

Address by Mr. Noel Dempsey, T.D.,

Minister of Education and Science at EU Ministerial Meeting in Dublin Castle, April 28 2004

Fellow Ministers, Delegations, Observers, I extend a warm welcome to you all to Ireland, and to Dublin Castle for this most important meeting. A special welcome to the Ministers and delegations from those countries who will join the European Union on Saturday. We can now count down in hours to what will be one of the most momentous occasions in the history of the EU, when there will be 25 countries in the Union.

It is fitting, therefore, that our topic for the next two days will be about improving the life experiences of the most important asset that the new European Union has -its citizens- soon to be over four hundred and fifty million of them.

How these citizens, in all their diversity, manage their lives - their personal, social, learning and economic lives - depends on the opportunities they are offered and avail of throughout their lifespan. How they contribute to the achievement of the shared goals of the European Council, as set out in the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, depends not just on the education and training opportunities that they receive throughout their life, but also on the skills they develop in order to match their abilities and interests with the opportunities available.

Investment in human capital is now seen as central to the development of advanced economies and democratic societies. The need for education and training to be more than instruments for employability and to have broader responsibilities to citizens and society was recognised by the Ministers of Education and the European Commission in their report to the European Council in March 2002. The Report clearly demonstrated that, as well as equipping Europeans for their adult and working lives, education and training contribute to their personal development for a better life and active citizenship and, in turn, this leads to greater social cohesion in our democratic societies.

While the value of strategies to improve the acquisition of formal knowledge and skills cannot be underestimated if economies are to grow, educational attainment and measurable skills alone account for less than half of the individual wage differences in OECD countries. Recent studies suggest that a significant part of the remainder may be explained by a wider view of human capital which includes the individual's ability to build, manage and deploy his or her acquired skills.

One of the key challenges facing us, as members of the European Union, is that of identifying and introducing policies that will be successful in supporting both the development of the individual's potential and the development of the community as a whole.

It is now recognised that in order to meet the target for 2010,- to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, - citizens must have access to flexible learning opportunities throughout their lifespan. However, they also need support in both accessing information, opportunities and options available at crucial times throughout the lifespan, and in helping them to reflect on their personal profiles and ambitions.

The report I referred to earlier specifically identifies the need to strengthen guidance services because of the key role that guidance plays in supporting learning for all ages and in empowering citizens to manage their learning and working lives. In this way, guidance services make it easier for them to access and progress through diverse learning opportunities and career pathways.

For most individuals, the capacity to blend a satisfying and productive work life with a successful personal life depends on the development of personal attributes and the acquisition of skills obtained through home, recreation, formal and informal education and through training. In fast changing circumstances - which may become even faster in the years ahead - people need to be able to manage acquired skills, develop new ones appropriate to their abilities and circumstances, and to know how and where to access relevant information in relation to learning, work and career opportunities.

For them to be able to do this, it is essential that there is support and guidance for all citizens at crucial transitions in their lives. It is particularly important that it is available for those who are excluded or who are at risk of exclusion from education and training systems. There are still too many early school leavers and too many young people without basic skills. There are too many long term unemployed, with all of the ensuing personal difficulties that long term unemployment can cause. There are still too many women vulnerable to unemployment and too few women entering or availing of opportunities in the scientific and technological sectors. And what about the needs of older workers, migrants and the disabled?

Lifelong guidance is therefore essential to promote access to and benefit from lifelong learning. It is also an essential part of any lifelong learning strategy and it is through guidance that individuals can realise their full potential as contributors to the achievement of the goals of the European Union, as set out in the Lisbon Strategy.

The purpose of this meeting is to examine the current position in relation to guidance policies and the provision of guidance services throughout the European Union; to determine what guidance programmes are offered, how are services delivered and who has access to them. In particular, I hope we can reach a consensus on how our guidance policies need to be strengthened so that more appropriate guidance services can be more widely available to citizens and can meet their needs, while at the same time contribute to the development of the society envisaged for the European Union of the future.

Three recent reviews of Guidance examined guidance policies and practice in 37 countries throughout the world, including many of the current European Union and accession countries. These reviews looked at how the organisation, management and delivery of career guidance can help to advance some key public policy objectives. In particular, the reviews have looked at how career guidance services can assist countries to advance lifelong learning goals and at how career guidance can help in the implementation of active labour market policies. They also identified gaps in service provision across countries. The reviews confirmed the need for guidance services which are flexible, coordinated and delivered in many forms throughout individuals' lifespan.

In order to establish the framework for the deliberations of our meeting, we will have a short overview of two of the reviews of guidance; one carried out by the European Commission through the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training and the European Foundation and the other by the OECD.

ENDS