Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking Professor Winkler and his colleagues for the kind invitation to address you here this evening.

It is a real pleasure to visit your campus. I always enjoy visiting universities and colleges. It makes me more than a little envious of those of you who are still studying. I know too that when standing in a room of students and professors I’m going to face particularly tough questioning. But I’ve been practising – I’ve appeared in front of the European Parliament on multiple occasions since the start of the Presidency and I can assure you that MEPs are also quite demanding!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today is day 78 of Ireland’s seventh Presidency of the European Union. We are almost at the half way point. It thus seems fitting to try to assess our performance to date and set out our priorities for the remaining three months.

Before doing so, however, I would like to give you a sense of the factors which influenced our Government as our Presidency preparations accelerated in the last months of 2012. I want to talk to you both about Ireland in Europe and about Ireland as a country in recovery.

**Ireland in Europe**

2013 marks not only our seventh EU Presidency but forty years of Irish EU membership.

Those forty years tell a story of transformation.

Today there are six-times the number of people in higher education than there were in 1973. Three-times as many women work outside the home. We have made good use of EU support, to build a modern infrastructure and a very strong educational system.

We joined the then EEC trading mainly with our nearest neighbour, the UK. Today we export
over 54 billion euro worth of goods right across the EU: that’s over half our total exports. And the transformation has been more than economic and social. The European ideal of peace and mutual respect saw the EU play an important role in the peace process on the island of Ireland.

As a small nation on the Western edge of Europe with our own different history, we approach the European project from a different perspective than Germany. But, like you, we cherish the gift of European unity.

And we don’t take Europe for granted. We have always thought long and hard about how we want the EU to evolve, and how we fit within it - the eight EU–related referenda we have held since 1972 are a testament to that debate. However, our people see the benefits which EU membership has brought over the last 40 years, and which I believe it will continue to bring.

I was personally struck by a poll in January this year which found that 85% of the Irish people believe that Ireland should remain in the EU and 83% believe that we have profited from membership.

**Ireland in Recovery**

I spoke earlier of Ireland’s transformation in its 40 years of membership. But we have also undergone radical reform and adjustment in the last five years. You will have read and heard about the serious, almost unparalleled economic crash which occurred in Ireland in mid-2008 and led to our entry under the EU’s rescue umbrella in late 2010.

Budget surpluses turned into double-digit deficits. Unemployment rose quickly from 4% to over 14%. Our banking system effectively collapsed. It had to be rescued at enormous cost to our citizens and with dramatic consequences for our national debt and indeed our national mood. All of this happened before the various European mechanisms we’ve now built were in place.

The government of which I am a part entered office just over two years ago. It is, what Germans would call, a grand coalition and the Irish people gave us a resounding mandate to fix the economy, create jobs and achieve renewed and lasting growth. Two years on, thankfully, we’re well on the road to recovery with recent developments offering further encouraging signs.

The economy is expected to grow in 2013 for the third year in a row. Along with Germany we are one of the very few Euro Zone countries expecting economic growth this year. Growth has been driven by improved competitiveness and by the health of our thriving export economy. Exports are now at an all-time high.

Irish exporting companies have persevered and faced severe global economic conditions with determination. They are now, more than ever before, leaner, stronger and continue to increase their appetite for international expansion.

After a decade in deficit, our balance of payments is now in surplus. Indeed we are one of the few countries to enjoy a balance of trade surplus with Germany – a position which many envy.
There has also been an unprecedented level of investment by the Irish Government in science and technology. That has helped support a vibrant research community in Ireland which, in turn, is a substantial platform for a stream of technology-based start-ups.

We have also started to see some promising signs on the jobs market. Unemployment remains far too high but the latest statistics showed that the number of people employed in Ireland rose in the last quarter of 2012. The first rise since 2007.

While seeking to promote growth the Government has also been working hard to dramatically cut state spending and stabilise the public finances. This has been far from easy but we are now ahead on our deficit targets and importantly we’re on course to exit from our EU-IMF programme this year. Our cost of borrowing on the markets is becoming manageable again.

I would like to give you one clear message this evening. We fully intend to be the first EU/IMF programme country in the Eurozone to make a sustained return to the sovereign bond markets. And we intend to achieve this in 2013.

It has not been easy to get to this point and there is a difficult road ahead. Our progress, however, is the result of collective national determination and sacrifice. We have made budgetary adjustments to the tune of 18% of GDP since 2008. Hard challenges remain, in Ireland and in Europe, above all in bringing down the numbers of unemployed and in spurring stronger growth. But we are on the right track.

**Presidency Objectives**

A sense of our role in Europe as well as a determination to drive forward both the Irish recovery and the European recovery were the overriding factors which influenced our preparations for this seventh Presidency. Having lived the crisis for the past five years, we were determined to bring our experience to the table in a constructive and productive manner.

With this in mind we set three priorities for our Presidency: stability, growth and jobs. These three concepts capture what Europe needs to do to recover and to deliver for our citizens.

