

ARTICLE FOR IRISH INDEPENDENT

EDUCATION, TRAINING AND JOBS

by

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The Treaty on European Union will increase the involvement of the European Community in education and training, and will result in a substantial increase in European spending for this purpose. The provision of greater resources for the education and training of our young people is an essential component of the drive to improve the development capacity of the Irish economy, create increased job opportunities for our young people, and reduce unemployment.

The availability of adequate education and training facilities is recognised as an essential part of the economic development infrastructure together with transport, telecommunications and energy. A recent report published by the European Commission showed that Ireland's overall infrastructure "endowment" is estimated at 65% of the level in the seven more highly developed member states of the Community. The so-called "knowledge gap" between member states is indicated by the proportion of 15 to 19-year-olds who are in full time education and training for qualifications. This varies from over 90% in countries such as Germany and The Netherlands, to about 45% in Portugal, the least developed member state. In Ireland only two-thirds of young people in this age group are in full time education or training while one-third either enter employment or are unemployed.

Thus in the highly developed countries like Germany almost all young people are educated or trained for a qualification for at least three years after compulsory schooling. This includes those who stay in education to the end of second level and subsequently study for certificates, diplomas or degrees, and also those who participate in pre-employment training courses within industry, similar to apprenticeships, and qualify in one of up to 400 vocational skills having achieved appropriate

standards. The fact that almost everyone has a qualification confers substantial advantages on German industry since it ensures that the quality of its employees is at a very high level from the day they enter employment.

The urgent challenge for Ireland is to raise the participation rates in pre-employment education and training close to 100% in the 15 to 19 age group, and to ensure that everyone is qualified for something as occurs in more developed countries. But this costs money.

The role of the European Community in this area is vital. Since 1973 the European Social Fund has provided £1,600 million towards the cost of education, training and employment incentives in this country. This year alone, almost £300 million will be allocated by the EC to our Regional Technical Colleges and Colleges of Technology, for vocational preparation and training courses, and vocational training opportunities schemes, as well as for the new pre-employment Job Training Scheme within industry. This allocation of funding for education and training is a reflection of the commitment of the European Community towards a reduction of the disparities between the more developed and less developed regions, and to providing the less developed regions of the Community with the wherewithal to develop themselves by educating and training their young people in relevant skills.

The provision of education and training for qualifications for all is a vision with which Irish people can readily empathise. One hundred and fifty years ago Thomas Davis coined the slogan in different circumstances "Educate that you may be free". Today we can adapt that slogan to one which ensures that every young person is educated and trained for qualifications which will open up new opportunities for innovation, creativity and the creation of employment, including self employment.

A recent survey in Ireland has shown that 80% of unemployed people stop school at 16 years of age or earlier. Education or training to more advanced levels will improve job prospects for school leavers. The likelihood of a well-qualified person being unemployed is very low.

The Treaty on European Union widens the involvement of the European Community in areas such as education and training. The Treaty also involves a commitment to greatly increased Structural Funds which will provide the opportunity to fund greater investment in the education and training of young people so that every young Irish person can be given education and training as good as the best in Europe.

The next decade holds out an exciting prospect. By ensuring that all young Irish people are educated or trained for qualifications in all the main aspects of business such as computers, marketing, engineering, finance, and in modern Continental languages, the basic capacity of the Irish economy to grow more rapidly will be greatly enhanced. The achievement in Ireland of the best Continental participation rates in education and training will require the provision of up to 100,000 additional education or training places for our young people in the 15 to 19 age group and would, by delaying their entry into the labour market, result in a consequent increase in employment opportunities of at least 60,000 for people who would otherwise be unemployed. Over the last 20 years the Irish economy has increased its share of the European market by 20% and employment in Ireland has grown faster than at any time since the Famine. By educating and training our young people to meet the needs of Ireland in the New Europe we can accelerate our economic growth rate and bring about a substantial reduction in the rate of unemployment. It is a target which can be achieved as a result of the commitments contained in the Treaty on European Union. A strongly positive 'Yes' vote to ensure that we can provide more jobs for our young people over the next decade than in any other decade since independence.