3 Dublin City University

Terrier or Wolfhound?

Dublin City University (DCU) is located on the Northside of Dublin, Ireland, a twenty-five-minute drive from the historic city center by the River Liffey. The university has five campuses. The main campus is fifty acres in size and located in the pleasant residential neighborhood of Glasnevin. It houses numerous modern academic buildings surrounding a central pedestrian courtyard. The St. Patrick's campus, in Drumcondra, a residential area closer to the city center, houses the Institute for Education, one of the largest faculties of education in Europe, with six schools. The Institute for Education works with schools across the city and country. The All Hallows campus, previously All Hallows College, a Vincentian institution also in Drumcondra, became part of DCU in 2016. The St. Claire's Sports Campus houses the university's sports pavilion. The DCU Alpha Innovation campus is a research-intensive innovation hub that focuses on new technologies in areas such as health and clean energy and houses 350 companies.

DCU's origins trace back to the 1975 founding of the National Institute for Higher Education. The idea was to create a hub that would promote technical education and innovation. The institute admitted its first students in 1980, and by 1989 had gained university status and the name Dublin City University. Its growth as a university accelerated in 2016 when it merged with four other nearby higher education institutions (All Hallows College, Mater Dei Institution of Education, Church of Ireland [Episcopalian] College of Education, and St. Patrick's College). Today, the university serves approximately 17,400 students, including 1,200 online students through the DCU Connected program. The majority of students are from the local area, and

17 percent are international students. The university comprises five faculties, with 1,690 members on its academic staff. Despite its large student and faculty populations, many experience and refer to DCU as a "small institution." As one faculty member explained, "We have relatively small classes. For some programs the maximum is 40 students. I know all my students by name. In a classroom of 100 students, that's almost impossible. I think this is what gives us a sense of community." Another faculty member reflected, "I think our students are very highly motivated. Our academics are demanding but I find our students want to learn. Some of them, maybe in the early stages, still haven't figured out exactly what discipline they want to go into. But you see that there's an effort as they enter the university. Those that aren't willing to transfer." Since its founding, DCU has sought to define its own unique educational mission. People at DCU are well aware that across the city are Trinity College – Ireland's centuries-old preeminent research university – and University College Dublin. Both are highly regarded and highly ranked institutions. While its research output is considerable, DCU has historically embraced a powerful and pragmatic aim – to promote innovation, prepare students for successful careers and lives, and serve the community.

This mission has been significantly shaped by its location on the Northside of Dublin. The Northside has always been the poorer side of town. It has higher levels of unemployment, crime, and substance abuse than other parts of Dublin. In the 1960s there was a large population living in tenements in the Northside – houses that are divided to accommodate many families. As one staff member who grew up in the area recalled, "You had multiple families living in one flat and they were really, really horrible conditions." The government responded by building high-rise tower blocks for low-income families. However, putting many people in one place without adequate community space, public transportation links, or prospects for local employment quickly led to a deteriorating situation marked by crime and despair. As one staff member who has long been involved in community-based work observed, "It's very little to do with people themselves, it's more to do with the circumstances that people find themselves with. And you know, if circumstances are very tough, people turn sometimes to less savory pursuits, so to say."

In the 1980s and 1990s, a suburb close to the main campus, Ballymun, faced significant social problems. Poverty persisted due to the absence of economic opportunities. Unemployment rates were much higher than the national average, with few job prospects to alleviate the situation. This led to crime

and drug use, especially heroin. In response, the Irish government and the Dublin City Council launched a rejuvenation effort, Bally Regeneration Limited. This initiative involved the tearing down of existing housing, construction of new housing, and establishment of transportation links. While this work physically rejuvenated the area, as one DCU staff member aptly put it, "It's not enough to just give people a new home. Because there's been a lot of stuff that's been building up generationally and at some stage, some social generation interventions have to be put in place. They had especially low levels of participation in furthering higher education." Another described the Northside as having "a big access problem, by far the biggest in Ireland." One in ten children from the area go on to higher education as opposed to eight out of ten in South Dublin or the suburbs.

The Northside is also where many recent immigrant groups have settled. One administrator who came to the university from the country said, "When I came to Dublin two decades ago, I could not believe how bizarrely monocultural the place was." That is changing. A rise in immigration from Europe and Africa is creating new diversity in the population. Since the Russia–Ukraine War began, Ireland has become home to nearly 100,000 (98,500 as of November 2023) refugees from Ukraine – a significant number in a country of 3 million people. The Northside is a place where some of the most pressing challenges facing cities in European countries are playing out. The university's location in the Northside has had a profound effect on its academic programs, outreach, and research, with many faculty members viewing it as the ideal environment for making an impact on the social problems that Ireland faces.

