

This article identifies the importance of strengthening the connections between research and policy in an Irish context, and reviews the development of this national conversation during 2021. It considers a range of measures for making progress and highlights the recommendations of the Research for Public Policy roadmap recently published by the Irish Research Council and the Royal Irish Academy as identifying important pathways for future action.

*Goal 2: A Connected Research System: Support a highly collaborative research system – closely connected with enterprise, public policy and practice, community and voluntary, innovation districts, national, regional and local interests; driving knowledge-creation, innovation and human capital; and contributing significantly in addressing major societal challenges. (DFHERIS, Statement of Strategy 2021–2030, p. 10)*

## Introduction

In my article for *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020*, entitled 'Strengthening the connections between research and policy in Ireland: Designing the infrastructure for an importance national resource', I made the case for strengthening the architecture in place to better align the national research ecosystem in support of public policy. To make progress on this agenda, I suggested that action needs to be initiated, led, and managed in three distinct but overlapping spaces:

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

Importantly, all three must then collectively design an architecture that enables them to engage positively with each other. I described the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), with its commitment to develop a national strategy for research, innovation, science, and technology and its national research engagement campaign, as offering an exciting opportunity to identify the future research needs, policy questions, structures, and supports

# Research for Public Policy: A Framework for Action in Ireland

Developing the Irish research ecosystem as an important national resource to address major societal challenges



**Mary Doyle**

Visiting Fellow in Public Policy at the Long Room Hub, Trinity College Dublin

to strengthen the policy–research interface in support of Ireland’s national ambitions.

In this article, I want to review the developments of the past year to support this dialogue and to raise some issues and questions to guide consideration of the next steps.

### How research can enhance policymaking in the changing global context

I would like to begin by briefly recalling the reasons this is an important national agenda for Ireland.

Ireland faces new and significant policy challenges and choices as we move into a post-Brexit, post-pandemic environment and as we look to build our influence at EU and international levels. These will require knowledge, expertise, and leadership from across multiple government departments and fields of knowledge. Resolving them will often require unprecedented levels of public awareness and support for what can be unpalatable but necessary policy directions in the longer term.

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Ireland’s higher education and research system is an extremely valuable resource for a small country and has significant untapped potential to contribute in a positive and dynamic way. To make the right decisions on complex issues, Irish policymakers need access to the best and most up-to-date information, much of which will have to come from many different fields of research and knowledge.

### Developments in 2020–21

This agenda has been recognised as important, and progress has been made in a number of areas during 2021. Important contributions have been made to the debate by a number of stakeholders, including the following:

- DFHERIS Statement of Strategy 2021–2023, which has identified specific goals in this area<sup>1</sup>
- The 2021 Irish Research Council (IRC)/Royal Irish Academy (RIA) series ‘Research for Public Policy: Opportunities for Ireland’ was addressed on this topic by a number of high-profile research and education leaders
- The subsequent publication on 8 September 2021 of ‘Research for Public Policy: An Outline Roadmap’
- Publication of Campus Engage policy briefing for HEIs: ‘Society and Higher Education Addressing Societal Challenges Together’
- Publication of the final SHAPE-ID toolkit in June 2021, which supports a systematic approach to multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary research and was funded under Horizon 2020.
- The ‘Review of Ireland’s higher education research system’ by the Higher Education Research Group, published in September 2021.

I will now look in particular at the Research for Public Policy roadmap published by the IRC and RIA, which sets out an important framework for future action in this complex area.

### Research for Public Policy roadmap

On 8 September 2021, the IRC and RIA published a detailed Research for Public Policy roadmap, which was designed to identify and bring together the key themes that emerged from recent joint work on 'Research for Public Policy: Opportunities for Ireland'.

The roadmap notes that although multiple sources of valuable policy advice exist in Ireland, the pathway for contributing to policy formation remains narrow compared with some other European countries. The challenge therefore is to create an adept and responsive system that enhances the public good by addressing several needs that have been identified in the course of the webinar series.

The roadmap sets out an ambitious programme of work across a range of stakeholders to move this agenda forward. It identifies three key pathways for the future:

Pathway 1: Building bridges, creating trust, offering opportunities

Pathway 2: Joining up and scaling up what already exists

Pathway 3: Knowledge management and brokerage.

The roadmap is designed to offer an ambitious route to enhancing the activities, interactions, and connections needed to support informed policy discussion for the public good; to show innovative leadership in designing responses to societal challenges by facilitating structured conversations between government and researchers; and to situate Ireland as an international leader and develop its influence as a provider of evidence-informed policy insights on shared global challenges.

### What are the immediate next steps?

I suggest that the following priority actions would support the building of the necessary architecture in a practical and immediate way:

- Create mechanisms, including the role of chief science advisor, which are credible, authoritative, based on expertise, and tap into the best that is available to the country, whether located in higher education, public research organisations, the private sector, or the third sector.
- Capacity-building for policymakers for this work could be supported through the Public Sector Reform framework and Civil Service Renewal programme. Capacity-building for the academic community could be supported through the Higher Education Authority (HEA), research funders, higher education institutions, and the RIA.
- The existing research funders should play a central role in this mechanism and could, for example, come together to provide a joint

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secretariat in support of its work, with additional involvement from stakeholders such as the RIA, Irish Universities Association (IUA), and Technological Higher Education Association (THEA).

Underpinning all this work is the important role of DFHERIS in providing the foundations and the ‘glue’ to lead and support activity across the landscape.

### The ultimate goal

In the future, the government needs to be able to access a broader range of experts in such a way that these experts are working together in the public interest. At the end of this journey, a great outcome would be if the Irish research ecosystem in place would support the following objectives:

- identify sources of research for public policy generated by Irish HEIs and other contributors that may currently be overlooked or underused
- produce engaged research for policy transformation on cross-cutting societal challenges
- provide the training and rewards to encourage researchers in HEIs to engage in research for public policy
- connect researchers and policymakers to embed engaged research in strategic policy planning and formulation
- ensure a spectrum of advice across the natural and life sciences, technology, arts, humanities, and social sciences disciplines, recognising the need for an integrated approach to address societal challenges
- create a vibrant space, supported by academics and government departments, for engaging with each other and with the public in research design and creation.

It is clear that Irish researchers and policymakers will benefit greatly from strengthening these arrangements for creating, analysing, and synthesising knowledge.

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## ENDNOTES

1. For example, Goal 4: Contribute expertise on National Priorities, including Climate Action: 'Lead our sectoral contribution to Ireland's Climate Action Plan and other national challenges, including by harnessing Ireland's research and scientific expertise to engage and inform the public and provide evidence-based input to policy development and evaluation.'

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**Aileen Kennedy has completed the Cullen Scholarship Programme at the Marine Institute.**

**Title of Research:** Fisheries Data Integration and Analytics

**Higher Education Institution:** National University of Ireland, Galway

**The Cullen Scholarship programme** at the Marine Institute builds national marine research capacity and capability and equips graduates with the skills and expertise in raising awareness about our ocean, as well as Ireland's rich marine biodiversity and ecosystems.