

# Strengthening the Connections Between Research and Policy in Ireland

Designing the infrastructure for an important national resource



**Mary Doyle**  
Visiting Research  
Fellow in Public  
Policy, Long Room  
Hub, Trinity College  
Dublin

Covid-19 has changed our world. Never before in recent times has Ireland so needed to draw on its resources of knowledge to analyse, to better understand, and to make good decisions in uncertain times. We have a valuable and under-utilised resource in the research capacity of our higher education system to contribute to policymaking and evaluation. This article makes suggestions for a systematic and long-term focus on helping the research and policy communities to work together more effectively to address pressing questions.

*There are a number of societal challenges, often involving complex human-environment systems, that are not fully understood and for which solutions are urgently required. ... The impacts of global warming, biodiversity loss, natural disasters, economic migration and health pandemics are manifest at multiples scales and require both technological and social innovations. In order to achieve this, different scientific disciplines, including natural and social sciences and humanities (SSH) need to work together and to fully engage other public and private sector actors, including policymakers. Solutions to complex societal challenges, such as those embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), cannot be generated based solely on disciplinary research but require a paradigm shift in research practice. (OECD Global Science Forum, 'Addressing Societal Challenges Using Transdisciplinary Research', OECD Policy Paper no. 88, June 2020)*

*Research into the natural sciences, technologies, medicine, the social sciences, the arts and humanities produces knowledge that enhances our culture and civilisation and contributes to the public good, for example through driving a sustainable economy, improving health and the quality of life, and protecting the environment. As such, research should be at the heart of Government with an effective dialogue and understanding between researchers, politicians and the public, so that policies and strategies are in place to bring about research that benefits society. (Sir Paul Nurse, Review of the UK Research Councils, November 2015)*

## Introduction

Covid-19 has brought about profound changes in how we live. Quite apart from the restrictions it has imposed, it has challenged us to think about how we organise and deploy scarce national resources, one of which is the focus on effective policymaking, specifically how to strengthen the connections between research and policy to support better decision-making. How decisions get made has been thrown into sharp relief, and it is clear that the answers lie not just in the health, medical, and scientific spaces but also in important interactions between all research disciplines, at political level, and across civil society.

These are complex issues playing out in a complex landscape. Building on work I am undertaking in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), I would like to make some suggestions and proposals for a systematic, long-term focus on helping the research and policy communities in Ireland to work together more effectively to address pressing societal questions.

## Policymakers and academics: Can they be friends?

In *Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2019–2020*, Charles Larkin of the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Bath posed a very interesting question: How can policymakers and academics be friends? He showed how the relationship can be deepened for the benefit of both parties and concluded that they not only can be friends but already are – though they do not know it yet. The next step, he suggested, is to deepen the relationship and find a common language which will allow both to flourish.

**“ Policymakers and academics not only can be friends but already are – though they do not know it yet.**

In a recent paper, ‘From lost in translation to gained in translation: How the research community and the public policy community need to find new ways of talking to each other’, I explored this important topic from the policymaker’s perspective. As a retired senior civil servant, I was invited in 2019 to take up a Visiting Research Fellowship in Public Policy at the Long Room Hub – the Arts and Humanities Institute in TCD: one of two such appointments, and, I understand, a first in Irish higher education.

Having spent time now in academia and noted similarities and contrasts with the policymaking world, it is clear to me that better dialogue between them is not only desirable but essential for our future well-being and development. There has been little focus in Ireland on the need to pay attention to this interface and to build a strong architecture to support it. This is particularly true of the arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS), which have struggled to input systematically to policy agendas. I wondered why, and what could be done.

## How we got here: some historical perspectives

Investment in higher education research in Ireland began in earnest in the late 1990s with the Programme for Research in Third-Level Education (PRTL). Many important initiatives followed, including the establishment of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), the Irish Research Council (IRC), and Knowledge Transfer Ireland. All of the key national strategies that have

guided developments in this area in recent decades – the Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2006–2013, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, the Higher Education System Performance Framework, Innovation 2020 – reference the policy connection. But it is not articulated as a key component in the same way as, say, building research capacity with the enterprise sector, though it is arguably of similar importance.

