



# Another pioneering step in higher education

The Cowen/Hanafin initiative on third-level funding should prove as historically significant as the earlier work of Hillery and O'Malley in education, argues **Hugh Brady**

**T**aken together, Wednesday's Budget and yesterday's Department of Education statement represent a very significant moment in the history of Irish higher education.

Minister for Finance Brian Cowen and Minister for Education Mary Hanafin have displayed a pioneering initiative in terms of:

- ◆ The acknowledgement of the historic importance of the Irish higher education sector – he stated that the intellectual capital provided by our institutions of higher education was the single greatest contributor to Ireland's current prosperity;

- ◆ The future financial commitment made to Irish higher education of €1.2 billion, made up of €300 million for the new Strategic Innovation Fund and €900 million for capital and infrastructure;

- ◆ The clear signal that higher education will be treated explicitly and distinctly in the National Development Plan.

In their various ways, these are things Irish universities have been campaigning for over the past two years.

The commitment made in the Budget to the establishment of 4th Level Ireland will see major investment by government in the promotion of research and innovation in the Irish higher-education sector over the period 2006-2010.

Specifically this investment will underpin the development of a world-class system for masters/PhD training in Ireland by providing the best of support and facilities for our rapidly expanding graduate-student cohort.

The key elements of 4th Level Ireland envisaged by the Irish Universities Association in its pre-Budget submission will be:

- ◆ Core masters and PhD programmes to provide the best research experience and training to our brightest and best young people;

- ◆ Feeder pathways that will enhance access to the best of university education countrywide;

- ◆ New programmes of lifelong learning and skills development to reach all sectors of the population;

- ◆ Strong links to external stakeholders, be they civic, economic or cultural;

- ◆ Investment in the arts, humanities and social sciences to promote the research,

scholarship and creativity in these domains, so central to the quality of all our lives, which will complement scientific, technological and commercial advances;

◆ Co-ordinated trans-institutional approaches to the provision of key enablers such as IT and other infrastructure.

Knowledge is and will continue to be the key to Ireland's future; the new Ireland we are working together to create will be a society and economy founded and grounded on knowledge; it was reassuring to note how the Minister in his speech spoke frankly about prosperity being no more than a means to a greater end of a fairer and more equal society.

The Budget speech was in many ways a welcome acknowledgement of the contribution made by university researchers and teachers across all disciplines.

It is good to be in a position to acknowledge a recognition by Government that it is investment in education and cutting-edge research that will secure and expand our ability to absorb, generate and harness new knowledge.

This investment will make us more prosperous in economic terms and make for us a better society through the innovative application of new knowledge to public policy and services.

The new Ireland will be created by the young people of today. Fourth Level Ireland will benefit our students most of all. There will be a clear pathway to the top of the research tree for our brightest and best, who will be the leaders of tomorrow.

Our universities will provide students with a radically improved teaching and learning system to support the fundamental changes required to ensure graduates are equipped for a lifetime of innovation and change – in other words, for real life as it now is.

Third-level students will be excited about research from the start of their student career through a reformed curriculum that emphasises creativity, discovery and knowledge advancement.

At fourth level, graduate students will experience a dramatic improvement of performance in overall research achievement and training.

This will benefit Ireland as a whole through the output of highly-skilled graduates with doctoral qualifications and

post-doctoral experience of the kind needed for a 21st-century knowledge economy and society.

On November 4th last, UCD honoured former president Dr Patrick Hillery with the UCD Foundation Day Medal. In preparing my citation for the event, I was struck by the significance of Dr Hillery's historic contribution to Irish education – and equally struck by how neglected it had become.

In October 1960, Dr Hillery set up the Commission on Higher Education whose report, *Investment in Education*, published in 1965, was a landmark document that shaped Irish education for the late 20th century.

I am sure that Ministers Cowen and Hanafin will only take the positive from having such a distinguished historic predecessor in Dr Hillery and his recognition of the strategic national significance of higher education.

It is striking to note, however, how little public comment there has been – with isolated but distinguished exceptions – on the significance of the 4th Level Ireland initiative. Assuming sustained momentum and scale-up of investment, the initiative of 2005 should prove to be as historically significant as the earlier work of Hillery, O'Malley and others for second- and third-level.

For too long, Irish higher education has been the poor relation in terms of education funding, with its vision and objectives being set in a bizarrely politicised opposition to the needs of primary and secondary education – instead of recognising that the past, present and especially future of Irish education lies in its being a continuum of excellence, spanning primary to, now, fourth level.

We have reached a crossroads moment where significant investment is needed to support and advance the reform process at third level and to progress the development of an Irish fourth-level sector which will make a huge impact nationally and internationally.

We have been given the opportunity to transform the landscape of Irish higher education in an irreversible fashion. It is hard to think of a better legacy which we could pass on to the next generation.

*Dr Hugh Brady is president of UCD*