

NUI Galway 'must set itself tough targets'

Jim Browne, president of NUI Galway, says it may never be the biggest but it can be the best within defined areas, writes **Margaret O'Brien**

Professor Jim Browne became the twelfth president of NUI Galway in March. Previously registrar and deputy-president at the university, he will serve a 10-year tenure as president.

A native of Athlone, Browne is an engineering graduate of NUI Galway, who has a distinguished academic record, with wide international contacts and experience of other universities in Europe, the United States, Asia and Latin America.

Browne has a particularly strong track record in the field of research and is committed to promoting the university both nationally and internationally.

As registrar and deputy-president, Browne has been instrumental in introducing significant change within the university, particularly in terms of structure and functions, changes, which he said, "were introduced gradually, quietly, but effectively".

It is widely recognised that in this and other ways, he has made a major contribution to the progress and the success of NUI Galway over the past seven years.

Three months into his new role and Browne is appreciative of the honour but also recognises the challenges ahead.

"This university has got to compete at the top level. We have done very well to date, but I believe we can do a lot better. While NUI Galway has established an enviable portfolio in the field of research, we need to ensure that we retain and grow our reputation."

He is ambitious for the university. "We won't ever be the biggest, but we can certainly be the best within defined areas. We have adopted a very progressive approach and have made huge strides. NUI Galway was the first university in Ireland to introduce incubator facilities and over the years we have forged strong partnerships with industry and at the same time are well aware of national priorities."

The university counts among its partners companies such as Nortel, Cisco, Hewlett Packard, Medtronic and more recently Beckman Coulter, said Browne, as well as organisations such as the HSE, the Marine Institute and Údarás na Gaeltachta.

"Our research agenda is driven by the needs of our partners and to a great extent reflects the local business landscape. For example the biggest area of research for NUI Galway is in medical devices. This is as it should be given that a cluster of leading global medical device companies are based around the city."

Browne defines strength and

success in terms of external, objective recognition. "Within

the area of social sciences, we have developed a terrific reputation for our work in family support, disability law, and in areas concerned with disadvantaged people and human rights.

"Our research in the fields of biomedical and marine sciences is highly regarded as is our work in the area of environmental change and in applied optics."

While Browne is proud of the university's achievements on many levels, one senses that his greatest source of pride is the achievement of its research institutes.

"What our research teams, working in the Digital Enterprise Research Institute (DERI) have achieved, is recognised and applauded worldwide," he said.

"DERI is home to a thoroughly multi-national group of 130 researchers, making it the largest Semantic Web research institute in the world. Semantic Web is the evolving next generation of the world wide web, which will allow our computers to understand the semantics of online information, rather than just pulling data."

The recent announcement of a four-year collaboration programme, with world leading US medical device company Beckman Coulter is,

according to Browne, "another measure of our success in medical device research".

While NUI Galway's location has been of tremendous benefit to the university, Galway is arguably just as lucky to have a university of the calibre of NUI Galway.

"Galway is a vibrant and outward looking city and as a university we are lucky to be part of it, and to have the opportunity to contribute to it."

Speaking of contribution, he is proud of NUI Galway's commitment to community engagement. While very often the focus of attention is on a university's economic contribution, at NUI Galway, there is a strong and formalised approach to the advancement of its civic role.

The university has begun to move towards mainstreaming its civic engagement agenda through its community knowledge initiative (CKI) and the increased participation in student volunteering and service learning through its ALIVE programme, and also through engagement in socially relevant research.

"In many ways we are ahead of other institutions, in terms of our commitment to working with the community and our secret is simple, it's to engage," said Browne.

Having spent most of his adult life living in Galway, Browne said one of the key attractions the city holds for him is that it is very definitely not provincial in its outlook.

"The people, and particularly the business community within Galway, have great outward vision, as exemplified most recently by winning a stopover stage of the Volvo Ocean Race.

"That event, to be staged next May, will be huge for Galway and will enhance awareness of the city to a global audience."

Other examples of the city's cosmopolitan attitude and outlook, as cited by Browne, include its strong commitment to the arts and culture. "Look at the achievements of Druid Theatre, which had its origins

here on campus.”

There are currently 15,000 students attending NUI Galway, 9,000 of whom are undergraduates, 3,000 are postgraduates and 3,000 are involved in part-time studies.

Browne acknowledged that an increasingly important challenge is to attract greater numbers of overseas students. “We have a commitment to doubling our PhD numbers and we know that to achieve that we have to attract students from overseas.