This may be changing, however. The midterm Review of Innovation 2020 noted that interdisciplinary research could be encouraged further to deliver economic or societal impact and that coordination between research and innovation performers and policymakers could be explored further.

So although an impressive higher education system has been built in Ireland over the past thirty years, it has tended to be discipline- and institution-oriented and has been less focused on developing the sort of connective tissue in the system that would support structural dialogue within and between the research and policy communities. This is true of both the scientific advisory community and the AHSS disciplines. On the practical side, there are few, if any, organised intermediate structures where expertise (particularly in the arts and humanities) has any systematic interaction with other disciplines in developing policy advice. In the third-level sector, there are very few places where scholars develop systematic interactions with policy as an integral part of their personal and professional development, or where subject-specific research is combined with knowledge-intensive interdisciplinary cooperation.

“...the time has come to unite education and research into a singular mission to create the most talented workforce in the world.”  
Prof Patrick Prendergast

In a paper at the Institute of European Affairs this year entitled ‘Covid-19 and the future of higher education’, Patrick Prendergast, Provost of Trinity College, set out his analysis of two ‘waves of activity’ which advanced the Irish higher education system. He concluded that the first wave was transformative for education in Ireland, the second for research, and that the time has come for the ‘third wave’: to unite the two into a singular mission to create the most talented workforce in the world. He welcomed the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science as a unifying mechanism to support and develop this agenda.

### What’s happening worldwide: key trends

The international literature on this issue shows important conclusions beginning to emerge:

- Many countries clearly consider research to be an important national and international resource for society and have invested in building up that infrastructure and developing connections to policymaking. In this context, it is important to consider how science is defined. In the EU a broad definition has been adopted covering a range of disciplines which are further defined as human scientists, social scientists, life, physical, health, computer, etc. This approach is not universally adopted; often a narrower, more focused definition is applied, with significant implications for national policy interaction. Worldwide, there are more examples of focused science policy institutions whose

mandate includes a clearly articulated responsibility to engage with the policymaking community.<sup>1</sup>

- There is growing global interest in developing and supporting this architecture with the establishment of dedicated structures and systems to deepen relationships. There are interesting examples across the globe of the development of a strong support infrastructure. The Policy Impact Unit at University College London provides professional policy engagement expertise and support to help feed research-based evidence into UK policymaking. The Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy is pioneering new ways of bringing academia and government together. The work of SAPEA (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies) has given particular emphasis to the connection between science and policymaking at European level.
- Finally, an important agenda is emerging in relation to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, which requires particular focus, attention, and investment. A recent paper from the OECD makes an important contribution to this debate.<sup>2</sup>

All of these are diverse aspects of a complex landscape. In attempting to tie the threads together, let me now consider how the infrastructure to support better relationships between the research and policymaking communities might be developed and strengthened in Ireland.

### Next steps: Developing the architecture for dialogue in Ireland

To make progress on this agenda, I suggest that action needs to be initiated, led, and managed in three distinct but overlapping spaces:

- in the research community itself, particularly in higher education institutions (HEIs)
- in our institutions of democracy, specifically in government and parliamentary machinery
- in the combined efforts of research funders.

**“ Ireland has a valuable and under-utilised resource in our Higher Education Institutions.**

Then all three have to design an architecture that enables them to engage positively with each other. Drawing on international experience, there are helpful models which can point to useful directions of action and experimentation.

#### *Research community and HEIs*

There are important actions to be taken at HEI level to support these relationships, which have implications for the nature of professional formation of academics. A clear articulation of the importance of the policy connect is an essential starting point, and creating a specific space in the framework for doctoral education would be extremely helpful.

Combining this with ongoing support through the induction, coaching, and mentoring supports offered to academics would deepen and develop these skills. The focused approach taken by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council in its Engaging with Government training course is an interesting model. It aims to:

- encourage academics to see opportunities where their research could make a valuable contribution in a public policy context
- challenge researchers to think more deeply about the policy process and the role of research in it
- increase the influencing and communication skills needed to achieve this.

