
Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Leo Varadkar, T.D., at the Trinity 425 Symposium

Provost; Ministers, members of the Oireachtas, and distinguished guests; Ladies and gentlemen.

It is a privilege to be here to open this symposium marking 425 years since Trinity's foundation. I would like to thank the Provost for his invitation to be here with you to share in this wonderful occasion.

A good university is one that changes the lives of its students. A great university is one that changes the world. To my mind, Trinity is a great university.

Over four centuries you have been at the centre of debate and enquiry, of scholarship and learning, of research and discovery. Your contribution is measured in more than the names of the three Nobel laureates you have educated, and your roll call of distinguished alumni from Edmund Burke to Mary Robinson. It is measured in the way you have encouraged hundreds of thousands of students to reach their potential, and the way you have pushed the frontiers of knowledge in the arts, in medicine, in the humanities, in the sciences, and beyond.

Twenty years ago this week I started in Trinity as a shy law student, uncertain about myself and the world around me. Here I was encouraged 'to think independently, to act responsibly, to communicate effectively, and to develop continuously', the very attributes which you have enshrined in your Trinity Education and which I believe have been at the heart of the Trinity Experience throughout its history.

I am not sure if any other institution on this island could have educated an Edward Carson and an Oscar Wilde, a Wolfe Tone and an Ernest Walton, a Samuel Beckett and a Susan Denham, a Conor Cruise O'Brien and a Mary Harney. Men and women who followed their own path, who sometimes stood against the tide, and who had the courage of their convictions.

By inspiring students in the classroom, and then encouraging them to learn from each other, you ensure that ideas are challenged, and minds are opened. It is a remarkable legacy, and something that Trinity continues to do so well. Perhaps this is why Trinity currently produces more entrepreneurs than any other university in Europe.

Research

As the leading university in Ireland in receiving Horizon 2020 funding, Trinity is also at the forefront of new research and new thinking about existing problems. Your government-funded research centres give an indication of the scale of your ambition. At the recent launch of the four new national centres in Dublin Castle I got to see some of this work close-up, and was impressed by the limitless potential of what was being developed. The virtuous triangle between government, industry and higher education, shows just what can be achieved when there is a shared vision about reaching our ambitions. Of course, imagination and innovation are not confined to the sciences. In the arts, humanities and social sciences, you have been pushing the frontiers of knowledge for generations, and this includes many of the areas where you are strongest globally. Mahaffy's republic of letters only exists in the 21st century if it is strong in the subjects that change how we think and feel about the world, and also how we understand it.

Brexit

Of course there are challenges to the Irish university. We all recognise that Brexit has the potential to affect every sector of education. Yesterday I met once again with Prime Minister May and among the issues discussed was how Brexit might affect the strong research and teaching links that exist between our two countries. Our position is that we would like to see the Common Travel Area maintained, protecting the free movement of people and the mutually beneficial flow of students, staff and researchers. We want to see continued UK/Ireland research collaborations. Later this week, I shall meet with 20 other EU prime ministers in Tallinn at the Digital Summit to discuss similar themes.

No matter how difficult things have been on this island, Trinity always acted as a bridge between north and south. Now, more than ever, we need bridges not borders. So, we will support higher education in its efforts to ensure that students continue to travel between north and south to study, because the best way of uniting hearts on this island, is by encouraging the best young minds to learn about and from each other. All of these issues are part of our approach to the Brexit discussions and negotiations, and I can assure you of our commitment to ensuring that you do not lose out.

Funding

The issue of third-level funding is one of our great challenges. The government is committed to putting in place a sustainable multi-annual funding base to cater for the continuing demographic expansion of the higher education sector while at the same time protecting and improving its quality. The recommendations of the Expert Group on Future Funding report are currently being considered by a cross-party parliamentary committee seeking to build consensus on a future funding model. While this is going on, we have provided increased funding for higher education this year for the first time in nine years. We've also made further provision for 2018 and 2019. One of the recommendations of the Expert Group report is for an increased contribution to higher education through the National Training Fund to be made by employers in recognition of the benefits they derive from the highly skilled graduates in the workforce. This could potentially deliver up to an additional €200 million per annum by 2020. Doing so, however, would necessitate greater involvement by industry in monitoring how the money is spent

as well as increased investment in up-skilling for people already in work. And, while I think it is appropriate that students should make a contribution to the cost of the course from which they will benefit so much, I could not stand over an outcome that left Irish students graduating with the kind of debts that American and English ones do.

International Education

My main regret, from my days in Trinity, is that I did not do an Erasmus year in Tours when it was on offer. I believe the chance to experience new educational opportunities is one of the greatest aspects of the college experience. International Education is one of our great success stories in this country and in Europe.

Access

It reinforces my belief that education is the single best route to a better life. So, you are to be commended for developing the flagship Trinity Access Programmes that have transformed the lives of so many students. The government shares this view of education and that is why we are giving new bursaries to increase access to higher education for people with disabilities, lone parents, and people from backgrounds that do not traditionally go to third-level. It's also why we've increased the Back to Education Allowance and re-instated the Cost of Education Allowance for student parents.

The government's philosophy is 'to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.' And this is an area where Minister Zappone has been a leader for many years, ensuring that young people get a second chance, and are shown a way forward. We accept we can do more and we will. I know there are many talented people in my own constituency of Dublin West and many other parts of the country who would thrive if given an opportunity to go to third-level.

Access to higher education should be available to all individuals independent of socio-economic background, gender, geography, disability or other personal circumstance. It should depend on your ability, your initiative, your work ethic, and your innate potential, not your parents or postcode. Ministers Mitchell O'Connor and Bruton are actively engaged in this area, and we are determined to work towards building a Republic where every person can reach their potential, and every child has the opportunity to grow up to be the person they can be. What better place to start than by guaranteeing equality of opportunity in education?

Conclusion

It was not so long ago that a Taoiseach could come here and suggested that the hearts of the College people were not centred on the Irish nation. Perhaps Mr. De Valera was still annoyed that he had come last when he went for 'Schol' forty years earlier, with marks of 20 out of 125 in Pure Mathematics and an impressive Applied Maths score of zero! Subsequent Fianna Fáilers, of course, did much better, not least that Trinity scholar, the late Brian Lenihan. It may have taken us nearly 100 years to have a Taoiseach from Trinity, but I have a strong feeling a few more are coming. Although Paschal will have to see off Mary Lou and Dara to see who the second Trinity Taoiseach will be!

I gained so much from Trinity – from my time in the Hist and the CSC, my time in Young Fine Gael, and the opportunities and experiences I had both inside and outside of the lecture theatre and laboratory. So, it gives me great personal pleasure to declare this symposium officially open.