I am delighted to have the opportunity to address you today on the internationalisation of Irish higher education, to which a strategic approach by all parts of the sector, publicly funded and private, is key to success. I will also take the opportunity to say a few words on the importance of the private higher education sector in the broader higher education landscape.

When we speak of internationalisation of higher education we can be speaking from one or more than one of several different perspectives. Most obviously internationalisation means attracting international students to Ireland, and here there are a range of benefits, social, academic and economic. Internationalisation also means outward mobility - Irish staff and students engaging in study, scholarship and research abroad. And internationalisation also encompasses efforts by higher education institutions to establish research and other collaborative links, and further develop Irish
involvement in trans-national education and multilateral initiatives such as the Bologna process.

We have had some success in each of these areas. For instance our success rate is ahead of the EU average when it comes to winning funding under the EU’s Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7). The Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation, in their publication ‘Staying the Course’ agreed that ‘Ireland has benefited greatly from, and contributed to, international relations and the internationalisation of research.’ Our investment in research and our drive to build our international profile, points to Ireland’s ability to attract relevant and highly experienced research staff in tandem with the expertise to support them. This attests to the internationalisation of Ireland’s research system and its attractiveness as a research destination.

There is also progress to report in attracting inward mobility, with the number of international students based in Ireland increasing slightly by 0.5% since last year, with those on Erasmus leading the way. Significantly PhD numbers are continuing to grow, accounting

1 Enterprise Ireland, FP7 progress report http://www.fp7ireland.com/Page.aspx?SP=224
2 Forfas/Advisory Council for Science Technology and Innovation, Staying the Course, 2010, P.9
3 Education in Ireland, International Students in Ireland 2010-11 – Survey of Results
now for almost 9% of all international students, which is high by international standards.  

But the progress goes only so far! While the overall number of international students coming to Ireland has increased slightly, in total the number of full-time students has decreased since last year by 8%.  

This shift is reflected internationally with students increasingly attracted to more flexible approaches to international education which demand less time spent outside the home country.  

This overall decrease demonstrates the strong efforts needed to compete in this arena and emphasises the considerable focus needed by the sector. It is only through strategic and collective engagement that we can best address the challenges that we face. For instance, I would very much like to see far greater cooperation between international offices in higher education institutions across the island of Ireland, and more coordinated application procedures for overseas students.  

While the direct economic impact of internationalisation is well understood, especially as it relates to fee-paying international

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4 Ibid, P.6  
5 Education in Ireland, International Students in Ireland 2010-11 – Survey of Results, P. 4  
6 Ibid,P. 4  
7 Taken from IBEC Education & Skills Working Group Speech, J. Hennessy, 1 June 2011
students, what is of more importance and I believe much less well appreciated are the longer terms economic impacts.

Internationalisation is part of a wider response to the need for, in the first instance economic renewal in Ireland and in the longer term building sustainable economic development. The Hunt Report articulates this objective for internationalisation well when it states that the Irish higher education system has a crucial role to play in ‘promoting Ireland’s international profile, forging strategic links with partners overseas, reinforcing ties with Ireland’s diaspora and developing a new network of influence among Irish-educated alumni.’

The theme is reflected again in the International Education Strategy for Ireland prepared by the High Level Group on International Education appointed by the Government. The group took the view that, ‘from a national perspective, the most compelling rationale for internationalisation is diplomatic and strategic. Students educated in Ireland can become our advocates overseas, with educational institutions that will be the research and teaching partners of the future, and with countries that will be Ireland’s next trading and business partners.’

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8 National Strategy for Higher Education, P.31
9 Ireland’s International Education Strategy 2010-15 – Executive Summary, P. 3
International education is therefore very much an investment in Ireland’s global relationships, in the widest sense.\(^\text{10}\) The environment in which Ireland operates demands a strategic and coordinated approach to global engagement, at a range of levels, and education is a key underpinning one. As the Minister for Education and Skills stated at the launch last year of the Education in Ireland brand, the strategic imperative to promote Irish education internationally goes deeper than immediate economic benefits. It is ‘a critical element to support Ireland’s international trading relationships and export-led economy.’\(^\text{11}\) This places the internationalisation of higher and further education in a much wider context.

