



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

**Address by Dr Maurice Manning,
Chancellor of the National University of Ireland,
at ASTI Centenary Conference
O'Reilly Hall
UCD Belfield Saturday 7 November 2009
Education and Social Recovery**

Colleagues,

As Chancellor of the National University of Ireland I am very pleased to have been asked to contribute to the ASTI Centenary Education Conference. I am delighted firstly to congratulate ASTI on the celebration of its centenary. For an organisation to reach a hundred years of existence says something about its durability and the importance of its role and certainly ASTI has been a highly influential body in Irish second-level education since its foundation.

As NUI Chancellor I am also pleased to have the opportunity here to pay tribute to the ASTI members who have contributed significantly to the Senate of the University. There has been a tradition for many years now of ASTI leaders being elected to the Senate by Convocation, the graduate body of the University. Currently there are four ASTI people on the Senate: Tommy Francis, who is one of the longest-serving members, John Hurley and Bernadine O'Sullivan. They have been joined recently by Pat Cahill. The ASTI members play a useful role in providing a strong connection for the University with the second-level sector, bringing to the attention of the Senate relevant concerns emerging in second-level education and issues arising for students in the transition from school to college. The connection ensures that the Senate is well informed when it comes to make decisions on matriculation and other issues.

The early 20th century was clearly a groundbreaking time in Irish education: in 2008 we celebrated the centenary of the foundation of the National University of Ireland and earlier this year, I had the pleasure of being here in UCD to perform the opening of the new UCD School of Education building in the centenary year for the School. In this centenary year of the ASTI, I think it's probably appropriate for me as Chancellor of the National University of Ireland to reflect a little on the early days of teacher education in NUI, whose universities and colleges have been responsible for the education and training of the majority of Ireland's secondary teachers in that time.

Founded in 1908, NUI awarded its first qualifications in 1910. These first awards included 41 BA Pass degrees 91 BA honours degrees. There were no BScs or no BComms till the following year. There were however 5 Diplomas in Teaching – four went to male candidates and one to a woman. Three of the candidates came from UCD, one from UCC and, in a carryover of arrangements under the Royal University of Ireland, one candidate was awarded the diploma on the basis of private study. Among the five who were awarded Diplomas in Teaching in 1910 was a certain Edward De Valera who went on to become one of the great figures in Irish life in the twentieth century. As you may know, for over fifty years, during most of which he served as Taoiseach or as President, he was also Chancellor of the National University of Ireland.

From 1912 onwards, a Higher Diploma in Education was offered. This was available only to graduates, the earlier Diploma being a qualification you could combine with undergraduate studies. The HDip really took off as a qualification and rapidly became the professional qualification for secondary teachers, being replaced in recent years by the Postgraduate Diploma in Education. As an indication of the growth of the profession over the century, I can tell you that in 2008 the number who graduated from NUI institutions (that is, all four constituent universities and in addition, the National College of Art and Design, in the case of art teachers) with the professional qualification in teaching was 831.

The growth in numbers and the general expansion in our education system are also reflected in other developments. Just over ten years ago, on the initiative of the NUI Schools of Education, a common system for admission to the Postgraduate Diploma programmes in Education across NUI was initiated. This is based on a points system and is administered by an NUI company based in Galway, Postgraduate Applications Centre. I am happy to be able to report that the Schools of Education in the four NUI constituent universities, including St Angela's College, Sligo which is part of NUI, Galway and in the National College of Art and Design, which is a Recognised College of NUI, are all flourishing. In addition to the Postgraduate Diploma in Education, they offer a range of other specialist programmes in education up to PhD level. You may be interested to know that in 2008, 128 MEd degrees were awarded and four PhDs in Education.