DCU'S CULTURE AND MISSION

Two values form the substance of DCU's DNA: economic innovation and service to society. These two strands, for the most part, powerfully complement one another. Describing this synergy, a staff member noted, "DCU exists to work in partnership with local employers and to prepare students for meaningful careers. It also exists to provide access to many who would otherwise not be able to attend higher education. It embodies a deep commitment to serving an historically economically disenfranchised local community. The ideal of community engagement is widely embraced." The first value stems from its founding as a technical institute. As one longtime staff member put it, "the reason this university exists is to meet the needs of enterprise and

technology." Many faculty and staff feel considerable pride in the institution's strength in science and technology. Innovation more generally is a value that is embraced by people who work there. A staff member explained, "DCU has had a willingness to try new things in a way when other Irish universities were slow." Another colleague noted that several current faculty and staff began working at DCU when it was a younger institution and at that time "[t]here was this battling – that sort of scrappy endeavoring." This quality has endured at DCU to the current day: "There has always been a sense of 'We'll try it' and 'Just say yes' to things. Change is good, we can be adaptable and flexible. Let's give it a bash and innovate."

One area of DCU's innovation work focuses on economic and human development – preparing students for meaningful jobs and employment. DCU was the first university in Ireland to require internship placements in the third year for its undergraduate students, and more than 80 percent of students participate. This initiative has proven to be a highly effective means of preparing students for the workforce and matching undergraduates with future employers. Indeed, many DCU programs actively solicit input from employers regarding the preparation of graduates. These values are reflected in institutional flexibility. A staff member described the university this way: "Decision-making here is much quicker. You don't have the same red tape as you may have elsewhere, and the access to senior management is much better. I think like that. So, there is a culture of openness and getting things done. And, yeah, I think people see DCU as a younger, more vibrant university." Because of these efforts, DCU's placement rate for postgraduates is quite high. As another staff member shared, "DCU has really good industry ratings, by the way, probably the best university in the country."

Coupled with the values of economic innovation and service to society is a deep concern for students. A staff member who came from Trinity described DCU as something of a "culture shock," explaining: "At Trinity you're taught by academics and it's 'You better swim to survive here.' Whereas here [at DCU] there's developmental time put into students to encourage them, to retain them, to help them if they're struggling through the first year. It's much more of a pastoral culture here, I think." In addition to embodying a culture of care for students, DCU also strives to be a beacon of hope in an area of the city that has often felt overlooked or even abandoned. From its inception, DCU sponsored programs aimed at alleviating some of the effects of poverty in the Northside. One longtime administrator noted: "There has always been somebody – no matter what school or department it was – always somebody doing something with community engagement." The belief

that the university should promote the economic and social well-being of the local community and wider city is a sentiment shared by many at DCU today. "Transforming lives and societies" was the title of a previous university strategic plan, and people still quote it as Gospel. As one faculty member from the institute said, "[Civic] engagement is a priority of DCU. You probably have heard that all over the place – teaching, research, and civic engagement. It's the pillars of what we do. So, it's certainly talked about, it's promoted, it's in our strategies, and it's in our Institute of Education strategy. Indeed, some see it as a distinguishing feature." Another faculty member noted, "We see civic engagement as a way you can distinguish yourself from the crowd," and indeed DCU has garnered considerable attention for its community engagement work. Representatives from higher education associations and visitors from other universities, including elite ones, have come to DCU to better understand how community engagement can be incorporated into core academic work.

In addition to these core values, a significant driving force at DCU is ambition. As one staff member explained, "I think it's a very progressive forward-looking institution … I think our values matter to us a lot *and* I think we are ambitious. I think we're an ambitious university. I think we want to have impact and influence globally and locally. I suppose we are very aware of our potential to achieve and our potential to have impact." This desire for recognition has produced some tensions as leaders, faculty, and staff work out DCU's future. As one faculty member put it, "DCU is a terrier that wants to be a wolfhound." Some feel that DCU's endeavors to compete with more elite institutions and "run with the big dogs" has hindered progress on other important institutional efforts, namely those with outcomes that are valuable but less quantifiable than numbers of peer-reviewed publications or grant dollars earned. It is a tension the university is still working out.

LIVING OUT ITS MISSION

DCU has engaged in a wide range of activities that support its goal of "transforming lives and societies." First and foremost are its efforts to provide a rigorous education that prepares its graduates for ready employment and meaningful careers. As one faculty member described, "There's a social consciousness around our work that is genuine … It is very much about the individual life of the student and how you transform that through their

education, and then how they interact with the society they're going out into." Another faculty member explained, "DCU has been known for graduate employability . . . we're very strong on that. Most programs have a work element, and employers love it." For example, in psychology, all students must participate in an internship in the second half of their third year and cannot begin their fourth year of study until this has been successfully completed. Students focus entirely on their internship for the duration of fourteen weeks and at the end present a portfolio demonstrating the skills they have developed during that time. DCU's internship office is a key partner in these efforts, managing a comprehensive online database of placement opportunities in the community and research apprenticeships on campus. Academic departments work with the internship office to identify projects that are particularly relevant to their area of study. They are located at hospitals, companies, special needs schools, and charitable organizations. As one associate dean for engagement put it, "Through very strong collaborations with the internship office, we establish the list of available placements for our students. We select the best available placements for that particular semester." Students must apply for internships, a process that includes completing an interview. In a sense, the process mirrors the job search students will undertake upon graduation; as one faculty member explained, "They get a miniature experience – but a full experience of how it feels to apply for a job in the area." This scaffolding of preparation for employment builds student confidence and leads to postgraduation success.

