

Statements on Further and Higher Education

1st March 2006

"We need to have a balanced expansion of educational facilities to ensure that all our population can use their talents", Liz O'Donnell told the Dáil today.

The importance of a skilled population is something we talk 'around' when we speak of Ireland's progress in recent years, but it is important that we clarify what we mean.'

Of all the many contributors to our economic success, the availability - to both indigenous and foreign investors - of an exceptionally well-educated workforce has been the most important.

When the Tánaiste Mary Harney took up the reins in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, it was a given that our policies of fostering research, enterprise and initiative were, and remain, dependent on first-rate education.

Our economy was changing. The nature of work began to change. In the last few weeks we have seen how that change poses challenges for traditional sectors. Manufacturing, Processing, Assembly. Despite creating more jobs than we can fill, workers in some sectors experience problems.

Manufacturing industry in particular is finding it more and more difficult to compete globally. We are creating more high-quality, high-end, high-pay jobs. A true 'race to the top'.

A key element of how Ireland copes with this transition is the level to which our education system not only continues to deliver top-class graduates, but also how it facilitates training, up skilling and re-skilling of workers. It is also very much about how we service the educational needs of school leavers who don't opt for the University or IT route.

I expect many Deputies will praise the attention and record funding of our education system since 1997. We now have a multi-annual Strategic Innovation Fund for higher education, a new Ph.D. level of education, a fourth level.

The Government is also committing €900 million to the 3rd level sector over the next five years as part of the Department of Education and Science capital envelope - €630 million from exchequer funds, and the balance from PPP initiatives.

Notwithstanding this, I share concerns, a serious dissatisfaction with one element of support for the education system: namely the further education and post-leaving certificate sector.

I have referred to the importance of up-skilling and re-skilling to our changing economy. Businesses¹ have called for serious evaluation of our training policy so that priority may be given to up-skilling those already in employment.

There has been a remarkable change in the composition of the Irish labour market. The correctness of our low-tax, pro-enterprise model has been borne out spectacularly. Employment has risen from 1.1 million in 1991 to over 1.9 million in 2005 and it is predicted

that 2 million people will be employed in 2006. Simultaneously, real earnings have increased substantially while the tax system has been reformed to reduce the overall burden on work. We now have the most favourable income tax system in the EU for people on low to medium incomes.

However, fears exist for those with low skills who have entered employment in this environment of labour shortages. They may find themselves vulnerable to either a downturn in the economy or changes in the nature of work.

The Further Education and Post Leaving Cert sector play a critical, and, I believe, an under-appreciated role in addressing that vulnerability.

In 1997 there were 18,000 enrolments in PLC courses. Today there are over 30,000. That is more than the number of school leavers entering third level education each year. Courses are delivered by a network of over 210 schools and colleges throughout the country - in the vocational, secondary and community school sector. The bulk of provision is in vocational colleges. In all, there are over 1,000 courses provided in more than 60 disciplines.

The value of what these courses achieve and the benefit they provide to the individual and the community can hardly be over stated. Why then are FE and PLC courses apparently the Cinderella of our education system?

Look at how this sector has been treated over the last twenty years.

PLC courses began to develop at that time, but incredibly had to wait 15 years for a report to be commissioned to recognise that huge resources were needed to support the work being done, and make appropriate recommendations. The so-called – ‘Mclver Report’.

To put this delay in context, currently negotiations are underway to agree the seventh partnership agreement, a successor to *Sustaining Progress*. The examination of required support and resources for schools providing PLC courses was based on a commitment in the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*. That was in 2000!

The Mclver Report outlined changes needed to allow schools and colleges to provide these valuable courses and comply with the Qualifications Act. The deadline for the implementation of new structures under the Qualifications Act is June 2006.

After the publication of the review in 2003, the Department of Education set up a Group to look at how Mclver Report might be implemented.

Here we are in 2006. The Report conceded that costs would be significant and that a phased approach was required. Still nothing has happened. What is the problem?

Frustration levels are high among Principals. They complain that FE and PLC courses operate within second level structures, within second level budgets, buildings and time. In schools where provision bears absolutely no relationship to the reality behind the service that is being delivered.

This is the crux of the problem.

Two weeks ago I tabled a PQ about additional funding and recognition. I specifically asked what progress is being made on implementing the recommendations of the Mclver review.

I regret to say that the reply confirms my suspicion that progress on helping the PLC sector is inert and lacklustre.

The reply points to support for the Post Leaving Certificate sector that the number of PLC places has increased by 60% since 1997 and, that PLC places approved for 2006 are up by more than 1,600 on the 2005.

