

Address by Mr Batt O’Keeffe T.D., Minister for Education and Science to the National Academy for the Integration of Research and Teaching and Learning Symposium on the Bologna Declaration. 12 May 2008

It gives me very great pleasure to be here this morning in the CIT Cork School of Music to open this Symposium on the Bologna Declaration and its implications for Irish education. I am delighted to be able to perform one of my first official functions as Minister for Education and Science here among my own in Cork. The School of Music is an institution which is long-steeped in the educational heritage of Cork City. The location and the subject matter under discussion both provide excellent starting points for my term ahead as Minister.

Before turning to that subject matter, I would like to briefly comment on the advent of the National Academy for the Integration of Research and Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL), which is behind today’s symposium.

The establishment of the Academy is a wonderfully progressive initiative. It has enormous potential to promote real quality improvement in higher education by enabling and supporting teaching staff to use and improve good practice in research-informed teaching and learning. The Government’s major strategic investment plans in our national research and development capacity are extremely important to our future prosperity, competitiveness and social cohesion. As Minister for Education and Science, I will be continuing to lay major emphasis on the importance of that agenda for developing capacity and excellence in our fourth level research system.

But quality research also relies on a quality undergraduate system that can produce skilled graduates who have benefited from top-class research informed teaching and learning. It is essential in developing our higher education system that this virtuous cycle is fostered. Quality research needs to feed into quality teaching and learning at undergraduate level. This will in turn ensure that we produce top quality graduates with an interest and capacity for leading edge research down the line.

The NAIRTL partnership encompasses some of the leading Third Level Institutions in the country: Cork Institute of Technology and University College Cork, Trinity College Dublin, NUI Galway and Waterford Institute of Technology. That represents a very powerful alliance of expertise and interest focused on quality improvement in our system.

The NAIRTL was established through funding provided under my Department's Strategic Innovation Fund. It represents a very good illustration of the potential of the Strategic Innovation Fund to create powerful synergies for improvement that draw on the best available expertise across the Irish higher education system. A key characteristic of Strategic Innovation Fund projects is their inter-institutional collaboration. In a country of our size, it is important that we encourage and support inter-institutional alliances of this nature in creating a critical mass of expertise that can enable excellence to flourish across the board. This is key to developing quality and spreading best practice across the Irish higher education system generally.

The topic of today's symposium is itself an extremely important one in the context of that overall quality agenda. The status and quality of professional qualifications in Ireland is a subject of considerable wider public importance. Although it is not something that tends to engage non-academic audiences in debate, it is an issue that ultimately impacts on society. I know that the Engineering profession in Ireland has been to the fore in addressing the impact of the Bologna Process on educational requirements and award levels. I commend them for their work in that regard. Setting the bar for an engineering qualification at Masters level 9 in the National Framework of Qualifications will represent significant challenges for our third level institutions, for students and for the engineering profession. It is important that these issues are openly discussed and explored. To-day's symposium provides a very welcome opportunity to do that.

Since its inception in 1999, the Bologna Process has become fundamental to the development of higher education in Europe. It has put in motion a series of reforms across European higher education systems and across European higher education institutions that directly benefit students. By making European higher education more compatible and comparable it is enabling much greater mobility for study and work purposes. It is creating systems of education that are more competitive and more attractive for European students as well as for students and scholars from other continents.

Ultimately, we need to measure ourselves by how well we are serving our students. The mobility of graduates, scholars, and researchers is key to the whole process of building a better European higher education sector and a more cohesive Europe. To achieve the Bologna objectives requires effective national and European quality assurance arrangements that support accountability, protect the public interest and enable institutions to monitor their performance and improve.

The need for reform in our higher education systems is not only of paramount importance for Ireland and other European states but it is also central to attracting more students and researchers from beyond Europe. Today's learner expects to have the option to study and work in different countries without having to worry about issues of recognition and transferability of awards. That expectation will grow even more so into the future. Therefore, the issue of quality is of crucial importance to our students. They need to know that their qualifications and courses can stand the test of international and national scrutiny whether by employers or other academic institutions.

If the EU and the wider European continent is to compete globally, we must have systems that enhance rather than limit the potential of our greatest resource – our citizens.

International education is not only about generating revenue for individual institutions and economies, though that is important. It also brings wonderful opportunity to learn from the best and bring what is best in our system to a wider audience. Our students have demonstrated their capacity for learning, innovation and excellence. It is our duty to fully involve them in the processes that can only further enhance Irish and European education.

Education must be seen as a lifelong experience and exercise. It is fitting therefore that this symposium is set in context by an opening address on Lifelong Learning. Factors such as Recognition for Prior Learning and Education in Employment are centrally important policy issues on the Lifelong Learning agenda. I am pleased to observe that initiatives in these areas are also being supported under the SIF programme.

I will conclude by wishing you a successful day's deliberations. I want to thank the organisers for the invitation here this morning. I am delighted to be able to share in what is an important day's work as part of the broader quality agenda in higher education. I look forward to further opportunities in the future to engage with many of you on that ongoing work.