

Niamh Bhreathnach

## **Challenges for Education and Training in the Global Economy**

### **Introduction**

I begin this presentation by thanking ICD, the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, for organising the conference here in Berlin on the theme An Interdisciplinary Analysis of the Roles of Global Politics and Civil Society in International Economics. I hope that your expectations that our papers and the panel discussions will help fashion the closing ambitions of the conference are realised. For four full days we are being asked to address such varying themes as the relationship between economics, global peace and green technology; while acknowledging the importance of corporate social responsibility, and all against the background of the recent global financial crisis.

As a sponsoring not-for-profit non-governmental organisation think tank, ICD is challenging us, its invitees, to search out the relationship between the international economy and the above themes while asking all of us, including *anciennes Ministres* like myself, to raise questions about the future, challenge known shibboleths and identify themes worth pursuing, themes we can only suspect are important in tomorrow's world.

I use the term "suspect" because our only certainty is that we are living in times of unprecedented change. Today's technological advancements, (IT), allows us to share and examine intellectual innovation, in a way that was not so, even 20 years ago. Our traditional western education system, able to trace its roots back 800 years, has been mainly developed to serve the educated elite. Older civilizations are no different. Little did I or the other members of the EU Council of Ministers for Education meeting in Amsterdam in 1997 appreciate how quickly this new technology would roll out. As we discussed earmarking future investment in education for European Union member states, google or facebook hadn't been invented. We talked then of a minimum of one computer per classroom. Yes, I did wonder aloud if we were preparing students for a new age, where they could soon be able to access an Ali Baba's cave of knowledge on what is today, their Apple, or through Google and Youtube. Then computer language was Basic, computer paper serrated. Just what skills these primary and second level students would need to be able to sort out the content, the relevance and the usefulness of the treasure. was only dawning on the collective minds of the Council of Ministers.

I did entitle my White Paper on Irish education,( published in 1995) “Charting our Education Future”, hoping that like Star Trek, our education policy would be ready *to boldly go where no man had gone before*. Throughout the early 90s the technological age looked destined to remain the prerogative of the privileged science or pharmaceutical graduate. Broadband, google, youtube, facebook and twitter were probably still in the invention lab. The future I was responsible for charting, as Irish Minister for Education, was committed to the reform a classical education system and an opening wider of the gates to education.

In today’s world all our economies are playing on a global playing field. Searching out ways and means of focusing research and development in our fourth level universities, on our campuses and in work place laboratories is our way of informing ourselves of our future needs. This requires new measures of judging outcomes, what we refer to as our performance indicators. Ireland is being measured not against past national performances but against the performance of global competitors. Mass education has been seen, since World War II, here in Europe, as the key to each country’s future prosperity. Nothing has changed, but everything has, as we battle to ensure that the environment in which to-day’s learning and training is best fostered, is one that first commits itself to academic freedom. Not a priority though in the Pacific rim where the newly industrialised economies (NIEs) are successfully challenging the traditional hierarchy of educational excellence in an environment dominated by their political elites.

Civil society and its political leaders whether from the poorest of communities or the richest of capitalist states are understandably mesmerised by today’s financial global collapse. In think tanks like this themes similar to those listed in our programme, are being addressed in the search for answers, seeking pathways to recovery. Delegates, I want us to leave Berlin asking more questions than answers we can give.

Using the opportunity offered to me to participate in this debate, I would like to raise a number of issues of concern with you that I believe, if addressed, would offer some way forward for those taking educational investment decisions. If you, like me, are concerned to create environments where original research can blossom let me first draw your attention to the work of Jonathon R Cole at University of Columbia, USA. Professor Cole believes that in a world of global terrorism, the academic freedoms we fought to protect in the ’30s and ’40s of the last century are again under threat. He counsels us, the past and present leaders of society, to **be the defenders of academic freedom in this century**. I want you all to recognise his name and be aware of his arguments, even when you do not share his opinions.

I will move on then to my home country, Ireland, where much of our current work and research involves those who believe in the need to maintain investment in education at this difficult time. Recently we welcomed the publication by the National Competitiveness Council of a report aptly named “**Ireland’s Education and Training System Must Continue to Improve Performance- Even in the Face of Scarce Public Resources**’. In the words of its Chairman Dr. Don Thornhill “*Without a world class education and training system, Ireland will have great difficulty in succeeding in the face of intensifying global competition and in protecting recent increases in our living standards.*” More anon...

