

“I can’t believe it’s in UCD.” That’s how Rachel Breslin, UCD Students’ Union President, responded when asked what she thought of the new UCD Sport and Leisure facility which will be officially opened in October. “It’s like getting a new car, you feel that it’s not really yours and someone is going to come back later and take it away again – it’s that gorgeous”.

To say that Rachel is excited and delighted with the new building, officially called Áras na Macléinn, would be to undersell both words; when she thinks aloud how the Áras is going to change Belfield her mantra is that the possibilities are endless. Some say the original Belfield buildings kept the student body somewhat split up; with students having a lecture here, a society meeting there, food in one building, a pint in another, sports in yet another.

“But that’s all changed, changed utterly,” says Business and Law undergraduate Breslin. “I can see the incoming cohort of students having a wholly different Belfield experience to any of the generations before them, directly due to the Áras. As the aim is to make it a 24hr centre, in an extreme case it’s possible that a student could come in at 7am to do some early morning study, go for a swim, have a healthy breakfast, head for lectures, come back to the Áras for a lunchtime movie, watch a Students Union Council meeting (joke!), work out in the gym, do some reading in the ‘quiet area’ and then cap off the evening with their buddies in the new student bar. Where else would you want to go? The Áras is now Belfield Central.”

She adds, “Anecdotally I’ve already heard of new students choosing UCD having seen the new facilities, which are easily the best in the country. They can imagine the possibilities here now. It’s like your holidays. You don’t imagine the hassle of airports and buses but you do see yourself sitting on a sunny beach. Well I don’t know anyone coming to college imagining the ‘thrill’ of attending a lecture with 500 others in Theatre L. But you can imagine yourself doing so many new things in the Áras. It’s like a social sweet shop and you want to try a little of everything. You like theatre? – Yes, there’s the university’s first dedicated ‘proper’ theatre. You



The new Olympic-sized pool

UCD students now free to head for the Áras



The new debating chamber

like movies? – Yes, you have your own ‘private’ cinema. You like keeping healthy? – Yes, you have your own Olympic sized pool and a massive gym. You like media? – Yes, there’s a dedicated newspaper office and your own radio station. You want to be involved with last year’s winning society, the Dance Society? – Yes, there’s a new dance studio...and, and, and.”

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“Finally societies have dedicated meeting rooms that can only help them grow and flourish. Then, for the debating societies, there’s what I think is the jewel in the crown, the FitzGerald Chamber, the first dedicated debating chamber in the country – a beautiful, beautiful space. What person involved in any aspect of student life will not use this building?”

Breslin believes that the Áras will have a direct, positive effect on student health. “Cost is always a deterrent for students but with the gym being free I know already of people starting to use the facility who were previously put off getting healthy due to finances. If the building did nothing more than that, then it would be a massive plus. But fortunately there is so much more. For example, there’s a play about mental health already at planning stage, due to open during Mental Health Week, aiming to highlight this big issue in a different way to our students. In fact mental health is now so important that the Students’ Union is planning some radical ideas to use the Áras to help integrate new students and break down isolation and loneliness. We’re going to host food and film nights where you are only allowed in if you *don’t* come with your mates – you have to fly solo – but the reward is

that you’ll leave with new college mates. I’m expecting a big turnout now that we have a proper cinema to attract naturally reluctant students.”

“Other ‘getting to know you’ initiatives involve fun relay races in the pool – never a possibility before. The UCD Volunteers Overseas/ Cumann Gaelach have plans to expand their annual spring Rás UCD to incorporate the Áras as well, all aimed at getting more and more student interaction, to break down barriers and drive loneliness off the country’s largest campus.”

“Here’s another thought. The Áras is a student centre but I’m delighted by the drive to get staff to use it as well. And here’s a challenge. I’m now asking the academic staff to make the new bar their bar as well. Part of the UCD education should be lively discussions with your lecturers about the Big Issues, over a pint. Isn’t it time for closer integration between ‘them and us’, lecturers and students, to become one UCD?”

“Finally, I’d like to acknowledge how grateful we are for the foresight of UCD students back in 2006 who proposed and voted in favour of charging a levy on every student for this project, even though they knew at the time that only the tiniest minority would be still in UCD to enjoy its benefits. I really do think it was a very selfless thing to do and we have a responsibility to see their vision for the Student Centre realised now that its doors are open. And in answer to those who’ve asked if I’m at all concerned about the Áras being ‘too good’ for students: I’m not. Students stick up for each other and mind each other. This is the students’ own building. They’ll ‘stick up’ for their building as well and it’ll be minded for future students, like we were kind of ‘minded’ by the students back in 2006. We’ll mind it – no doubt about it.”

Rachel Breslin was in conversation with Conall O Morain (BA 1979), columnist and radio presenter.