Another expression of DCU's mission is its access programming. These programs provide funding and support for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas and benefit many students from low-income families in the Northside. DCU supports approximately 1,200 access students – individuals who almost certainly would not be attending university without substantial aid. While the access student numbers are not vast (approximately 7 percent of the student body), DCU's commitment far exceeds that of other universities in the country. As one administrator noted, "Our next biggest competitor that's twice our size has 500 [access students]. Trinity, which is seen as the 'great-all' has 40."

Community engagement is also a prominent feature of the university's cocurricular activities. DCU offers a wide array of clubs and societies that provide students with opportunities to learn to collaborate together and develop skills as leaders. Many of these groups are actively involved in community-based activities and volunteering efforts. One faculty member observed, "I definitely wouldn't have seen this kind of activity or engagement

when I was a student." An associate dean for internationalization and external engagement noted, "I think it's running in their veins . . . I really think it's part of the Irish culture . . . there is a connection to the local community."

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-BASED WORK

At the institutional level, this commitment to community engagement is clearly evidenced in DCU's stated priorities, including its strategic plan. As one staff member explained, "I know, I know, that might just be words on paper, but they're very important words on paper." DCU's faculty reward system is supportive of community engagement, and key performance indicators are tied to community-based work. The workload system allows faculty to allocate units of work to accommodate their particular responsibilities. Teaching courses, advising internships, and publishing peer-reviewed journal articles are all worth a certain number of units. Faculty can devise their own balance between teaching, research, and service, and workloads are assessed annually by faculty supervisors. A faculty member reflected, "I think the culture of the university allows for us to have this flexibility to make the choice for ourselves on when we can participate and at what." Many faculty members can incorporate community-based work into their work lives. As one colleague explained:

> A lot of people link their community work with their research work. It's very hard to uncouple that. So, for example, in a lot of the research I do, my research I always try to make sure it has an actual impact on the ground and is of useful practical help to settings . . . I would say there are a lot of people who think like that.

Indeed, according to a faculty member who sits on DCU's Research Ethics Committee (which reviews research proposals of the faculty), "I see all the research that's to be done in the university and I know there's loads of engaged research going on."

COORDINATING INSTITUTIONAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

While DCU has always had a broad ethos of service to the community, these efforts were largely uncoordinated in the early 2000s. One administrator recalled when speaking with a dean of a faculty, "It struck me that there

had always been a social consciousness of some sort. It was ill defined but quite different from some of the elite universities." This changed under the presidency of Ferdinand von Prondzyski, who joined DCU in 2000. Von Prondzyski was a progressive German-born Irish citizen who had been a fellow at Trinity College. His work focused on industrial relations and the value of resolving disputes through bargaining. Early in his presidential tenure, he sought to foster more collaboration across DCU's schools. A key staff member charged with advancing this work recalled, "The faculties and deans were not very happy with this," so President Von Prondzyski decided to shift his focus to promoting greater civic engagement.

Sociologist Ronaldo "Ronnie" Munck was working in the president's office at the time. Originally from Argentina, he had previously worked at the University of Liverpool, where he was involved in community-based research. At DCU, President von Prondzyski charged Munck with exploring avenues for advancing his vision of a more civically engaged DCU. Munck visited several other universities in the UK, including Brighton University, to understand how they were engaging in such work. What emerged during the 2005–2006 academic year was a strategy of redefining the three pillars of faculty work as teaching, research, and *civic engagement*. As Munck explained, "The key is getting the formal structure of the university, to have it mainstream and embedded into the consciousness." Reflecting on these efforts many years later, a senior faculty member noted, "One of the great achievements that Ronnie pushed was having engagement listed as one of the three criteria for promotion. So, engagement and service, teaching, and research. That was foundational."

An important aspect of this was creating opportunities for faculty to learn more about community-engaged teaching and research. As one staff member involved in the effort said, "We actually helped academics get their heads around it." In meetings and trainings, they drew on the expertise and examples of colleagues from DCU and also from Trinity. Characterizing the efforts, Munck said, "It's really been a capacity building exercise." This capacity building continues to this day and involves training faculty interested in this work through the showcasing of examples of community-engaged work at DCU. Indeed, there are many faculty at DCU doing exemplary community-engaged research, both in terms of scholarship produced and the collaborative nature of community partnerships. Members of the community are involved from the inception of an idea through the entire research cycle and serve as invaluable research partners. As one faculty member in the health sciences explained:

> I've worked with people [from the community] on many projects. I've had two people with dementia on the project as paid co-researchers who evaluate, and they were involved in going out and doing educational evaluation of supermarkets where we would be doing dementia awareness training. And they went and walked around the supermarkets and bought stuff and they could tell any difference from a supermarket where we hadn't done this intensive training . . . We call it PPI. The Center of Water calls it citizen science. The people in Comms might call it responsible research and innovation . . . everybody has a slightly different term.

