

'THE ALGERIAN FRONTIER' - NEW PHD

A specially designed International PhD at University of Limerick will help transform the way teaching and administration at Algerian universities is carried out. The ground-breaking initiative by the Algerian Government to use English as the official language of teaching and learning at the country's universities will be supported through the specially designed programme offered to the country's visiting students.

Winning a four year contract that is estimated to be worth up to €20million, University of Limerick has agreed to facilitate the conversion to English as a teaching medium with the Ministry of National Education (Algeria) as the country moves to increase the visibility of research in higher education institutions.

Previously described as a move "to open up to the international environment" for Algerian universities, a think-tank of specialists and administration officials presented proposals to the Algerian Ministry last year for promoting the use of English in teaching and research.

Dr Mairead Moriarty, Assistant Dean of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at University of Limerick, told Links how the new partnership originated.

"The Algerian government are moving from teaching everything through the medium of French to the medium of English so they need to upskill all their Universities staff, their trainee teachers and all of the current students so they have put aside a significant amount of funding to do this," she says. "UL's first engagement with the proposal came about last Summer when Professor Tewfik Soulimane, an Algerian national who is the head of chemical sciences at Bernal Institute, was asked if University of Limerick would like to bid for the contract," she says.

This is a result of a long term collaboration of Professor Soulimane with the University of Tlemcen through the Erasmus+/ICM.

From there, Mairead joined a UL delegation, led by Tewfik, along with Puneet Saidha, Ann Ledwith and David Tanner, who travelled to Algeria last November to pitch for the project.

"While we were there we had consultations and presentations to document all of the aspects of our bid to host the candidates, including how the programme would look, the types of supports available for international students and how competitive UL was against other Irish and UK universities," says Mairead.

"Our job now is to bring students, who have competed nationally in Algeria for these scholarships, over to us so that they can be trained on how to teach through the medium of English while also doing a PhD at the same time."

Professor Soulimane says he was "delighted to see this major engagement between my country of origin and University of Limerick adding that he was looking forward to the positive impact for students.

"They will be undertaking world class research while developing their language skills and cultural knowledge in



the outstanding and welcoming campus that we have here in Limerick," he explains.

The project team in UL created an international PhD with a taught component of English as a medium of instruction after which candidates will embark on three years of individual research resulting in a PhD upon completion.

"Essentially they made a national decision that they wanted to divorce themselves from the use of the French language in an educational setting because publishing their research and continuing to educate people through the medium of French keeps them out of international university rankings and therefore that really damages their reputation," says Mairead. Mairead says that it was explained to the UL delegation during their visit to Algeria that universities there were having difficulty accessing funding and attracting international collaborators outside of the French speaking world.

"We were told that they needed to start the switch and publish in English and to ensure that their education system is moved over to English quickly," she says.

"Algeria is doing this on two levels – in third level education and in primary schools and then they will expand it in time," Mairead told UL Links.

"The first phase of the project saw 117 PhD students, the majority of which are female, join the international PhD programme at the start of 2020 and in September and next January we envisage taking on more students across more disciplines in the University."

At each intake, students will join a structured four year programme with a taught cycle on English language proficiency and the pedagogy (training to teach) of their subject through English.

At the end of the first year, the students, who have all completed BAs and MAs at Algerian Universities, can opt to exit the UL programme with a certificate in English as a medium of instruction or they can go on to complete the international PhD through a three year research programme. >

Pictured (Left):
Dr Mairead Moriarty
and Professor Tewfik
Soulimane

Picture credit: Brian Arthur

Pictured (Right, L-R):
Professor David Tanner,
Professor Puneet Saidha,
Dr Ann Ledwith, Mr
Arezki Saidani Algerian
Director of Higher
Education and Scientific
Research, Professor
Tewfik Soulimane,
Dr Mairead Moriarty
and Dr Tayeb Bouzid
Algerian Minister of
Higher Education and
Scientific Research



> "Overall the programme will see 400 Algerian PhD students study at UL during the four years of the project in a contract estimated to be worth up to €20million," says Mairead.

"As part of the initiative, a full support network, including on-campus accommodation, has been put in place to help the international students while they are at UL,"

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between UL and the Algerian Ministry of Education has been signed agreeing to the relationship and the fee structure over the first four years of the project, as well as a contract guaranteeing €5.5million for University of Limerick on the initial intake.

Mr Arezki Saidani, Director of Cooperation and Interuniversity exchanges at the Algerian Ministry of Education, said: "We are delighted to have signed and sealed the agreement and we look forward to a long-term engagement and fruitful collaboration with the University of Limerick."

Dean of Arts, Humanities and Social studies, Helen Kelly Holmes, says: "This initiative is a game changer in terms of our international presence and impact.

"It builds on our strong reputation in the field of English as a Second Language, which is continually growing and innovating.

"We have much to learn from the cooperation with Algeria and it is a fantastic opportunity to help shape the future development of higher education in that country," she adds.

Mairead explains that the project must be put in context in terms of the Algerian economy to fully understand it.

"It is a very wealthy country in terms of resources such as gas, oil and diamonds, but it doesn't have the industry to support that. There is huge unemployment and the State basically provides everything in terms of housing, provisions and supports," she explains.

"For this particular cohort, they would be unemployed and with limited opportunities to further their education if they didn't continue with their studies and given the fact that they have all competed to be on this scholarship programme, we are very confident that the vast majority of the students will see

it through to the end.

"This is hugely important for Algeria because the price is too high for them not to complete the programme especially in terms of future prospects," she adds.

Mairead explains on completion of the international PhD, each of the Algerian students are well placed to access a lecturing post when they return home.

"From a diversity point of view, a large portion of the cohort are females, and that is a good thing," Mairead said adding that "it's females from a developing country which is in line with their Government policy to upskill women since gaining their independence from France in 1962".

While French is still used in certain educational settings such as medicine, Mairead added that the universities wish to make "a bold statement to get what they need from international markets".

In a broader context, Mairead cites UL's focus on the "global south as a real area of opportunity, as the emerging markets in Africa will prove to be worthwhile.

"We also have a moral responsibility to the developing world and to developing countries to reach their goals. I think the fact that we are a University of Sanctuary and the fact that we have a huge amount of projects with Irish Aid and a history of doing research that is community led is important.

"That type of work can't just be in our own local community because if you really want to be an international player, you can't just focus on what is happening in your own front yard. "This type of contract impacts on a number of separate levels. It impacts on the individuals and their professional development as they become the train the trainers. It also has an economic impact in the sense that these students return highly trained and highly skilled meaning that their own universities will go up the rankings, so you bring them in line with the Global North.

"Also remember that the majority of the students are female and if you are putting women in that role of train the trainer, where society is traditionally male dominated, that is a really strong statement made by Government," she adds.

- Andrew Carey