If the early 20th century was groundbreaking for education in Ireland, this early 21st century is also shaping up as a period of dramatic change. The early years of the century were marked by great optimism and national self-confidence. Mobile global industries were establishing bases here, attracted not only by our tax regime, but also we thought, by our well-educated work force, the happy outcome of increasing participation in higher education and the high quality of our education system at all levels. Full employment was generating previously little experienced levels of prosperity. Immigrants were coming in increasing numbers into Ireland, in search of employment and opportunity. Official reports highlighted skills shortages in the workforce and pointed to the need for continuing inflows of workers if the needs of the economy were to be met. Ireland embraced the knowledge economy with enthusiasm. Irish society became increasingly diverse in its composition, its social units, confessional affiliations, dietary preferences and languages spoken. (As an aside may I say that there a certain irony for a country whose educational system has singularly failed to rise to the challenge of bilingualism now finding itself confronted with the plethora of languages spoken by new immigrant communities. I note for example that the DES website now contains material in German, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and Spanish)

Suddenly as if overnight, all changed and Ireland again is a country filled with self-doubt. This is fuelled partly by the crisis in the economy and also to an extent by a crisis of confidence in public institutions. For the past year or so, the global recession, the specifically Irish recession and the crisis in the public finances are all severely, but unavoidably, inhibiting the national capacity to finance key areas such as education and health, resulting in damaging cuts in budgets and loss of resources. Pressures for reform of public institutions are growing as their structures are shown to be insufficiently robust to withstand close public scrutiny. At a personal level, incomes and living standards are under pressure, unemployment is once again a reality for many people, job insecurity has increased and recent graduates face a sadly depleted jobs market. The most recent Eurobarometer pool conducted for the European Parliament on the results of the financial crisis whose results were released last week showed that 'Irish attitudes towards job prospects are among the most gloomy in the EU and Irish people were among those most concerned about finances.'

Against this negative backdrop, where does our educational system stand? What is the role of education in social recovery?

The first thing we can say with a degree of certainty is that regardless of the prevailing economic climate, education is good for you. It is beneficial to the individual and it also benefits the economy and society. Schools and colleges make a difference to the life chances of students and the education system as a whole has an important contribution to make to economic and social regeneration. Part of the satisfaction for teachers and

educators is derived from the knowledge that they are active agents in the intellectual, social, personal and skills development of their students.

The benefits of education have become clearer with successive research reports from the ESRI. The most recent study published in June this year by Emer Smyth and Selina McCoy under the title *Investment in Education Combating Educational Disadvantage* finds that - and I quote here from the summary of findings - having a Leaving Certificate qualification now 'operates as the 'minimum' needed to secure access to post-school education/training and high quality employment, among other outcomes. Those who left school before the Leaving Certificate were three to four times more likely to be unemployed than those with higher qualifications, even before the current recession. Early school leavers are more likely to become lone parents, earn less if they have a job, have poorer health and are more likely to be in prison.' For social recovery we need to redouble our efforts to keep young people in school. While there has been very significant progress, with four out of five students now staying on to the end of upper secondary education, there is still a hard core of around 20% whom the system has not yet managed to reach. While many of their problems may originate outside of school, and may at times seem intractable to the teachers entrusted with their education, it is in the interests of society that we seek to achieve appropriate educational targets for these most marginalised students and introduce incentives to encourage their continuing participation.

The ESRI findings on Irish education are confirmed both for Ireland, and across the OECD countries, in the annual OECD study *Education at a Glance*. That has shown with consistent regularity that on a scale of indicators, those with higher levels of education score higher than those with lower. The 2009 OECD report came out this September. While the data relates at latest to 2007, and therefore does not yet capture the downturn, they show once again a consistent correlation between employment, earnings and level of educational attainment. Job prospects are better with higher qualifications and the highest earners across various age groups are those with postgraduate qualifications. This is true across the OECD countries and specifically in Ireland.

The study points out that

- earnings increase with each level of education
- the educational earnings advantage increases with age
- earnings differentials between those with third-level education – particularly to postgraduate level – and those with upper secondary education are generally more pronounced than the differentials between upper secondary and lower secondary or below
- in many countries, upper secondary education forms a dividing line beyond which additional education attracts a particularly high premium.

Another recurrent finding of *Education at a Glance* is that males consistently earn more than females. The 2009 edition comments that in Ireland, females who have not completed senior cycle secondary education are particularly disadvantaged and that at the other end of the scale, the highest qualified females earn more than two and a half times what is earned by females who have not completed senior cycle.

These findings will come as no surprise to this audience and in fact are not lost on middle and higher income parents in Ireland who go to great lengths to enable their offspring to enjoy the fruits of third-level education. Many would claim that the progression of children from middle- and upper-income families to third-level is nearing saturation point.

