



IUA Future of Ireland Seminar - Keynote Speech

12th of May 2025

Introductory remarks

A chairde, good morning everyone, to those of you here in person and those joining us online.

President Leinonen, University Presidents, esteemed colleagues, staff, students, researchers, friends; I am delighted to deliver this keynote address to the Future of Ireland seminar.

Let me begin with a thank you to Jim Miley and the IUA for the invitation. Jim, this marks one of your final events as Director General. I want to publicly acknowledge your outstanding leadership since 2018 and thank you on behalf of the Department – not only for your invaluable contribution to Ireland's higher education sector but also as a leader in the charity sector with Sightsavers and Concern.

I wish you every success in your next chapter.

INTRODUCTION

We are at the start of the story of my department – nearly five years old - but the story of Higher Education in Ireland has just had one of its best chapters.

Since the formation of my Department, we have seen a period of intense change, technological disruption and impacts from climate change. The fundamental strength of our higher education and research has allowed us to excel during this time.

I commend everyone in this room for creating that strength. The research and skilled workers coming from your universities set in motion the huge economic and social progress we made over the last 30 years. It also allowed us to bounce back from economic shocks and disruptions.

But as Chaucer said – *time and tides wait for no man*.

To achieve more, I want to work with you to create the future we want today.

So, what is my vision for the future?

- It is a vision that recognises higher education, research and skills as foundational pillars for Ireland's economic strategy.
- It is a vision that sees us working together to advance a step change in research and innovation, to strengthen our skills base and to provide high-quality and accessible higher education.

- It is a vision that we can give assurance and comfort to all our citizens that we can react to any shock, any bump, any pivot.
- It is a vision of the future that student, academics and researchers are inspired by and want to be a part of it.

This is the future we will create together.

Vision for R&I

The first aspect of my vision is placing particular emphasis on strengthening Ireland's Research performance. I want to channel research excellence into real impact for a competitive and innovating knowledge economy.

By prioritising research, we can generate high-value jobs in emerging sectors such as AI, semiconductors, and life sciences, ensuring sustainable economic growth

Professor Conor Ryan's research in UL Lero in creating the first fabrication and design of a silicon chip without direct human input is the type of research I speak about. We now must work with our colleagues in DETE to create the high-tech export-based roles that this type of research promises.

We will use strategic research investments to support growth in the sectors where Ireland can be most competitive such as pharmaceuticals, medtech, and advanced manufacturing.

We will make targeted investment in research infrastructure such as the Higher Education Research Equipment Grant and the recent €17.7 million Research Ireland Research Infrastructure Programme.

Budget 2025 includes an overall envelope of €309.2 million for Research Ireland to move ahead with its mission to support excellence across all disciplines. Research Ireland will fund research centres, regional ARC Hubs, and high-impact initiatives such as the National Challenge Fund and Frontiers for the Future, enabling a shift from ideas to outcomes.

I know we will not always agree. We will discuss, we will challenge, we will debate, we will listen to each other, and we will collaborate. I welcome this – that's what makes our institutions great, that's what makes our researchers innovate. No discovery is made without questioning the status quo. I will protect that right as long as I am Minister.

I have listened to you and agree that we need a renewed investment Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTLTI). The original Programme was a turning point in Ireland's development as a knowledge economy and the State's first major strategic investment in research capacity, infrastructure and training.

It empowered Ireland's universities to define their own research priorities while ensuring that funding decisions were completely devolved to a world-class, independent panel avoiding any conflicts of interest. My audience here today are all only too aware of the benefits that accrued. This programme drove collaboration, built capacity, and embedded excellence

across disciplines, including the humanities and social sciences. It changed our country and it is time to introduce a new PRTLII.

My Department is young and I recognise that research ambition, of this magnitude, has not been prioritised sufficiently in the five years of its activity.

As the new Minister, I intend to change that and I am pleased to have the full backing of the Taoiseach in doing so. My ambition is to deliver a new programme that responds to today's needs while retaining the founding spirit of the original PRTLII. This will include targeted support for equipment renewal, recognising that much of what was funded under the original scheme is now nearing obsolescence.