While different terms may be used, all are examples of civic engagement and demonstrate DCU's commitment to reciprocal and mutually beneficial partnering.

Although good work is happening, spreading the word across the various faculties has been a challenge. As one staff member said, "Even though we've done tons of open houses for faculties and gone around talking, this is what we do, this is what we're trying to do, I think many people still don't know what we do." One thing this capacity-building work has clarified is what DCU means by "the community." Drawing on the expertise of Deiric Ó Broin, professor of public policy practice at DCU, Munck recalled, "I was asked as part of this strategy to define community, so [Deiric] said to me, 'We have a river that goes through Dublin, the Liffey, and you have a motorway, the M50, that circles it. This is more or less our community.'" For academics, community may mean the academic community they are a part of. Munck explained, "People would come to me and say, 'I have an academic community I'm part of,' and I would say, 'That's fine. That's not what we're talking about when we say community.'"

DCU IN THE COMMUNITY

A second major initiative launched to advance DCU's civic engagement was DCU in the Community. To begin to foster the development of long-term reciprocal partnerships with the community, Munck reasoned that DCU needed a footprint in the community itself, specifically in Ballymun, the heart of the Northside. At the same time, Ballymun Regeneration Limited reached out to DCU and began talking to Munck to see if the university might commit some resources. As a staff member described, "It was a little embassy in the community, just saying 'We are on your doorstep.' DCU had the resources and the expertise to partner up with local community partners

to see if we could encourage people back into education. That was the idea." The goal became to create a physical space where programs and educational classes could be held near a large housing project. The programs would work both with adult learners – helping people develop new marketable skills – and with young people to encourage an interest in further education.

The DCU in the Community Center opened during the 2008–2009 academic year, its funding shared by Ballymun Regeneration Limited and DCU. It was a challenging start. Early on there was skepticism from the local community about the effort. Young people vandalized the space and broke windows. It opened for a pilot phase for a year, closed for half a year to reassess the effort, then reopened again in 2010. Joanna Ozarowska, who was hired to manage DCU in the Community, recalled a great deal of work ahead of her when she joined in 2010, especially when it came to building credibility and trust with the community. Ozarowska noted:

> I think sometimes universities are seen still as operating on this kind of "grab and go" or sort of "hit and run" approach to communities where you go out, you take what you want, you report on it and you make yourself look good, and then you leave. I think trust-building in the community here was a really massive part of our work. I think probably for the first half of year, myself and a colleague who was working with me here, we were literally doing coffee rounds in the community.

These meetings between DCU senior management, staff, and community groups created a foundation on which later partnerships were built. Ozarowska explained, "There is a strong network here of community education or adult education providers. We also had to find a way to add to what they were doing rather than duplicate what they were doing because that doesn't make sense." At one point DCU attempted to partner with a local college of further education to expand capacity, but that proved difficult to sustain. Ultimately, they settled on providing youth and adult programming out of their center.

It took some time for DCU in the Community to gain traction. As Ozarowska recalled, "We began with women coming in to take classes. The lads would stay outside. Sometimes someone would break the windows in the facility. Gradually what happened was the women broke the ice and now the lads are coming to take classes as well." Soon the initiative and center gained recognition from the community. As one administrator recalled an important visitor from the higher education governing body that came to visit DCU in the Community. "I said 'did you find us OK?' He said. 'Yes, I asked

someone on the street and then my taxi driver who dropped me off if they knew about DCU in the Community and immediately they said that, yes, it's just down the road there.'"

Today DCU in the Community provides a variety of educational programs for youth and adults looking to pursue higher education. Among its adult education programs is Bridge to Education, a precollege preparation course that addresses academic reading and writing along with college survival skills. Another is an introductory course in psychology to model college-level learning. A third is a course called "Community Organization Management" that focuses on capacity building in the community. People who are employed by local community organizations can learn more about management in the volunteer sector. The DCU in the Community Center also provides educational guidance, helping returning students map out progression pathways and even assisting them with completing finance applications.

Adult and youth classes tend to be small, approximately fifteen students, which enables participants to get the support they need to be successful. Expansion is currently not possible, and as one staff member noted, "We are not looking for huge numbers of students here overall. We do what we can within the staffing levels that we have." Efforts are augmented by student volunteers from DCU. A staff member explained, "We have some really great center volunteering initiatives. DCU students, particularly those linked with clubs and societies that are more socially oriented, they've been absolutely great here. Just coaching kids, doing cooking classes for parents. Anything. Running coping programs for kids, you know, amazing volunteers."