The OECD study for the first time sought to analyse the social outcomes of education. *Education at a Glance 2009* incorporated an indicator to examine the relationship between educational attainment and social measures of well-being (i.e. social outcomes) for 21 OECD countries. It focused on three outcomes reflecting the health and cohesiveness of society: self-assessed health, political interest and interpersonal trust. Once again the findings were not surprising and the study concluded that 'Educational attainment is positively associated with self-reported health, political interest and interpersonal trust. That is, adults who have higher levels of educational attainment are generally more likely than those with lower levels of attainment to report that their health is at least "good", are at least fairly interested in politics, and believe most people try to be fair.'

The findings remained true when adjusted for age and gender. The connection between education and these social outcomes weakened when household income was factored in suggesting that income is a strong determinant of these social outcomes. However, even when adjusted for household income, there was still a strong association between education and these social outcomes. The study concluded that 'what individuals potentially acquire through education – e.g. competencies and psycho-social features such as attitudes and resilience – may have an important role in raising social outcomes, independent of education's effect on income.'

So I think we have reasonable evidence here to support the contention that we must look to our education system to help us to achieve social recovery and that a national objective of enabling the highest possible proportion of our population to progress to the highest levels must be the target. While we have made significant progress in terms of the numbers of students going on to third level, there has been growing realisation that the education system tends to reproduce existing inequalities in society. There remain serious issues of social equity to be faced in this country arising from socially differentiated participation in higher education.

A number of initiatives have been taken in recent years and are beginning to bear fruit. This is clear from *The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013* published by the HEA in 2008. That report concluded that 'the combined measures and investment of resources at all levels of the education system to address social exclusion and educational disadvantage is paying dividends. The national participation targets set in 2001, and endorsed in the 2005 Access Plan, have now been achieved and exceeded for students with a disability, for students facing social and economic barriers and for mature students in full-time higher education'. I am aware similarly that each of the NUI universities and of our recognized colleges can point to outstanding success stories among its graduates recruited through access programmes or links with disadvantaged schools, through the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. However, there has been a realisation that limiting initiatives aimed at widening participation in higher education to designated DEIS schools is insufficient. Part of the problem was to find transparent means of identifying disadvantage so that targeted support could be provided to those most in need. Poorer students are not to be found only in listed schools: Economic disadvantage is dispersed throughout the educational system. The recently launched HEAR (Higher Education Access Route) initiative is a radical attempt to address educational disadvantage. It recognises that the points achieved by disadvantaged students are artificially depressed because of their circumstances. Using more sophisticated tools than were previously available to identify disadvantage, HEAR provides a route to college for eligible students with slightly lower points than would normally be necessary, and supports for students in college to optimise the chances of success. Similarly the DARE (Disabled Access Route to

Education) provides a similar mechanism to make it easier for students with a range of disabilities to get into university and be successful there. It is to be hoped that these important initiatives by the higher education sector will enhance the contribution of higher education sector to social recovery.

In addressing the theme of education and social recovery overall what I have been seeking to convey is that we have a very good educational system in Ireland, from primary to university level and that the policy directions we have been following are soundly based. I am happy to say at this ASTI gathering that part of the strength of our system is derived from the high calibre of our teaching profession. Further strengths are the breadth of the second-level curriculum and the fact that so many students complete the full senior cycle. We have excellent universities, whose qualities are beginning to be reflected in international rankings. We have good institutional diversity. The evidence is there to show that our educational system has the capacity to be a powerful tool in both economic and social recovery. The challenge is to sustain and nurture it.

These are dangerous times for the education sector with serious threats lurking round every corner. Changes which are advocated need to be rigorously scrutinised. While the crisis in the public finances must be addressed, in this time of crisis we should not be panicked into making short-term damaging changes to our educational infrastructure, such as have recently been proposed. I refer specifically to the proposal in the McCarthy Report that the University of which I am Chancellor should be abolished, ostensibly on cost-saving grounds. I am unashamed in referring to the proposal here knowing that most ASTI members are NUI graduates. This proposal does not stand up to impartial scrutiny. It would not save money and would seriously damage a national institution which like your own has served the country well for a century. The National University of Ireland has been closely linked with the State and with the leadership of the State since its foundation. Does it not seem outrageous that one year after the State generously supported the University in the celebration of its centenary, the Department of Education & Science should be pursuing an agenda for its dismantling.