

Opening Address by President McAleese at the NUI Conference 'Leading Universities in the Twenty-First Century', Dublin Castle, Dublin 2, 2nd December 2008

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile is a thoscairí oirirce, is mór an pléisiúr dom bheith anseo inniu chun Cothrom Céad Bliain Ollscoil na hÉireann a cheiliúradh agus chun an Chomhdháil idirnáisiúnta seo a oscailt.

Chancellor, members of the University, distinguished delegates,

Good morning, thank you for that warm welcome and let me in turn welcome each one of you with the traditional Gaelic, céad míle fáilte, one hundred thousand welcomes. This conference is the centrepiece of the centenary celebrations of the National University of Ireland and it opens exactly one hundred years to the day when the Irish Universities Act of 1908 established two new universities - the National University of Ireland and the Queen's University of Belfast.

I am very proud to be a graduate of both and an honorary graduate of both august institutions but I am even prouder that one hundred years on from the days of that predictably political compromise with more than a hint of denominational overtones, both institutions flourish today as intellectual heartlands for men and women regardless of background, faith, ethnicity or identity. They are both the richer for that and Ireland, North and South, is set on a much more optimistic and ambitious future trajectory as a result of the disappearance of history's old and wasteful vanities.

It is no accident that in this the best-educated generation ever on the island of Ireland we have managed to bridge those longstanding and often conflict-inducing divides. It took formidable brain power, creativity and commitment to construct the pathway to peace on this island. It took a significant and profound culture change and attitudinal changes. The universities are entitled to claim their rightful place among those who gave strong leadership, who helped prise open the space "that let the future in". They are also entitled to claim a considerable role in the uplift in quality of life that has been a feature of recent generations. Despite the recent economic downturn we can say that the story of NUI's universities and constituent colleges is one where the best is yet to come, for the advent of mass third-level education in Ireland is still only in its opening chapters.

On its foundation, the National University of Ireland brought together a number of older colleges in a small, federal university with some 1,000 students spread across four institutions in three of the four provinces of Ireland. In 1910 when it awarded its first degrees, 300 students were conferred. One hundred years later that figure was closer to 30,000. The pattern of growth, however, is considerably front rather than back-loaded for by far the greatest upsurge in growth occurred in the decades after the advent of free secondary education in the late 1960s. Against a background of conflict in the North, high unemployment and high emigration, a dwindling population and an old-fashioned economy with little traction, the infusion of well-educated brainpower and scholarship across a wide range of disciplines began to visibly effect the catharsis that brought a poor Ireland into prosperity, a divided Ireland into peace and an insular Ireland into a forceful role in European and global politics. It brought the foreign investors in leading high-tech industries, fostered Ireland's global role in software development, bred the self-belief that grew a significant, indigenous entrepreneurial sector and a marked cultural confidence, provided the ingenuity and resourcefulness that seed-bedded an active problem-solving environment so necessary in a world of endless capacity to present problems and such a big

contrast to the passivity of previous generations described by Seamus Heaney as living "under high-banked clouds of resignation".

NUI has been and will keep on being a big part of Ireland's new story. Its own growth has seen it develop from those first modest days when it was a small family of three to today when it embraces a very large clan, with four self-governing constituent universities – University College Dublin, University College Cork, National University of Ireland, Galway and National University of Ireland, Maynooth and five recognised colleges of NUI, each of which is a celebrated and significant institution in its own specialist area, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, National College of Art and Design, Shannon College of Hotel Management, the Institute of Public Administration and Milltown Institute. Simply naming each of those institutions gives some idea of the breadth and depth of intellectual muscle and scholarly leadership which NUI has invested in our people and in our country. NUI graduates have invested their lives in every facet of our national life, every sphere of civic society. They have taken the name of Ireland around the world and showcased our best attributes and character so much so that in celebrating the progress of NUI we are also celebrating the progress of Ireland itself. What a debt we owe to NUI.

On this special day I wish to extend my congratulations and thanks to you Chancellor, to the Presidents of the four constituent universities and to the heads of the five recognised colleges. Through you, I send my congratulations and thanks to the members of the Senate and the Governing Bodies, to the Academic Councils, the staff, the students and all of those many people spread across Ireland who make up the National University of Ireland today. I congratulate you on a century of achievement in teaching, scholarship and research, a century of expansion, both physical, as reflected in your fine campuses, and intellectual, as reflected in the extension in the range of disciplines studied throughout the university, but above all a century of investment in the human person, men and women alike, able-bodied and those with disability alike, poor and wealthy alike, those of all faiths and those of none. Today we have strong communities and a powerfully rooted democracy, wedded to the very best of humanly decent values. We believe in the dignity of every human being, we believe in human rights, in equality and in justice, in the rule of good law, we make war on no-one and work to bring peace and care where we can. We have an ambition to create a republic in which the children of the nation are cherished equally and that destination is only achievable with the help of our educators and our entire education sector. It was the seminal importance of education that forged the connections between the National University of Ireland and the office of President of Ireland. The first President of Ireland, Dr Douglas Hyde was a member of the first Senate of NUI from 1908 to 1919 and one of the greatest figures in twentieth century Ireland; Eamon de Valera was NUI's long serving Chancellor right up until his death in 1975.

At a conference which focuses on leadership it is only right to mention the exceptional contribution made by the current Chancellor, Dr Garret FitzGerald whose national and international leadership credentials were long forged before he took over the reins in NUI. Just as he once guided our country with graciousness and distinction, he has steered the federal university through a period of considerable change and increasing challenge for higher education. As he nears the end of his period as Chancellor of NUI, I congratulate him on a formidable and an enduring contribution and wish him well. He can look back on a chapter of marvels, for higher education has shifted from being an elite to a mass system and potentially a universal system.

Participation in higher education in Ireland is at an all-time high, nearing 60% of the age cohort and yet we know there are pockets of serious exclusion we still work to address, as well as the step up to fourth level that we are at last making significant progress in. Our universities are not only bigger than before, they are more diverse in their student cohort, their staff cohort and in the range of disciplines studied. The pressures on them are urgent and serious - to lead national innovation, to publish research at a high level, to teach at a high level, to run universities with the ease and fluency of a Swiss clock, to make the lived university experience a humanly good and meaningful one, to manage budgets, attract the best students and staff, attract grants, court alumni and philanthropic donors, update systems and conduct public advocacy for resources, to be amenable to both credible and not so credible rankings and assessments, to be of the community and in the community, to listen to the needs of business and industry, to produce graduates who have high employability in the most volatile of marketplaces - all these things and more call for superb university leadership at all levels which can cope well with these new levels of complexity. The health and well-being of our third-level sector is dependent upon good leadership. In fact our country is dependent upon their leadership being good. What is true for Ireland is true for the rest of the world.

That is why your conference is as timely as it is important. Universities have not only to get through the coming tough times - they have to help all of us get through the coming tough times. Here are people who are used to the steady focus on innovation, the solitude of research and measured deliberation, who don't chase the crowd of instant public opinion but quietly search out the truth, the statistics, who critique, analyse, measure, test and do not rush to judgement but rather round solutions in credible scholarship. Was there ever a time when that kind of leadership was needed more than in this swirling storm of public sentiment? I wish you well as you help enthuse and energise, guide and direct this generation of leaders within our university sector and hope that tangible benefits will flow from your deliberations here.

I would like to thank all of you for your dedicated commitment to the cause of higher education and for the restless curiosity and generosity of spirit that brought you here and I am delighted to formally open this NUI Centenary Conference.

Go raith míle maith agaibh go léir.