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The Education System is Not Relevant to the 21st Century

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Proposition: “The education system is not relevant to the 21st Century”

HONORABLE CHAIRPERSON, ADJUDICATORS, TIMEKEEPER,
MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSITION, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.

Malcolm X once said that “Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today” and I, as an educator, am troubled that I must admit to you that tonight I stand for the motion and declare that our current system was relevant for the 1980’s but not for today and certainly not for the 21st century that we now live in.

The nature of work is changing and continues to change with apparently increasing speed. Irish industry now needs people who can produce knowledge and design new things. In the modern company, this is achieved with multi-disciplinary project teams that include senior and junior people with varied skills. Does our secondary school system bring our junior cert and leaving cert students together to work on projects? Does it have the physics students sitting on the same team as the business students and the music students, all without a teacher in sight? No, it does not, but it must for the 21st century and so the current system is not relevant and the motion stands.

The Leaving Certificate system has not effectively changed since 1980. Today, the primary value of the Leaving Cert has decreased to merely serving as an entry mechanism for college. It should prepare all students for life and the majority of students for successful transition into higher education. But it fails in both of these missions. Therefore, I ask, how can it be relevant today? It was relevant to a time, a mid 1980’s time, when the majority of available jobs required only a junior or leaving certificate. It is clearly not relevant today, and so the motion stands.

Last year, 4,500 Irish students failed ordinary-level maths. A further 5,000 students took foundation level maths, therefore making them ineligible for most 3rd level courses: 9,500 students unable to progress to college. That is the equivalent of the entire leaving certificate classes of 172 schools the size of St. Brendan's here. This is an indictment of our 2nd level system and so the motion stands.

According to a FAS/ESRI study, three out of every four new jobs created between today and 2015 will require a higher education. Clearly the needs of our economy have changed, and continue to change. But we only have just over 50% of secondary students progressing on to higher education. We are not educating young adults for the jobs that will be available.

Returning to the motion: Systems, just like organisms, must adapt and evolve or become less relevant and less successful over time. This is also true for educational systems. If the Ireland of the 21st century is different than the Ireland of the 20th, and it most assuredly is, then how can we argue that the Irish education system of the last century is relevant to this century when that system hasn't changed? That argument can't be made and so the motion stands.

The changing nature of the world economy favours those with very high levels of education over the least educated. Our Government and numerous expert groups have all reported on the need for Ireland to develop a 4th level to our education system. The fact is, Ireland needs to educate many more PhDs. But the existing system in leading institutions such as DIT, UCD and Trinity does not have the capacity to produce these graduates. Therefore the system must change, which is another way of saying that the existing system is not relevant to Ireland's current needs. Thus the motion stands.

And what of the students who do make it to third level – who get accepted onto a programme of their choice? The statistics are that approximately 20% of students will drop-out rate during their first year of college. Therefore how can one argue, without one's face turning red or one's nose extending from this platform and into the audience, that the current system is relevant to the Ireland of today? No the education system is not relevant today and the motion stands.

Our education system is under-funded. In Ireland we invest only four and a half percent (4.5%) of our GDP into education. This places us 25th out of 30 OECD countries, and also well below the EU average. We need to invest over €1 billion more per year into education just to reach the average spent by other OECD countries; twice that to be near the top in investment in education. Measured against our stated aim to be a knowledge society we are not investing nearly enough on education and so the motion stands.

Today, in some fields such as computer science, what students learn in college is obsolete before they graduate. Let me repeat that: By the time that some of our students graduate college, what they learned is already out of date. The problem does not lie with our students and teachers, it lies with our education system's inability to cope with change. It is no longer relevant to merely teach what the teacher knows. What we must now do is teach our students how to learn what the teacher doesn't know and how to keep on learning after they leave the hallowed halls of school and college.

The 21st century is the century of the knowledge worker, of the lifelong learner. As the philosopher of the future Alvin Tofler has said, "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn". Does our current education system teach us how to learn, to unlearn and to relearn? No, not nearly well enough, and so the motion stands.

In closing let me state clearly that we have not proposed that the existing system has always been a failure. Indeed it has worked well in the 80's and 90's. Its success is seen all around us, and I thank that system for my success. But as John F Kennedy said of his country and of his time: "Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education." It is time now for our education system to change to meet the needs of 21st century Ireland and its young people. And so the motion must stand.

Thank you.

February 2006