You are young educated Europeans. You know the potential and the limits of what a Presidency can achieve in its six months. Equally you know that a Presidency does not hold all the cards. Rather it is a more complex, subtle leadership role that involves partnerships with fellow Member States, the Commission, the President of the European Council, the Parliament, other institutions and stakeholders.

No Presidency can do everything. But each and every Presidency must do what it can. Our approach has been to identify concrete proposals in those areas where progress will make a real difference.

We have also been determined to build on the reputation we have won in previous Presidencies of being an impartial honest broker with a firm focus on results.
Achievements to Date

I am genuinely proud to be able to report that in our first three months we have delivered some concrete results with real benefits for the people of Europe. These have included:

- The negotiations on the EU budget – the Multiannual Financial Framework are on track.
- Real progress has been made in addressing youth unemployment.
- Broad agreement is in place to pursue negotiations on an EU-US Trade and Investment agreement.
- The Unified Patent Court Agreement was signed in Brussels.
- Agreement was reached for move forward with a Financial Transactions tax on the basis of enhanced cooperation.
- The Presidency brokered agreements with the European Parliament on the so called “Two Pack” of economic governance legislation and on overhauling banking regulations.
- Agriculture Ministers responded decisively to the mislabelling of meat products.
- And the European Year of the Citizen was launched in Dublin.

Of course, the Irish Presidency does not take sole credit for these achievements. They represent the type of patient and carefully worked our compromises which are at the heart of what the EU does best.

Let me say a little about some of them:

Perhaps most significantly, on 8 February, EU Governments reached agreement on the budget for the next 7 years (the Multiannual Financial Framework). This agreement was essential to underpin our pursuit of stability, jobs and growth. The agreement is, as always, a compromise that broadly satisfies all Member States, and has boosted the credibility of the EU at a critical time. We believe the budget is focussed on the right issues: tackling youth unemployment, boosting key growth areas such as research and innovation and maintaining solidarity with less developed Member States and with regions which have been particularly severely affected by the economic crisis.

As Presidency, Ireland has focussed particularly on the needs of Europe’s young people. I am forced to say that you are fortunate that you will be graduating in Germany at present. Unacceptably high youth unemployment is currently one of the most serious blights on our continent. It threatens the well-being of your generation, particularly in those parts of Europe which are hardest hit. We have a responsibility to act now to ensure that your peers throughout Europe can achieve their full potential. If we do not, if we fail them, the consequences for our communities and societies will be very serious.

We were pleased that the MFF agreement includes €6 billion for a new Youth Employment Initiative. And we were delighted to steer through political agreement in late February on the new Youth Guarantee: this will stand as one of the achievements of our Presidency. The Guarantee aims to ensure that young people who are not working or studying receive an offer of employment, continuing education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship. Successfully implemented, the Youth Guarantee will increase the employment rate, reduce early school
leaving, and help lift many young people out of poverty and social exclusion.

We have also taken significant steps in our drive to promote a more stable economic environment, without which there can be no sustained recovery and growth. Last month the Irish Presidency helped broker an agreement with the European Parliament on the “Two Pack” of economic governance legislation, designed to improve budgetary and economic coordination among euro area members.

Under our Presidency, a key decision has been taken to move forward on an enhanced cooperation basis for a Financial Transaction Tax. The Irish Presidency also reached a breakthrough in talks with the European Parliament on an overhaul of banking rules. This will ensure that European banks hold enough good quality capital to withstand future economic shocks. It should also enforce greater transparency and discourage excessive risk-taking including through restrictions on bankers’ pay. Finance Ministers signalled their broad political agreement to this deal at the beginning of March.

As Presidency we have also been seeking to improve the working of the Single Market. The signature in February of the Unified Patent Court Agreement will provide businesses with a central one-stop shop for registering and protecting patents. In addition we devoted a significant part of an Informal meeting of Justice Ministers in Dublin to a productive discussion of reform of data protection, to increase individuals’ control over their personal information. This will help to boost confidence and trust in the digital economy.

As an open, trade-focused economy, with a historically close relationship with the US, we set ourselves an ambitious target to agree a formal mandate for the Commission to start negotiations on a new EU-US Free Trade and Investment Agreement. We have made good progress. Last month, President Obama called for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and our Prime Minister discussed the way forward on this with the President during his recent St. Patrick’s Day visit.

Negotiations with Japan should also start later this month. And those on Canada are very close to the line. Other important negotiations are either coming to the start or the finish line.

Every Presidency can expect to find itself dealing with the unexpected, and this one is proving no exception.

We have moved swiftly to address the horsemeat scandal, first exposed in January by the Irish Food Safety Authority and subsequently shown to be a pan-European issue. The Irish Minister for Agriculture called an urgent meeting that agreed on control and testing in all Member States and while the last regular meeting of the Agriculture Council continued the urgent work to address this issue, to restore consumer confidence that the food we eat is what it says on the packet.