“Already, over 10 per cent of our students are from overseas. While we have identified China as one of the key countries to recruit from, as it stands our largest cohort of international students come to us from North America. We also have students from Malaysia, the Middle East, India, China, and Sri Lanka, all taking taught postgraduate or doctorate studies.”

He believes that the presence of overseas students is of great benefit to Irish students.

“It is important that our students have an international perspective and a good mix of international cultures and students from different backgrounds on campus is good for everyone,” said Browne.

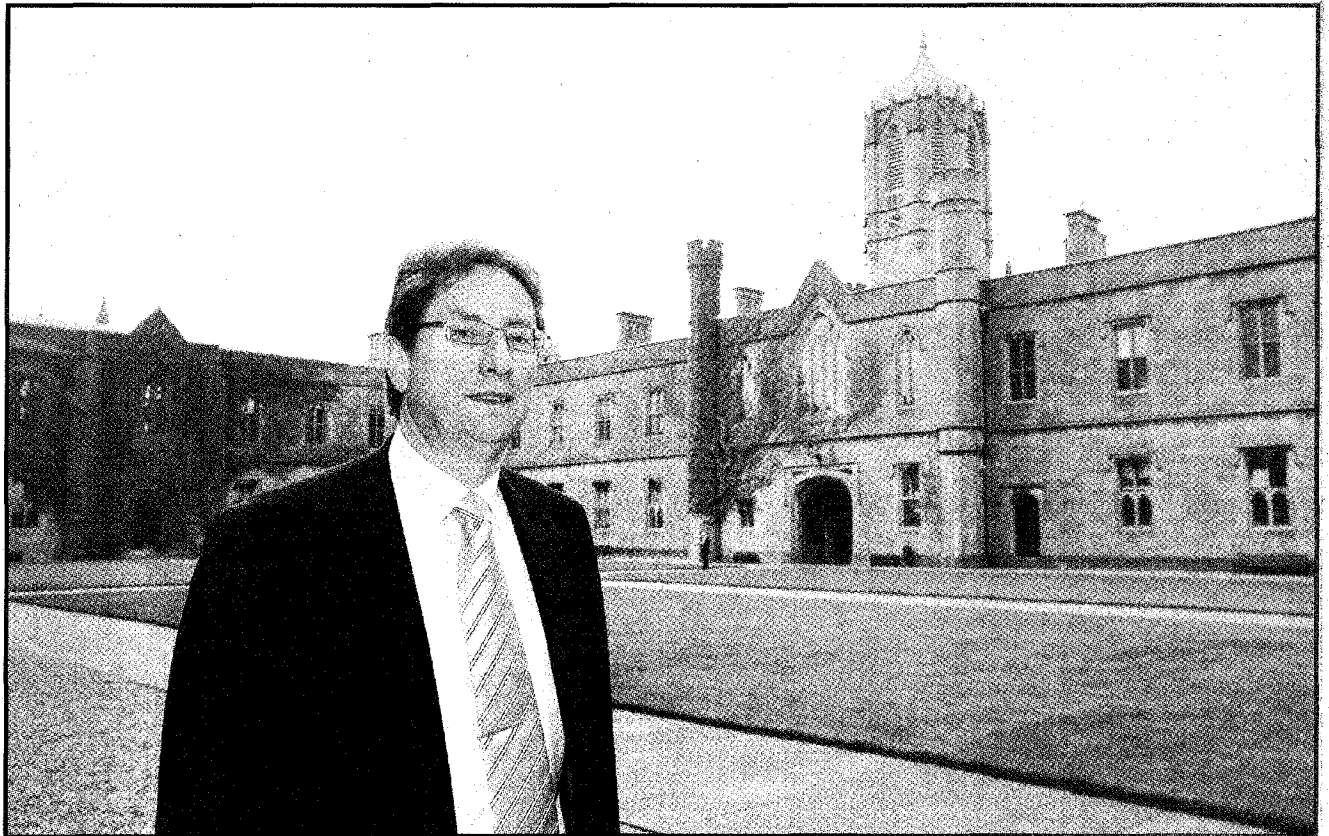
Unlike many other institutions, NUI Galway ensures that foreign students join existing programmes.

“We also impose quotas, so they are obliged to mix with local students. We have a strong pastoral care programme and resources to ensure that these students are looked after so-

cially as well as academically.”

The university’s recent restructure has been seismic, with the college reorganised from seven faculties and 60 schools to its current pared-down structure of five colleges and 16 schools.

As one of the architects and leaders of this change, Browne has proven his ability to bring about change without unnecessary fanfare. NUI Galway can face into the future with confidence.



Jim Browne, president, NUI Galway: 'This university has got to compete at the top level'