Apart from the DCU in the Community initiative, DCU has developed organizational structures to support civic engagement on campus as well. Most of DCU's schools have established an associate dean position charged with supporting local and international engagement. The range of activities these administrators take on varies. Some focus on marketing DCU to external constituencies to ensure robust enrolments. Others focus on international teaching, research, and pipelines of students while encouraging community-based work in Dublin. While there is variation in the roles, there are administrators in nearly every school that faculty and staff interested in this work can turn to. As one administrator put it, "You go down to any corridor, talk to any head of school or dean and they know that DCU has an engagement strategy, and many have appointed associate deans for engagement."

In 2020, DCU launched a center aimed at further advancing civic engagement work, the Center for Engaged Research. One aspect of its work has been to identify and hold up exemplars of civic engagement at DCU. The center

offers presentations by Zoom that highlight community-based projects and draw in people from the community and even from other countries. A staff member shared, "There are some really gemlike engagement projects. We had one on breastfeeding. We had a really lovely one on parental mental health and the impact that has on the mental health of children. The importance of investing in the parents prenatally and postnatally for a year–Young Ballymun, the project's called, and it's been amazing." The Center for Engaged Research has also emphasized capacity building for faculty members, helping them learn the possibilities and challenges of community-engaged scholarship. Topics include developing meaningful and reciprocal partnerships, working with community groups to jointly define research goals, organizing community-based projects, and running meetings that give voice to the community. Finally, the center maintains a strong network of contacts in the community – community organizations, public participation networks in Dublin, and nonprofits – and helps faculty and staff identify potential partners for their research.

There are an impressive number of community-engaged teaching and research projects being led by faculty and staff across the university. For example, the School of Mathematical Sciences has a math tutoring program for secondary-level students at Trinity Comprehensive School. DCU students work one on one with pupils there. Another cross-faculty project is working with Irish brewers and distillers to manufacture compostable bioplastics for use in labs, replacing fossil fuel-based plastics. This project won a Science Foundation Ireland plastics challenge award and received major funding for their ongoing work. Another project, the DCU Water Institute, has worked to identify and train citizen scientists to test waterways in Ireland, measuring water quality and the presence of nutrients, nitrate, and phosphate that can choke waterways with algae and deplete oxygen. A recent effort gathered close to 600 samples across the country over four days, enabling the project to test thirty-three out of forty-six river catchment areas nationwide.

Community impact is increasingly important to many funders in Europe. Munck, who has helped advance this work, explained, "In earlier years for colleagues like physicists, doing community engagement was nice, 'Oh we'll help those people over there.' But it wasn't core. Whereas now, the idea of working with others, of co-creating knowledge, is becoming the bee's knees with funders, and the EU in particular. Today, even if you're a physicist, you have to show that you're engaging with your communities because that's what funders expect." However, in some instances, faculty involved in community-based research activities are reluctant to join the center's efforts

since, as one staff member put it, "[t]hey know we're going to ask them to deliver a presentation or a seminar on their work." In other cases, there seem to be concerns about who will get credit for the work. Describing the reluctance of one faculty member deeply involved in the community to affiliate with the center, a staff member said, "I think it's a branding thing and it may be the way centers work at DCU . . . There's nothing personal between us. It's just literally . . . I think she's very protective of the brand of her own center." As a result, the center has faced some difficulty coordinating and documenting community-engaged research. Another challenge the center has faced is its capacity; it is led by two individuals for whom this is only part of their work. "It's a small amount of support and a part time job," said one.

THE AGE-FRIENDLY UNIVERSITY

Another initiative aimed at reimagining the university's relationship to the community is DCU's impressive work on lifelong learning, with DCU pioneering the idea of the "age-friendly" university. In 2010 DCU established a committee to explore the concept of lifelong learning. That group finalized ten principles in 2012 to define what being an "age-friendly" university meant in practice. The timing of this happened to coincide with the European year of intergenerational solidarity, and DCU began conversations with other institutions about how they might work together in implementing these ideas and formed the Age-Friendly Network.

Today, the Age-Friendly Network has over 100 university members from a variety of countries all striving to enact these ideals. As one staff member explained, "In nearly every white paper on education, certainly in the European context, you'll see the emphasis is on lifelong learning. But how is that actually represented in the university?" The age-friendly university model is an innovative response to that question. Age-friendly universities strive to develop the human potential of people of all ages. That work has important economic implications for these learners. As one faculty member explained, "Governments look at higher education for being the conduit for young people. They don't look at the ancillary benefits [such as adult learning]. We have been asking how do we create a revenue stream for that mid-life person that might be looking to re-train or skill up and come back to the university?"