**Aims for Remainder of Presidency**

So a good set of tangible results almost half way through our Presidency. But there remains a lot to be done in the coming weeks. We are realistic – a Presidency which involves chairing negotiations in at least 1600 meetings is bound to come up against some unexpected hurdles. But we are ambitious.
A major focus will continue to be the MFF. Agreement among Member States is far from the end of the process. The European Parliament must agree to the deal, and pass almost 70 pieces of legislation to put it into effect. It is our job to take this forward with the Parliament. We aim to complete the process by the end of the Irish Presidency. This is a huge political challenge: the Parliament has made clear that its agreement cannot be taken for granted.

At the same time, we believe that our strong relationship with the European Parliament will help. Ireland has been at pains over the years to listen to and understand the concerns of MEPs. We have built close and constructive links with the European Parliament, which now decides jointly with the Council on nearly all European legislation. We have picked up the tempo further during the Presidency. In January, twenty Irish Ministers spent three days briefing 27 EP committees on our Presidency priorities. I myself have already participated in hours of debates in plenary sessions. It has been an honour to engage so extensively with elected representatives from across our Union and I believe that it is bearing fruit.

I firmly believe that our investment in our relationship with the Parliament has underpinned the agreements we have already brokered between the Council, the Parliament and the Commission. And that it will help us as we take forward our discussions of the MFF. We are confident that, with good will on all sides, we can achieve the agreement with the Parliament that we need before the end of our Presidency. Implementing the MFF on time is absolutely critical to underpin recovery across the EU.

We will also be seeking progress and further agreements on a wide range of other issues. There is much more to be done on Banking Union, and on proposals to advance the Single Market and the digital economy. The concept of a banking union is especially significant for a country like Ireland, as the rescue of the banking sector cost some 40% of our GDP. This contributed to the stability of the European banking system.

We aim as Presidency to drive forward in a coordinated and consistent way the new European Semester process of economic and budgetary coordination between Member States.

We will be applying our own national experience of using research and innovation to underpin economic growth, as we push forward the Horizon 2020 programme to make Europe a world-class research and innovation centre and boost high-potential sectors of the knowledge economy. Researchers across Europe must be able to access funding with minimum red tape. And Small and Medium Enterprises, who have great potential to generate growth and jobs, must also benefit from funding for research and innovation – which is why we are focussing as Presidency on the Competitiveness for SMEs Programme, or COSME.

As we proceed with this work, we will also not forget that we are working for the people of Europe and that our work must be legitimised by them. With this mind, I was personally pleased to host an informal meeting of European Ministers in January on democratic legitimacy and accountability in Europe. We had a good discussion and I am looking forward to further discussions with my colleagues as we seek to find ways to engage the people of Europe and their representatives more fully in European affairs.

We are, of course, also holding this Presidency during the European Year of Citizens. The aim of the year is to encourage debate, throughout our societies, about what it means to be part of the European Union.
European citizens enjoy rights, including the rights of free movement of persons, goods and services across the continent. We benefit from protection in the workplace, equality between men and women and freedom from discrimination, protection as consumers. These are rights which would have been inconceivable to past generations. We have to ensure that we do not take them for granted.

People in the EU need to understand the rights which their EU citizenship gives them, and how to derive the most benefit from them. And we want to encourage people to think about their relationship with the EU, and the future direction they want the Union to take. After all, the EU’s decisions are taken by the political leaders of Member States, and by Members of the European Parliament. Both these decision-making groups are chosen directly by our voters, in national and European elections. So the future of the EU is in the hands of the EU’s citizens, and we all have a responsibility to make informed choices when we vote.

**Irish - German Relationship**

I would like to conclude this evening with some observations about Irish German relations and our shared future as Europeans.

There is no doubt but that the crisis has unleashed populist tendencies in some parts of Europe and given new life to old stereotypes. My experience has been however, that the crisis has actually increased our engagement with one another. I can assure you that Germany and German views are present and discussed in Ireland today in a way that never occurred before. Your election in September will be closely observed in Ireland as well as in other EU countries. The Presidency has also provided a myriad of new opportunities for politicians and officials to work together and cooperate with their German counterparts to a much higher degree than in the past.

It is a pleasure to observe how Irish-German relations are thriving at present. Business and cultural ties are stronger than ever before. Germany is our fourth export market, is second for inward investment and third in importance as a source of tourists.

I also know that just two days ago on St. Patrick’s Day, Ireland’s national holiday two major German landmarks, the iconic television tower in Berlin and the Allianz Arena in Munich were greened for the evening. They joined other world buildings and monuments including the Sydney Opera House and the Pyramids in Giza in turning green for the day. The German greenings were a great – you could say glowing – symbol of the friendship between our countries.

I am looking forward to hearing your views now as young German Europeans. Later this evening I will be also be meeting with a group of Irish Europeans living in Frankfurt. I am confident already now that many of your concerns and your hopes will be very similar.

Thank you.