

“INNOVATION RATHER THAN SPECULATION HOLDS THE KEY TO OUR FUTURE PROSPERITY”

Address by Ned Costello, Chief Executive Irish Universities Association at a PhD and Masters Conferring Ceremony, UCC, April 11th 2008.

President, Members of the University, new graduates and distinguished guests, I am very honoured to have been asked to make this commencement address. My sincere thanks to the President for the opportunity to speak to you. Let me begin by congratulating you all on your magnificent achievements in your journey towards this very special day.

Although not a graduate of this august institution, I have a long association with UCC. My relationship with the university began in the early 'eighties, shortly after the foundation of the National Microelectronics Research Centre, and continued with its metamorphosis into the Tyndall National Institute in 2004. Through the NMRC, UCC established itself as a pioneer in the Irish research landscape. Two and a half decades ago, that landscape was so barren as to be positively lunar. Policy makers viewed research rather much as the medieval cartographers viewed uncharted lands: filling in their maps with the legend “here be monsters”.

Thankfully, all that has changed. One of UCC's great successes was to demonstrate to those sceptics that research did make sense, especially from an economic perspective. It showed that resources invested in university-based research produced postgraduates with the kinds of skills and acumen which companies wanted, and that investment would follow those skills. It also showed that universities could be outward facing and could profit (and I use the term in its widest sense) from a dialogue with the wider economy, without compromising their core mission of scholarship and academic excellence.

The national Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation – the SSTI - is a very explicit commitment by Government to building a world class research base in Ireland. All credit is due to Minister Micheal Martin for securing both the strategy and the resources to go with it. Your own efforts and achievements in your postgraduate work are a tangible manifestation of the strategy in action.

Much has been made of the strategy's objective of doubling PhD numbers. It must be stressed that this is very much a means rather than an end. The end in question is to build a national base of creativity, knowledge and innovation which contributes to the betterment of our society as a whole. Political and societal support for the development of research and of our universities can only be maintained if this larger goal is achieved.

On the simple metric of GDP per capita, Ireland is now one of the richest countries in the world. But you will all know how dangerous it is to attempt

to describe complex systems on the basis of a limited set of data points. In truth, Ireland has been extraordinarily fortunate in the past decade and a half. Global credit expansion, unprecedented low interest rates, positive demographics and an associated construction boom have all given an enormous shot in the arm to our growth rates. This unusual confluence has conspired to create a pool of benign circumstances favouring growth. It should also be acknowledged that our recent success has also been predicated on some important public policy choices. These included the period of correction in the public finances in the run up to EMU, wide scale reform of business and labour taxes, and effective use of the EU structural funds to kick start initiatives in areas such as research.

Another of those policy choices was the more recent decision to invest heavily in research. Returning to the science and innovation strategy, a key target is to see that enterprise spending on R&D more than doubles by 2013. This is central in the drive to turn Ireland from a country which is excellent at producing products and services based on imported ideas to one where those products and services derive from ideas generated here. In our globalised world, physical and financial capital is very mobile. Intellectual capital is much less so and is the dominant source of competitive advantage today. Innovation rather than speculation holds the key to our future prosperity.

I am delighted to see the wide spread of disciplines represented here today covering the medicine, arts, humanities and social sciences, as well as the physical sciences. Too often, false dichotomies are drawn between these fields, ignoring the fact that knowledge and ideas are a common currency whose value-added is derived from its application rather than its origin. I say this as someone who comes from an arts and social sciences background but has spent much of their career commingling with the world of the physical sciences.

In small countries, the quality of public policy making has a disproportionate impact on the prosperity of the nation. We have seen this graphically at home where misguided policies based on economic and social introversion born in the thirties condemned generations to poverty. Not just physical poverty, but a poverty of expectations, which is far, far worse. Insight and intelligence gained in the humanities and social sciences has much to contribute to the policy process.

Today, we are at an important crossroads. We are entering an environment where intensive growth and the tide of revenue that goes with it, is ebbing. The choices which we make now will have an enormous impact in the future. One of those choices concerns the level of investment we as a society are willing to make in our universities and how we should fund that investment. We need courageous vision to ensure that the factors which drive real lasting prosperity such as investment in education and research are not dissipated in more difficult times.

Embarking on a Masters or PhD is not unlike responding to Shackleton's famous advertisement. "Men Wanted: For hazardous journey. Small wages,

bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.”

Like Shackleton’s crew, you know of the long hours spent staring at the “north face” of the problem being confronted; the frustration of going down what seems like a promising route only to find it turn into a blind alley; and the combination of elation and relief when the magnum opus finally comes together.

Today is about the honour and recognition which rewards success. It is also about celebrating the support of parents, spouses, partners friends – and academic mentors – who have all played a significant part in making your achievements possible.

You have all seen the benefits which investment in our universities brings. I am sure that you will also know that those efforts need to be sustained and expanded. In your future lives you have the opportunity to use the experiences gained here in UCC to build a better Ireland and to act as advocates for research and education. Please grasp that opportunity with courage and vigour.

Congratulations on your achievements and good speed for your onward journey.

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