However, the majority of funding will be reserved for a major competitive call based on application quality; one designed to drive institutional ambition, deepen collaborative links, and deliver real system-wide impact. Critically, it will not duplicate existing schemes. Instead, it will create space for excellence to flourish, independent of rigid priorities, responsive to strategic vision, and open to new ideas that can transform Ireland's research landscape once again.

My Department is actively developing a new proposal for this and I intend to pursue a sustainable funding pathway through the National Development Plan (NDP). This significant multiannual funding for a genuinely strategic, open-ended capacity-building programme will be transformative.

As we debate, Ireland should - and I will - stand firm in our belief in scientific excellence and academic integrity, of truth and fact based on evidence.

After World War II, America became a global leader in research by welcoming exiled European scientists, among them - Albert Einstein, Enrico Fermi, Leo Szilard, and Edward Teller, - by investing heavily in university-led innovation, and by forging strong federal-academic partnerships.

This created a vibrant, well-funded ecosystem that attracted global talent and led to American dominance in areas such as physics & nuclear science, space, medicine & biomedical sciences, computer science & information technology, chemistry, materials science and agricultural science.

The last few months however, has undoubtedly changed how people view the US when it comes to research. It has become a cold place for free thinkers and talented researchers. Faculty are having pledged funding revoked, institutes are facing shutdown.

We all know how that will grind advanced research to a halt. And that is nothing in the face of the human suffering of targeted student arrests and deportations. Reports of library culls bring to mind book burnings of old – something that should stay the reserve of history lecturers.

Aside from any cultural wars, do they not understand investment in innovation and cultivation of the best minds is key to economic advantage?

Europe recognises that, through the Draghi competitiveness report which prioritises innovation.

Europe will do more. European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen has committed to putting research and innovation at the heart of our economy. Her recent announcement of €500m to make Europe a magnet for researchers during these uncertain times is a welcome response.

As Minister for this sector, I get it too. Today, as U.S. research freedoms come under threat, Ireland has a unique opportunity to emulate their post war success by offering a stable, open, EU-aligned environment where world-class researchers can thrive, contribute, and shape the future of science. Ireland will be a welcoming host for the best and brightest fleeing the US university system and I intend to inform government of my formal plans this week.

Ireland has been successful in attracting top talent in the past, providing researchers with certainty through uncertain times. Taoiseach Eamon De Valera courted Erwin Schrodinger during World War 2 and convinced him to help establish the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies (DIAS). When founded in 1940, DIAS was only the second of its kind in the world and first in Europe – a bold decision at the time. While Schrodinger’s work led to discoveries in genetics and his eponymous cat thought experiment, DIAS has and continues to impact Ireland through its research.

Ireland prizes science, research and academic freedom, talent is our greatest natural resource and our best defence to trade wars and economic upheaval.

I want to be clear though: this is not about funding science for its own sake. The pursuit of knowledge always has merit but research also drives massive economic growth through supporting Irish companies to innovate and fostering new industries. The National Bureau of Economic Research estimates that every €1 invested in R&D returns at least €5 back.

PhD graduates are essential to Ireland's future, driving innovation, fuelling industry, and generating the ideas that power modern economies. With recent government measures, including increased stipends for PhD researchers, and commitments to fund additional PhDs through the NTF, Ireland is further strengthening its commitment to supporting this vital talent pool. As global competition intensifies, investing in research, PhD graduates, and collaboration is key to staying ahead. A strong PhD culture, supported by initiatives, is a strategic necessity for a resilient, knowledge-driven economy and a more competitive, outward-looking Ireland.

In advance of these plans, initiatives such as Global Citizens 2030, Talent and Innovation Attachés in Boston and San Francisco should also position us well.

We will continue to look outwards for collaboration in this uncertain world.

