

Royal Irish Academy Leaders in Higher Education Address

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Speaker Mr Ruairí Quinn, TD

Title The Education of Ireland





Ruairí Quinn TD was appointed minister for education and skills in March 2011, and served until July 2014. He has been a public representative since 1974 and a TD representing the people of Dublin South-east since 1977.

As minister for education and skills, Ruairí Quinn's priorities included:

- patronage and pluralism;
- literacy and numeracy;
- improving teacher training;
- training and reskilling the newly unemployed;
- reform of the Junior Cert, Leaving Cert and points system;
- improving our education system at all three levels.

Ruairí Quinn has broad political experience, having served as a minister in six different departments, including as minister for finance from 1993 to 1997. From his time in government to serving as leader of the Labour Party from 1997 to 2002, his depth of experience and political acumen is extensive.

His political memoir, *Straight Left: A Journey in Politics*, was published in 2005. Previously, Ruairí Quinn was an architect and town planner.

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Foreword

Professor Mary E. Daly, President of the Royal Irish Academy

As president of the Royal Irish Academy, I am delighted to introduce the inaugural Royal Irish Academy Leaders in Higher Education Address. The Academy is keen to promote a greater dialogue between academic experts and policymakers in the hope that, together, we can promote evidence-based policy. This series is intended to offer a platform for leaders in higher education—both national and international—to offer their reflections and perspectives on the world of higher education, research and innovation. I am delighted that Ruairí Quinn TD has agreed to deliver the first Leaders in Higher Education Address. During his term as minister for education and skills, he was responsible for institutions and policies that are vital to the future of Irish society.

Professor Peter Kennedy MRIA, Royal Irish Academy Secretary for International Relations

Ireland's continued development in an increasingly competitive global economy depends critically on the capability of our education system to produce highly creative, environmentally aware, socially responsible and adaptable individuals. What types of third-level graduates do we need, how best to form them, and how to pay for it all are some of the burning questions of our time. We are delighted that the former minister for education and skills, Ruairí Quinn TD, has accepted our invitation to share his thoughts on these and related matters.

The Education of Ireland

Introduction

I have been honoured to deliver this inaugural address, on an educational theme of my own choice, to the members of the Royal Irish Academy and their guests. I want to thank the president of the Academy, Professor Mary Daly, who herself has made history by being the first woman elected to this position in 229 years.

I have chosen as my title 'The Education of Ireland', and I want to begin with some reflections on the Irish educational tradition before I concentrate on higher education in the twenty-first century.

A Landscape of Learners

Archaeology and history inform us that humanity has settled and lived on this island of ours for approximately ten thousand years. The traces of settlement and communal living reveal much about which we can only speculate. However, one thing that is clear to us today is that we have inherited a landscape of learners. The early monastic settlements and what we can deduce from much older monuments indicate that the people who settled on and shaped this landscape were learning from their experience and honouring learning through the generations. We have much yet to discover, but by early Christian times we do know that the high crosses of Ireland were, in their time, stone-carved blackboards used to tell the Christian narrative to a people who believed but could not read.

Indeed, such books that did exist were handwritten texts of the early Christian faith and the sacred scriptures. Our great illustrated manuscripts represented the high point of that tradition. The written text of the Greek and Latin languages were known to very few, but they did exist and formed the first basis of our independently stored knowledge.

A History of Schooling

From the monasteries and the big fortified homes of the powerful landowners, knowledge and learning was held and shared by a small portion of the population. It can be assumed

that the transfer of knowledge and wisdom was considered to be a powerful social tool. Centres of education were invariably located in the precincts of cathedrals or large Christian religious settlements. It was in such places that the school as we know it today emerged. St Patrick's Cathedral Choir School, still in existence in Dublin today, is probably Ireland's earliest surviving school.

The value of schooling was long ago well understood. Once the printing press was invented in Europe, around 1450, the cultural and commercial, not to mention political, strength of this new technology was established. Whether it was in the formal seats of academic learning, such as Trinity College, Dublin, or the many private institutions connected with the professions or the commerce of the day, formal and informal schooling and training continued to develop across Ireland. Throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, the hedge schools met a demand that was widespread across the rural communities of Ireland. By 1824 there was a remarkable total of 9,352 hedge schools in operation. This all culminated, in a formal sense, with the state-supported Irish National school system established in 1831 on the basis of the famous Stanley letter. It was to be forty years later before a similar system was to be established in England.