Finally, the design of incentives and rewards in the system needs to be considered as part of an overall approach.

There is a need for a more integrated approach system-wide. This is where the Irish Universities Association could play a role. More connective tissue is required here. Again, there are interesting models to look at. We can see the establishment of the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) in the UK to harness the collective research power and expertise of member universities and to make it easier for policymakers to draw on it to improve policy. The Alliance for Useful Evidence, established at UCL and hosted by Nesta, champions the smarter use of evidence in social policy and practice. At individual university level, Policy@Manchester and the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Bath are good examples of architecture to enable effective research collaborations that contribute to tackling public policy challenges in the UK and beyond.

#### *Government and the Oireachtas*

The second pillar focuses on the institutions of democracy, in this context the Oireachtas and government departments. Many Irish government departments have published data and research strategies, so it would be relatively easy to augment these along the lines of the UK model, where departments publish short Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) that tell the research community, in an accessible way, the pressing policy questions that are live in the system.

**“ The Alliance for Useful Evidence, established at UCL and hosted by Nesta, champions the smarter use of evidence in social policy and practice.**

Allied to this, there needs to be focused investment in developing policy capacity in the system, particularly building on the work of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Services (IGEES) but broadened to include other disciplines.

#### *Funders*

Finally, there is the role of funders, principally the funding councils but also philanthropic organisations active in research. How programmes and calls are designed and evaluated fundamentally influences the shape and nature of the national research effort. Moving away from a purely discipline-led approach, as is being advocated in much of the literature in order to include a wider variety of knowledge and perspectives, will require significant thought and cooperation.

Strong discipline competence is essential for strong interdisciplinarity, so both require support mechanisms. There is work to be done to think about the alignment of programmes and calls, how they are designed, who

inputs, and from where. How they are evaluated, and who evaluates, is also important.

Variou other new approaches are clearly necessary to support the change. The IRC has a government ‘shadowing’ scheme where one of our early career researchers shadows a TD or minister.<sup>3</sup> It has been working well and raises awareness at both ends. The SFI Public Service Fellowship is a pilot initiative which offers researchers a unique opportunity to be temporarily seconded to government departments, agencies, and the Library & Research Service of the Oireachtas, to work on specific projects where they can add value, with mutually beneficial outcomes. This is an important pathfinder and could surely be replicated in the system in both directions.

In another interesting initiative, the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ERC) and the Government Office for Science (GO) have jointly funded two fellowships designed ‘to enable genuine co-creation (of projects, analysis and programmes of work) between researchers and those making and informing policy’ based on using ARIs.

## Conclusion

This is a timely debate. Never more in recent times have we so needed to draw on our resources of knowledge to analyse, to better understand, and to make good decisions in uncertain circumstances. Supporting Ireland to better achieve its potential and create a better and more sustainable society and economy is a matter of great urgency. Building relationships and mutual trust is at the heart of this effort.

Ireland has a valuable and under-utilised resource in our HEIs. The new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science provides an important opportunity to develop a more joined-up approach, bringing together a whole-system view of policy, structures, and funding. Given the challenges we face, nationally and globally, it couldn’t have come at a more important moment.

---

## ENDNOTES

1. The Institute for Science, Society and Policy is a cross-faculty institute at the University of Ottawa exploring the links between those domains. The Rathenau Institute in the Netherlands supports the formation of public and political opinion of socially relevant aspects of science and technology. There are far fewer examples of dedicated structures in AHSS; one is SKAPE, the Centre for Science, Knowledge and Policy at Edinburgh University.
2. OECD (2020) ‘Addressing societal challenges using transdisciplinary research’. Science, Technology and Industry Policy Paper no. 88, June 2020.
3. <http://research.ie/2018/07/11/researchers-to-shadow-oireachtas-members-under-new-irish-research-council-initiative/>.