

CONSULTATION ON THE STRATEGY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

IBEC SUBMISSION

JUNE 2009

BACKGROUND

IBEC welcomes the opportunity to define its vision for the future for higher education in Ireland by making a submission to the strategy group. In order to compile its submission, IBEC held a focus group of our members to discuss the two questions posed in the consultation notice;

- The three most significant changes that you would wish to see made to Irish higher education,

And

- The barriers or obstacles, which you would identify to the achievement of those objectives.

A group of 20 senior representatives from a cross section of business representing both indigenous and multinational companies formed the focus group. These businesses included the following sectors; Medical Devices, Pharmaceutical, Information Communication & Technology, Energy, Hotels, Retail and Financial Services. Representatives from the following sectors within IBEC were also present; Irish Software Association, ICT Ireland, Pharmachemical Ireland, Financial Services Ireland, Retail Ireland and Irish Medical Devices Association.

There is consensus that a strong relationship between business and higher education is critical to Ireland's economic competitiveness. However, business is emphatic that this relationship should not be viewed in simple terms of developing graduates with the skills and knowledge needed to drive business forward (whether through up-skilling the existing workforce or in collaborative research and innovation partnerships). The belief is that building the relationship between business and

higher education should have at its core the principle of equipping individuals with the skills that industry requires which will maximise their prospects of having fulfilling and rewarding careers, and that this will be a major determinant of their quality of life.

In analysing the outcome from its focus group, IBEC explores the following three major priorities in its submission;

1. Higher Education Institutions as Centres of Excellence

2. Deeper partnerships between industry and higher education institutions

3. Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century

This submission also examines the major obstacle to achieving these priorities.

PRIORITIES & OBSTACLES

1.1 PRIORITY: Higher Education Institutions as Centres of Excellence

The establishment of accessible Centres of Excellence within higher education should be a key priority of the strategy. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to identify individual areas of competitive strength in both teaching and research. Priority must be given to quality in specific areas of excellence either by each institution or in the form of an alliance between institutions.

International competitiveness is a key part of becoming centres of excellence and business, in particular the multinational sector places emphasis on Irish HEIs performing well in international rankings. Businesses aiming to attract high calibre graduates claim that university rankings are critical and corporate hiring policy in some cases is not to recruit from universities in Ireland, which do not rank internationally.

To achieve this international status, the core focus should be on differentiation and excellence in unique areas of academia and research and by implication avoidance of duplication of courses and research. Such a strategy reflects government priorities within the *Smart Economy* strategy and within the *Strategy for Science Technology and Innovation*.

The perception of business is that inflating student numbers within HEIs has taken precedence over striving for excellence. This may have eroded quality within the sector over recent years. There is a need for some institutions to become more practically focused on science and technology, by delivering more emphasis on high quality practical experiments and that, this experience takes place as part of the course. A specific recommendation is where a duplication of faculties across different HEIs in close proximity occurs, that a merger should take place to create one shared faculty. This would be most relevant where the faculties are small and where there would be obvious practical and administrative benefits.

The establishment of centres of excellence within the higher education sector should support the idea of balanced regional development. Business communities in all regions in Ireland should have access to centres of excellence within higher education. There is also a strong business view that the presence of an institution with a university designation within a region is a fundamental driver of growth in the context of Ireland's smart economy strategy, particularly in areas trying to address lagging economic performance. There have been a number of positive recent proposals on greater collaboration between HEIs to create more effective centres of excellence around aspects of innovation and proposals on establishing "technical universities" that would link in well with this principle.

1.2 OBSTACLE: Quantity not Quality

The duplication or repetition of courses throughout the higher education sector is identified by business as a system failure. The perception of business is that in many cases, the duplication of courses has led to the deterioration in the quality of graduates and emphasises the mismatch between the courses provided and the needs of society and the economy.

The business view that the balance has tipped in favour of quantity rather than quality such that this presents a major barrier to achieving centres of excellence within the higher education sector. This may also have served to erode the quality of teaching in the sector.

The race for quantity has been driven mainly by the need to attract greater funding. This presents a major question around how the sector is funded and whether the

current mechanism is a major obstacle to the development of centres of excellence. There must be a re-balancing of funding for higher education in Ireland so that we match the investment levels of our competitors. While recognising the vital role played by the State, the higher education sector will become less dependant on state funding in the future. However, the public good nature of higher education must continue to be recognised by the taxpayer.