I find people have a new understanding of collaborative, international research during uncertain times after watching the movie Oppenheimer. In the current geopolitical environment, there is uncertainty for researchers on what the future may hold for international linkages.

I am inspired by Niels Bohr. After the war he still believed in international collaboration enough after the horrors he saw to help establish CERN, with it starting in his institute in Copenhagen before moving to Geneva.

Last Thursday I was proud to sign the Associate Membership Agreement with CERN on behalf of Ireland – an outcome I had long campaigned for since my time as opposition spokesperson. I visited Geneva twice in my first 100 days to help bring this over the line. This surely signals how serious I am about science.

In the same week I also secured cabinet approval to join the EU quantum computing pact. International collaboration is the way forward and science knows no borders.

We want to forge new global partnerships that will shape the next generation of discovery - working with the likes of the European Universities Alliances or closer to home on renewed North–South and East–West cooperation.

On Europe, I want to compliment the organizations here today in our performance securing Horizon Europe funding. We are punching well above our weight. I am delighted we have already drawn down €895 million.

I believe we can do even more. We need to redouble our efforts to exploit this opportunity and focus on achieving the most from the remaining work programme for 2025-2027 and on into the next EU budget.

To quote a Polish Philosopher – who was also a mathematician – Jacob Bronowski, ‘Knowledge is an unending adventure at the edge of uncertainty’.

The world can appear to be uncertain now. But what I am certain of is the impact of our research, our quest for knowledge and my belief in our ability to deliver the impact we need.

The Minister’s vision for Skills

I am aware research does not exist in a vacuum.

If research fuels innovation, then skills drive the realisation of that innovation.

Skills are key to our resilience and social cohesion. Skills open the doors to opportunities.

I recently read with interest the research output of Meghan Mackie. She is a third year PhD candidate in UCD from Canada who will also stay Ireland after her conferral. Her research expanded the range of the Denisovans – an early human species who went extinct. There are many theories on why they went extinct – perhaps maybe we, homo sapiens, were able to outcompete them due to our skills.

Skills have always been a key to Ireland success – but I am equally focused on ensuring we do not have a gap in our nation’s skills.

My vision is for us to work together, and with other stakeholders to expand higher education provision in key disciplines where there is a shortfall of graduates, as well as preparing for possible uncertainty ahead.

I can be certain that we will need more digital and green skills in the coming years to prepare for changes we currently see and meet the demands of the future economy, as well as valuing traditional skills such as construction. And indeed reinventing ways to do the same old things in new ways such as through modern methods of construction.

I am amending the National Training Fund (NTF) Act to enable new investment announced in Budget 2025 to flow from 2026 onwards. The Government has committed **€1.485 billion** from the NTF over six years to 2030, delivering a major boost for higher education, skills, and research.

For the first time, NTF funding will cover new areas including capital investment, core higher education funding, and research supports.

This investment will deliver modern, world-class training facilities and ensure we are ready for the skills needs of the future. It's a critical step to secure Ireland's workforce in a time of global change.

I opened the RDS Craft show last week and viewed the work of the many artisans from wood turners to farriers that were exhibiting. Their work balances tradition with innovation, an intrinsic part of our cultural identity but also a driver of economic growth. So I thank you and of course the Education and Training Boards, for producing a skilled talent pipeline for Ireland's construction industry -an area where we are all aware we need continued and increased enrolment.

We have reformed the National Skills Council to help us adapt and evolve in response to changing skills needs.

We may be entering a phase of economic uncertainty. History has shown us that this leads to an inevitable rise in demand for higher education. It is essential that our skills and education systems are well prepared if this comes to pass.

Darwin said that the species that survives and thrives is not the strongest or the fastest but is the society that is most adaptable to change. We need to be adaptable to change.

Many of the skills of today didn't exist yesterday, and many of the skills of tomorrow don't exist today. As educators, trainers and policy makers, this reality shapes our work so we must use the National Skills Observatory to guide that work.