A Culture of Commitment

The penetration of educational demand across the country surely reflects a real community belief in the value that education provided to Irish families across all classes. Parents made sacrifices to send and keep their children at school because they knew that it was good for their children's future at home and abroad and, so, perhaps for their own old age. There is no doubt, in my understanding of this history, that a culture of commitment to education was instilled in the vast majority of Irish homes. Indeed, in a work undertaken by Garret FitzGerald within this institution and published posthumously in 2013, it emerged that the Irish spend per capita in education was amongst the highest in Europe; he calculated the total education spend for 1824 to be £750,000, a remarkable sum in the context of the times, and equivalent to around €70 million in today's money. Given that the budget for the education system in 2015 is well in excess of €8 billion, we can see clearly how our national commitment to education has continued over the intervening years.

The Call to Training

The rapid growth of the Irish population in the 1800s and improved agricultural productivity saw an increase of large families working smaller holdings. While the Famine devastated many parts of the country, by the late 1800s farming families would see a future in education for some of their children, as not all could derive a living from the family farm. The now well-established and greatly expanded National school system required more and more teachers to meet demand. This, in turn, produced bright pupils—now young adults—who were encouraged to apply to become school monitors or for a coveted place in a teacher-training college. The lucky ones were informed, by post, with the famous phrase of 'the call to training', which signalled a life of study, secure employment and social status in the community.

I draw attention to these background factors because the present position of education in Ireland today and its public status, cannot, in my opinion, be fully understood without realising the deep commitment to the pursuit and provision of education by Irish parents for their children, which has been evident over the generations. It is not unique to Ireland, but its enduring strength continues to inform the landscape of Irish education to this very day.

Accordingly, when looking at many of the educational issues in Ireland, particularly within the higher-education sector today, we should bear in mind how the legacy of the past commitment to education informs modern responses to new challenges.

Higher education in the twenty-first century

From the Past to the Future

In less than sixty years, Ireland has gone from the introduction of free post-primary-school education for all our children to a point where half of school-leavers go into third-level education. We've moved from mass primary education to mass second-level education, and now to mass higher education. In 1966 only one in ten school-leavers who sat the Leaving Certificate went on to third level. Now, almost fifty per cent transfer to higher education, which is the highest proportion within the EU and even shows signs of increase. In addition, post-Leaving Certificate courses and other educational pathways to third level add to undergraduate numbers in our system. This is all taking place against a quantitative increase in both population numbers and in final school completions. The first is caused by natural demographic growth and will only peak in 2027. The second is because specific intervention measures are significantly improving school retention levels. Among other interventions, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), the scheme targeted at students in disadvantaged schools, is working.

The University Sector and the Technology Sector

Ireland's higher education was designed as a binary system, and has two distinct and different sectors:

- the university sector, with seven institutions;
- the technological sector, with fourteen Institutes of Technology (IoTs).

We need both sectors to develop and grow. Where appropriate, they should complement but not duplicate each other.

I am very strongly of the view that the two sectors are complementary. However, there has been a view that the IoTs were/are drifting in the direction of becoming quasi-universities. In my view, this would be a major error.

In 1992 Prime Minister John Major rebranded nearly all the polytechnics into universities in the UK. This was the almost inevitable consequence of the policies pursued by his predecessor, Margaret Thatcher, who had presided over the deindustrialisation of Britain, with disastrous results for large parts of the United Kingdom north of London. At a stroke, the Conservative government ended the binary system in the UK, a path I believe we should not follow.

The Possibility of Modernisation

The National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 (the Hunt report) identified a range of modernisations. However, it is now for the HEA (Higher Education Authority) to explore different ways in which effective and efficient modernisation can take place. The role of industry and the focus of third-level research are also matters that need constant attention during this period of consolidated modernisation.

For example, a positive development at higher-education level has been the modernisation of primary and post-primary-teacher education. Nineteen state-funded third-level teacher-training institutions have been reconfigured into six centres of professional educational training, encouraging the synergies which centres of excellence can provide.

