

IBEC/CBI Joint Business Council briefing on skills and education

Key Messages

1. JBC calls on the Irish Government for an urgent and firm commitment to fund ICT in the classroom with full implementation of the recommendations of the ICT Strategy Group report "Investing Effectively in Information and Communications Technology in Schools, 2008-2013".
2. The declining numbers opting for third level courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is a cause of concern and must be addressed through curriculum reform and a focus on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers.
3. An all-island approach should be undertaken with regard to a review of the higher-education sector in Ireland. An 'investment needs' analysis should be conducted to determine the funding required to enable Irish institutions to become world class. A full range of options (including the reintroduction of tuition fees) should be explored if additional funding is required.

1. Introduction

A strong focus on education and training and increased levels of investment in research, technology and innovation are critical in maintaining the competitiveness of the all-island economy and in ensuring that we remain an attractive location for both domestic and international investment in an increasingly challenging global economic environment.

The IBEC-CBI Joint Business Council emphasises the critical importance of skills and education for economic development and competitiveness. We are also keenly aware that education has an importance that transcends economic issues and has a profound influence on the well-being of society.

The recent OECD report, *Education at a Glance 2008* shows that the proportion of Ireland's GDP invested in education has dropped from 5.2% in 1995 to 4.6% in 2005. The current OECD average for the proportion of GDP invested in education is 5.8%. The UK recorded a stronger performance with 6.2% of GDP invested in education in 2005 compared to 5.2% in 1995. Overall, Ireland ranks 30th out of 34 countries in terms of education expenditure as a percentage of GDP while the UK ranks 9th. In order for the island to achieve the stated objective of becoming a knowledge economy, the education system must be adequately funded. This investment must continue despite the downturn in the economy.

2. Technology in the Classroom

The JBC calls on the Irish Government for an urgent and firm commitment to fund ICT in the classroom so that Ireland can achieve its goal of being a leading knowledge economy. A 2006 OECD report showed that students who are accomplished computer users tend to perform better in key subjects than others. Worryingly, however, the report also showed that Ireland has one of the lowest percentages of regular computer users at school among OECD countries, and student attitudes towards computer are among the least positive. As a result Irish students are at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts in other countries. One reason for this is the failure of government, until recently, to devote funds needed to equip schools with the necessary technology. While some schools have been successful in raising the funds needed to give students access to technology, many lag far behind which has resulted in a digital and social divide.

Enterprise welcomed the Government announcement that €252 million would be made available for the use of ICT in the classroom. However, while the headline figure is impressive, the breakdown behind it is not quite so impressive. Over the seven years of the National Development Plan, this equates to an average of €36 million per year, or €46 per student per year. This compares to an average spend in England of €110 per student per year. This money is a drop in the ocean and only allows us to catch-up. However, it was a welcome development and we are very disappointed to hear that the roll out of the ICT in the Classroom Strategy may be delayed.

The JBC calls on the Irish Government for an urgent and firm commitment to fund ICT in the classroom so that Ireland can achieve its goal of being a leading knowledge economy. The Government should address the lamentable under-investment over recent years by implementing the recommendations of the Minister for Education's ICT Strategy Group report "Investing Effectively in Information and Communications Technology in Schools, 2008-2013".

3. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)

Ensuring that the island of Ireland has a healthy supply of people with science, engineering, maths and technology skills is essential if we are to maintain and develop our science base and grow our knowledge and technology-led wealth creating sectors of the economy. In Ireland and Northern Ireland, employer demand for science skills is likely to grow in the decade ahead. Projections of the likely demand for occupations requiring science, engineering and technology skills show that we need to invest heavily in these skills for the future.

The declining numbers opting for third level courses in engineering and the sciences generally is a cause of concern and we must give priority to reversing that trend. Above all we must convey effectively to young people the exciting developments and opportunities to which these studies can give rise.

