

HEA Opening Statement

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

Meeting of the Committee to discuss the Research and Innovation Bill 2023.

16th May 2023

Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

I am happy to attend here today and hope I might be able to assist this Committee in its discussion on the Research and Innovation Bill, 2023.

As the State agency with a statutory responsibility, at central government level, for the effective governance and regulation of higher education institutions, the HEA promotes the strategic development of the Irish higher education and research system, with the objective of creating a coherent system of diverse institutions with distinct missions, which is responsive to the social, cultural and economic development of Ireland and its people and supports the achievement of national objectives. The HEA welcomes the new Research Bill and looks forward to working with the new agency once established.

A key aspect of this work will be future planning for the sector. As specified in the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, one of the functions of the HEA is to “plan for research in the higher education system and to make recommendations to the Minister on the overall higher education research system”.

This new Bill, alongside other recent legislative and policy changes, along with the ongoing progress of the higher education and research system may provide us with a once in a generation opportunity for higher education and research and a flexible and balanced research funding system capable of meeting national needs now and long into the future.

The emergence of new Technological Universities under the Technological Universities Act 2018, the creation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the establishment of the HEA under the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, the publication of Impact 2030: Ireland’s Research and Innovation Strategy, and the development of the Research and Innovation Bill 2023, all provide the legislative instruments fundamental to a system that can meet challenges being experienced in higher education and research. These instruments are reinforced by the HEA’s System Performance Framework, Annual Governance Statements submitted to the HEA by HEIs, and the HEA’s Principles for Good Practice for Research in Irish Higher Education Institutions. Actions being undertaken in the European Research Area also provide guidance on how best to formulate our system and it is important that Ireland continues to contribute but also expands its international role and positioning.

A primary positive outcome of planning and monitoring for balance in our higher education and research system will be a reinforcement of the continuum of learning between education and research. A balanced system is one where research informs the education delivered to and experienced by our learners. Our graduates should have been exposed to the very best

of national and international practice and principles in research, to new cutting-edge knowledge, technology and emerging techniques and their application. Such an outcome can only be achieved through coherent future planning, monitoring and oversight such as provided by the HEA through its relationship with institutions.

Establishing the new agency also presents an opportunity to reinforce the quality of the research environment and culture in higher education. This will also be achieved through the legislative architecture already established under the Higher Education Act, 2022. A consistently excellent research environment and culture supported by the appropriate infrastructure is necessary to the success of the new agency and we look forward to collaborating with the new agency in that regard. Such coherence and clarity of shared mission will ultimately, benefit Ireland's reputation in higher education, research and innovation on a global scale and will produce graduates who perpetuate the impact of investment long after they have qualified.

The scaffolding necessary for education and research to flourish across all disciplines and across interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches includes the provision of training and research support that meets standards established by international best practice. The appropriate resourcing of infrastructure and promotion of the best research culture, by the HEA, will enable an environment where the upholding of research integrity and best standards is a fundamental principle of how the system operates. This will help to enhance the capacity of the new agency to perform, and for Ireland to excel in the development of and application of new knowledge.

The HEA as part of its responsibilities in the HEA Act 2022, and under actions attributed to us in Impact 2030, is overseeing a number of initiatives aimed to make Ireland a leader in research and innovation on the international stage. These include initiatives aimed at improving areas such as open research, research integrity and the quality of the doctoral education environment. The nine principles set out in the HEA's Principles for Good Practice for Research in Irish Higher Education Institutions provide coordinates for institutions on a quality research environment and the delivery of research informed learning across a spectrum of disciplines. HEIs are required to adhere to these Principles as part of the HEA's Annual Governance Statements and to use them to guide strategic planning through the System Performance Framework. Such system wide oversight by the HEA is intended to facilitate sectoral enhancement. Ultimately, any new agency cannot operate successfully in isolation, and we look forward to collaborating to ensure best possible outcomes for higher education, research, innovation, our economy and society.

This new competitive funding agency will be key to promoting a balanced higher education and research system if it is enabled to delivering adequate competitive funding, unrestricted by prioritisation across both fundamental bottom-up research and applied research. This will be beneficial in balancing breakthroughs in knowledge while also finding solutions for existing challenges. A balanced higher education and research system is of great importance to Ireland in maintaining its competitiveness and maintain an agile and responsive research environment.

The creation of the new competitive funding agency is also particularly welcomed by the HEA as it will benefit the higher education and research system by providing funding opportunities to researchers across all disciplines and all stages of research careers. These opportunities will help to continue to improve the performance and reputation of the Irish education and research system. In providing these opportunities though, care needs to be taken in how funding is delivered, balancing the amount of funding provided for fundamental research and strategic research, and to individual-led research and research groups. Therefore, it is important that the Bill make specific reference to providing funding to individual researchers due to the importance that the experience in leading research projects has in developing researchers that have a good track record and are adequately skilled to be successful in larger funding schemes such as Horizon Europe and ERC grants. Consistent use of language when referencing fundamental research, sometimes call basic or blue skies research is also required of the Bill.

When looking at the proposed structure of the Board for the new agency, and given the HEA's larger system oversight role, it would be useful to consider a nomination from the HEA towards the process for Board membership. It would also be our view that the formation of the new Board should be constituted by a balance of competencies including the proposed industry perspective, but it would also benefit from the inclusion of active researchers as they will bring a good understanding of what supports the system needs, of international developments relating to research and would have beneficial specialised knowledge.

As this new competitive research agency will be an amalgamation of two existing agencies (IRC & SFI) it is important to have a positive culture from the outset including a parity of esteem that can foster a shared sense of mission and purpose amongst staff in the new agency.

As I hope I have outlined here today, ongoing engagement between the HEA and the new agency will be key to planning for an ever more successful research system that continues to meet national needs, and which provides a rich pipeline of researchers for the future. The HEA looks forward to such engagement with the proposed new agency.

Thank you again for the opportunity to join this conversation today, I am happy to answer whatever questions the Committee may have.

Ends.