The three-year course for primary teachers has been extended to a four-year degree, with a greater focus on pedagogical skills, educational research and an understanding of children with special educational needs. At post-primary level, the one-year HDip course has been turned into a two-year masters course, with the requirement for a wider range of teacher learning experience in partnership with schools, and also a deeper engagement with educational research.

The Teaching Council is a major agent in the formal reconstruction of teacher education as a continuum. Since January 2014, all primary and post-primary teachers in the Irish system must be fully qualified and registered with the Teaching Council if they are to be employed in an Irish school. The Teaching Council requires evidence of continual professional development over the teacher's career as part of the maintenance of the mandatory registration. This measure has already removed untrained teachers from the classroom. These developments are of historical significance and will lead to the enhanced professionalisation of all our teachers.

Principals at primary and post-primary schools should, over time, have postgraduate qualifications in school leadership. In addition, they could be confined to a maximum of two seven-year terms in office, not necessarily in the same school, before redeployment within the education system. Increasing the flow of expert teachers and school leaders between our schools, together

with our support systems for teachers and academics, can help ensure that research and practice become linked much more strongly than they are at present.

Maintaining Quality in Times of Economic Recession

The impact of the financial crisis has been hard upon the education system in general, and on higher education in particular. The improvement in the economy has resulted in a better budget this year than was thought possible. However, I am not convinced that all efficiencies and improvements that could take place have occurred, or that the improvement in productivity that has been achieved should be reversed because of a relaxation in funding. Extra funding, when it comes, will have to be deployed carefully. Improvements in pay and conditions for teachers will have to be combined with increased productivity and flexibility.

Because higher education generates more than forty per cent of its total revenue in some institutions, there have to be clear and transparent rules about how that non-exchequer money can be deployed. Inevitable tensions and constraints developed with the introduction of the FEMPI (Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) legislation. There were also the consequences for institutions of the state assuming responsibility for the university pension fund, which had to be taken in under the umbrella of the public sector. These tensions and constraints will require re-examination as non-exchequer funding of our institutions increases.

Issues of concern

Rankings (in no particular order)

The Republic of Ireland has seven universities for a population of 4.5 million people. Dr Ellen Hazelkorn is a Dublin-based expert on the international rankings of universities. Following this year's publication of the rankings, she made some very interesting observations on the results from an Irish point of view. First published in 1993, there are now three international ranking systems that get worldwide coverage. Rankings in some form or other have been around for more than a hundred years. The International Association of Universities reckons that there are about eighteen thousand university-type institutions throughout the world.

The top thousand were ranked recently, and Ireland's universities—with the exception of the NUI Galway (National University of Ireland, Galway)—all dropped down the rankings. In her commentary, Dr Hazelkorn noted that US universities made up forty-five per cent of the top one hundred, compared to Europe's thirty-four per cent. However, looking at the top two hundred universities, the figures are virtually reversed, with Europe having forty-two per cent and the US thirty-seven per cent of the top two hundred universities.

Let me be very clear, we cannot ignore the rankings, but nor should we become obsessed by them. One factor in climbing up the rankings is the need to advance additional finance to meet some of the ranking criteria. However, the level of funding required to deliver a top-ten institution in Ireland is simply not available, and never will be.

A new ranking system pioneered by the EU but not confined exclusively to EU-based institutions, called U-MULTIRANK, aims to capture much more information about the whole university experience from a number of different points of view. I would like to see all of our universities and institutes of technology participate in that system. The final point I would make on this issue is well articulated by Professor Hazelkorn. On balance, over the space of a number of years, Ireland's seven universities and the Dublin Institute of Education range within the annual publications of ranking in the top three per cent of all the eighteen thousand universities in the world. That is a very significant statistic, which should be noted and from which we can build.

Research Funding

Research is a really important area for the different higher-education institutions. It is essential to the work of the institutions, for the education of generations, for most graduate students and for the economic viability of the university or institute. But it is also centrally important to the Irish economy and to all our enterprises, both established companies and young start-ups.

