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Making Life Worth Living

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Making life worth living

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DUBLIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY:DIT's Environmental Health Sciences Institute aims to achieve 'healthier lives for children, the elderly and vulnerable populations'

NEW TECHNOLOGIES to improve water quality, to assist people with disabilities and to boost hygiene and infection control measures are just some of the results Dublin Institute of Technology's Environmental Health Sciences Institute (EHSI) hopes to deliver.

This diverse range of research areas is an indication of the scope of this dedicated research centre for interdisciplinary research. Its stated mission is to achieve "healthier lives for children, the elderly and vulnerable populations".

The institute is a collaboration between the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Dublin City Council (DCC). At present, research is conducted at three DIT colleges but it is soon to move to a new campus in Grangegorman, Dublin.

Last July, the EHSI was awarded €12.4 million in funding under the Programme for Research in Third-level Institutions, with the stated aim of developing a dedicated research facility on the campus to enable interdisciplinary collaboration between scientists and environmental health professionals.

EHSI researchers hope to develop evidence-based interventions to address environmental health problems identified in the National Environmental and Health Action Plan (NEHAP), informing the Research Strategy for Environmental Health (2009-2012).

DIT's head of graduate research, Dr Mary McNamara, says: "The breadth of the research being carried out goes back to the definition of environmental health, which is very broad. It can range from food quality to the state of buildings and land and their impact on human health.

"We are trying to develop practical solutions to environmental health problems and inform environmental health policy, planning and decision-making. We also aim to have an impact on the health of vulnerable populations and facilitate investments to reduce the burden of chronic disease and injuries."

The collaborative nature of the institute is important in achieving these aims. "Our partners in the HSE and Dublin City Council are very important," she says. "All the environmental health officers who have experience of what is happening on the ground work for the HSE. What we are trying to do is bring our research together with the professional expertise and experience of our partners in order to develop innovative solutions."

She points to food quality and safety as one area that could have several outputs.

"We are looking at the diet of the population, and its impact," says McNamara. "This could result in the development of new policies and practices for dietitians. Research in this area could also result in technological advances that will enable food producers to enhance the quality and safety of their products.

"Another interesting area is the development of new techniques for hygiene and infection control. This could have major implications for the control of [infections] such as MRSA.

"We are also working with the National Disability Authority on technologies to assist people with disabilities. Another strand of our research could result in the development of non-invasive diagnostic tools for diseases such as cancer.

"The beauty of it is that in DIT we have the research expertise, the HSE has the professional expertise and practical experience, and we are bringing these together to define the research question.

“It’s only by defining the right questions that you can come up with the solutions people need. Our aim is to do research that people want and need. It may be a product or a policy, but the important thing is that it will affect people’s health and improve lives.”

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