DCU has created several initiatives connected to this work. For example, one faculty member launched a series of medically supervised health

programs that link people in the community with healthcare settings. The program was so successful that, with the support of the Irish government, it has now been rolled out nationally. Another program pairs management students with adults in the community. They meet twice a week for two hours for computer classes. Students may receive up to two credits for participating, and many continue participating long after receiving their credits. Students learn to interact with adults with confidence and in a professional manner, build social skills, and get practice in presenting information clearly. As one faculty member explained in describing community-based teaching connected to the age-friendly university initiative, "This is the type of learning – the social things – that I think have a real impact that we probably don't measure properly and often overlook."

DCU's age-friendly university work has garnered considerable recognition for the institution. The university was a founding member of the covenant on demographic change developed under the auspices of the European Union. Representatives from DCU were involved in developing the age platform in Europe and, more recently, promoting the Global Coalition on Aging. Despite these broader contributions, related efforts have sometimes struggled to gain significant recognition on campuses, including at DCU. As one faculty member said, "I still think [the idea is] a hard sell for management teams."

In 2023, the senior leadership of DCU decided that the university would no longer host the Age-Friendly Network, allowing another university in the network to assume this responsibility. "That's obviously a huge disappointment," one faculty member involved in the effort remarked. However, he notes, "It doesn't take away from the fact that DCU did this work and built this network." While a primary issue was the financial commitment, it is clear that the senior administration did not see great value in the initiative. One staff member recalled an event DCU hosted that brought retired adults from the community to campus. The event was oriented around learning, and organizers hoped it would inspire attendees to get involved in or enroll in DCU programs. When asked to give a brief speech, a senior administrator arrived, welcomed the crowd, made some pleasant remarks, and then said that attendees were welcome on campus anytime and that "we" (the institution) would be happy to give them a cup of tea. While this was, no doubt, meant in the spirit of hospitality, it struck a false note. One participant who had recently sold his business for tens of millions of Euros said to a program staff member, "If I want a cuppa tea, I'll go to my mother's." This points to perhaps the biggest challenge in promoting a novel idea and getting traction

among leadership and community members. As one staff member explained, "A lot of the job has been challenging attitudes and I think it starts with challenging your own attitude towards aging."

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH CENTER

Another notable example of community-engaged research is being led by Professor Mathias Urban at the Early Childhood Research Center in the Institute for Education (formerly St. Patrick's College). The initiative was the brainchild of former DCU president Brian MacCraith (2010–2020). According to Urban, "Ireland is one of the countries in the Anglosphere with a long tradition of underinvesting in early childhood services – dramatically underfunding them. [It has a] long tradition of hands-off governance and over reliance on private for-profit provision." When Ireland became independent, many educational services were left to the Catholic Church. Much of the educational infrastructure in the country, including the buildings, is owned by the Church. Teachers are employed by the Church but teach a national curriculum and have their salaries paid by the government. However, for-profit providers have been used to serve the needs of early childhood education. President MacCraith convinced a leading donor to endow a chair and create a center dedicated to early childhood development and education, thus ensuring it would remain a strategic priority.

The Early Childhood Research Center has drawn together faculty colleagues from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, education, sociology, and political science. While the center does focus on early childhood education, its purview is more expansive, seeking to understand the systems and structures that influence the lives of young children. As Urban explained, "I'm basically the jack of all trades trying to bring this connection." Reflecting on the center's work, Urban shared, "What connects us to DCU is a certain spirit, ambition, and mission. We're grounded in the local – north Dublin – linked to the community. We're very proud of our access programs – serving students from non-traditional backgrounds. At the same time, we're also globally connected. It's the local and the global." Indeed, Urban's efforts have had an extensive reach. He has been engaged with UNESCO in global policy work related to young children. The center helped organize the World Conference on Early Childhood and Care, held in Pakistan in 2022. Urban has also organized a global group of research institutions and think tanks across the G20 focused on early childhood development and education.

At the same time the center is involved in several initiatives in north Dublin, including the development of preschool preparation programs for children of immigrant families.

One participatory action research project funded by the Federal Trust in London brought together community members, community leaders, members of the Dublin City Council, and children to interrogate the conditions in which children are being raised in the inner city of Dublin. The event enabled children to express creatively the sorts of environments they would like to be living in and led to actionable steps forward. Urban shared, "We're not staying in a blue skies fantasy world, we're actually translating this into concrete steps and policies." This deeply rooted community-based work forms the basis of research that is having a global reach. Urban explained, "We're trying to make an argument at a global level about support systems for young children and families and to make communities better. [To do that] you have to critically involve children and families on the ground." It is an ideal mix of conceptually rich research and pragmatic intervention making a difference in the lives of children in Ireland and beyond.

COMPETING VISIONS OF DCU'S EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIETAL PURPOSE

It is clear that DCU has sought to define its institutional purpose in ways that both honor the traditional values of the academy and seek to enact a more expansive vision for the role a university can play in its community. But wider market pressures and the pursuit of prestige make these purposes challenging to reconcile. Those deeply involved in community engagement see it as a continuation of DCU's historic commitment to the Northside and a means to address key societal challenges through pragmatic ways and acts of deep scholarship. Community engagement opens up a better way of teaching disciplinary concepts and learning how to problem-solve. Partnering with the community on social problems and benefiting from the community's knowledge and expertise enables researchers to understand complex social problems more fully, leading to richer theoretical contributions to the field. In short, it produces better research.

