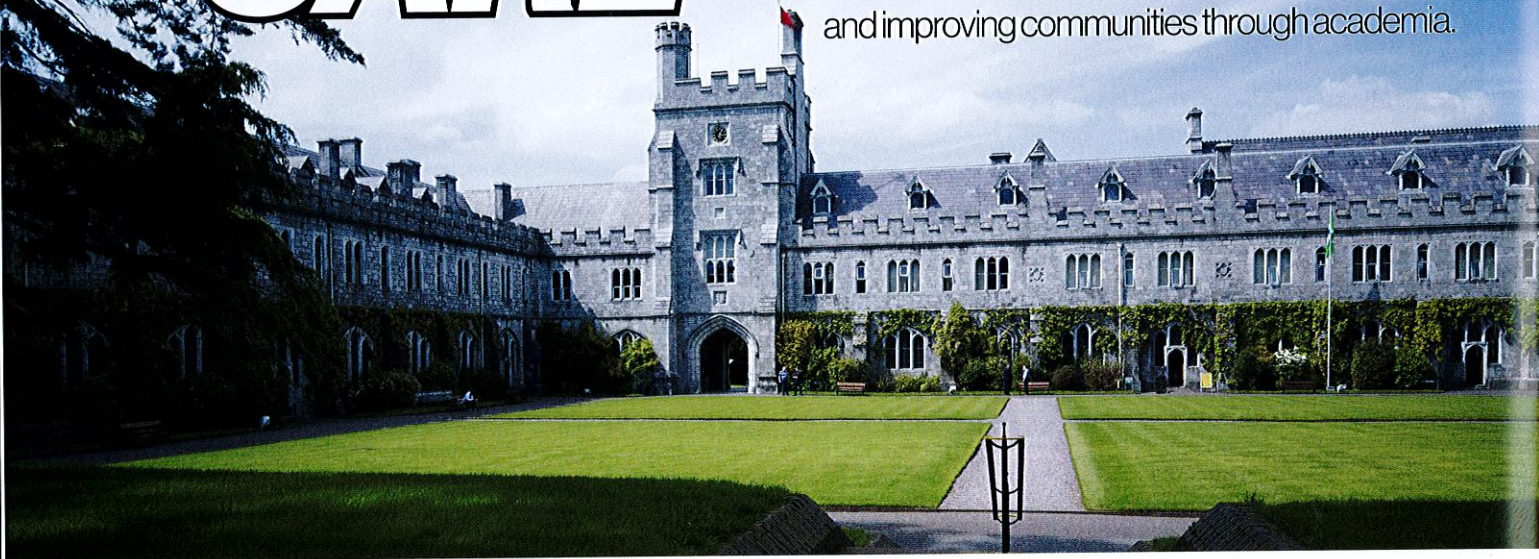# CARL

Motley staff writer **Ryan O'Neill** sits down with student researchers from the Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) initiative in UCC to talk about the power of student research and improving communities through academia.

Living by a (sometimes) equally balanced combination of doing college work, socialising and deciding on the considerable matter of what career to choose next year, I am often unaware of many of the lesser-known aspects of UCC. Naturally, I had previously never heard of the CARL initiative. Equipped solely with the small amount of information I had found online, I met a host of its student researchers, all of whom are, like me, in their final year of college, without much of an idea of the nature of CARL's work. While this might make me sound unprepared, it was in fact pleasantly refreshing to learn about something on the spot, rather than coming into an interview with a plethora of information. Answering my initial question, Paul, a final year social science student, explained the concept of CARL.

"CARL is part of the science shop model and works in collaboration with community organisations who want to carry out research on a particular topic but may not be able to afford to, or have the expertise to do so. They would get in contact with student researchers like ourselves who would work in smaller groups to research the particular area for the benefit of the services of that organisation."