These policy statements have created a greater awareness of the need to develop a strategic approach to internationalisation by the education sector. Current drives by the government to market Irish higher education internationally are intended to double the number of international students studying in Irish higher education institutions. And while the value to the Irish economy is clear, the real win is more long term relationships, economic, cultural and social developed with international partner countries.

\(^\text{10}\) National Strategy for Higher Education, P.81
\(^\text{11}\) [http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=&pcategory=10861&ecategory=10876&sectionpage=12251&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=52556](http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=&pcategory=10861&ecategory=10876&sectionpage=12251&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=52556)
Ireland has several advantages when it comes to implementing an internationalisation agenda – the most obvious being that we speak English. In addition, as a small country we have the benefit of a manageable system, which due to its size can be adaptable and flexible in the face of change. Ireland’s membership of the European Union and its enviable diaspora network serve to extend our reputation. But, Ireland is part of a crowded marketplace, where ‘competition for the attraction of talented international students and the development of mutually beneficial partnerships with globally-ranked institutions overseas is fierce.’\textsuperscript{12}

And frankly, given our advantages Ireland’s performance in attracting international students compares poorly in comparison with other English-speaking countries. If Ireland is to capitalise on its potential, then I suggest that three elements need to operate in a really cohesive way. First we need a coordinated and complimentary approach by both Government and higher education providers, one which conferences like today will help promote. Secondly we need a clear strategy with identified markets, stated targets and objectives and clear roles and responsibilities for delivery on them. This implies a well-co-ordinated whole of government approach. To a very great extent these requirements are met in the International Education Strategy, The following definitive actions are set out in the Strategy

\textsuperscript{12} National Strategy for Higher Education, P. 82
as the foundations on which we intend to build over the next five years;

- Ireland will enhance its performance through partnership and collaboration.
- Quality will be at the heart of Ireland’s international education offering.
- Ireland’s higher education institutions will be globally competitive and internationally orientated.
- Ireland will develop targeted and relevant international education offerings.
- Outward mobility of Irish staff members and students will be encouraged.
- North South and EU Co-operation will enhance Ireland’s education performance.¹³

These are fine words but I would advocate rigorous on-going examination of the impact of the Strategy. Unless it is delivering on the targets set, we should not be afraid to revisit it fundamentally.

The third key element is a relentless focus on quality of outcomes in our higher education system. Our first responsibility is to Irish students. If we deliver on that responsibility and create a really high quality higher education system then international attention will

¹³ Investing in Global Relationships, Ireland’s International Education Strategy 2010-15
follow, as will students, staff and, more generally, economic activity. It is to this end that the HEA in partnership with the Minister, his Department and the higher education institutions, is now embarking on a major reform of the higher education system. The key objective is to create a more co-ordinated system of complementary but mission specific institutions delivering the range of programmes required for the development of our economy and society and most importantly, doing so in a way that puts us among the world leaders for the quality of outcomes.

The publicly funded institutions face two key barriers in achieving this goal. The first is the financial sustainability of the system, and individual institutions within it. There is no denying the enormous difficulty the Government faces in meeting demands for services from limited resources. All the more reason therefore to find a more creative way to finance higher education than relying on the public purse. If we cannot do so then we cannot but damage the quality of what today still has a high reputation internationally. In doing so we will damage the employability of our graduates internationally; we will lose one of our key cachets when it comes to foreign direct investment, and we can forget about meeting our challenging targets for international student recruitment. Employability and internationalisation, the twin themes of this conference, come neatly together at this point. A way forward must be found, and soon, and
should reflect both the public and private benefits that come from higher education. I believe we can do it.

The second barrier I identify is the very restrictive HR practices that are imposed on our higher education institutions by the fact that they are regarded as part of the public service, not much different from a government department or a local authority. I am all too aware that in speaking here many in the audience who operate in the private higher education sector have few such restrictions. We need to find a way to unshackle our publicly funded universities and colleges, allow them to employ appropriate modern HR practices, while being respectful of the rights of those employed in our institutions.