Many faculty are pursuing community-engaged scholarship. One faculty member who spoke about her community-based work remarked, "I don't believe you can do research [of the kind I do] unless it's engaged. So, it's not engagement for the sake of engagement, it's because I can't do – I can't find out the knowledge that I'm interested in finding out unless I'm engaged with

people." Many of her colleagues agreed. One pointed out, "It's very hard to separate out research and teaching and engagement." Further she noted that community-based work uniquely positions DCU as a place whose research and expertise has practical value and relevance to the community: "I think it's wonderful that they see us as an organization to come to, to advise and to develop things for, and to assist and support the system. So, I'd really like that to continue and do more of it."

There is an understanding among this group that community engagement is not something everyone must participate in. Traditional scholarship is valuable. However, community-engaged scholarship should also be a welcomed and encouraged way of conducting scholarship. Those who choose to do it deserve understanding, support, and resources from the institution. As one staff member put it, "A lot of [the university's] work is around excellence in teaching, learning, and research. But I think DCU's real strength is in outward looking community engagement. I think [the motto] 'transforming lives and societies,' with a focus on the local neighborhood as well – I think that would be a nice way of reflecting what DCU's mission is."

However, this vision rests alongside other competing notions of what DCU should become. Another vision emphasizes having DCU serve the business community. Indeed, the impressive internship program connects many students with companies in the city. So many connections have been made between DCU and the business community that one faculty member expressed concern that "civic engagement has slipped a bit" and that the concept of "enterprise engagement" – working with employers and companies – has eclipsed work with the wider community. A staff member observed that DCU's institutional language is changing as well. She was asked to look at a volunteering pamphlet being produced by the university and recalled, "The first line was, 'In today's competitive labor market, volunteering can give you an extra edge.' I was like 'Volunteering is not about that.' But it speaks to a certain group of students. It speaks to university leaders who say, 'Okay volunteering is good because yeah, you develop all those kind of marketable skills.'" DCU is also experiencing the pressures of the larger market and policy environment in its search for external validation, including its performance on metrics that drive national and international rankings. As one staff member put it, "It's a bit of a crass game [but] the pressure is there. Nationally, in the Irish context, for the new model technological universities, the pressure is huge." Many involved in DCU's community engagement work have come to terms with this. As one faculty member said, "I've become a more pragmatic person about these things. It's hard to

criticize universities because they operate in a certain environment. They have to tick certain boxes and make rankings, you know." However, one administrator pointed to some of the consequences of such pressures, "There's obviously [external] pressure to swing the university back to the hard rankings piece. So, 'I'm sorry, none of this added extra stuff.' This is about citations and all that kind of thing. But in a way, that's sort of a slightly different end of the university."

Indeed, such an end leads to incentives that run counter to the work of community engagement. This can promote a culture where peer-reviewed journal articles matter more than grants for community-based programming. Recently there have been messages coming from the senior administration that are clearly bowing to rankings. When asked if there were subtle pressures favoring traditional research metrics, a faculty member replied, "I think it's even more mercenary than that. Actually, we have a new [senior administrator] and he just wrote a staff email that has a lot of people very [upset] because he said research funding is an input, not an output. Publications are outputs." In other words, projects that draw in grant monies to support community-based interventions don't count unless a peer-reviewed journal article is also produced.

However, research aimed at solving complex community problems does not always yield definitive findings. Community-based scholarship grounded in deep, reciprocal partnerships can produce important new knowledge, but scholarly and practical outcomes must reflect the needs of community partners. Far more time is spent cultivating relationships and mutually deciding upon the outcomes of the partnership than is the case with traditional research done in (not with) the community. Furthermore, desirable outputs for the community – such as reports that summarize and provide detailed analyses of a community-based problem – are generally not suitable for publication. The impact is intuited but can be difficult to measure using standard social science approaches. One faculty member shared her experience of this:

> I did a piece of research on [the psychosocial well-being of the elderly]. We did it in nursing homes. We tried to compare our intervention to a drug the pharmaceutical companies were giving people for dementia. They look at [indicators like] does it have an impact on function, does it have any impact on quality of life, does it have any impact on mood? In our therapeutic intervention we could see that for everyone it was a "craic." But those moments of fun didn't translate into a measurable, better quality of life a week later. Dementia is a complicated thing.

> If you decide if you can't measure it a week later it doesn't matter, you're really just condemning these people to just sit round the edges of a room being miserable the whole time . . . We could see it had made a difference, but we couldn't measure it in the standard ways. We're getting better at those evaluations now.