One of the key aspects of the CARL initiative is its ability to transfer sophisticated academic research into tangible improvements in communities, ensuring that, rather than being stowed away on shelves or research rooms, its impact translates to real-life results. Áine, a final year Occupational Therapy student, says: "CARL stands for Community Academic Research Links. For us, it's about making the connection between doing academic research and that work making an actual difference to communities."

The idea of research extending beyond the network of academics and into the real world is clearly an important one for all five student I am speaking with. Michael, another final year student, is keen to stress the ability of CARL to "take research out of the ivory tower of 'research for research's sake' in the university to allow it to become part of the wider community, so that academics don't feel as far removed and are making a real difference in society."

In terms of being attractive for organisations, CARL is both cost-conscious and accessible. While often research is kept away from prying eyes, exclusive to those who commission or publish it or bound by endless red tape, Michael explains to me that all research conducted by CARL is made available on the initiative's website, making it freely

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available to everyone. "It's a great principle to have as it can benefit everyone in society rather than only those who can access academic journals."

Áine outlines the importance of the financial aspect of CARL, assuring me that: "[CARL] try to keep our research as cheap as possible for the community organisation. We want to make it about the knowledge and the research as much as possible, rather than the cost of undertaking big research projects which can be intimidating for community organisations."

A wide-ranging and diverse initiative

Although part of the 'Science Shop' model, CARL's projects stretch across various topics in a wide range of areas – even today the students interviewed come from a wide range of fields, from occupational therapy to zoology and social science. Paul currently works with an organisation called Friendly Call Cork, which provides daily phone calls to over 160 elderly people who may be lonely or vulnerable, checking on them and providing them with the security of knowing they will be contacted. For Paul, these organisations are very important in ensuring that older people don't feel isolated or alone:

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Since it began working with community organisations back in 2010, CARL has continued to expand its areas of research. Ciara, a Zoology student, notes that her current project with CARL is the initiative's first foray into zoology. Working in collaboration with Leave No Trace Ireland, Ciara monitors ethical outdoor behaviour in order to preserve wildlife. As part of her research, she has been to two different sites to make observations, ensuring that outdoor activities like walking dogs are not having a negative effect on birds in the area. She acknowledges that the project is an outlier in terms of what CARL normally researches, which is testament to the expanding nature of the initiative.

Julie, a final year Occupational Therapy student, is currently working on a project with the Cope Foundation. Her project is specifically focused on pre-schooling and children with autism or other intellectual disabilities: "We've found from our research that children with disabilities like autism play differently, and the purpose of our project is to work with those children across Cork City and County to ensure they have access to those methods of play."

Michael is partnered with the Cork Centre for Independent Living, who focus on accessibility in the city for those with sensory or physical disabilities: "In particular my research is on wheelchair accessibility in the city. What I like is that it's very participatory; I didn't formulate questions for my participants. Rather, I constructed a very broad interview to begin with and undertook my research from the answers I received. The idea is to directly incorporate the people involved into the research, which I think is really good."

How welcoming are the organisations to student research proposals? Far from having to sell themselves or their ideas, Paul notes the appreciation that he has been met with by the services he has collaborated with, while Julie says that "Once we went to them there was no question that they weren't going to be involved – they were just delighted to get our help and be a part of the projects."

Unbound by resource limitations and under the watchful eyes of their supervisors, the idea of students undertaking research is an undoubtedly attractive one. Michael notes that "the organisations know that we are students and not experts, but that we are being supervised by experts, and I think that gives them a sense of safety", while Ciara muses that access to key resources like academic journals and the library is something which gives a value to student participation in the eyes of the organisations.

Although academic research is something which appeals to me personally, I have always been sceptical of academia for academia's sake; the idea that something which may be confined solely to academic circles and dusty library shelves until the end of time, despite being excellently researched and well written, leaves me a little cold. Initiatives like CARL, therefore, are essential in prompting research which is properly integrated into society and leads to palpable, real improvements in the community. I am therefore hopeful that CARL and initiatives like it continue to grow and prosper in UCC (and, dare I say, in other colleges around the country) and forge strong links between student-based research and community improvement.