



UCD takes lessons

A flexible approach to learning is key to University College Dublin's quest for excellence, reports **Colm Murphy**

from Harvard

A radical restructuring of its degree programme, boosting applications by 10%, has helped carry University College Dublin to the 2006 Sunday Times Irish University of the Year title.

In key areas, UCD has improved its ratings since last year, climbing to joint second place in our overall league table alongside last year's winner, University College Cork. But both institutions fall some way behind Trinity College Dublin, which continues to hold the top spot. Two-thirds of the students at UCD now graduate with a first or 2:1 — up 20% in the past two years — and research income per member of academic staff has soared to nearly €86,000, up from €55,000 last year.

The Sunday Times award is made for excellence across a wide range of indicators, including the academic calibre of entrants, the dropout rate, staffing levels and graduate unemployment. The student experience and the university's role on regional, national and world stages are also assessed through questionnaires. In all these areas, UCD is now among the top performers in Ireland.

A key ingredient of UCD's success is its new flexibility that allows full-time undergraduates greater choice in their subjects. Some have gone for exotic mixes, such as the medical student who last year also took programmes in archeology.

This flexible approach has been instigated by Dr Hugh Brady, the 47-year-old medical specialist who has been UCD president for the past 21 months. He has cut through bureaucracy, reducing by two-thirds the number of academic units through a series of departmental mergers. "Some had become like bunkers," he says.

The student reaction exceeded expectations with a 10% increase in applications to UCD this year. Half of last year's students chose

add-on subjects outside their main course area, showing the demand for a broader curriculum.

With the second-biggest student body on the island of Ireland — 12,518 full-time undergraduates, 4,050 part-time undergraduates and 5,891 postgraduates — UCD can be daunting for first-years. An enhanced student support programme, both pastoral and academic, is being developed through "one-stop shop" programme offices.

WiFi technology is being enhanced to allow students to work from anywhere in the Belfield campus on laptops. In addition, almost a third of students will be offered an opportunity to spend a semester abroad at another prestigious university, one of UCD's partners in the Universitas 21 network.

Mixing arts subjects with more professionally-oriented programmes is common in America but new to Ireland. Its introduction at UCD is no coincidence; Brady spent nine years at Harvard before returning to UCD a decade ago. "We have an opportunity to take the best of the American and European models and create something unique in Ireland," he says.

Brady plans to upgrade UCD's sprawling campus, which is two miles south of the city centre. Millions of euros are to be spent improving spaces and walkways. An Olympic-size pool, another gym, more student accommodation and refurbishment of the original science and humanities blocks, which are more than 30 years old, are a priority.

Stephen Carroll, editor of one of UCD's two newspapers, the *University Observer*, says: "UCD's student life is wide and varied: there's a society catering to every taste, a club for every sport, a radio station and soon a TV station."

UCD is also catching up with Trinity and UCC in winning

contracts under multi-million-euro state research schemes such as Science Foundation Ireland, aimed at creating a knowledge-led economy. It is building one of the country's biggest multidisciplinary research centres, the €72m National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training, aimed at placing Ireland at the forefront of bio-technology.

Commercialisation of research is also stepping up a notch. Its priority patent applications rose to 11 last year and the NovaUCD incubation centre, which provides support for new high-tech companies, is almost full. Its competitive research budget reached €79m, or €85,782 per academic, the country's third highest.

Such funding is a far cry from the university's embryonic days when it was founded by the 19th-century educationalist John Henry Cardinal Newman as Ireland's first Catholic university. Many of its first 17 students had to live and be taught in Newman's city centre home. This is not an issue today with 2,650 student beds on campus, 450 being added in the last year, the highest new additions in the third-level sector.

The university's *raison d'être* was to create an educated Irish class of Catholic professionals not only to serve but to shape the state. It has fulfilled its mission, being alma mater of several taoisigh and a number of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, including Patrick Pearse. Other alumni include James Joyce and Neil Jordan.

From these troubled days it has become a bastion of middle-class conformity,

although the number entering without traditional Leaving Certificate points has grown to 17.3%, which includes mature students, some of those with a disability and those from the poorer socioeconomic groups.

UCD has re-entered the Shanghai Jiao Tong university world rankings at between 300 and 400 and Brady aims to get it into the top 30 in Europe. It was selected by the Chinese government as one of 100 centres around the world for a Confucius institute and has added a commerce with Chinese degree.

Similar international success was one of the factors in Dublin City University being shortlisted for the award. The calibre of its research was illustrated this year when it was selected by Google, the world's largest search engine, as a partner in its programme to make manuscripts searchable on the internet. A similar collaboration is taking place with Microsoft.

This and other factors show that Ireland's joint youngest university has not rested on its laurels since it won our university of the year award in 2004. It has moved up two places to be ranked fourth this year thanks to improved performance in research, employment, completion, high grades and staffing levels. It has set out ambitious plans for the next two years to further reinvent its course portfolio, have a more interdisciplinary mix and a wider engagement with the north Dublin community. This will see 11% of its student intake come from disadvantaged families.

Cork Institute of Technology wins our Institute of Technology of the Year award. Strong academic performance, significant course expansion and the biggest upgrade in its 203-year history helped it to move up to ninth in our rankings.

Its main 80-acre campus has been refocused around a new central courtyard and newly opened state-of-the-art student centre. A €20m hospitality studies building, €2.5m of new sports facilities and a €4m business incubation centre are coming on stream at the campus. Its replacement school of music in the city centre is due for completion in a year's time.

Among four new degrees is one in nautical science at its €53m National Maritime College at Hawboline, a unique course in Ireland. It also opened its Blackrock Castle Observatory, a pioneering approach to integrating research and public access to its facilities.

Despite its expansion the 633 teaching staff retain the personal touch with the 14,243-student body. Brian O'Sullivan, Cork IT's students' union president, says: "The best thing about Cork IT is the close relationship everyone has within the institute."

Such individual attention to students was a feature in the shortlisting of Dundalk Institute of Technology for the award. Dundalk, which has risen from bottom of our league table last year to 13th, improved across most of our key indicators.

It is acting as a catalyst for the rejuvenation of the border region through the expansion of its facilities and research. Helped by special border funding, it attracts the second highest competitive research funding per academic among the republic's 14 institutes of technology.

Dundalk has one of the best records for attracting third-level students from poorer backgrounds. Its retention rate has improved dramatically to 70% for all courses and is now on a par with universities for honours degrees.



The right chemistry: PhD student Rosaria Leyden savours the academic and social mix at University College Dublin

CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE OVER THE YEARS

	2002	2003	2004	2005
The Sunday Times University of the year	NUI GALWAY	UC CORK	DUBLIN CITY	UC CORK
Runner-up	Limerick	Dublin City	NUI Maynooth	NUI Maynooth
IT of the year	Award started 2004		GALWAY-MAYO IT	WATERFORD IT
Runner-up			Limerick IT	Athlone IT
Based on league table				
Best university	Trinity College Dublin	Trinity College Dublin	Trinity College Dublin	Trinity College Dublin
Best institute of technology	Dublin IT	Dublin IT	Dublin IT	Dublin IT

THE SUNDAY TIMES
UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
 Runner-up
 Dublin City University

INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY OF THE YEAR
CORK IT
 Runner-up
 Dundalk IT

BASED ON LEAGUE TABLE POSITION
BEST UNIVERSITY
 Trinity College Dublin

BEST INSTITUTE
 Dublin Institute of Technology

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