

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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Ireland

Note1: To meet UNESCO publishing standards, some editing of papers has been required.

Note2: Authors are responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in signed articles and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Ireland

**Speech of Mr Tom Kitt T.D.
Minister of State
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Introduction

On behalf of Ireland's Minister for Education and Science it is my great pleasure to extend to this high level conference organized by UNESCO on "Higher Education" in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action" very sincere congratulations and good wishes for every success. The programme that has been organised and the vision and challenges articulated in the preparatory papers circulated are most impressive and bear the hallmark of the hard work, commitment and dedication of all those involved. I congratulate UNESCO and I am confident that there will be a very fruitful outcome to all the deliberations of this week

It is perhaps useful to commence with a reflection on the development of higher education in Ireland. Prior to 1970, third-level education was out of the reach of the majority of Irish citizens, a luxury reserved for the middle-classes. Over the past three decades, however, there has been a fundamental change in both the way education has been run and in its availability to the various sectors of society. Even within the last 15 years, the increase in participation rates has been remarkable. Let me give you an example: in 1984-85, around 39 percent of 18-year-olds were engaged in fulltime education. Ten years later that figure had risen to 60.6 percent. Amongst those aged 20 years and older, the rate of participation had increased from 8.9 percent to 18.2 percent - a twofold increase in the space of a decade.

Expansion and Development of Third-Level Education

Numbers in third-level education have expanded rapidly over the last thirty years, from 21,000 full-time students in 1965 to over 100,000 today. This represents about 50% of the age cohort, about half of whom take degree level programmes. The need to significantly broaden and deepen participation in third-level education is acknowledged - it needs to become commonplace for all groups in society to aspire to and experience third-level. The first element of realizing this ambition has been the creation of a significant number of additional places in third-level institutions, a process which has been ongoing in recent years and received a substantial boost following the acceptance by Government in 1995 of a Report on the Future Development of Higher Education in Ireland.

Binary System of Higher Education

The higher education or third-level sector in Ireland comprises universities and institutes of technology as well as teacher education training colleges and some non-State aided private higher education colleges.

Developments in higher education in Ireland, particularly over the past twenty years, have been based on this differentiated system of third-level education. One part is formed by the universities and the designated institutions under the Higher Education Authority, with state funding allocated by the Authority. The other part includes the institutions designated under the Regional Technical Colleges Act, 1992, now known as Institutes of Technology and the Dublin Institute of Technology, with state funding allocated directly by the Department of Education & Science.

Both sectors have different and challenging missions. The universities are essentially concerned with undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes, together with basic and applied research. The main work of the Institutes of Technology is in certificate and diploma programmes, with a smaller number of degree and postgraduate programmes and a growing involvement in regionally orientated applied

research. However, within each sector and between the two sectors, a diversity of institutions offer differing types and levels of courses and advancement possibilities through and across the sectors.

In Ireland the objective of the Government is to develop a framework for the structured development of institutions in the technological sector to address changing local and national demands, while ensuring the maintenance of the complementary third-level systems of university and technological education. The diversity of institutions and the separate missions of the two broad sectors will be maintained so as to ensure maximum flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of students and to the wide variety of social and economic requirements.

The role of apprenticeships, certificates and diplomas in providing people with valuable skills, which will enable them to find well-paid employment, is continually acknowledged. These courses provide an opportunity for people to enter areas at one level and then progress at their own pace. They also provide an opportunity for multiple exits and re-entry to the system thus providing a comprehensive and linked system for participants.

The need for greater inclusiveness in education is one of the primary concerns of the Irish Government. In recent years Ireland has been hugely successful in economic terms and I believe this success can be sustained and furthered through investment in education, and by extension, encompass the lives of all our citizens. Educational inclusiveness and the development of the education and skills of people have been identified as critical sources of economic and social well-being in modern society.

It is the view of the Irish Government that investment in education is as effective a form of capital accumulation as increases in physical capital. The competence of a nation's workers is coming to be at least as important to the success of a state as are other factors, such as the availability of land and capital. In other words, investment in people and in people's futures plays a critical role in economic and social progress.

At an individual level, the advantages of improved education and improved access to education and training are immediately obvious. For those already in employment, there is the prospect of higher earnings from better qualifications. International statistics clearly show that, in Ireland in particular, the pay differential between those who have gone on to higher education and those who have not is substantial.

In 1997, Irish women graduates in mid-career could expect to earn double that of women who had left education following the Leaving Certificate. In all OECD countries, without exception, educational attainment remains a very significant factor in explaining differences in earnings.

Over the last 25 years we have seen very significant investment in technological and vocational education. The current level of economic prosperity is due in no small way to this investment, which saw a significant increase in the number of well-equipped workshops and other physical facilities in the Institutes of Technology for the training of highly skilled craftspersons and technicians.

We acknowledge the need for ever-improved standards of education to ensure that those entering the workforce have the requisite skills to compete in an increasingly technological world. Employers feel more than ever the need for new employees to be well educated in the broadest sense, adaptable, multi-skilled, good communicators, capable of making decisions and potential lifelong-learners. The days of cramming an individual with facts and sending them out to perform a specific task are long gone. The key today is adaptability and continuing education.

