

Press Release

Monday 9 March 2009

Ireland's Education and Training System Must Continue to Improve Performance - Even in the Face of Scarce Public Resources - National Competitiveness Council

The National Competitiveness Council (NCC) today called for a renewed emphasis on strengthening and reforming aspects of the education and training system in Ireland as part of the broader effort to reignite economic growth.

Launching its Statement on Education and Training, the Council also highlighted the need for all stakeholders to recognise the stark fiscal realities facing Government and respond with the necessary flexibility to ensure that our education system can continue to improve the quality of learning and skill levels of the population.

National Competitiveness Council Chairman, Dr Don Thornhill, said "As knowledge and creativity increasingly become the basis of competition, high skill levels are vitally important to economic performance, living standards and social inclusion. Without a world class education and training system Ireland will have great difficulty in succeeding in the face of intensifying global competition and in protecting recent increases in our living standards. Ireland has consistently achieved strong education outcomes with relatively modest investment.

"Our policymakers and educators must be ambitious and continue to strive for the best outcomes for students. This applies even more strongly in an environment of very scarce public resources. This is the only way to ensure that our children, young people and adult learners are equipped with the knowledge, the skills and the personal and moral attributes that are necessary to support a socially inclusive society underpinned by economic development and high employment and living standards.

"Though some areas of our education system require additional funding, many of the recommendations made in this paper are revenue-neutral and necessary reforms can be achieved with a focus on student performance and flexibility from all stakeholders," continued Dr Thornhill.

Key Recommendations

Skills for the Future:

- Curricula and means of assessment should develop critical thinking, team working, communication and influencing skills and instil responsibility for self-directed learning.
- Implementation of the *Strategy for ICT in Schools* is vital; its delivery will require new and innovative solutions to the current funding impasse.
- Recruitment of qualified mathematics teachers and their professional development is critical to improving mathematical proficiency. The recommendations of the *Expert Group on Future Skills Needs* should now be implemented.
- The amount of time dedicated to studying science and mathematics in schools needs to be increased; and perceived disincentives to studying mathematics at higher level for the Leaving Certificate should also be addressed.

Targeting Disadvantage and Maximising Outcomes

- The NCC supports the development of a formal pre-primary education system as a key long-term priority. Specifically:
 - Ensure sufficient capacity to integrate under-privileged children into education at the earliest stage possible;
 - Provision of early childhood education and care should be integrated, combining pre-primary education with centre-based day-care at the same location;
 - Reorientation of the existing childcare sector is the most cost-effective way of expanding early childhood education;
 - The poorly-targeted *Early Childcare Payment* should be replaced with a targeted subsidy to accredited early childhood education and care (ECEC) providers, facilitating the adoption of national quality standards in ECEC.

Improving the Delivery of Education in Irish Schools

- Curricular reform and investment in teachers' skills is the best means of improving student achievement. Reducing class sizes is expensive and an excessive focus on this area can deflect scarce resources from other strategies: for example, ensuring teachers avail of frequent professional development and providing suitable physical infrastructure and teaching/learning technologies.
- A coherent approach to teacher professional development is urgently required; and the Teaching Council should drive this forward as early as possible.
- Professional and in-service development should be frequent, continuing and progressive during a teacher's career and not limited to introduction of new syllabi. Teachers should have opportunities to benefit from peer review and collaboration with colleagues.
- Outstanding teachers should be recognised for their excellence through the promotion system; while the system of administration in schools should allow principals to focus on the quality of students' learning and less on administrative returns.

Enhancing Ireland's Higher Level Education System

- It is vital to clearly identify the expected outcomes to be achieved by the sector over the next decade and set an agreed vision to provide higher education institutions with the autonomy and funding required to achieve these outcomes.
- Higher education tuition fees should be reinstated in conjunction with a revised student maintenance grant, a universal student loan system and targeted tuition waivers based on both income and assets to ensure that lower and lower-middle income families are not disadvantaged.
- Greater specialisation and amalgamation of courses among Irish HEIs is required in order to reach critical mass.
- Greater use of competitive funding mechanisms would yield efficiency improvements in the delivery of higher level education.

- Implementation of the *Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation* is important and high levels of R&D spending will contribute to closing the gap between facilities available to researchers in this country and leading knowledge economies.

Further Education and Training

- Investment in further education and training courses should be targeted in areas where skills shortages are forecast and in sectors where potential exists for future employment growth.
- There is a need for a pro-active upskilling plan for workers in the construction sector who lack formal qualifications and those that have had their apprenticeship terminated mid-programme.
- A balance must now be struck between repositioning the skills of the newly unemployed, with the longer-term objective of upskilling the entire workforce.
- The provision of workplace based training, which is fitted around working hours, needs to be actively promoted.

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