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**Irish science is smiling**

on 25 January 2001, 22:00

by [Niall McKay](#)To get this column sent to your inbox, [subscribe](#) to the email newsletter.

During Bill Clinton's third and final visit to Ireland as President of the United States in December, he told the Irish people that peace in their country depended on building upon its recent economic progress.

It seemed fitting, then, that he delivered his speech at the Guinness Storehouse, a newly refurbished section of the 300-year-old Guinness brewery in Dublin that will soon become home to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab Europe.

Media Lab Europe is being established by technology visionary Nicholas Negroponte with financial aid from the Irish government and is part of the government's \$670 million push to bring Ireland to the next stage of its economic development.

Indeed, so far, the country's economic gamble on the high-tech industry has paid off handsomely. Since 1994, it has reduced unemployment from 20 percent to less than 6 percent; attracted nearly 600 U.S. companies to its shores; and spawned hundreds of indigenous high-tech companies, about a dozen of which are publicly traded on U.S. stock exchanges, such as Iona Technologies (Nasdaq : IONA), Trintech (Nasdaq : TTPA).

But where will Ireland go from here? It no longer offers a low-wage, highly educated work force. Salaries have crept up and now exceed the European average, companies can no longer find suitably qualified employees, and a three-bedroom house in Dublin now costs about the same as one in the Bay Area.

"We've got to move up the value chain," says Conor O'Carroll, senior policy analyst with Forfás, the Irish government's economic policy division.

So Forfás has proposed a plan to bring original scientific research to Ireland. "We already have plenty of product development that has helped create new Irish high-tech companies, but what we need to do now is build the nation's intellectual property," says Mr. O'Carroll.

**SUPER MODELS**

To achieve this, Forfás looked to the United States' National Science Foundation and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency as models. Both organizations have a good track record of funding long-term research that has benefited economic growth.

"What we need is the left-brain kind of thinking," says Mr. O'Carroll. "The type of research that looks a great deal further than developing next year's products."

"What we are looking for here are the people who can create and lead projects that will lead to new scientific discoveries," says Mr. O'Carroll.

**NOBEL CANDIDATES WANTED**

Actually, Forfás is looking for the sort of people who are most likely to be nominated for a Nobel Prize. So it is offering a five-year, \$5 million research budget, plus a six-figure salary, to anybody with a track record and a really good idea. So far, it has had more than 80 serious responses from scientists in the United States, Germany, India, Russia, Israel, and Slovakia.

From the applicants, it will choose ten winners who will be attached to an Irish university but will not have to teach. That way the researchers can use the university's resources and recruit the cream of the post-graduate student crop. Forfás has not chosen the winners yet, so it will not discuss any of the projects, but about 50 percent will be in the life sciences and the rest from high-tech sectors.

Still, it may take 20 years to assess whether Forfás's strategy is successful. In the meantime, MIT's Media Lab Europe should play its part by putting Ireland on the scientific research map.

Topics: [Science](#), [Irish](#), [Smiling](#) **COMMENTS**

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