

# More needs to be done to attract talented researchers to Ireland

The focus on upping the research ante in Irish universities is already bearing fruit, and Ireland now has universities with world class research teams who attract students and researchers from around the world writes Dave Boland

**U**P UNTIL the mid-1990s, Ireland was not considered to be a particularly attractive location for researchers. Since then, however, major government-funded investments have enabled the universities to implement ambitious research strategies, building state-of-the-art research infrastructure and attracting world class researchers and doctoral students to Ireland – all of which is integral to the European and national policy to increase the levels of R&D excellence in all sectors.

Under the National Strategy for Science Technology and Innovation (SSTI), the specific government target to double PhD graduates by 2013 has acted, and continues to act, as a focus for this objective. In 2005, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) put forward the concept of 4th Level Ireland as a collective sectoral strategy, to bring structure and coherence to all activities in the graduate education and research field. This has enabled the universities to work towards a major objective of 4th Level Ireland, which is the production of new PhD graduates. Through the 4th Level Ireland network, universities are radically changing the PhD student experience, in order to ensure the ongoing increase in numbers and to maintain the quality of the graduate.

"The target of doubling the number of PhD graduates however, is only a small part of SSTI," explained Dr Conor O'Carroll, director of research at IUA. "The investments in people and research

infrastructure will continue, fulfilling the objective of generating greater numbers of researchers at all levels. This focus on people is essential, as excellent research needs to be conducted by excellent people."

As part of the overall drive, Irish universities are encouraging more undergraduates to become researchers, and a recent IUA study shows that a quarter of all undergraduates want to pursue a PhD.

"An essential element of research is internationalisation," said O'Carroll. "Isolationism does not engender high quality research; it is by its nature a global activity. In addition, Ireland cannot achieve the national target of doubling PhDs without recruiting overseas talent. We need the best students and researchers from all over the world, and this starts with simple measures such as short term research placements over the summer that can lead to students pursuing their PhD in Ireland.

To this end, the universities are working together to attract PhD students and senior researchers, and currently 30% of PhD students in the seven universities come from abroad.

This focus on upping the research ante in Irish universities is already bearing fruit, and Ireland now has universities with world class research teams who attract students and researchers from around the world. But there are still barriers in place which are restricting full growth.

For example, administrative barriers – notably immigration procedures – can pose

serious obstacles to the movement of these students and researchers. But initiatives from the Departments of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment have helped remove some of these obstacles.

"Ireland has become significantly more attractive to researchers since the introduction of the Researcher Hosting Agreement Scheme in 2007," said Dr O'Carroll. "This scheme implements a European Union Directive, which Ireland opted into voluntarily, on the admission of third country nationals for the purpose of conducting research. Under this free scheme, researchers do not require a Green Card or Work Permit. They can also bring their immediate families with them; and their spouse is entitled to work."

The Researcher Mobility office in the IUA is responsible for implementing this scheme. This eliminates a major barrier to researchers coming from countries such as China, India and the US to live and work in Ireland as part of the national research effort.

The Department of Justice also introduced a Third Level Graduate scheme last year, which allows non EEA students who graduate from Irish universities permission to remain in Ireland for 6 months to seek work. This is an essential measure to retain international students. Those who have studied in Ireland and often benefited from Exchequer funding are encouraged to stay and contribute further to Irish



Dr Conor O'Carroll, director of research at IUA

research and development in a professional capacity.

Even with these measures in place, there are still significant barriers for both third and fourth (PhD) level students in Ireland. For example, non-EU students coming for short placements or internships with Irish research teams can find it very difficult to obtain a visa. Recent changes in policy will have negative impacts on the attractiveness of Ireland for undergraduate and graduate students (such as not allowing international students to bring immediate family and denying the students' chil-

dren places in state schools). And when one considers that 18% of international PhD students are married (as opposed to 8.5% of Irish), this can be a significant problem.

"The kernel of the problem is that the classification of 'student' is applied equally to those with no prior qualifications undertaking a six week English language course, and to a first class honours graduate coming to do a four year PhD in an area of national priority," said Dr O'Carroll. "The treatment of students and researchers has improved dramatically with the introduction of the Third

Level Graduate Scheme and the Hosting Agreement which can be attributed to the ongoing efforts and support from Justice. However there are still outstanding problems."

Leading countries across the world are investing in R&D to maintain and increase competitiveness as part of long term economic growth, and each of these has schemes in place to attract students and researchers. Ireland has, in itself, invested heavily in R&D and, in addition to increasing the numbers of "home-grown" researchers, it must rely on

bringing in top quality students and researchers from abroad as a key element of the national effort. "Ireland has to compete with other countries for these people," warned Dr O'Connor. "We have already put in place some very effective schemes for students and researchers, but this must be extended to ensure that international students are treated equally with their Irish counterparts otherwise they will go elsewhere. This talent pool of international students is an essential component of the national effort to build research excellence in Ireland."

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