

PRESS RELEASE - 30th August 2007

Ireland has made significant progress in its ambition to become an international leader in scientific research but needs to “up its game” if it is to reach the Government’s own NDP targets by 2013, the Government’s Chief Scientific Adviser Prof Patrick Cunningham said today.

In a major presentation to an international conference of science researchers at UCD Prof Cunningham gave some details of new figures, published this week by Forfás. These show that having lagged behind much of Europe a decade ago, Ireland’s spend on research has reached the OECD average as a percentage of GNP. R&D spending in the higher education sector has trebled in a decade.

Prof Cunningham said this morning: “We are now at the OECD average which represents good progress. But the Government’s target is not to be average - it is to be among the leaders. In that respect, we still have a big job of work to do but we have the policy commitment in the National Development Plan, the resources and the structures with which to do it.” He was speaking at the annual conference of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers.

The Chief Scientific Adviser provides high level advice to the Government on scientific issues and plays a key role in monitoring, evaluating and delivering the Government’s Strategy for Science Technology and Innovation (SSTI 2006-2013). This is his first public statement on this aspect of his role.

He said the SSTI target - incorporated into the National Development Plan - is that 2.5 per cent of GNP would be invested in research by 2010. One third of this was to be provided by the State and two thirds by the private sector. In 2006 some 1.6 per cent of GNP was spent on research: “Despite our improvement it will be a challenge to reach that target”, he said.

The new Forfás figures show that in the past decade Ireland has dramatically increased its spending on research in third level institutions, in both monetary terms and as a percentage of GNP. “In 1996 we spent under €200 million compared to €600 million in 2006. We have now caught up completely with the OECD average in terms of spending as a proportion of GNP, from a position just a decade ago where we were well below that figure. That is substantial progress and means the State has delivered on the commitments given in the last National Development Plan.”

“We are on track, but still well short of the target”, he said. The Government’s target was not just to reach the OECD average but to position Ireland among the leaders in research and development. As the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment Micheál Martin put it at last year’s launch of the Government Strategy for Science Technology and Innovation: ‘Ireland by 2013 will be internationally renowned for the excellence of its research, be at the forefront in generating and using new knowledge for economic and social progress, within an innovation driven culture’.

“This is an ambition about which everybody in the university sector and within the science community is enthusiastic. We are certainly not among Europe’s leaders yet and there is major challenge ahead to get us there. But Ireland now has the resources, the policy commitment and the structures to achieve this ambition.”

He said other measures apart from the level of spending showed that Ireland remained among Europe’s average performers. “Non-monetary measures of our progress include for example the number of researchers employed here per thousand of population, and in that regard the Forfás figures published earlier this week show us in the middle, rather than

among Europe's leaders." He said the European Innovation Scoreboard, recognised in Europe as a seminal measure of each country's performance in this area, also placed Ireland among the average performers rather than among the leading countries that include the Scandinavian countries and Switzerland.

He said State spending, while critical, would not on its own bring Ireland to where it wanted to be. There were two other vital contributors:

- R&D spending by private industry must increase in parallel with State spending
- We must ensure that society receives the benefit of this increased funding.

On the challenge of increasing private sector spending he said: "The Government target is that of total R&D spending, one third should come from the State with the remaining two thirds from the private sector. That is roughly the proportionate split of the spending now. As the Government increases its spending substantially, the challenge is to ensure the private sector does so too. They must see it as profitable, not simply because there may be Government incentives for such research, but because it allows dynamic companies to innovate, change and stay competitive." Business spending on R&D has in fact grown strongly in the past few years (up 17% in 2006). There are nearly 1,400 firms doing significant research. Over a thousand of these are domestic companies, but up to 70% of the total business R&D is done in 345 foreign-owned firms.

On ensuring that research activity brings benefits to society he said universities, their departments and staff needed to respond to this. "The first purpose of universities is to transfer knowledge from one generation to another. The second and increasingly important one is to increase the pool of knowledge in society. We need a better way of giving credit for socially useful research and for rewarding performance."

The value of academic research is determined first by peer review through publication in recognised journals. "This is the quality control stage. It can then be seen to have practical value based on the number of patents issued and the flow of capital into business to develop products and services. This brings direct benefits to society in terms of increased employment, better health services or improved quality of life. It also underpins our competitiveness as a nation."