I strongly supported the establishment of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the way in which the board and its various directors managed the allocation of funds. The fact that SFI was located within the Department of Jobs, Innovation and Enterprise reinforced the message as to why research was so important to Ireland and our people.

The previous European Commission, led on the issue of research, innovation and science by Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, significantly increased funding for research. Ireland should be well placed to access those increased funds. The recent amendment to the SFI legislation enlarged the remit to research and applied research. This should facilitate research being brought closer to market and commercial realisation than was the case before. The HEA and the SFI should examine new ways in which this can be developed and progressed. An emphasis on research to promote economic development does not mean that research for the arts and the humanities should be downgraded. Culture, in all its manifestations, has a huge economic potential that Ireland cannot afford to ignore.

Collaboration on Campus and Between Different Institutions

The brief description of the role of research brings us logically to review the existing levels of collaboration within existing higher-level institutions. This requires a complete sense of openness and horizontal sharing across the campus, while at the same time recognising and respecting the individual drive of persons and research teams to pursue the completion of their own projects. Leadership is important here, and regular cross-campus briefings and information

exchanges could bring this about, and hopefully already are.

Research and collaboration can be used to project the individual institutions and the educational clusters to connect and relate more directly with local industry and enterprises. While there are many examples of this happening in individual institutions, I do not consider that the practice is sufficiently applied across the country. Likewise, I think that Chambers of Commerce, local authorities and individual enterprises should be activated to ensure closer and ongoing collaboration and interaction.

Accommodation and Capacity

Let me start with student accommodation, which has been seriously aggravated by the economic crisis and the collapse of the construction industry. While surveys show that sixty per cent or more of students live at home, the remaining group do have difficulty in finding affordable accommodation. In addition, student subject and course choice can be constrained by access to affordable/suitable accommodation. Clear cooperation with local authorities and institutions is needed here. I also think that there could be a role, nationwide, for the USI (Union of Students in Ireland) to establish an enterprise to address this issue or, indeed, to cooperate with the voluntary housing associations to achieve the same end.

Companies have already started to renovate or construct new premises, such as the conversion of the old Montrose Hotel in south Dublin across from UCD (University College, Dublin). But I believe that the demand makes room for different providers and also for different models of delivery. The twelve-week period of vacancy by many undergraduates in the summer also offers new opportunities for on-campus short courses of many different kinds, which will enhance the year-round operational life of the institution.

Horizon 2030

Finance, Fees and Accommodations

There has been a long discussion about the finances of our higher-education sector that has not really produced an informed debate. That was one of the reasons that I, as minister, established the working group under the leadership of Peter Cassells. While I don't want to interfere in its work, I am now more free to articulate some thoughts of my own.

To begin with, higher education has a cost, and so can never be described as free. What is at issue is the access to higher education and how the cost of that is carried within our society. This includes the full cost of providing a high quality of education in the first instance. The academic labour market for third-level education has now become very internationalised.

Increased academic collaboration worldwide, greatly facilitated by electronic modern communication, has changed the profile of the college staffroom. Most Irish people who are now more than twenty years out of college are just not fully aware of this change. Because English has increasingly become the language of academic communication worldwide, Ireland has an advantage in this regard. But this has an impact on the employment of academic staff as well as implications for funding.

As was mentioned earlier, Irish student-participation rates in third level are also growing. The population cohort is increasing in absolute terms and will only begin to level out in twelve years' time. In addition, the participation rate within our own society is increasing, with both mainstream numbers and also the access programmes in our various institutions. These processes add to the cost. I am of the view that the state must start, again, to increase the overall funding to third-level education now that the economic crisis is behind us. A lot of economies have been achieved within the institutions, and these must be consolidated. Therefore, new resources must be targeted at increasing both capacity and quality.

How then can the participants, in receiving the undoubted economic benefits of third-level education, contribute directly towards its cost? The phased increase of the student charge from €2,000 in 2011 to €3,000 in 2015, in four annual increments, was a painful but necessary step. It had at least the benefit of providing clarity so that participants could make the necessary provision.

What many commentators do not seem to understand is that over fifty per cent of undergraduate students do not have to pay this charge because of their economic circumstances.

So what is the next step?

