

**UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 08.30AM, 29 JANUARY**

**Ensuring the best future for higher education in Europe  
Irish Universities Association Key Event  
Dublin, 29 January 2019**

Minister O'Connor,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be with you this morning. This event is both pertinent and timely. I would like to thank the Irish University Association for bringing us together to discuss how we can ensure a bright future for higher education in Europe.

Let me give you the European perspective – which resonates strongly with at least some of Ireland's issues and ambitions.

In all European countries, and Ireland is no exception, higher education is undergoing massive and essential changes. The profound transformation of society – in its technological, environmental, demographic, and social dimensions – has inevitable and necessary impacts on higher education.

But universities are not passive in this change. They are, and should be, among the most important agents of change in Europe today. Change that is necessary to ensure that Europe stays competitive and prosperous. To ensure that we can build

cohesive, resilient communities – and that we equip young people with the skills and attitudes they need to lead fulfilling lives and find their place in our societies.

My ambition is to make Europe a place where young people get the very best education, with the freedom to study and work across countries without obstacles.

At the Gothenburg Summit just over a year ago, EU Heads of State and Government asked the European Commission to do more at the European level. In response, we have presented a bold vision for what we call the European Education Area. This should be a genuine European learning space, aimed at achieving three main objectives by 2025.

First, it should promote cross-border learning mobility and cooperation.

Erasmus has arguably been the most successful programme in EU history. Yet, less than 4% of students currently participate in it, and they mostly come from the more affluent parts of society. This is not good enough.

Doubling the Erasmus budget – as we have proposed for the period 2021-2027– is a good start. It will allow us to triple the number of participants who have a learning experience abroad. At the same time, it will enable us to make Erasmus even more inclusive.

I know that for universities it can be a challenge to give access to the best minds, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

But this is the added value of our European programmes – Erasmus+ and the Marie-Skłodowska-Curie Actions.

Learning mobility should benefit all.

We are working hard to ensure a timely adoption of the next Erasmus Regulation to ensure a seamless transition between the current and the next programme and avoid any 'gaps' .

Second, the European Education Area should tear down remaining obstacles to the free movement of learners. This means we must develop automatic recognition of qualifications between EU Member States, and promote multilingualism.

And third, the European Education Area should stand for inclusive, innovation-driven lifelong learning. This involves strengthening cooperation between education institutions, and deeper engagement beyond academia, including with regional and national authorities, businesses, employers, research institutions and civil society.

In each of these three dimensions, higher education has a crucial part to play. To succeed, we need to have a shared agenda with Member States and education stakeholders, including universities.

Our purpose is to move forward and boost both educational excellence and fairness. Only by acting together can these two elements make European higher education smarter, better adapted and more impactful.

Let me mention four concrete initiatives we have recently launched to make this vision reality.

The first is the European Universities initiative. I am sure you have heard about it. This is one of the cornerstones of the European Education Area.

It is a strong initiative because we are building its foundations together with Member States and the higher education community. Our Irish partners are fully involved. European Universities will be inclusive. They will engage students on an equal footing and irrespective of their social backgrounds, or that of their parents.

All types of higher education institutions across the EU will be able to take part, bridging the gap between North and South, East and West. This can help create more unity and strengthen young people's sense of what it feels like to be European.

We need excellence, not elitism. European Universities must develop strong links with their communities and become civic universities. This is key to allow them to become real engines of economic and social development at local and regional level.

That is why it is so important that the European Universities develop joint long-term strategies on education, with links to research and innovation where possible, and with a focus on sustainability, excellence and European values.

To be clear, let me add that European Universities are an education-driven initiative. It is paramount that teaching is as important a priority as research – in terms of both policy and investment. This is essential if we are to empower as many young people as possible.

European Universities will serve as role models. We hope they will help lift quality, attractiveness and impact across the entire European higher education landscape.

I am happy that several Irish universities are planning to respond to the Commission's pilot calls.

The second important initiative addresses the recognition of qualifications.

The Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition of diplomas and learning periods abroad, adopted in November 2018, now needs to be implemented.

The aim is clear: any student who completed a learning experience in an EU Member State, should get automatic recognition for their work anywhere in the EU, so they can access further learning, without any separate procedure. Of

course, each university will retain full autonomy with respect to their admission policies.

Your Department of Education and Higher Education Authority will guide you on how to make this possible by 2025. And the European Union will support Member States in this process.

Third, one year ago, we launched the Digital Education Action Plan, and – as part of it – the “Higher Education Hub”. The objective is to help make higher education more accessible to a wider range of students.

The Higher Education Hub will be an EU-wide platform to share best practice on teaching, mobility and student engagement.

For instance, universities from different countries could organise joint virtual interactive classrooms, allowing groups of students and teachers to collaborate on specific topics, together with research organisations or companies.

Students will also be able to use the platform to prepare for a period in which they go and study at a different university, and to complement this time abroad with a longer-term period of virtual exchanges.

Finally, we are building stronger links with research.

Basic interdisciplinary research and skills development – including for socio-economic sciences and humanities – are

crucial for Europe. That is why we are developing even more ambitious Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions for training and career development of researchers. And we are building a stronger European Institute of Innovation and Technology, bringing researchers, students and businesses closer together, creating unique spaces for innovation, and educating a whole new generation of entrepreneurs.

Ireland has an excellent track record in both the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and the EIT, and I have no doubt you will continue to perform at the highest level.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All these joint efforts and our common resolve to transform European higher education will not work unless we have the financial support necessary for a high-performance sector that equips our young people with the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and knowledge they need.

As a country with a long tradition of cherishing learning and sharing it with the world, Ireland has a lot of success stories to share, and we value your input as we shape an exciting future for education in Europe.

I would like to thank the Irish Universities Association again for making this event happen, and I look forward with great interest to our discussions.