But, while enrolments numbers reflect the importance of the sector- they are not really an accurate measure of commitment- unless increased enrolment is matched with increased funding. There is scant reference made in the 2006 Estimates to additional funding for schools and colleges providing Further Education or Post Leaving Cert courses.

There is a perception of 'drift' in overall policy towards the sector. Schools and colleges struggle with an increasingly complex and demanding situation as they have for years, without the appropriate support structures being in place.

The introduction of maintenance grants for students with effect from September 1998- the waiving of tuition fees - and the PLC maintenance grant scheme - do provide some help. PLC grant holders will receive some €23 million in direct support in 2005.

I also welcome the inclusion of PLC students in the calculation of non-pay budgets and the supplemental non-pay grant towards running costs specifically for PLC schools. But the central, 20 year old issue lingers on.

The Minister of State's reply to me mentions the 21 over-arching recommendations, and 91 sub-recommendations of the Mclver report. It states, and I quote, that "*extensive consultations have been held with management and staff interests with regard to such issues as the prioritisation of recommendations, the structural changes envisaged in the report, their implications and associated costs in the context of the overall provision of resources for Further and Adult Education*".

It is worth considering that for a moment. The Mclver Report was published in 2003. At present, in 2006, recommendations are being prioritised. Implications are being considered. Active consideration is being given to all the issues involved.

The words of comfort from Department are, and again I quote, "*while this work is ongoing, extra investment has been provided in the 2006 Estimates to develop the further education sector and to improve supports for other aspects of further/adult education*".

We need interim action.

Action on the Mclver report's recommendations.

Let's take the necessary steps to properly support the PLC sector. Negotiate new teacher arrangements if needed. Provide the technical support to the larger schools and colleges.

Provide the required funding to assist in providing support services. Inject some cash into the colleges to enable them some flexibility.

Just as Ireland's economy has changed utterly since 1985, so too has our education system. The requirements on it have changed. It now has to serve an economy driven by innovation, a knowledge based economy. Global competition for manufacturing necessitates an education system that can continue to prepare the highest quality graduates, and can re-skill and up-skill others. The Further Education and Post Leaving Cert sector are critical here.

One senses elitism in all of this.

A preferred focus on the traditional University / third level sector, and now, fourth level.

We must get away from any notion that Further Education and PLC courses are a sector for disadvantaged students. For some students, these courses are their first choice. The 30,000 students currently enrolled are not 'settling' for these courses. Their availability is crucial to many students, for example to many women who seek retraining, for those seeking a second chance at education. Those seeking education that is firmly focussed on work. Equality of opportunity is at issue here.

Why then should the people who enter FE, VEC or PLC colleges have less support, less attention, poorer facilities and lower status in terms of policy attention?

Why is there an unwillingness to recognise further education as a legitimate, important and quite separate sector in its own right?

Why does it struggle for equality in terms of facilities and funding?

Why is it still linked to the second level sector in terms of teacher's contracts etc?

Yes, we are making progress at primary level.

Yes, there are exciting developments at second level.

Yes, the commitment to the third and now fourth level is evident.

But there is no statutory sector for Further Education to take its place alongside primary, secondary, tertiary and beyond. We cannot allow the PLC sector to exist as the Cinderella of the education system. I myself examined the Estimates for 2006 just to see the extent of the problem, but this merely affirmed the sectors Cinderella status.

For first-level, the Estimates set out a clear allocation of 2.3 billion for salaries, capital, grants etc.

For second-level; a separate section listing the 2.5 billion in grants, payments and the rest.

And for the third-level sector, the Estimates list 1.6 billion allocation for 2006.

In contrast, Further Education finds itself 'squashed in' somewhere. Some of its funding is covered in the second-level section, some in the third-level. It makes it difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain what the Estimate for the sector actually is.

The purpose of the Estimates is to set out the amount required in a year for salaries, expenses, grants and services. It seems that for Further Education and PLC courses, there is an unfortunate lack of will to treat them as separate, distinct yet equal in this regard.

In conclusion, I believe that a statutory Further Education sector could provide high access, low cost and local educational opportunities for a significant number of our population. A population that is changing by the day.

We have thousands of immigrants who seek up-skilling and language supports, and this is a sector which is very accessible and suitable to immigrants and women who need supports to enable them to take up jobs in our economy - particularly in the domestically traded service industries.

We need to have a balanced expansion of educational facilities to ensure that all our population can use their talents. This has not happened to date.

Go raibh maith agat.

ⁱ Chambers of Commerce of Ireland, 2002.