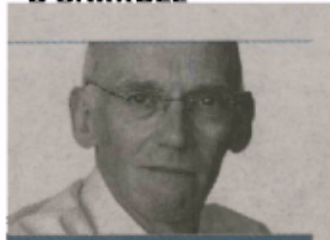




EU argues for ongoing investment

Document states despite the economic downturn, continued investment in research and education is essential

CONOR O'CARROLL



THE PRESIDENCY of the European Union is now held by Belgium. It lasts for only six months and there is always a great flurry of activity as the country works with the Commission to advance EU policies and objectives across all areas from finance to culture. Of course what they want is a win so they can show a tangible achievement during their presidency. Education, research and innovation are centre stage at the moment especially with the publication last week of the new policy document, *The Innovation Union*. This is about placing innovation at the heart of European strategy for 2020. The core message is that even in straitened times, investment in education, R&D, innovation and information and communication technologies should continue and increase.

It is made clear that this increased investment must come with reforms to get more value for money and overcome fragmentation. European and national research and innovation systems need to be better linked up with each other and their performance improved.

Researchers and innovators must be able to work and co-operate across the EU as easily as within national borders. There is the ambitious target of putting in place the frameworks for a truly free movement of knowledge within four years. European education systems at all levels need to be modernised with excellence as the guiding principle. There is clear recognition of the need to get more innovation out of research. Co-operation between science and business must be enhanced, obstacles removed and

incentives put in place. Remaining barriers for entrepreneurs to bring "ideas to market" must be removed: better access to finance, particularly for SMEs, affordable intellectual property rights, smarter and more ambitious regulation and targets, faster setting of interoperable standards and strategic use of our massive procurement budgets. An immediate goal is to agree on the EU patent before the end of the year.

I would like to focus on the objective of having more world-class universities, raise skill levels and attract top talent from abroad. In this context the new policy covers a very wide range of topics from doctoral education and university rankings to better co-operation with industry.

A feature of each EU presidency is the conferences that provide the opportunity to bring together a wide range of stakeholders to discuss issues of common interest within the context of EU policy directions. These conferences can act as a mechanism to shape and alter new emerging policies. Last week in Brussels I spent two days at one on *Conditions for Achieving Excellence in Universities*. It is important to understand that this gives recognition to the central role that universities have in education, research and innovation. They will be a major player in achieving the goals of the Innovation Union.

The conference touched on a very wide range of topics from university autonomy to how to best to train doctoral candidates, with a wide range of participants from industry, academia and the public sector. I chaired the session on research training for innovation - towards a framework for doctoral training in Europe. All countries recognise the importance of the PhD qualification as it signals the transition from a teaching and learning-led education to research and knowledge creation. The question is how to ensure that the structures we have in our universities across Europe are optimal for the benefit of both the individual and society.

The European Universities Association, representing over 850 universities, says: "doctoral education is highly individual and by definition original. The path of progress of the individual is unique, in terms of the research project as well as in terms of the individual professional development".

In 2006, Irish universities changed their approach with the introduction of Fourth Level Ireland. Across Europe, Ireland along with the UK, Finland and Germany, are seen

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as pioneers in this area.

The Geary Institute at University College Dublin and the Irish Universities Association have conducted a major survey of PhD students over the past three years. It demonstrated that the reformed approach has improved the student experience and has increased excellence. It is important to recognise that we are leading change in approaches to doctoral education – a key element of the vision for Europe in 2020.

Conor O'Carroll is research director in the Irish Universities Association

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