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***“ENRICHING THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND  
COMPETITIVENESS”***

**The 10<sup>th</sup> Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free  
Trade**

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- It is a great honour to be here in Doha and to address this prestigious gathering. At the outset, I would like to thank His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani and Qatar for hosting this important meeting for what is now the 10<sup>th</sup> time.
  
- My remarks today in this session will centre on the critical role of Education in the social and economic development of our people.
  
- Ireland’s role in recent social and economic success was underpinned by Social Partnership agreements which brought together 5 Pillars of Society:
  - Government
  - Employers
  - Trade Unions
  - Farmers
  - And other Civil Society Partners.

- Social Partnership is a uniquely Irish process. Its success over many years since 1987 was based on participation, solidarity and mutual respect.
- We saw a need for change. We couldn't go on blaming and criticizing each other for the country's woes. We had to try to bring the trade unions, employers, farmers and civil society groups together. We had to find a shared sense of direction for the country based on participation and mutual respect for each other's position, and bring all our people together.
- While we in Ireland, like many other countries around the world, face new challenges with the current economic downturn, we have taken early and decisive action to put us back on track. We must remember that our GDP per head of population was only 12,000 Euro when we began our Social Partnership Programmes. It rose to 44,000 Euro per capita and still stands at 41,000 Euro at this stage.
- Our experience in Ireland taught us many things but perhaps it is worth highlighting two important factors which changed Irish society, our economy and our political landscape forever.
- First, free secondary education was made available to all in the mid 1960s. This meant that, for the first time, there were large numbers of young, well educated men and women ready to transform Irish society.

This was enhanced by the introduction of free third level education in the mid 1990s.

- Second, throughout the 1970s a raft of legislation was implemented giving rights to women in a number of areas such as equal pay, property rights, and the right to sit on juries. Some of this was inspired by a new more confident population and a developing civil society. Some was driven by Ireland's accession to the European Economic Community (now the EU).
- Free education and equal rights for women enabled Ireland to move from being the poorest country in Europe to the wealthiest in little more than a generation as we saw increased participation by women in the labour force. Building further on this experience, in 1989 while Minister for Social Welfare, I introduced Second Chance Education, which aimed at increasing the skills of adults who had not had the benefit of free education as children.
- Second Chance Education at 2<sup>nd</sup> level and university level, was provided as an option to all those who were on the list of unemployed people and to lone parents with children, to widows and to people with a disability. They were allowed to keep their unemployment or other payments and to return to education and also to receive education grants and supports. You had to be aged 21 or over to re-enter the 2<sup>nd</sup> level cycle and 23 or over to enter university or other third level institute.

- The response to this was Fantastic! Every year since 1989 there has never been fewer than 10,000 participants each year. A large proportion of those who eagerly took up the Second Chance were women – women aged 23, 25, 28, 35, 40, 45 and older. This was their opportunity and they took it !
- Other approaches which we took then in developing education were that in 1987 under Partnership we decided to dramatically increase our investment in Research and Development and in Education generally.
- The first step was called the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLTI). This provided special funds for Research and Development in universities and institutes of higher education. These funds went to support research at the cutting edge of innovation. To qualify for these large grants the universities had to put their projects before international boards of their peers. As a result the project teams included the best brains in the field from the different universities working together. One university then assumes the leadership of the team and receives the physical facilities for the project.
- The strength of that is that you're not looking for what is regarded as the best university but you ARE getting the best team for the project. Our leading universities are now forming Alliances of Excellence in R & D.

- The Second initiative was called Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and it focused particularly on Innovative Research and Development in companies and in the Commercial Sector. As a result both multi national and indigenous companies greatly increased their own R and D with assistance from the state.
- The number of Post Graduate and Post Doctoral researchers throughout our educational and business sectors expanded to new record heights. This was done to underpin further development and competitiveness in the global markets. Ireland now ranks 17<sup>th</sup> worldwide for investment in R and D. Our current target is 3% of GDP.
- In relation to general education, Ireland has for a long time had a system of Vocational schools in addition to the more academic secondary colleges. The Vocational schools in their general education concentrated particularly on skills – electrical, carpentry, design, painting and decorating, plumbing, bricklaying, construction and a variety of other technicians and skilled trades. As a result we take high places in the Biennial World Competitions in these skills. In addition we have available to new industries the variety of skills which they need.
- We broadened their qualifications and introduced new internationally recognized standards for these and for other Certificate and Diploma courses. To do this I introduced the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and, for third level examinations I introduced the

Higher Education and Training Awards Council known as HETAC, and also FETAC the Further Education and Training Awards Council to cover all the Certificate and Diploma courses outside universities and higher institutes of education. A few long established universities continued with their existing qualifications.

- All in all these qualifications guarantee standards of excellence not only for universities and institutes of technology but also for the many other essential degrees of qualification. Going into the 2002-2003 academic year some 85% of those who had completed their second level education, at approximately 18 years of age, applied for further or higher education.
  
- So, Education and good Qualifications that will be recognized internationally are there for all the children of our country and for those who take up or avail of the Second Chance option. This is why the skills of our young population, over a wide spectrum, are so important to international investors and for attracting Foreign Direct Investment.
  
- In this short contribution I have highlighted, in our development, the role of :
  - Women
  - Second Chance Education
  - Vocational Education
  - Standards of Excellence and
  - Research and Development,

in fulfilling the lives of our people and advancing our economic and social development.