From my experience in Government, I know the importance of being involved in this form of debate; it helps alert the political classes, the non specialist, to the presence of rogue experts. Fora ready to discuss future pedagogical needs, can positively challenge politicians in Government and alert Parliamentary Oppositions to the need for refining investment decisions in the light of changing trends. David Ashton of the University of Leicester, in the UK, has published with Francis Green, a book worth reading, whose title my paper shares, **Education, Training and the Global Economy**. In it he sources the interdisciplinary skills needed to achieve best returns from educational investment. He focuses on how the newly industrial economies (NIEs) have emerged recent winners in global comparison tables. He alerts the reader to watch out for experts who in a simplistic consensus-call for more specialists have left the student underprepared for ever changing work environments.

I will finish my contribution calling for a more targeted investment in girls’ education. The economic returns could be spectacular. Today it is estimated that 600 million adolescent girls remain largely invisible in developing countries. To ignore them is according to Alyson Warhurst, at Britain’s Warwick Business School to miss what she calls “**the girl effect**” which could, she believes, be an unexpected and improbable answer to the present global economic crises.

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### So in Planning for Tomorrows World

If we are to secure environments where research innovation and invention are to foster, let us agree that more funding may not be the only pre-requisite for successful educational investment outcomes. As the debate rages about the funding needs of all levels of education from pre-school through to 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> level, from urban disadvantage schools to third world village communities, I would like us to pause first and consider how we expect our traditional education systems to serve tomorrow’s worker. Ali Baba’s cave has been opened. The texts, the formulae and the thesis are on-line. The days of rote learning only are

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nearing an end, yet are our schools' curricula adapted enough to guarantee each student a skills set that will allow access to this bottomless pool of knowledge. While Governments recognise the wisdom of giving all students the capacity to drive economic progress; should we here be asking if the education system itself must deliver more? It is, I believe, timely for gatherings like this to call for a global comparative study of pedagogical outcomes to inform educational and training investment. Students probably require more relevant skills, teachers' possibly new approaches and examination systems' change to allow outcomes to be properly measured and assessed.

### Academic Freedoms

Looking for information on the budgetary needs of our Third level education institutes, and mindful of a passionate debate in Great Britain between the lobbying Russell Group of leading research universities and the British Treasury, I was attracted to a paper by Jonathon R. Cole of Columbia. Cole is questioning the capacity of the American research university to remain the world's most powerful engine of innovation and discovery. His worries are not funding based at all. He is concerned that America's leading research establishments might be in danger of throwing away their excellence. For those at the top of the education ladder, financial cuts to university budgets are usually seen to be the culprit for limiting research. Yet imposing ideological constraints on the freedom of academic inquiry may be more damaging and difficulties with visas being experienced by overseas students to the USA, following 9/11, may, Cole suggests, be undermining America's prestigious position gained at the expense of millions of invested public tax dollars in research and individual students during the last century in particular. Here delegates is a theme worthy of discussion; are fiscal restraints in the University sector budgets all we have to worry about if the universities are to lead in the area of innovation.

### Ireland's Competitive Challenge

Back to Ireland where the education system is credited with our standing in today's competitiveness' tables, **seen here in this slide**, our National Competitiveness Council has in a recent report delivered by its Chairman Dr. Don Thornhill called on the Irish Government to continue to be ambitious in its expectations of the 3<sup>rd</sup> level sector. While the economic climate is poor, it is, according to the Council, more important than ever that funding be earmarked as a priority and those improvements that are revenue-neutral, and reforms that are needed continue to be a Government goal for the sector. Besides drawing attention to the need to target funding at basic primary education, all graduating students in today's IT world need more than ever to

- develop their critical skills,

- be familiar with team working,
- develop the ability to communicate, and if they are to be ready for tomorrow's inventions
- have learned to take responsibility for acquiring self-directed learner skills.

All these necessary ingredients are a far cry from the squeaky slate of Shakespeare's snivelling school boy or the chalk and talk days of my own teaching experience. Thornhill spells out the necessity to set targets and to clearly identify the expected outcomes to be achieved by the 3<sup>rd</sup> level sector. All these recommendations will require changes to the traditional curriculum and changes in teaching methods, in Ireland at least. I must admit that in the days following Dr. Thornhill's report, the lead editorial in our Irish Times newspaper, lauded the report but warned that too many Governments had in the past allowed such reports gather dust!

