

Introduction

2020 was a year of dramatic and unprecedented challenges for our country, Europe, and the world as a whole. It required rapid responses and innovation in public policy in every area, including our education system. When our schools and colleges were forced to close in March, it brought home to everybody just how important they are to our society. Just as importantly, the reopening of our schools in September was a critical moment, bringing a new hope.

Dealing with the pandemic will continue to be a major concern until an effective vaccine has been widely administered, but I think it is important to note the work of the partners in education during 2020 in cooperating to overcome so many hurdles. I also want to acknowledge the work of Minister Norma Foley and her officials during the intense and highly pressured summer months to put in place one of the most effective back-to-school programmes in Europe.

Hopefully 2021 will be a year when we can give our absolute attention to the many other urgent and important challenges which our country faces. This said, it is important to recognise that 2020 was a year when we put in place the foundations for a new era in Irish education – including the most significant ever restructuring of how government oversees education policy.

Policy and progress

I believe passionately that education is the most important part of building a strong society and an economy which can provide for all of our people. While many policies have played a role, a core fact remains in relation to Ireland's progress: every major advance secured by our country in the past sixty years has been enabled by the sustained expansion in participation and achievement in education.

As we look at the challenging reality of the modern economy and social developments, I believe that education will actually be even more important to us in the future. The challenge for us is to create a new agenda.

Yes, the resourcing of core functions and the spread of institutions will always have to be addressed, but they cannot be allowed to be the only areas of concern. Far more than before, we have to be more challenging of our policies. We have to move faster, address obvious gaps, and be more strategic.

Vision of Ireland's Future through Investment in Education



Micheál Martin
Taoiseach

Short-term changes and chasing after passing fads can do great damage in education – and consistency can be a great strength. However, we simply have to embrace the idea of a steady evolution in our policies rather than keep to a model which can too often wait for once-in-a-generation change.

This is what lies behind the major structural reforms we implemented when forming the new government, and it is what will drive our agenda in the coming years. The creation of a separate government department with responsibility for higher education, further education, and research puts a radical new emphasis on a vital and dynamic sector. Less discussed is the fact that it also creates the space for the Department of Education to be more active and innovative in its work at first and second levels.

The over one million pupils and staff in our schools represent the largest and most complex public activity we undertake. We can never succeed by just focusing on aggregates – we have to respond to the unique needs of individuals. In fact, a lot of the progress which our schools have delivered in the past two decades has been based on embracing new programmes which are far more tailored to the needs of specific pupils.

A series of early-school-leaving measures helped Ireland reach one of the highest school-completion levels in Europe through tailored programmes and offering different pathways for pupils within the same schools. Twenty-five years ago, we had little special education provision in our mainstream schools and no expert provision for many children with particular special needs. Today, special educational provision is part of the work of every school.

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Future development

It's progress like this that we now have to build on. Even in the midst of responding to the pandemic, important first steps have been taken by the government to show our intention to support and develop our schools. The reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio, the increase of devolved funding for school capital projects, and the restoration of dedicated guidance and counselling provision have been provided for – as has the expansion of a range of special education supports.

What I want to see in the coming years is for us to continue to expand support for initiatives which will allow schools to help each child develop their potential. Literacy has to be a priority, and we must renew our approach to helping schools which serve communities with significant levels of educational disadvantage. But we must also be open to innovation and to addressing clear challenges faced by our country.

We need to introduce a full national scheme for teaching European languages in our primary schools. We have to build on early steps to give every child access to music and cultural activities in school.

We've known for many years that the Leaving Certificate is often too inflexible, and it uses a very limited range of methods for learning assessment. This became even clearer during 2020 when, with no notice

and with great pressure on everyone, a new system had to be put in place. Given the threat of possible future pandemics or other events which could disrupt exams, we obviously need to develop a more permanent backstop – but equally we need to learn as much as possible from this experience and see how we could do things differently.

Most countries in Europe have in place a mixed approach to assessment at school-leaving stage, and we need to seriously engage with the potential benefits of this for Ireland. Ways where we can do more to encourage independent thinking and creativity must be considered.

Structure and strategy

The reformed Department of Education has a strong voice in government, and it has more space now to push forward what is still a challenging agenda. The creation of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is a major departure for public policy, and it is an even stronger signal of our belief in the role that knowledge will play in shaping Ireland's future. The Department covers areas which have grown dramatically and dynamically in recent decades yet have rarely been the focus of public debate.

There has been a lot of attention placed on creating institutions but very little on their role and quality. It's time for a new, more active and strategic approach. We need to do much more to value the vital role played by further education both economically and socially. Apprenticeships and similar qualifications deserve a renewed level of respect and priority – and we need a new impetus behind supporting a culture of lifelong learning.

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As our higher education sector has grown and become more diverse, the need for us to be clear in what we are aiming for has become more urgent. We have to make sure that our institutions offer students programmes at high international standards, are financially stable, and respond to the social and economic needs of today. This is an area which will be addressed in detail early in 2021.

Research

As for research, the simple fact is that many of the jobs in our country today would not exist without the investment in advanced research which began in 1997. From a position where Ireland was at the bottom of nearly every international ranking in research, we advanced to a leading position in key areas. For example, we now have one of the world's leading centres for immunology research – a critical area as we work to tackle this and future pandemics.

However, we have become overly prescriptive in some areas, and we need to build a broader culture of research. We have to support both applied research and the basic, frontiers work which is essential to developing cutting-edge ideas and people.

Just as importantly, we have to have credible paths for support for individual researchers and smaller research groups outside of core national priorities. Of course, we also have to recognise that a strong culture of research requires diversity, and that our country needs cutting-edge work in the humanities and social sciences at the same time as in the sciences.

Finally, we have not yet really cracked the link between higher education and the research needs of Irish companies. In an era of Brexit and uncertain trading conditions, we have to be able to diversify and innovate more than in the past. The strength shown by our existing research-intensive industries needs to be extended in many more sectors.

This is a broad and an urgent agenda for the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. It is a central part of the new government's determination to place the ideas of education, skills development, and research as the drivers of our country's future.

First-ever Woman President of an Irish University



In September 2020, Professor Kerstin Mey assumed her role as Interim President of the University of Limerick, the first ever woman President of an Irish University. Prof Mey replaced the outgoing President Dr Des Fitzgerald, who had previously announced his intention to retire.

Kerstin Mey was born in East Berlin, Germany. She studied for an MA equivalent in Art, and German language and literature, at Humboldt University of Berlin and obtained a PhD in Art Theory and Aesthetics there. She held academic positions in universities in Germany and the UK. Before she joined the University of Limerick as Vice President Academic Affairs and Student Engagement, she held responsibilities as Pro-Vice Chancellor and Dean of the Westminster School of Media, Arts and Design, University of Westminster, UK.

Over the past 30 years, Professor Mey has built a record of accomplishment in successfully initiating and implementing pioneering academic and research initiatives and cultural projects in higher education. As an experienced leader and senior manager, she has led major infrastructure and culture change programmes and set up a range of strategic external partnerships.