

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

## Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the Research and Innovation Bill 2023

Opening Statement 11 May 2023

Prof. Philip Nolan, Director General, Science Foundation Ireland

Chairperson, members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to attend here today. I am really pleased to have the opportunity to support the Committee in its pre-legislative scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Research and Innovation Bill 2023.

I have been Director General of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) for just 15 months, and am proud to represent it as a high-performing state agency with an outstanding staff. Over its 20 year history, in collaboration with the higher education system, enterprise, and other State agencies and Government departments, SFI has helped transform our national system of research and innovation, so that as a country we are have an excellent research base. We are positioned on the European Innovation Scorecard as a strong innovator, and on track, with added investment, to being an innovation leader. Prior to my appointment as Director General, I worked for almost thirty years researching, teaching and leading within the University system, and have seen at close hand the positive effects of the work of Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council (IRC) fostering talent, building capacity, generating knowledge and accelerating innovation.

SFI welcomes the Government decision to create a new research and innovation funding agency through the amalgamation of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Irish Research Council (IRC). The decision was taken in the context of the new national strategy for research and innovation, *Impact 2030*, which sets out an appropriately ambitious plan, emphasising the broad environmental, societal and economic impacts and benefits of research and innovation. *Impact 2030* recognises

the importance of investing in talent and fundamental research across all discipline areas as the basis upon which applied research and innovation can flourish to create a thriving ecosystem. Let me be clear at the outset that we at SFI share the vision that the new funding agency must support fundamental research in all discipline areas, and support research talent appropriately through all stages of an academic career. We also share the ambition to build on this through sponsorship of interdisciplinary research, and strong collaborations with enterprise, the public service, civil society and communities. These are essential if we are to reap the benefits for our citizens of research investment.

Given the track record and success of SFI to date, a fundamental concern in the establishment of the new agency is to ensure we continue to invest, and increase investment, in fundamental research and talented individuals across a wide range of disciplines, and at the same time invest at scale, in partnership with enterprise, the public service and civil society, to translate that research into tangible economic, social and environmental benefits.

We advise the Committee, in scrutinising the General Scheme of the Bill, that if the ambitious objectives of Government are to be met:

1. The establishment of the new agency must be accompanied by a step change in investment in research and innovation, towards strategic target of 2.5% of the domestic economy.
2. The Board must be independent, and have the diversity of perspectives and skills to provide for good governance, to understand how the research and innovation system works, to set a strategy for the agency in support of government policy, and to hold the Executive accountable. At the same time, it must maintain critical distance, be free of real or perceived conflicts of interest, be able to reflect and consider the broad interests of all stakeholders and society, and bring a strong international perspective.
3. The legislation should set out appropriate powers for the Minister in regard to strategy and policy, but must ensure that individual funding decisions, and

the making and management of awards and grants, remain a matter for the Agency and its Board.

4. The legislation should make it clear that the “*development and competitiveness of industry, enterprise and employment in the State*”<sup>1</sup> remains a core function of the new agency.
5. The international brand of SFI, which sits alongside that of IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland in attracting inward investment, must be preserved in some way through the transition.

The establishment of a new research agency is a very significant opportunity for Ireland. It is an opportunity to build on our current strengths and achievements to build a research and innovation system that is globally competitive, to build strong partnerships with enterprise, to leverage the knowledge and talent that emerges from that system for our collective economic and social benefit, and to play our part as a nation in addressing the societal and environmental challenges we face. We look forward to empowering legislation and policy which seizes that opportunity.

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<sup>1</sup> Section 7(1) of the Industrial Development (Science Foundation Ireland) Act 2003 as amended by Section 4 of the Industrial Development (Science Foundation Ireland) (Amendment) Act 2013