



Opening Statement of the Irish Research Council

Joint Committee on Education and Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Pre-Legislative Scrutiny Meeting on the Research and Innovation Bill, 2023

16 May 2023

Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

I am delighted to be here on behalf of the Irish Research Council and to have the opportunity to discuss the Research and Innovation Bill with the Committee.

The Irish Research Council (IRC) was established in 2012 under the aegis of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) following the merger of the former Councils of the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS, est. 1998), and Science, Engineering and Technology (IRCSET, est. 2001). The IRC is mandated to fund excellent curiosity-driven research within and between all disciplines and at all career stages. The funding programmes of the Irish Research Council, including the flagship Government of Ireland Postgraduate and Postdoctoral schemes and the landmark fundamental research Laureate scheme have made a significant contribution to building and developing the talent pipeline, enhancing Ireland's competitiveness, and delivering impact for the citizens of the State.

We welcome the decision by Government to create a new competitive research funding agency and the amalgamation of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland. Our shared challenge, across the system, is to ensure that the new agency can best deliver the intended additional impact.

I want to address three principal themes in the time available: the importance of basic, fundamental research; the composition of the board of the new agency; and the importance of a commitment to the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

Curiosity-driven, fundamental research is the foundation for all research and innovation activity in Ireland. It lies at the heart of the decision to enter the field of research, to tackle difficult questions, and to produce results. Our shared commitment to it delivers a significant return for the State in terms of its impact on the quality of the higher education system. We understand the world and one another better as a result, and society benefits through the development of products and interventions that improve lives; along with our economic prospects by creating a knowledge base driving foreign direct investment in Ireland. It is therefore vital that the new agency meaningfully supports fundamental bottom-up research across all disciplines and career stages.

To illustrate the point, consider the response needed to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. The rapid development of mRNA vaccine treatment relied on a whole history of curiosity-driven research. An all-of-society crisis demanded an all-of-society response, calling on the work and expertise of a host of researchers, both in the sciences and the humanities and social sciences, including education, sociology, psychology, politics and philosophy as we contended with a major challenge to social values. Exchequer investment in fundamental, frontier research made this possible, creating the knowledge base as well as the talent pool to draw on.

To take a different example, we are now seeing the transformative effects of quantum computing, but only after years, even decades of backing basic research emerging from the insights of Einstein, Heisenberg, Feynman and others.

The urgency of the new agency's support for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research in areas of evolving national and global strategic priority is well-understood, such as climate change and digitalisation, as identified in *Impact 2030*. However, we must avoid overdirecting the system toward particular research areas, to the detriment of our agility and capacity to respond to new and evolving priorities as they arise. The new agency must therefore be empowered through the legislation to support bottom-up fundamental research within and across all disciplines and career stages. Eighteen months ago we did not know how much we would rely on our knowledge of Eastern Europe to confront the crisis in Ukraine, by understanding the history, politics, language and religious claims underpinning Russian aggression, while facing renewed social challenges of migration as part of our response.

My second point relates to the board of the new agency. The IRC's governance structures have allowed it to support research within and across all disciplines. The Board consists of active researchers representative of a wide spectrum of disciplines. They bring their expertise in higher education and research in Ireland as well as strong international connections and experience. This proven model should be replicated in the governance structures of the new agency.

The Bill should set out the competencies of governing board members and these competencies must reflect the full remit of the new agency. The governing board should be representative of active researchers from across the range of research and across all disciplines, alongside research users including enterprise. Members must have a developed understanding of the higher education and research system in Ireland, and there should be provision for international representation.

Maintaining the connection between research and teaching and learning is critical, and the Bill must protect and promote this key relationship. The quality of our higher education system relies on research-led and research-informed approaches to teaching and learning, and our research system is invigorated by new ideas and new perspectives via the intersection of research and teaching and learning. The HEA's role in ensuring the overall health of the higher education system, including research, as set out in the HEA Act, 2022,

means that the HEA should nominate at least one member for appointment to the governing board of the new agency.

My third point relates to the commitment to the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS). In addition to the IRC's mandate to support excellent research across all disciplines, we have a particular responsibility regarding policy and funding of AHSS. This responsibility recognises the distinct needs of different types of research and different research disciplines and their importance. The IRC has successfully supported research across *all* disciplines including AHSS by ensuring that the design of our research funding calls are inclusive of all disciplines and afford equal prioritisation to research across all disciplines, overseen by a representative Board with active researchers from across all disciplines. We caution against the intention to establish a separate Council for AHSS in the new agency, which may unintentionally isolate such research and suggest that the main business of the new agency lies elsewhere. A legislative commitment to ensuring a balance in the support for AHSS and STEM research, and funding streams appropriate to each, would therefore strongly signal appropriate recognition of the distinctness of the disciplines and their contribution. Again, the Covid-19 crisis reminded of us why we need this robust and resilient community of researchers.

In closing, I want to make two further points. The inclusive nature of IRC schemes, across all career stages, and the structure of support has strongly contributed to the success of our funded researchers in securing prestigious European research grants, including European Research Council awards. Since January 2022, 67% of Ireland-based ERC awardees are current or past IRC award holders and/or mentors/supervisors of IRC funded researchers. Grants provided by the IRC are made in the name of the Principal Investigator (PI). This is critical as it enables the awardees to demonstrate experience in managing research grants and to evidence their leadership track record in developing early career researchers, which are core criteria in the evaluation of research grant proposals. The funding programmes offered by the IRC therefore play a central role in supporting the delivery of national objectives and building the research talent pipeline to secure prestigious European research grant funding. The Bill should include explicit provision for funding to individual principal investigators from early career through to leading researcher stage in order to ensure this pipeline is sustained and enhanced.

Finally, the work programme of the Irish Research Council is administered by a small team of HEA staff assigned to duties in the Irish Research Council. This team has considerable expertise in the management and administration of multidisciplinary research funding schemes which is of significant value to the new agency. It is imperative that the contribution of this team is appropriately recognised in equivalent terms and conditions for staff of the new agency to foster a positive working culture.

The new agency will be central to enhancing Ireland's reputation in terms of research excellence and cutting-edge knowledge and innovation. It is therefore vital that engagement on this Bill takes place with active researchers at all career stages and across the full spectrum of research. The disciplinary expertise and knowledge of our researchers of national and international research systems will ensure that the new agency is best

positioned to deliver our national ambitions and best serve the needs of our researchers and the State.

Thank you again to the Chair and Committee for the invitation and I am happy to expand on any of these points and to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Ends.