their energies into making this transformation in 18 months is clearly one of Hugh Brady's proudest achievements.

FOR the academics in this brave, new world of drive and choice, there is little doubt that the pressure is on, although of course Brady doesn't put it in those terms.

There is the pressure to emerge from the "bunkers and silos", pressure to form a "critical mass" for research purposes, pressure to publish and to look at every piece of research whatever the discipline, and to "ask 'has it got commercial potential' – but equally 'has it got the ability to influence either social or cultural policy?'"

He gives, for example, the model of UCD's flagship Conway Institute current partnership with Wyeth, working on a neuro-therapeutics programme "looking for molecules against which you could direct new drugs to treat diseases such as schizophrenia, depression, Alzheimers."

"Our researchers have access to certain technologies through Wyeth and when you put them together, there is the possibility of really exciting discoveries. The university is a full partner, so there is generation of new knowledge, a programme that is a magnet for new undergraduates and the possibility that, if something is commercialised, the university has part of the rights to that intellectual property and that feeds back in..."

But will this research emphasis be at the expense of teaching excellence?

"Not at all. It should go hand in glove with state-of-the-art teaching. What we're saying is that also in the great universities, you have students who want to be taught by the guys who write books or are at the leading edge of discovery. If students feel someone is coming in and giving them a lecture that is drawn from a book, the students will go somewhere else."

Of course, in such a scenario, he concedes, there will be winners and losers in academia. "We're playing an international game. We can't afford UCD to lose, because if this, our largest university loses, then Ireland loses. So, we have to make some hard choices. We can't be good at everything."

In terms of general staff anxiety and opposition, he says, "a corner has been turned. We've noticed that much of the anxiety has died away. Now people are talking about what's possible, talking together, particularly in the past two or three months."

In five years' time, will people walking into UCD get a different feeling from the place? "Completely different", he says confidently, suddenly focusing rather unexpectedly on the physical entity. From the sterile, unwelcoming, concrete void that is the UCD entrance area now, is promised a complex designed to give the visitor "a feeling that this is an exciting and innovative place to be, a place that's got a social heart-beat."

Expect to see "appropriate" campus retail facilities, an art-house cinema, a film studies area and an exhibition space among others, not to mention the pitter-patter of happy postgraduates in new postgraduate housing.

Just 18 months gone of Hugh Brady's relentless reign – 102 to go. It promises to be an interesting ride.

## Broaden your knowledge of Horizons



UCD stands for a lot more than University College Dublin. UCD stands for the cutting edge of development in Ireland, as it has done throughout its proud 150-year history. It stands for excellence in education through an ethos of opening minds to new ideas, new discoveries, new creations.

UCD has been the alma mater of Ireland's leading political, economic, scientific and cultural voices. We are proud to have nurtured the luminaries in our roll of honour.

Today UCD still stands for excellence and ambition. In 2005 we are striving to provide the same atmosphere and opportunities to the next generation of UCD graduates.