

**Address by Dr Maurice Manning, Chancellor of the National University of  
Ireland, at the opening of the new UCD School of Education building  
UCD Belfield 8 May 2009 at 6.30 pm**

I am delighted to be here, as Chancellor of NUI, to perform the opening of the new UCD School of Education building in this centenary year for the School. This is my first official function since becoming Chancellor. The National University of Ireland itself has just completed its centenary in 2008, so it's good this year to have another centenary to celebrate and to take us back to the origins of the University, and this very important School.

For me at a personal level I am delighted to be back at my *alma mater* where I spent so many very happy years and which shaped so many aspects of my life. UCD's traditions and values are in many ways my values and traditions and I look forward to a warm and productive relationship with UCD in the coming years.

The School of Education has always had an important role in the life of UCD. It was almost a founding Chair – missing out by just a year, but giving us the opportunity today to celebrate a century of contribution to Irish public and educational life – from that time in 1909, when the School had 10 students in its HDip Class to today's intake of over 200 students; to today's range of professional courses, including Education, Psychology, developing research and teaching in Inclusive Education - such as the education of Ethnic minorities and pupils with special education needs - and of course continuing high level research in the history of education and education ideas.

In some ways the founding Professor of Education at UCD, Timothy Corcoran is a bit of a hero of mine. He felt that the new University had an important contribution to make to the national debate on the future of Irish Education in the new Ireland unfolding in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He was right to believe this and governments listened to him. They took what he had to say seriously and this Department – as it then was – was a major shaper of Irish educational policies, practices and structures in those early formative years. Maybe not all of it was good advice, but it was given in a disinterested and informed way, and always in the national interest.

Today we are in the midst of another major national debate on the future of Irish education. The 1920's were turbulent and uncertain times, and in a different way, so is today. Unlike the '20's, there are many conflicting voices and competing claims today. In political science terms what we increasingly have today is a battle over the allocation of increasingly scarce resources.

One voice not being heard is that of the Education Schools in the various universities. Yes, there is research, good research, training and curriculum development to a high standard but what we, the wider public, are not getting is the reflective, probing concentration on fundamentals, raising questions that rise above an increasingly technical and often process driven debate. That is what Tim Corcoran would have been doing, and it is needed more than never before.

Let me put some of these questions in context. In the context of major expansion, significant investment, and heightened expectation, governments are looking to higher education to deliver, to be more productive and give better value. Universities, Institutes and colleges are called on to be more accountable and transparent in their activities. With a view to achieving the desired levels of accountability and transparency, a superstructure of systems, processes and instruments of measurement has been put in place, which is beginning to dominate the discourse of higher education. I am referring

here specifically to qualifications frameworks, quality assurance mechanisms and the concept of systematised enhancement.

Much of this is necessary and positive. I don't for one moment dispute the utility of a qualifications framework or the importance of quality assurance procedures or the value of learning outcomes. I acknowledge the greater clarity these can contribute to an education system whose traditions and practices, developed over a long time, can seem obtuse or arcane. I appreciate that at European level, the objectives of the EU are served through measures which make qualifications more easily understood across borders. In particular, I realise that with larger institutions, more students on campuses, more subject choices, the quality of information provided to students is of critical importance.

What does cause me concern is that the focus on frameworks, processes and outcomes is becoming disproportionate and that content, the currency of knowledge and the particularities of individual disciplines are being sidelined. There is a need, in my view, for the rewards of learning, of intense engagement with a discipline, in-depth scholarship, passion for subject to come more strongly into focus and feature more prominently in discussion of higher education. I look to this School of Education to seek to redress the balance, to re-assert the centrality of knowledge and content in higher education discourse, to bring the discussion back to the nature of history, or physics, or constitutional law, to create space for these subjects to be discussed in their own terms rather than being squeezed within the narrow confines of systems or procedures.

A second concern I have relates to the position of the academic community and specifically, the status of the university teacher. In an environment where higher education increasingly is treated as a commodity, a rather repugnant vocabulary is gaining currency where the student is referred to as a consumer, selecting a customised education from a menu of choices. In this scenario, teachers are seen as passive facilitators of learning or mere service providers, responsible for delivering a range of learning outcomes and subject to quality assessment of their delivery. A statement in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Third Edition 2009) which has become the core text in quality assurance, exemplifies this. In listing fundamental principles, it refers to 'the interests of students as well as employers and the society more generally in good quality higher education'. While this is followed by a reference to institutional autonomy and responsibility, there is no mention of the interests of professors or lecturers in providing good quality higher education. To me the omission is glaring. The role of the teacher as an expert in his or her field, with the capacity to encourage and inspire, to spread ideas, to stimulate interest in a subject, provoke critical responses and in general to foster intellectual debate and discovery is at the core of higher education and needs to be reaffirmed. The impoverished vocabulary resulting from process and systems-driven approaches to education needs to be resisted.

Thirdly I note that relatively little research is undertaken in this country into Irish higher education. Given the pace of change in universities and colleges, there is a need for research and critical analysis to inform future policy. I hope that this School will be able to encourage more research in this field.

On behalf of the National University of Ireland, I wish the UCD School of Education continuing success and good fortune in its new building which I am happy to declare open.