We're not just preparing learners for today's jobs, we're equipping them with the adaptability, critical thinking, and resilience they'll need to thrive in careers yet to be imagined.

We will need that agility and flexibility in our system and we need to be prepared to respond to labour market shifts. Unlike the Denisovans, we must be ready to compete – and you can be assured you will have a partner here who will help you prepare.

High Quality Accessible Higher Education

The future belongs to those who prepare for it today, as Malcolm X said.

To realise our ambitions, we must get the fundamentals right.

I believe this begins with sustainable core funding, to give higher education institutions the stability they need to plan, to deliver on strategic reforms, and to meet demand.

As I mentioned, I have already secured cabinet approval to unlock the remaining €100 million additional core investment through the National Training Fund.

The National Development Plan is currently being reviewed. I intend to reorient this multi-annual source of investment beyond traditional bricks-and-mortar infrastructure toward a more extensive portfolio—one that extends to funding for research and technology.

I want to see more robust institutional governance enable our higher education institutions to thrive and innovate, supported by the Higher Education Authority Act.

We also need to orientate the sector to ensure the needs of society are being met. I am working to increase the number of therapist places to service disability for example as well as dentistry, veterinary medicine and nursing. This is working towards aligning our skills needs with our society needs.

My department is developing a Tertiary Education Strategy, the first of its kind, to set out a long-term vision for higher education, research, and skills. Just last week, I launched the third phase of this programme, with 38 degree courses now available, double what was available to students in the previous year.

I also want a system that works for everyone; not just for some. My vision is of a higher education system that reflects the full diversity of our society and provides pathways and opportunities for all. I am determined to be more targeted in investing in underrepresented groups.

I am also taking a more targeted approach to the cost of education. We must continue to help people who need it most. That's why we recently increased the SUSI threshold to €115,000 for undergraduate students. I intend to make further changes in this year's budget to continue to address access and support those that need it. Interventions should be fair, targeted and progressive. The cost of education is multifaceted. There is no single solution that suits every learner. That is why our response must be appropriate, tailored and targeted and above all, designed to be sustainable and deliverable year after year.

I am also focused on student accommodation. I want to see students move from private rentals into purpose-built student accommodation. This will improve their wellbeing and ease pressure on the wider housing market. My department is developing a new Student Accommodation Strategy as we speak.

Cost is only one part of improving access. Another critical step is the development of flexible and diverse pathways. This means investing in opening more flexible and inclusive routes to higher education.

The Part-Time Fee Scheme is a milestone. It marks the first time part-time students have been eligible for financial support under the Student Support Act. That's a real step forward for learners with caring responsibilities, jobs and other commitments.

I am working to improve progression between further and higher education. I want to continue to work with the universities to expand the range of tertiary degree programmes – in particular ones that allow learners to start their degree locally in an ETB and progress to complete it in a higher education institution.

These pathways are about more than inclusion. They're about unlocking the full potential of our people, because when everyone has the chance to succeed, our whole society benefits.

Conclusion

Before I close, I want to commend the Irish University Association in representing Ireland's public universities.

Is é an todhchaí a tógaimid inniu. Located across the country, our universities are our beacons for the future. By creating, sharing and applying research and knowledge, you enable innovation throughout the

country and ensure that our knowledge economy not only remains competitive, but can also thrive during times of uncertainty.

And I recognise that this is a shared responsibility.

As Minister, I am guided by four clear priorities: first - to foster research and innovation as an economic enabler; second - to provide high quality accessible higher education, third, to expand pathways to skills, reskilling, and apprenticeships that match Ireland's evolving workforce needs; and fourth, to promote curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge as a public good.

These are the goals I am determined to deliver. And I look forward to working with you to make it a reality.

I am reminded of a quote by George Bernard Shaw, who once said: "*we are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future.*" I understand this responsibility.

Our shared success depends on our ability to adapt and to support each other to adapt.

I look forward to higher education and research continuing to step up to the challenge in providing the skills, talent, knowledge and innovation that our country needs.

Thank you.