

Royal Irish Academy Gold Medal Awards
Taoiseach's Keynote Address on the Power of Ideas Research and Education
Thursday 20 February 2014, 6pm, Academy House

Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

I'm delighted to be here. I would like to thank the President and the Academy. I feel like I should have an Oscar in my hand.

Thank you all for inviting me here to present something so much more important for our country and its future - the RIA Gold Medal Awards. This is the Awards' eighth year and they are a significant and looked forward-to event in the Irish academic calendar.

This year we celebrate two outstanding academics – Professor Colin O'Dowd, NUI Galway and Professor Robert Kitchin, NUI Maynooth.

Professor O'Dowd is Professor at the School of Physics, and Director of the Centre for Climate and Air Pollution Studies, Environment Change institute, NUI Galway. I'm sure Professor O'Dowd your public reach extended way beyond academia in recent weeks, and will do again, as we battle the early impact of 'weather weirding' and climate change.

Professor Kitchin is Professor of Geography and Principal Investigator for the National Institute of Regional and Spatial Analysis, NUI Maynooth. Another specialist area central to life as we will live it on this island of Ireland.

As you know, these awards are conferred on the basis of substantial, distinguished and internationally-recognised contributions made by the winners. There is no doubt that in the case of the academics we honour here tonight, that work, that contribution is stellar. It is a perfect example of why Ireland is consolidating its position in the international Top 20 for the quality of our scientific research. And that is why equally this evening we celebrate academia itself. Because it is on you, your ideas, your work that we are beginning to rebuild our economy and society.

You will know better than most, that innovation and imagination are vital to our being an attractive international prospect for investment and jobs. Indeed our excellent reputation for R&D is giving us the edge when global companies are looking to expand or relocate. Which is why we have made R&D a central aspect of our Action Plan for Jobs. Right now we're setting up new Research and Technology Centres, bringing together academia and industry for research in areas that will have crucial impact on life in our country.

Improving the funding environment for innovative businesses and entrepreneurs is critical. By enhancing the skills and research base, we intend to have the highest percentage of computing graduates as a proportion of all third level graduates by 2018.

In a month where we celebrate the anniversary of the births of Galileo and Copernicus we see clearly that the power of ideas, research and education has transcended national borders and traditional boundaries.

Even now we're entering a new phase in education, redefining the role of teachers, researchers and lecturers. Now, in Castlebar a student can log onto the website of MIT, follow lectures, download course material.

Two weeks ago I was on Prof. O'Dowd's campus to open the new state-of-the-art BioScience research facility in NUI Galway. The week before, NUI Galway announced it would be the first facility in Ireland to manufacture human stem cells. I believe there are fewer than 12 such centres across Europe. It will bring huge advancement in the development of personalised medicines, bespoke approaches to treating and preventing disease.

As you will know, medical research has become a priority area for the Government. Again, the Action

Plan for jobs is crucial here. It's driving and supporting the creation of a Health Innovation Hub. Overall, our ambition is to establish a world renowned Hub driving collaboration between the health system and commercial enterprises. Once again leading to the development and commercialisation of new healthcare technologies, products, and services. A pilot project in UCC last year has proved very effective and is now scaling up operations.

Just as we're doing across the board. Because another big research area for the country is the technology and data sector. Innovation in these businesses is changing the way we live our lives at a faster pace than at any other time in human history.

We want to build on existing enterprise strengths to make Ireland a leading country in Europe in the area of Big Data and data analytics. Last year we progressed a number of significant initiatives and investments in partnership with the enterprise sector.

Of course the launch of the INSIGHT initiative marked a major investment in disruptive reform in the area of Big data, this being the Science Foundation Ireland-supported Centre for Data Analytics. The €88 million euro INSIGHT investment represents the largest, single investment in a research centre in the history of the state. The Centre will receive funding of €58 million from our Research Centres Programme, along with a further contribution of €30 million from its industry partners. INSIGHT brings together the expertise of 4 universities, 30 industry partners, and 200 researchers in one multi-location research centre. The industry partners range from small, Irish start-ups and established SMEs to large multinationals who will work on a range of projects to advance data analytics technologies in Ireland.

But politically too we have been busy. As you know, under the Irish Presidency of the European Union, the Government played a central part in reaching agreement on the new EU R&D programme Horizon 2020. The programme has a total budget of over €70bn to the year 2020.

We are now centrally focused on leveraging the EU funding to win support for collaborative research programmes in Ireland. Progressive Irish universities - among them those you represent - will have a key role in ensuring how well we access those funds.

All of this is crucial to jobs. As is our joint Action Plan for Jobs and Pathways to Work strategy. We now have 58,000 more people in work than this time last year. And of course your work in Education and Innovation has been central to this. Education and training is a critical part of our recovery and growth, and is being radically reformed at all levels.

Now, we have an impressive science base through a prolonged period of investment in innovation. Our current research and innovation strategy is centred on accelerating the returns to the economy and society from that investment. It also aims to enhance collaboration with Higher Education Institutions and industry partners and increase commercialisation of publicly-funded research.

Both fronts – education and innovation – will again be a focus of the Action Plan for Jobs in 2014, which is to be published shortly. Because smart use of technology and innovation will be key to addressing many of the major challenges that affect society; whether its improving crop yields, seeing how we can use technology to improve healthcare, or simply making sure that technology helps everyday life as we get older. Areas that in turn will yield a new generation of Gold medal winners.

I want to pay particular tribute to the Academy for the role it plays in galvanising the academic community and advancing academic discourse. I also want to acknowledge the foresight of the Higher Education Authority who has sponsored the medals since their inception.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to warmly congratulate this year's medallists, Professor Colin O'Dowd and Professor Robert Kitchin. I am delighted that through these Academy awards, we as a nation are able to acknowledge and celebrate your many achievements to date, and I give you both my best wishes for your continued success in your respective fields.

Thank You