

Press Release

TECHNOLOGY FORESIGHT REPORT STRESSES THE NEED FOR IRELAND TO BECOME AN ATTRACTIVE LOCATION FOR WORLD- CLASS RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Reports from the first ever Technology Foresight exercise to be carried out in Ireland were published today (30 April 1999). The initiative was undertaken by the Irish Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (ICSTI) in Forfas, at the request of Noel Treacy, T.D., Minister for Science, Technology and Commerce.

Technology Foresight is a recognised process for bringing together, in partnership, scientists, engineers, industrialists, government officials and others to identify areas of strategic research and the emerging technologies likely to yield the greatest economic and social benefit and which will in the long term sustain industrial competitiveness. The time horizon set for the Irish exercise was 2015.

The 'suite' of reports published today consist of eight individual reports from expert panels, established in the following areas :

- ◆ Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals
- ◆ Information and Communication Technologies
- ◆ Materials and Manufacturing Processes
- ◆ Health and Life Sciences
- ◆ Natural Resources (Agri-Food, Marine, Forestry)
- ◆ Energy
- ◆ Transport and Logistics
- ◆ Construction and Infrastructure

Through a process of communication and consultation, the eight expert panels reached a consensus about the actions needed to underpin and sustain economic prosperity for the sectors under consideration.

The panel reports identify the opportunities and challenges for the future, the technologies that must be developed and the policies the Government must put in place to meet them.

A ninth report, from ICSTI itself, builds on the Technology Foresight panel findings and develops a vision of Ireland as a knowledge-based society. Knowledge societies will exploit the enormous potential of new knowledge-intensive technologies in areas such as information and communications, biosciences, medical systems and nanotechnology. Over time, such technologies and the industries they support will become increasingly important in international trade.

The report is being submitted to Government for inclusion as an investment priority in the next National Development Plan.

The report finds that competition will, in the future, focus more and more on the creation, transmission and incorporation of knowledge within the production of goods and services.

Mr Brian Sweeney, Chairman of the Technology Foresight Task Force said that Ireland needed to face up to the fact that it cannot have a competitive advantage in manufacturing. "Industrial and fiscal policies which have served the economy well in the last decade cannot, on their own, sustain the current economic boom. If Ireland is to remain an attractive location for inward investment, we need to address a major weakness in the Irish economy which is the failure to invest adequately in human knowledge. Equally, if Ireland is to generate new high-tech indigenous companies there must be an environment of world-class technological expertise, which will encourage their development and competitiveness", Mr Sweeney said.

Compared to leading industrial countries, too little research is being carried out in Ireland. Only 50 companies here spend £1m or more per annum on R&D activities. We have no world class research centres or groups with the critical mass necessary to make an impact.

The report concludes that if Ireland does not take the necessary steps now, we will not succeed in replacing low skill industries with new R&D based companies, the existing high-tech production units will become more vulnerable and we will fail to attract the new wave of multinationals in information communications technology and biotechnology.

The main recommendations of the ICSTI report are based on the recognition that key drivers of growth in the future will be in the areas of information and communication technologies and biotechnology. There is a need to create, develop and attract firms which are research and technology based. The key recommendations are:

1. All Government Departments and Agencies should utilise the Foresight findings in future planning exercises
2. Ireland should become a centre of excellence in ICT and biotechnology niches
3. Government policies should be more proactive in the creation of an environment conducive to technological innovation specifically in relation to regulatory and fiscal measures
4. The Government should establish a Technology Foresight fund – IR£500 million over 5 years.

The objective of the Technology Foresight recommendations is to reposition the Irish economy to be widely recognised internationally as a knowledge-based economy and an attractive location to undertake R&D. To achieve this, there is a need to develop a world-class research capability of sufficient scale in a number of strategic areas within our universities and colleges, research institutes and industry.

The partnership of Government, industry, the higher education sector and society must combine to deliver the knowledge framework, which in future will produce :

- ◆ Research and technology development (RTD) intensive and advanced technology-based indigenous and overseas companies, using high level expertise
- ◆ A vibrant, cohesive, durable and internationally recognised competitive RTD base
- ◆ An environment conducive to innovation
- ◆ Investment in the physical and human infrastructure
- ◆ Citizens well informed on scientific issues in the context of an innovation culture

Dr. Edward M. Walsh, ICSTI Chairman, said that Ireland must engage with its scientific diaspora : “The additional capabilities needed to accelerate the development of world-class research capability resides in graduates of Irish institutions who have gone abroad to work in Europe and the US. Many of these people have developed specialities which would be needed to provide the initial momentum and scale for the development of strategic niche areas of ICT and biotechnology”, he said.

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