

# **Speech by the Taoiseach**

## **Education – Building Relations, Transforming Lives**

### **20 May 2021**

#### **Introduction**

Thank you Ambassador Morikawa for your kind introduction, and to the Asia-Europe Foundation for the invitation to speak to this inspiring group of young leaders from across Asia and Europe.

I was delighted to accept this invitation, as education and youth development are issues very close to my heart, being a former secondary school teacher and indeed being former Minister for Education. In many respects the story of modern Ireland from the 1960s onwards is the story of open access to education. Most commentators would say that the opening of a free second level education to the Irish population in the 60s was the major catalyst for the modernisation of the country and enabling its full economic potential and growth. I would have been one of the generations that would have benefited from free second level education. My parents' generation would not have had that access to second level, they would have finished education at the end of primary at 12 to 13 years of age. I would have been the first in my family to proceed on to third level education, along with my brother. That just illustrates the journey but it is also a feature of Irish life that defines people generally – this aspiration or this hunger for education. For most parents in Ireland, if it is anything they want for their children, it's access to education.

The last 14 months have only confirmed that conviction as we have worked to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic and observed the particular challenges and difficulties it has presented for you as young people. This has been an extraordinary year for young people in education at all levels, involving adaptability and flexibility.

Your input will also be critical as we now work to build a sustainable and inclusive global recovery, restoring opportunities for your generation.

I am absolutely certain that this effort can only succeed through genuine international cooperation, and the relationship between Europe and Asia is crucial in this regard.

One of the overarching themes of your Summit is ‘Un-learn, Learn, Re-learn’.

It is a phrase that got me thinking when I first read it, and I think it speaks to the value of all of us approaching difficult issues with a truly fresh, and open mind, and a readiness to have our assumptions challenged.

I hope that in the process of engaging with this programme, each of you as potential leaders of the future get to challenge yourself in this way – to confront whatever assumptions you may bring to the debates you will have, and then to grow from the process.

## Global Ireland

Ireland may be a small country, and very far from where some of you are in Asia, but we have always been an outward looking people, keen to work, to trade, to share our culture and our friendship with people around the world.

Our foreign policy is rooted in a commitment to bilateral and multilateral partnership. Our *Asia Pacific Strategy*, which was published last year sets out the strategic objectives for our engagement with countries from Pakistan to Japan to New Zealand, and everyone in between.

In that Strategy we are committed to harnessing our experience in education to enhance our governmental, institutional and people-to-people relations. I see this meeting and the opportunity to engage with you today as one very practical example of how we can deliver, in part, on that commitment.

The story of modern Ireland, as I said earlier, is a story of transformation through education – for me, education is the single most powerful driver of opportunity, of economic prosperity, of social progress.

It transforms lives, communities and countries.

It is also an important tool for building meaningful links between countries, helping us to learn more about and from people in other parts of the world.

Deepening understanding is a key element of our approach in our *Asia Pacific Strategy*.

We have set ourselves the challenge of building much greater knowledge about the social and cultural characteristics of countries in the region - across government and in business and academia.

As part of our effort to deliver it, we are very pleased to be hosting the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub in University College Cork; an institute deeply committed to developing our understanding and practical application of learning techniques.

### **Sustainable Development Goals and Education**

Education is also at the heart of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

Goal 4 commits all states to provide inclusive, equitable and quality education for all, and also to promote lifelong learning opportunities.

As I have said, in Ireland, we know first-hand the transformative effect that education can have on social and economic development and we bring this experience to our international partnerships.

Within our policy for International Development, *A Better World*, we have attached a particular focus to education in emergencies, and education for girls. This includes allocating at least €250 million to global education between 2019 and 2023.

**Just yesterday** (May 19), we announced a new €60 million funding pledge for the Global Partnership for Education.

This will contribute to transforming education systems in up to 90 countries, reaching 175 million girls and boys.

Ireland's commitment to Official Development Assistance in the area of education increased from €39 million in 2018 to €43.4 million in 2019.

We are working closely with other education stakeholders on promoting adolescent girls' education.

Last year, Ireland launched the Drive for Five initiative at the UN, calling for meaningful action to get all adolescent girls into school and learning in supportive, safe and healthy environments.

Ireland addresses gender inequalities and the social barriers to girls participating in education through gender responsive education planning, creating safe, school environments, reducing the risk of gender-based violence and financial supports for girls from poor, marginalised and vulnerable households.

Our humanitarian partnerships also support education initiatives targeted at internally displaced and refugee children.

Since 2019, Ireland has contributed USD 6.85 million to the Education Cannot Wait fund, which mobilises political and financial support for education services for children and young people affected by conflict and other crises across the globe.

## **Quality Education**

Here in Ireland, we believe that everybody, irrespective of age, should have an equal opportunity to access a high-quality education. It is this core ambition that Ireland has for our own citizens that motivates our engagements internationally.

The eradication of poverty and disadvantage and the adoption of a rights-based approach to educational opportunity is key to achieving prosperity and peace.

This requires deliberate, strategic, policy interventions.

Education and skills training must target all citizens and provide opportunities for all to participate on an equal footing.

As young leaders, you will know well that for young people to become an active and important part of tomorrow's citizenship, a lot is asked of you.

You must really understand and you must master diversity, you must learn how to cooperate with others locally, nationally and internationally.

You must to be open to the innovation and versatility, which comes from inter-cultural and international experiences, and face the challenges and understand the potential of greater digitalization and the AI and automation revolution that is coming.

These are just some of the reasons why upskilling and reskilling through lifelong learning will be an ongoing necessity for our people, our economies and for our societies.

As Governments, we must ensure that all sectors of our economy have timely access to a highly skilled and flexible labour force, that meets the different existing and future skills needs of our economy and our society.

### **An Education in Ireland**

I am delighted that Ireland's reputation as a destination for quality education is reflected in very significant numbers of international students studying in Ireland, including many from the Asia Pacific Region.

And it is important to say that they add at least as much to our educational environment as they benefit from it.

Students in Ireland gain a well-regarded education, a safe and rich European cultural experience and enhanced professional prospects into the future.

Our success will always depend on our people. Those who undertake research, create successful companies and work in our industries.

Our citizens have also contributed as teachers throughout the world - it is always a source of great pride when I meet people from distant countries who tell me – sometimes even with an Irish accent - about the excellent education they received from Irish teachers.

## **Conclusion**

As the past year has shown us, global connections are more important than ever.

The great global effort in Covid research and vaccine development has also shown the immense, life changing benefits that can come from global engagement.

My hope is that with this renewed commitment to multilateralism, the global community will apply some of that same energy and urgency to the challenge of ensuring a quality education for everyone.

I commend the Asia-Europe Foundation for focusing on this area in this Summit and I hope that all of you, the young leaders on this call, will bring your own particular energy and expertise to what I truly believe is the great enabler of global progress and peace.

Thank you for inviting me to be part of your Summit, and I look forward to your questions.