1. Should fees/charges be increased?
2. Should the cost of fees relate to the cost of providing the course?
3. Should a student-loan system be introduced and, if so, what form should it take?
4. Should a graduate income tax be part of the mix?

These are now no longer theoretical questions as there is experience to be examined in other parts of the world—for example, from existing loan schemes. There are many points that could be explored, developed and discussed by Irish audiences.

The reality is that the culture of commitment to education within our society will enable us to have a constructive exploration that will, I am confident, lead to a sustainable solution. It is important that any solution be regarded as equitable and transparent. But it must also be more than that. It must be framed in such a way that it provides for the leaders of education a platform of certainty over a fixed period of time—perhaps fifteen years to 2030? At least that will facilitate planning and development in our various institutions.

The Impact of Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Much has been written already about the changes that the new generations of information and communication technology are making to all aspects of modern living.

Education, at all levels, is being directly and indirectly affected by the continued speed of change. The need to adapt and readapt is a reality that most professionals within higher education already understand.

The cohorts of incoming students are also driving that change because their experience and use of all kinds of ICT is the new norm. However, when government ministers attempt to introduce change in this area it can become the focus for resistance that really has its causes located in other parts of the education system. I think that the reluctance to embrace change in the Junior Certificate post-primary space with the new Junior Cycle Student Awards is a good example.

Since the arrival in Europe of cheap and effective printing, the now traditional academic form of black-and-white written and readable information dominated the world of formal academic learning and information storage. That has now changed. The extent of that change is open-ended. Young people, and so future generations, will acquire and exchange information and so learning in a multimedia way. It has already started. It is here now. So all existing courses—in particular state curricula, and more importantly state examinations—can no longer ignore this ICT revolution.

There is a tendency to exaggerate the scale and impact that the array of new technologies will have on the fundamentals of our education system. This is partly driven by many of the commercial companies in the sector who are, understandably, trying to create or expand their own market.

The new forms of technology cannot obscure the reality of long-established practices. Distance learning, correspondence courses and even the Open University are reminders to us all that change has been with us in this area for quite some time. Then, as now, the key factor was the method of evaluation and examinations, as well as the quality of the interactive experience of the student and, most importantly, the teacher.

As we increasingly move into a knowledge-based society, including our economy, an essential skill remains even more central: the ability of young people to learn how to think and how to react quickly and effectively to change. Learning how to think, to analyse and to remember different sets of facts is at the core of what university education has always been about. In our modern third-level sector, that essential core competence has to apply to all aspects of learning.

I am of the view that ICT has already penetrated many areas of educational activity at all levels because of the widespread use of ICT within our homes, our classrooms and even the staffrooms. That will continue, provided we ensure that every school classroom is properly connected to good-quality broadband.

No discussion on ICT and education in Ireland is complete without a reference to Hibernia College. This ten-year-old successful college is Ireland's leading online third-level educational institution, and is delivering recognised courses in a balanced manner that meets the needs of graduates who wish to qualify as teachers. It is an integral part of the teacher-education landscape, and is now in the process of a successful expansion into other areas both at home and abroad. Originally seen as suspect in some quarters, it is now a model attracting international recognition and respect.

Education, Society and Our Economy

In a sense, the debate about education in Ireland has been dominated by the academic side, both at post-primary level and higher education.

Part of the resistance to any change to the junior cycle is based upon the argument that, for all its present faults, the Junior Certificate exam is a great rehearsal for the Leaving Certificate examination three years later. That is true for some but not all fourteen-year-olds. Many young students, among them many working-class boys and others whose homes and families are not supportive or comfortable with academic learning, are either left behind or abandoned by the present system.

Recently published research data at an ESRI (Economic and Social Research Institute) conference on leaving school in Ireland, post-school transition and policy is most revealing. The departure begins in second year typically among thirteen and fourteen-year-olds. The path leads away from academic learning inexorably to either traditional apprenticeships if you are lucky or dead-end, low-paid employment and long periods of unemployment. The personal and social consequences for our young citizens who are left to drift into this unproductive route is very damaging for them. But it is toxic for the rest of society as well.

