



TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **PROFESSOR JOHN G. HUGHES**, Vice-Chancellor of the University, President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on 20 September, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Education *honoris causa*, on **DON THORNHILL**

A Sheánsailéar, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Born in 1947, Dr Don Thornhill is the eldest of two children of the late John and Peg Thornhill. His father John was a Forestry Department official. His mother, Peg, who had been educated in England and later worked there as a nurse and midwife, was a survivor of the sinking of the Rosslare-Fishguard passenger ferry, St Patrick, by German submarines during World War 2. His sister, Brid Clarke, is Chief Executive of the Mental Health Commission.

His initial schooling (until 1957) was in Bennetschurch National School, Co Waterford, a two-teacher, 50-pupil school which was subsequently closed. Following his father's transfer by the Forestry Service to Kilkenny in 1957, he completed his primary and secondary schooling in the Christian Brother's Schools in Kilkenny.

He then went on to University College Dublin (UCD) where he was awarded a BSc and PhD in Chemistry. There he worked on the chemistry of organometallic metals under the supervision of Professor Anthony Manning. He later studied Economics in Trinity College Dublin and completed an M.Sc. (Econ.) under the direction of Professor Dermot McAleese. He was awarded the Barrington Prize by the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland for his research dissertation on the revealed comparative advantage of Irish exports; this study identified the increasing "education content" of Irish manufactured exports. In 1987 he was a Fulbright Scholar in the Brookings Institution in Washington DC. In 2000 he was elected as a member of the Royal Irish Academy and in 2005 he was elected as an honorary life member of the Royal Dublin Society for his services to Ireland.

The major (and stabilising) influence on his life is his wife Maura (nee Byrne), a medical scientist and former champion Irish orienteer who has also been a member of a number of Irish international orienteering teams. They married in 1974 and have two adult daughters, Kate and Claire. Kate

is an accountant working in Dublin and Claire is an economist working in London. I am delighted to say that all three ladies are with us here today.





Don was Secretary General of the Department of Education and Science from 1993 to 1998. Significant developments in the education system and in education policy during this time include the National Education Convention (1993), the publication of the White Paper "Charting our Education Future" (1995), the development of the Leaving Certificate Applied and "Breaking the Cycle" programmes, the publication and enactment of the Universities Act in 1997 and the publication of the first comprehensive Education Bill, also in 1997, the launch of the Schools IT 2000 programme and the establishment under legislation of the €317m Scientific and Technological Education Investment Fund in late 1997 which for the first time provided for secure multi-annual Exchequer funding for scientific education and research.

He completed a seven year term as executive chairman of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in January 2005. Major developments during this period included the putting in place of large investment programmes to provide for skills needs and shortages, and the development and publication of policy documents, reviews and other contributions to policy formation in a number of important areas - including equality policy, quality assurance and financial governance. In particular however, Don played a vital role in the development of national policy for research and development.

Following his appointment to the HEA in 1998, the Government launched the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTLTI). This competitive and internationally benchmarked research funding programme which is managed by the HEA has to-date allocated over €800m for strategically selected research programmes in third level institutions.

The initial phases of PRTLTI involved a partnership with Atlantic Philanthropies who had already invested substantially in Irish University campuses. However, since this was the first agreement of its kind made by Atlantic with a government, it was unfamiliar territory and carried a certain level of risk. In this context, it is fair to say that Atlantic's success in negotiating this partnership arrangement with the Irish government owed much to the skill of Don Thornhill. He was able to design and pre-test the funding model and its related assessment processes, he secured the essential commitment from the sponsoring government department (The Department of Education and Science) and was able to convince the Department of Finance of the benefits of Atlantic's support for basic research in Ireland. Without this, it would have been very difficult for Atlantic and the government to reach agreement, given the extent of inter-departmental cooperation needed to deliver it. Dr Thornhill's standing with the senior political figures involved, especially with the Ministers for Finance and the Education and Science, enabled him to establish a transparent and competitive system for resource allocation that provided the necessary reassurances on quality and objectivity in the

assessment process that Atlantic required. Also, his influence with the higher education institutions and their researchers was sufficient to overcome the latter's initial resistance to this new model for resource



allocation for basic research that was based on competitive institutional bidding around the strategic planning goals and objectives of the institutions.

The PRTLTI initiative has resulted in a substantial enhancement in the capacity for world class research in Ireland, the enablement of Irish researchers to participate in the international research community as scientific leaders and peers and the considerable strengthening of the 'fourth level' in Irish education.

In 1996, a Nobel physicist remarked that one encountered so many outstanding Irish researchers abroad that it would be possible to establish a least one more first class university in Ireland '...if only one could repatriate those people'.

Today, thanks to PRTLTI and to SFI the brain drain of the best research talent in Ireland has been reversed. Key Irish researchers who were forced to go abroad to pursue their careers are returning, Irish institutions are retaining their young researchers at both PhD and post-doctoral levels and high quality researchers from other countries are taking up positions in Ireland.

Ireland is indeed fortunate that we had a man of the calibre of Don Thornhill at the helm of its Higher Education system during the most crucial phase of its history. Indeed, since retiring from the HEA Don has continued to contribute extensively and effectively to both the public and private sectors in Ireland. He is a consultant and adviser on strategy and policy and his current responsibilities include:

- Chairman of the National Competitiveness Council of Ireland
- Chairman of the Irish Payments Services Organisation Ltd
- Deputy Chairperson of the Chartered Accountants Regulatory Board
- Board member of The Irish Management Institute, the Irish Hospice Foundation, Forfás and Science Foundation Ireland.

He is also a former member and Chairman of the joint inter-governmental Ireland/United States Fulbright Commission and of the Board of the Digital Hub Development Agency.

Don Thornhill has made immense contributions to education and to public life in Ireland. The benefits of his work will endure for many years to come and he is indeed a most worthy recipient of the highest honour of the National University of Ireland.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Arte Paedeutica, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.