

PRESS RELEASE

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Ireland has the opportunity to develop world-class biotechnology industry

Report highlights future requirements for skills to facilitate the development of
the biotechnology sector in Ireland

Ireland is well positioned to benefit from the anticipated rapid growth in the biotechnology sector worldwide over the next 7 years according to Dr. Danny O'Hare, Chairman of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN). Dr. O'Hare was speaking at the publication of a major study into the future requirements for skills for the biotechnology sector in Ireland carried out by Peter Bacon & Associates on behalf of the Expert Group.

“The European Commission has estimated that the market for biotechnology products in Europe alone could be worth €100 billion by 2005. Biotechnology is an emerging technology, which has the potential to impact on many facets of our lives in the near future and will provide substantial opportunities for those countries that are proactive in promoting the sector. Due to its high added-value and its reliance on intellectual capital, biotechnology is widely expected to become a keystone of the knowledge economy said Dr. O'Hare.

The study, entitled “The Supply and Demand for Skills in the Biotechnology Sector”, was undertaken in order to identify the potential growth rate of the sector, to quantify the levels of skills that would be required to realise this growth and to review the projected supply of these skills over the period 2004-2010. A central element of this analysis was the formulation of a plausible scenario for the future development of the biotechnology sector in Ireland.

The report highlights a number of Ireland's strengths, which could facilitate the exploitation of the biotechnology opportunity:

- growing base of industrial activity in two closely related sectors, namely pharmaceuticals/chemicals and medical devices;
- the attendant pool of skills in pharmaceutical processing and engineering as well as specialisations such as quality control and regulatory affairs;
- substantial investment to date in basic research in biotechnology by Science Foundation Ireland; and
- Ireland's highly competitive corporate tax regime.

“Ireland must increase the supply of science-related skills in the economy if the biotechnology sector is to realise its full potential over the next 7 years,” said Dr. Bacon. Other enabling measures are also required, namely a vibrant research community, a culture of collaboration between academia and business and an appropriate financial framework to support this collaboration. The report makes a number of recommendations on how this can be achieved. This is a realistic objective, but will require a concerted effort on the part of all stakeholders, namely, government, development agencies, educational institutions and business.

Recommendations

- The report calls on Government to affirm its long-term commitment to the public support of science in general and biotechnology in particular, by the setting of multi-annual targets for the level of funding. It also recommends that capital funding under the HEA-operated Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLTI) should be restored immediately.
- It highlights the fall-off in the uptake of science subjects in secondary level and endorses the recommendations of the Task Force on the Physical Sciences to achieve greater participation in science and engineering. It calls for the speedy implementation of these recommendations.
- It recommends that the diverse and rewarding career paths (including in particular, biotechnology) opened up by an education in the sciences be highlighted to students and parents by industry and relevant agencies.
- The report also recommends changes in the third level institutions; In particular, course curricula should be aligned with the specific skills requirements of industry. It advocates the blurring of the traditional vertical boundaries between science disciplines to match the inter-disciplinary nature of the industry. In addition, science courses should be broadened to incorporate subjects such as business, marketing, law and regulatory affairs.
- It also proposes that students should be recruited from abroad to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at Irish third level institutions in order to boost the supply of science-related skills.

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