I think that much of the recent surge of support for UKIP (UK Independence Party) in Britain is fuelled by young, white, British males who have been left behind without the skills to operate within an increasingly globalised world economy. The transfer of many skilled and semi-skilled jobs out of Europe to other parts of the world has removed employment in many regions of Europe that have effectively been deindustrialised. The manifestation of anti-immigrant sentiment across Europe, including Ireland, is a cry for re-inclusion in a society which once had a role, an education and a place for people who now feel abandoned because they are closed out of the modern workplace.

A major challenge facing Irish education over the next ten to twenty years is to educate that cohort of our young people back into the world of work. It starts where they are beginning to depart, at junior cycle, and continues on through post-primary education to our technological section. The institutes of technology are the successors of our regional technological colleges, which were established by Seán Lemass. They had a mission to prepare farmers' sons and daughters for a world of work away from the land in a modern industrial Ireland. They were successful then, and can become so again. The transition from school to third level has to realise that the

academic and the technological are two sides of the same coin that we call education. Industry and the world of work are the partners for this modern form of technological education.

Many parents of the present cohort of third-level students have no direct experience of being a full-time student in college. But they associate a college qualification with a guarantee of a job. However, true though that might have been in the past, the ESRI survey shows that more than fifty per cent of college graduates four or five years after graduation are dissatisfied with the jobs they are doing, and feel that their chosen course did not provide the employment which they would have liked or aspired to. Many of these were squeezed into an academic route, when a more vocational path would have better suited their skill sets. It would also have meant better employment chances and more job satisfaction.

We have a strong academic third-level tradition and a weak technological third-level tradition. The transition from school to third level, both academic and technological, is one of the great challenges that now faces our educational system. There has to be a rebalancing of the system from ages fourteen to twenty-four.

The historic divisions of primary, secondary and tertiary need to be reinterpreted so that they fit the needs of all our young learners. Their abilities, skills and aptitudes are not all academic, and yet our system is predominately academic-based. Indeed, our current Junior Certificate state examination is entirely academic-based.

We should not try to transpose a Germanic vocational model from the last century onto our own educational landscape. Rather, we can use the next fifteen years to readjust and rebalance the educational system so that its path is wide enough to facilitate all our young learners to achieve their full potential.

The establishment of SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) now provides us with the opportunity to create in Ireland our own model of a twenty-first-century technological vocational structure. SOLAS was established to provide a similar level of service to this technological vocational sector as the HEA does to the higher educational sector. While not a direct provider, unlike its predecessors AnCO (An Chomhairle Oiliúna) and FÁS (Foras Áiseanna Saothair), it will identify and commission courses, skill sets and other kinds of competencies needed in a twenty-first-century economy. These will then be delivered within the technology sector from the institutes of technology, colleges of further education and the education and training boards. Existing courses will be expanded and altered or, where necessary, replaced with new sets of skills and expertise.

The important difference will be the direct engagement with industry and employers to ensure the design of specific courses and the delivery of qualified technologists. The Apprenticeship Review Report, led by Kevin Duffy, chairman of the Labour Court and originally a qualified bricklayer himself, recommended a fifty–fifty share of responsibility between the employer and the educational institutions for the apprentices—time being employed and time being educated.

This model is being developed on the back of existing practices as well as meeting the needs of young people and the Irish economy. A further step has taken place recently with the establishment of the Apprenticeship Council. It is being chaired by Pat O'Doherty, CEO of the ESB.

This new learning landscape must also take into account the transformation of the Vocational Education Committees (VECs), which were established in 1930. The thirty-three VECs of vastly different sizes were merged into sixteen new Educational and Training Boards (ETBs). Following the completion of the local election earlier this year, the new boards are now fully operational. The eighteen training centres formerly operated by FÁS have been transferred to the ETBs in the areas where they are located. Within the third-level sector, the ETBs will now have an enlarged role, combining with the colleges of further education and the post-Leaving Certificate courses. It is in this new space, as well as in the IoTs, that SOLAS will oversee the various courses, including apprenticeship training.

The final addition to this educational landscape is the technological university (TU). The concept of a technological university in Ireland has grown out of the local recognition of the value of a university to a community as a cultural, social and economic resource.

