

Not to be outdone by the partnership of the capital's leading universities, Cork is developing the country's first dedicated science park

WHILE THE TWO largest Dublin universities have combined their efforts in innovation research, Ireland's second city looks set to be the location of the country's first Science, Technology & Innovation Park, following another collaborative initiative.

In an ambitious scheme announced recently, third- and fourth-level institutions in Cork, and the county council, have combined to identify a suitable site and have commissioned a plan to create a 150-acre high-tech park. Its promoters say that this could create up to 5,900 jobs and contribute €450 million to the local and regional economy.

One of the key drivers of the project is UCC, which owns part of the lands identified for the site at Curraheen on the western side of the city, which also borders Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), another key stakeholder in the concept. "We have been working on a plan for the last eight years," UCC president Dr Michael Murphy explains.

"Parks such as this act as hubs for research, innovation and investment, and the location of this one will facilitate collaboration between UCC and CIT, as well as the various other stakeholders."

The concept is modelled on a similar park that has been successfully developed by Surrey University in the UK over the past decade, he says.

Dr Murphy says that the plan, which has been undergoing a public consultation process in recent weeks, has achieved a high level of support from the local public. The scheme is being developed as a collaborative effort with various State agencies, including the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and Cork County Council. The council is working with land-owners and developers to secure the site, which will require planning permission and an amendment of the Local Area Plan.

UCC plans to establish at least one major campus research function in the start-up phase of the project, in either the life sciences or food sectors. It is hoped that this will be in place by early 2012.

Specifically, the campus will consist of a central "hub" building to foster innovation, a dedicated research building to foster and promote



Masters in Science graduates receiving degrees at UCC, which plans to set up at least one major campus research function in the start-up phase of the Science, Technology & Innovation Park. Photograph: Alan Betson

“The combined location of overseas and Irish-owned companies will aid the sharing of knowledge and innovation

start-up companies, and a range of other specially designed offices for firms involved in hi-tech research and innovation. In total, the plan envisages some 130,000sq m of enterprise space and 30,000sq m of research space.

The IDA has given its backing to the plan and says it will support the international marketing of the park through its network of global offices. According to the IDA, research suggests that such parks act as an engine for growth within a region. The combined location of overseas and Irish-owned companies at the facility will significantly aid the sharing of knowledge and innovation.

The promoters say their hope is that the park will act as a hub for world-class research, innovation and knowledge-driven technology enterprises that will be attractive to key researchers, entrepreneurs, innovators and investors.

They believe the site they have chosen has an added benefit because of its proximity to two third-level institutions that have a significant track record in research and innovation.

The viability of the plan is supported by a major research report undertaken for Cork County Council by international consultants Atkins, in conjunction with Roger Tym & Partners and Goodbody Economic Consultants.

Their feasibility study notes the national as

well as local support for the plan from relevant agencies such as Science Foundation Ireland, the Higher Education Authority, the IDA and Enterprise Ireland.

As the first designated science park in Ireland, it will assist the region in its quest for more foreign direct investment and will provide opportunities for third- and fourth-level graduates, the report says.

The initial phase of the project, which will include the construction of the primary UCC research centre and the hub building, is estimated to come to a cost of €36 million, excluding land acquisition.

International experience bears out the potential for huge economic benefits of well-run science parks. The world's first science park was developed in California in the 1950s and effectively sowed the seeds for what is now Silicon Valley. In 1969, the Sophia Antipolis Science Park broke new ground when it was set up in a greenfield location in the south of France, and it remains one of the most successful centres in the world with 1,300 enterprises employing over 30,000 people.

Closer to home, the UK has developed a science park sector with a representative body, the United Kingdom Science Park Association, which represents around 80 such locations in the UK. ■

Second city goes first class