3.1 Curriculum reform

There is a continuing fall in the number of students taking science at leaving certificate and A-level. The content of the curriculum is a key issue – pupils need hands-on experience of science (which requires appropriately equipped laboratories) and they need to be exposed to the excitement of STEM by focusing on relevant and exciting applications and be encouraged to use their imaginations.

The JBC urges the Department of Education and Science to continue its progressive work in implementing *Project Maths* which got underway in September 2008 in an initial group of schools in the South and to continue its work on curriculum reform in line with teaching and learning for the 21st century. Innovative initiatives such as bonus points need to be introduced if we are to encourage more students to consider taking higher level mathematics at junior and leaving certificate.

A Northern Ireland STEM review is due to be published shortly – we look forward to assessing the recommendations and how the business community can help to stimulate more interest in STEM subjects.

3.2 Teacher training

Significant training and personal development support for maths teachers in the introduction of *Project Maths* should be delivered to ensure its successful implementation and expeditious rollout nationally. A Continuing Professional Development (CPD) framework for secondary teachers adapting good practice from business and the best performing education systems should be developed by the Teaching Councils and Departments of Education north and south.

There is a need for greater levels of teacher placement into business such as one week work placements. Very few teachers, north and south have had this exposure. Priority could initially be placed on teachers in the STEM subject areas.

4. Review of higher education system

It is expected that a review of the Irish higher education system by the Higher Education Authority will be undertaken over the coming months. In the UK this issue is assuming greater political prominence with pressure from government to secure even more external funding – as a result the CBI has recently launched a major taskforce to look at what business needs and what it is prepared to pay for. The NI Executive faces its own funding challenges in this area, with a current cap on the number of university places available.

The Joint Business Council believes that the HEA review should be undertaken without delay and should incorporate an all-island approach. Greater north/south cooperation in the higher-education sector can result in more efficient use of facilities, better value-for-money, improved access as well as economies of scale. The findings of the review should be speedily implemented by the Department of Education and Science.

4.1 Re-introduction of tuition fees

As part of this review, an ‘investment needs’ analysis should be conducted to determine the funding required to enable Irish institutions to become world class. A full range of options (including the reintroduction of tuition fees) should be explored if additional funding is required.

The current policy is inequitable because it provides substantial subsidies to students whose families could well afford to pay tuition fees. It also discriminates against part-time students who are required to pay tuition fees. When the OECD examined this issue, it stated that no evidence was produced that the decision in 1995 to abolish fees had more than a limited, if any, impact on the disparity of participation rates amongst the different social/occupational classes.

Therefore, any re-introduction of fees must be accompanied by a sound student finance system. This should include a significantly reformed means-tested support scheme, under which a fee waiver and adequate maintenance support is available to assist the less well-off and other students with particular needs.

There are a number of different approaches to the re-introduction of a private contribution to the funding of higher education, such as subsidised loans and graduate contribution schemes. The suitability of these scheme to the Irish situation requires detailed analysis and careful consideration. It is important that whatever system is put in place will strengthen third-level education without undermining wider participation and social inclusion.

If tuition fees for undergraduate study are reintroduced, the additional income must not be offset against reductions in state funding and should represent a real increase in resources for third-level education.

5. All-island skills

A skilled workforce is essential to our future prosperity and the island of Ireland must have the right mix of skills to allow us to move successfully to the next phase of our economic development. The IBEC-CBI Joint Business Council has consistently called for an all-island approach to be taken to labour market skills forecasting and welcomes the joint initiative of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and the Northern Ireland Skills Expert Group to produce an “All-Ireland Skills Study” on future trends in all-island skills and the skills needs of major sectors. This work will underpin policies to deliver the necessary workforce on the island. The statement will be launched at an all-island skills conference on 9 October 2008 and the JBC calls for the continued co-operation of these two groups and the full implementation of both the “National Skills Strategy” and the “Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland – Success through Skills” (which is currently subject to review by the Department of Employment and Learning).