## Creating Sustainable Economies

Moving from Ireland to work being conducted at Leicester University in Great Britain, David Ashton, Professor of Sociology, warns that the accepted theory that a ready supply of graduates automatically creates the demand necessary to employ them, needs to be challenged. So delegates let us add this challenge to today's discussion. Accepted presumptions that more investment in education and training for the individual will readily give rise to improvements in the economy are not, according to Ashton and his colleague Francis Green, an accepted given. The authors suggest that a multi disciplinary approach to measuring what are successful outcomes should be adopted. Do we agree? The success of the newly industrialised economies (NIEs) of the Pacific Rim, **listed in this slide**, have in recent decades successfully emulated the west and now have trained labour forces which can be compared to those of Germany or Japan.

Eastern governments, less democratically accountable than western democracies, have delivered through a three prong approach this success story. Their Governments, moving rapidly from having only a low-skill workforce with little added-value to a high-value-added economy, began by attracting multinational companies to their shores. Then their political elite intervened and oversaw massive investment in the education of their workforces in a most proactive way. So while we in the west were concentrating education budgets at school and pre-school levels, these countries caught up with and passed many of us out, by concentrating on workplace investment in education on a massive scale.

Given the power of the education stakeholders in my own country, Ireland, the tax paying parents, the teachers, their unions and the owners of our many religious schools, this change on emphasis would, I fear, take more than a life

time to achieve. But in countries which are distinctive in that they share a Confucian philosophy, change can be imposed by ruling elite. **Confucius** teaches that supporting the common good is a prerequisite for the individual's improvement and that the role of authority should be exercised by political elites; some distance from the Social Partnership model adopted in Ireland. But if Singapore, in particular, can adopt German and Japanese models to suit its needs, Confucius or no Confucius, what can we usefully learn from them?

What I found striking in researching this particular section, was their political elite's determination to steer investment into education and to widely use on-the-job training. While none of these countries cut investment in primary or second level education; their recent success was predicated on the channelling of extra resources at the adult population. Having successfully studied outcomes in other parts of the world, and deciding their own countries' needs, priority was given to investment in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> level education and in workers education on the job. How far away is this hothouse environment from Cole's call for academic freedom?

## Girl's Voices

But even Confucius's belief in serving the common good never resulted in education doors being opened widely for girls. Within systems of past paternalisms, the girl effect was rarely measured. Girls, east and west have been lost in this pooling of talent for too long. I am, an old fashioned feminist, excited by today's moves to include "**girl's voices**" in any proposals to meet and deal with today's global economic crisis. If the NIEs, could achieve their progress in such a short time by massively targeting economic resources at an undereducated workforce, isn't it time that our global institutions consider the same option for girls in emerging economies. In truth, there are a myriad of local women's schemes successfully in situ in many third world village communities but many, many more are needful of our support. They still seem to appear only on the margins of their education systems, acknowledged within aid budgets. Yet when a girl benefits from an education so do her neighbours and her community. She will, we know, probably marry later, have less children and create an income for herself which in a girls' or women's world will probably see as much as 90% invested back into the community. This needs to be seen as a good economic statistic not just another aid budget success.

We need to remember that less than 0.5% of official development aid is targeted at girls. Alyson Warhurst, at Warwick, recommends visiting the web site [www.girleffect.org](http://www.girleffect.org) where relevant projects are listed that could, if implemented,

lift local economies by some billions; the return to Kenya from a suggested \$25 billion investment in an education programme could be in the region of \$27.4 billion.

If we are to leave Berlin having looked at new areas to target investment budgets then we must not marginalise women's potential. In the words of CARE's CEO. Helene Gayle, "educating girls yields some of the highest returns of all development investments", a sentiment echoed by the World Bank's own Okonjo-Iweala who is on record for saying "Investing in women is smart economics. Investing in girls – catching them upstream- is even smarter economics."

## Conclusion

Just to remind us all of the wealth of knowledge and information that is out there and that is ours to harness I'll finish by re-showing my Ali Baba slide. Global mass education is less than a century old. Many newly independent countries might have to thank their colonial masters for introducing the 3Rs. reading, writing and arithmetic to their countries. But these countries, from India to Malaysia and on to Singapore have now forged ahead and set their own much higher education and training targets. The east meets the west's needs; environments for investment may be very different but the ambitions are the same.

Will we look back and congratulate ourselves for taking right decisions at the end of this decade? Will we manage to update our performance indicators, change our pedagogical methods and see girls save us from ourselves in a time of economic global crisis? Perhaps only time will tell.

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