2.1 PRIORITY: Deeper partnerships between higher education institutions and business

Business favours the concept of becoming a real partner and voice within higher education and deepening this partnership was identified as a key area for change. The major theme of bringing people from business and academia together in new ways to encourage knowledge transfer is core to deepening this transfer. This principle brought forward a number of recommendations;

- Continue to raise awareness within the business community of the expertise that exists within higher education and to provide pathways to make valuable connections between business and researchers. This would allow business to learn to harness innovative ideas that are being developed in HEIs.
- Greater industry partnership in both course design and outputs to avoid duplication or lack of relevance of skills developed by graduates. This involves more involvement by people from industry to enter into third level course design.
- Efficiency in terms of the higher education response to industry and visionary in terms of what is happening in the economy or what will happen in the future. This implies the need to change and adapt quicker and include a flexibility to deliver new programmes. One concept brought forward was the establishment of rotational internships. It would be beneficial for academics to spend time in business and equally for business to take part in university life.
- Collaborative, contract or consultancy research services are the core means through which knowledge transfer and collaboration between universities and

business will occur. HEIs need to develop awareness within business of these options so that the most appropriate research channel can be pursued depending on the size, sector and location of the business.

- Raise the levels of demand from business for collaboration with higher education institutions..
- Encourage more frequent and easier interaction between business people and HEI academics particularly at a local level. Balanced regional development for the sector should be reflected within the strategy where businesses locally have direct access to high quality graduates and excellent research.

2.2 OBSTACLE: Responsiveness to change

Business is critical of what it perceives as highly bureaucratic and the risk averse style of certain segments of the higher education sector. Business maintains that HEIs could be more dynamic in their approach to collaboration. There is an overwhelming view that HEIs need to take steps to modernise the way that they run themselves and that this change needs to be acknowledged and led from within the sector.

Despite much progress in more recent times with the establishment of technology transfer and industrial liaison offices, the perception continues that the complex structures of HEIs can be in many cases intimidating for business. It was pointed out that, in particular for SMEs, it can be difficult to navigate their way around and identify an obvious point of entry.

The barriers to deepening the relationship between business and HEIs identified were significant and included; bureaucracy and sometimes-poor understanding and knowledge of industry's needs.

3.1 PRIORITY: Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century

Industry believes that the creation of a system which supports lifelong learning and incorporates teaching and learning for the 21st Century should be the core of the strategy for higher education. The characteristics of life long learners should be

engendered and supported within the higher education system. Lifelong learners should have the following attributes; be inquisitive, explorative, bold, self-reliant and ideas driven. In addition, be socially effective and competent, a problem solver, environmentally and socially aware, capable of long-term and strategic thinking and be a team worker.

The strategy must examine how they engage with the future and the kinds of skills that we should be creating. Business believes that a challenge should be set to redefine higher education in Ireland and move away from the paradigm in which it currently exists. A number of strong recommendations are made in this regard;

- a post leaving certificate intervention by way of a compulsory “year out” in the shape of a pre-3rd level course. This would be one year of pre-university service in, for example, the community or voluntary sector where school leavers would develop a range of social and other skills reflective of the lifelong learner characteristics prior to entering higher education.
- The extension of “advanced placement” courses for second level students to give a flavour of what to expect from a higher education course they are considering.
- Provide learners with the capability to manage their subject choice rather than HEIs controlling the curriculum. This implies broadening the CAO entry courses terms into higher education so that it encourages cross-pollination of subjects and more dabbling by learners in new areas. This idea in many ways replicates the US model, which allows greater flexibility and promotes multidisciplinary approach. The Irish system requires people to choose a discipline too early, with very little flexibility and an over specialisation of subject.
- Provide a modular based system with credits and flexibility to take time out to do internships or engage in community and voluntary work.
- All postgraduate courses (in particular at Masters Level) should be provided on a part-time basis, which can be completed over a 2 or 3-year timeframe. This system would allow people working undertaking postgraduates do so under more flexible terms.
- The delivery of courses through innovative and blended channels should also take place. The US model provides a good example of how this might work where all courses are available online though (a relatively small) investment

in web technology. The current emphasis on having learners present in class should be reviewed.

3.2 OBSTACLE: The Points System, Outdated Curriculum and Teaching methods

The leaving certificate points system promotes a system of learning by rote and fails to generate a spirit of enquiry and the attributes of a lifelong learner described earlier in this submission (Section 3.1). The points system also pushes applicants to choose entry into narrowly focused disciplines in higher education, in some cases for the wrong reasons and which may not necessarily reflect the strengths of the learner.

Business holds the view that there is a need to encourage creativity and entrepreneurship to a much greater extent in higher education so that the system develops the following practices;

- reflective learning
- applied knowledge
- practical experience in laboratories and scientific skills

Many companies cite students being competent in an academic qualification but not being in a position to explain what that qualification means or indeed define their learning outcomes. In addition, they are also in many cases, unable to relate what they learnt at higher level to the world of work and lack essential skills such as teamwork, people management, time management and basic literacy skills such as spelling.

4. Conclusion

The Strategy for Higher Education represents a crucial juncture for our economy and society to put this vital sector on an ambitious and sustainable path. Irish business is delighted to have an opportunity to make this submission and intends to be a collaborative partner for the remainder of the Strategy Group's work.

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