Looking back on the situation, she noted, "Why would you compare this amazing psycho-social kind of experience to a dose of a drug that you give somebody? Why are we even trying to compare ourselves with the drug companies?" Community-engaged scholarship invites researchers to question those assumptions. It also allows faculty to do work they find immensely meaningful, even if its scholarly impacts are limited. A senior faculty member noted, "Early on in my career, I was headlonging to just getting funding and just doing loads of publications. And then you realize, I'm not really very proud of some of that work . . . It's actually [some of] the smaller projects that I've done that I'm most proud of those outputs."

The institution has sought to recognize civic engagement in its tenure and promotion process for faculty by reframing the traditional triumvirate of teaching, research, and service, to teaching, research, and civic engagement. However, making civic engagement the equivalent of "service" has posed challenges. First, it equates that work with other forms of service. One faculty member explained, "Many kinds of service count towards that. It could be engagement with the wider university by serving on a committee. It could be community engagement. It could be all sorts of administrative things." While such work is important, in most universities it is valued less than research or teaching and advising. Perhaps more importantly, this formulation fails to recognize the ways faculty have incorporated community-based work into their teaching (service learning) or research. As one colleague put it, "For me, civic engagement *is* my research." She continued, "[The university] sees engaging with the public as a kind of extra thing, and extra responsibility. Whereas with me it's embedded in the responsibility in knowledge generation because if you don't involve the people who you're researching in that, you may be asking completely the wrong questions. You may be doing 'valid' research but it's useless really."

The support lent by presidents has also varied over time. Part of the variation comes from the ten-year terms of university presidents, which is the national norm. Each president comes with a vision and set of aspirations. At DCU there has been consistent vocal support for civic engagement from leadership, but the value of effusive praise has its limits if it is not backed by action and tangible resources. As one faculty member put it, "It's in the

strategy and I think the highest places in the food chain of this university talk a lot about engagement but don't really want to translate what that means into anything concrete. And that's a really big problem." Another explained, "You need a champion. I'm not sure that we have a champion at a higher level." In 2019 the Taoiseach, Ireland's prime minister, visited DCU. A staff member recalled:

> It was a really big deal. Because he looks at us as the kind of model of this kind of community university partnership. So, we had the previous DCU president here, Brian MacCraith. We had a lot of colleagues that are involved in community engaged research, we had some student volunteers . . . There was this huge PR machine around this, and we were delighted. We're finally, we're getting some airtime! But then, you know, it just kind of died down after a while and the university moves onto the new thing that is nice and shiny.

While civic engagement continues to be mentioned in the university's strategic plan, there is no high-level tactical plan for advancing and institutionalizing it. Instead, the university's leadership has been content to highlight its various impressive initiatives, many of which were implemented on a grassroots basis. But such recognition falls short. As one administrator explained, "We have far too many shiny buttons, right? . . . I feel we don't need any more shiny buttons . . . We've got to work out why we have them, why they are essential, and tell that story a bit better. Do they fit? Do they matter?" Without a clear, coordinated institutional commitment and greater financial backing for existing community engagement initiatives, civic engagement at DCU will continue to rest on the shoulders of those personally committed to this work.

CONCLUSION

Whether DCU will be able to maintain its innovative and progressive community-based work is uncertain. Several faculty members noted that a changing of the guard appears to be occurring at DCU. One said:

> If you look at the founding generation, the people are either just retired or coming close. They developed the ethos [of community engagement] and imbibed the ethos. Over the last five or ten years – it's not that the ethos has dimmed. But I think you have a lot of the younger staff coming from very different traditions. The cultural reproductive is maybe not as successful as we had taken for granted.

Indeed, one staff member, who provides professional development to faculty interested in community-based work, has noted a shift in the attitude of newer faculty:

> I had a couple of conversations recently with people in [one school] and basically what they said to me – they used this terminology: "I would like DCU to be a normal university." What that means is not a university that's going to break boundaries in the disciplines or change the world. Just a normal university like Bradford University or Manchester University. There is a sense that the first generation had that first rush of enthusiasm. DCU was a very special type of university. It was engaged with the professions, it was engaged with the community, it was engaged with enterprise. That is going with people coming to us from Trinity and UCD and saying, "We just want a normal teaching job like everybody else."

A faculty member who has helped champion this work and seen this attitude remarked, "It comes up time and again and it can be awkward. They just want to come in and get home and you don't have to care about the community. Whereas this place is built to care about that."

The innovation that has occurred at DCU is quite remarkable. Its community-based research produces not only new knowledge for the academic disciplines but also actionable knowledge that addresses real-world problems. DCU has creatively reinterpreted the definition of scholarship itself, leading to traditional outputs (e.g., peer-reviewed publications) alongside community reports and work advancing positive societal change. The university has taken institutional steps to advance this work, through the forming of various centers and adapting its tenure and promotion processes to recognize such community-based work. Yet DCU is a relatively new institution, and whether the commitment to this innovative, impactful work will continue among the next generation of leadership and scholars remains an open question.