I repeat, the reputation of our graduates is high at home and abroad. And I have evidence. Ireland was ranked highest of all countries in the international recruiter reviews of graduate employability and second highest of 28 countries in the international peer review of graduate quality (2010). But we are in a world where the pace of change is extraordinary. Our higher education system, in all its aspects from the quality of academic programmes to funding models must change if Ireland is to retain, and build on, the advantages we have inherited from previous custodians of our system and compete successfully in a global environment.
ROLE OF PRIVATE COLLEGES

I would like to take this opportunity to comment on the role of private colleges in the broader higher education landscape. In fact, the link between employability and internationalisation, the two themes of today’s conference, capture well the contribution that private colleges have to make and indeed are making to higher education.

As I have already discussed, internationalisation is fast becoming an emergent driver of growth for the higher education sector and one that underpins and enhances employability. A challenge in responding to the scale of growing demand over the next twenty years however will be to continue to create maximum learning opportunities from the available resources, which is where the growth of the private sector becomes an increasingly important factor. The National Strategy for Higher Education has signalled a significant shift in the way in which higher education is expected to evolve and perform. As a growing sector, the private sector has the potential to add significantly to the overall capacity of the system in meeting growing demand, particularly in the context of increased
requirements for non-traditional modes of provision and learning.\textsuperscript{14}

This augmentation will have a key role in promoting performance enhancement through competition. Competition is as important in education as it is in industry and commerce - every institution is in a way an ‘economic check on its competitors.’

As my colleague Mary Liz Trant from the National Access Office will attest to later, the sector is also well placed to respond swiftly and efficiently to the needs of Ireland’s labour force and changing economic trends. Under both the Springboard and ICT Skills Initiative, a comprehensive responsiveness to skills needs has been demonstrated by the active and successful involvement of the private colleges. In fact, under the Springboard initiative, private institutions made up 33% of higher education course providers, 20% more than the university sector. This high percentage is testament to the excellent ability of members of the HECA, as private higher education institutions, to react to the needs of employers with a level of responsiveness and flexibility which is essential in an evolving transitional economy like ours. The ability to react and anticipate the needs of the economy also echo’s the ability of the sector to offer ‘an opportunity to periodically reassess the value for money and effectiveness of public providers; where private providers can offer better value for money.’\textsuperscript{15} In the continued implementation of the

\textsuperscript{14} National Strategy for Higher Education, P. 110
\textsuperscript{15} National Strategy for Higher Education, P. 108
National Strategy for Higher Education, the HEA will endeavour to clarify the role of private colleges in meeting growing demands and ensure that quality remains at the heart of delivery.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By way of conclusion, I wish to acknowledge the active engagement of HECA in the development of Irish higher education, notably their strong contribution to the High Level Group on International Education and their contributions to the debate on quality assurance in the sector. I am aware that HECA has spearheaded the development of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) code of practise and guidelines for Irish education institutions entitled ‘Provision of Education to International Students’ and is a member of the IHEQN group working on guidelines for collaborative and transnational provision of higher education. I expect that both sets of guidelines will underpin and inform the Quality mark and Code of Practise to be developed by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority of Ireland (QQAI) when it is established later this year. I commend the members of HECA in their efforts to respond to the needs of the sector and encourage them to use their ability to react to market needs to take on a bigger role in global engagement and building Ireland’s higher education capacity.
Conferences such as todays are important in clarifying our shared objectives to ensure greater internationalisation of Irish higher education and to refine and enhance the employability of Irish graduates in the international arena. They are also important in fostering collaborative strength between higher education providers, both public and private. I have sought to emphasise how Ireland’s higher education system has a crucial role to play in deepening our strategic relationships in a changing world economy. As a nation we have a long history of international engagement which is globally respected and so it is vital that we collectively capitalise on the opportunities available and use them to address some of the challenges facing the country at this critical time.

Thank you.

ENDS.