The history of Limerick city's campaign for a university is well documented in Ed Walsh's autobiography. With the emergence of the secular university in Maynooth and the evolution of the National Institute for Higher Education, Dublin into Dublin City University, three new institutions have been added to the original four universities in the state.

In order to maintain and protect the status of any new institution and the reputation of existing Irish universities, clear, objective criteria were established by the HEA in consultation with the Department of Education and Skills. There are four stages in the process for being designated a technological university.

Firstly, institutions must express their interest in beginning this process. That stage has been completed by three consortia— in Dublin, in Munster and in the south-east.

Secondly, the institutions coming together must prepare a plan to meet the set criteria. That stage has been completed in Dublin and in Munster, and work on stage two remains ongoing in the south-east.

Stage three involves an evaluation of those plans by an international expert panel. I expect that Munster and Dublin will complete stage three in the near future.

Stage four involves the merger of the institutions, achievement of the set criteria, and a formal application for designation as a technological university.

The final decision on the designation of an institution as a technological university will be determined by an independent expert panel appointed by the HEA. That panel will determine whether the applicant has met all the criteria that have been clearly established, and reports its

recommendations to the HEA. Following consideration by the HEA, a final report and advice will then be sent to the minister for education and skills.

At present, Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Tallaght and Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown are preparing an application for TU status to the HEA. Waterford Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology, Carlow may apply. Cork Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology, Tralee are finalising their application for TU status to the HEA. The path and the process have been set out. We can but await until that is concluded before we have a complete picture.

Finally, a great new resource that will be available are the four regional educational clusters of our seven universities and fourteen institutes of technology. This will ensure that up to seven educational institutions within a region will share resources, exchange and interact with personnel and courses, and so maximise the learning potential of the region. It will also keep all third-level bodies and activities, both academic and technological, interacting in constructive ways. I believe that a new strength of these four clusters will be the integration of third-level learning. This will make impossible the kind of intellectual and educational apartheid that once haunted our post-primary education system but no longer does so.

Next year, we will be marking the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the radical document *Investment in Education*. It is a timely reminder of how far we have come in such a short time. It is also, therefore, a great encouragement to continue the work of development and renewal.

Conclusion

Everybody who has gone to school considers that they are an expert on education because of their twelve years or more of immersion in the system. If they have gone on to send children to school, their qualifications include a PhD! For many, school today is what it was in their time, even if that was thirty years or more back in the last century!

There are many people who think that teachers have an easy job with great holidays and not much hassle, so why do they complain so much? These are some of the observations that I encountered when I became minister for education and skills in March 2011.

Despite the horrendous economic collapse in 2009, education was significantly ring-fenced. It was done so without much debate because of the existing widespread support and respect for education within our society. We as a people take that as normal. Is it not something that exists in all developed countries? No, it is not. The US and our nearest neighbour, the UK, has had a

very different experience. Many of our EU partners would simply love to have what we have here in Ireland.

There are 4.5 million people in the state, and about one quarter of them are enrolled or working in full-time education. Its public budget is the third largest, after social protection and health, with approximately €8.3 billion. But much more money is contributed by parents and families as well as through community support for local fundraising.

Irish people respect education and regard teachers as professionals. There are almost ninety thousand teachers formally registered with the Teaching Council. All of our teachers are paid for by the state, provided they are professionally qualified and registered with the Teaching Council. Next year, they will be required to do continuous professional development in order to maintain their registration.

By comparison, the Conservative education secretary in Britain, Nicky Morgan, is considering whether the two-year primary-teacher-training course is enough. Untrained graduates are encouraged to sign up for Teach First, an America-inspired education-type Peace Corps to attract young university graduates into the classroom and to fill the many gaps in the school system. Both in the US and Britain the dropout rate of such volunteers is high, after the initial enthusiasm is eroded by the reality of large schools and unruly pupils whose parents are indifferent to the value of education.

The Kerry writer and primary teacher Bryan McMahon wrote a book about his many experiences as the master. He defined a great teacher as a good person who teaches. We are very fortunate in this country that we have very many masters and great teachers. They are so because teaching is highly valued by parents and the wider community. While we take that for granted, we must continue to treasure it!

Royal Irish Academy
19 Dawson St
Dublin 2

www.ria.ie