Flexible Course Structures

The co-ordinated development of a system of modular course structures and related credit transfer arrangements, is being promoted by the legislative authorities with responsibility for higher education in consultation with the third-level institutions. Such flexibility in course structures has the potential to:

- ◆ facilitate access;
- ◆ enable mature and part-time students to study for qualifications while remaining in fulltime employment;

- ◆ facilitate the better use of resources;
- ◆ facilitate students' transfer between courses and between the technological sector and the universities;
- ◆ facilitate the development of a wider range of subject opportunities within courses, for example, modern European languages in business and scientific courses; and
- ◆ facilitate international mobility for students and employees.

The number of potential pathways and ladders linking qualifications is increasing every year and, through the work of the National Council for Educational Awards and TEASTAS, the Irish Certification Authority, these developments are set to continue. The Government is now committed to putting in place a national framework of qualifications to meet the demands of learners. Learners need to be central to any new arrangements, statutory or otherwise, that are to be put in place. There is a real need for a single national basis for co-ordinating and comparing all education and training awards and this would involve setting out in legislation how such a framework can be set up and how it can be continually revised and updated. Progression arrangements and improved mobility for learners would also need to be provided between and within levels of qualifications throughout education and training. It is intended to publish a suitable statutory underpinning for the development of a national qualifications' framework within a number of months.

A number of recent initiatives, aimed at ensuring that the higher education system addresses changing economic needs, and involving greater education/training and industry co-operation, have been undertaken by the Government.

In November 1997 the Government announced details of an important initiative in relation to interaction between Government, business and education and training. The purpose of the initiative is to promote dialogue between Government, business and the education institutions, in relation to the education and training needs of the economy, to develop and facilitate the forecasting of skill requirements and to provide mechanisms for the speedy implementation of decisions. Thus the three basic components of the new initiative are:

- ◆ a business/education partnership Forum which is widely representative at the highest levels of the business sector, the education sector, the trade unions, Government Departments and the development agencies;
- ◆ an expert group on future skills which advises on future skill needs and forecasting techniques; and
- ◆ a high level management implementation group to progress recommendations to the point where decisions can be taken and to monitor progress on the rate of implementation of decisions.

A Joint Education/Industry Task Force was established to improve the supply of technicians for high-technology industries. The task force was asked to produce an action plan to address identified and anticipated needs and to ensure an improvement in the supply of trained technicians in the short and medium term. Arising from the work of the task force, a new industry/college initiative to jointly recruit and educate and train technicians was set up and 300 students commenced new courses in January 1998. These students have been recruited on a joint basis by institutions in the third-level technological sector and by industry. The courses involve structured work-placement and it is planned that these students enter the work force about 18 months after the courses begin. A further intake on these courses is underway this Autumn.

Building on this, a series of Summer Courses in Information Technology were conducted in several third-level educational centres around the country during the Summer of 1998. The courses were aimed directly at non-standard applicants, who would benefit from the opportunity to acquire fundamental knowledge and skills. It is projected that the experience and qualifications they gained from the courses will assist them in developing or enhancing a career in the IT area.

At the same time the Government announced details of a £250 million Scientific and Technological Education (Investment) Fund which is being used to develop technology education at all

levels, ranging from primary schools to advanced research. There are three main objectives to the establishment of the Fund:

- ♦ to renew and modernise the infrastructure of third-level institutions, particularly in the technological sector;
- ♦ to develop new areas of activities where emerging skills needs have been identified; and
- ♦ to invest in promoting innovation in order to maintain and further our economic growth.

The Fund has been established by legislation and is being managed by the National Treasury Management Agency. This funding will be in addition to annual capital allocations and will not replace or reduce existing investment. Funding will be allocated on the basis of priorities developed in consultation with industry and education and will allow for a strong partnership between the State, the institutions and the private sector. The broad areas targeted for support are skills, craft and vocational education needs, infrastructure development, equipment renewal and research and development.

Also critically important is the quality and international standing of our research and development work. It is clear that research and development in higher education is absolutely crucial to attracting knowledge-based industries to Ireland.

Substantial dedicated funding for research and development has been made available through the Department of Education and Science. In addition a programme of scientific and technological research in third-level institutions has been established to promote the development of high quality research capabilities and enhance the quality and relevance of graduate output and skills. It is our intention to provide support for outstandingly talented individual researchers and teams within the institutions and the encouragement of co-operation between researchers both within the institutions and between institutions. In this way we can tie the two halves of our binary system into a joint system, which will be of benefit to both and to research and development in the state as a whole.

I think you will agree that innovations such as these are of vital importance in securing economic stability and underpinning the development of society as a whole.

We have made great progress during recent years but it will still take us some time before we can attain our desired participation and completion rates. Consequently, we consider the concept of lifelong learning and initiatives to attract more mature individuals into high-technology industries to be of such importance in the Irish context.

We are proud of the advances we have made. We have an economy that we could only have dreamed of 20-years-ago. I firmly believe that it is the duty of all of us in education to ensure that our present success becomes our future success. It behoves us to establish a platform from which our world economy and world society can continue to build and to create a secure and prosperous future for succeeding generations. I am convinced that initiatives such as those which have been undertaken in Ireland will lead to a more open and inclusive education system, which serves the needs of both industry and society.

It will be obvious from the above that the Issues of this conference - Relevance, Quality, Management and Financing and, of course, International Co-operation - are all issues of ongoing debate and reflection in our country. It is our privilege to participate in the broader world-view of these issues being debated at this conference and to contribute in any way that we can to the development of Higher Education in a global context. Again may I wish this conference every success.

Thank you.