



Submission on General Scheme of the Research and Innovation Bill, 2023

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Introduction

On the 6th of April 2023 the Irish government published the scheme for its proposal ‘Research and Innovation Bill 2023’ to create a single agency ‘Research and Innovation Ireland’. This comes after other major overhauls in the sector, namely the passing of the HEA Act 2022. We have identified several areas of improvement to this scheme, which will be described under the following headings, alongside recommended amendments to the wording. The goal of establishing such a separate and unified agency, merging Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Irish Research Council (IRC) into one comes from the *Impact 2030 Ireland’s New Research and Innovation Strategy*.

Context

The scheme comes at a time of severe government underfunding of academia, and this has to be taken into consideration when discussing it. In a way, it even seems nonsensical to pick apart this scheme to the extent that it will be done in this paper when this government has not provided the basic financial environment in which Irish research can excel. The neoliberal ideology that the state has employed means that the third-level sector in Ireland has been struggling since decades. In the Budget 2023, €40m, representing just 13% of the €307m core funding gap¹, means that the sector continues to be underfunded. As a result, the sector has taken on a distinctly corporate approach to teaching, research and academia overall. This is problematic as the activities of third-level institutions risk being subservient to the needs of the market. For example, in 2015, more than a 1,000 academics signed an open letter to denounce the government's funding focus on marketable research². The stated aims of the government to become leaders in Research and Development are furthermore in opposition to the fact that they invest only 1.23% of the GDP into this area as compared to the EU average of 2.32%³.

There is a risk with this scheme that it will fit into the neoliberal direction of the government, just as the previous third-level legislation, the HEA Act 2022 which sought to increase the number of external members on governing bodies - a classic public sector reform which destroys internal democracy in favor of external members who tend to be corporate-leaning⁴. In this case the issue would be a lack of focus on blue skies research and research for research's sake, instead focusing on entrepreneurial and marketable research.

Furthermore, research is being discussed at a time when 50% of the Irish academic workforce is on casualized contracts⁵, and postgraduate researchers are unionizing in an effort to gain workers' rights and living stipends⁶. At the moment, the living and working conditions of researchers are dire and so this scheme also needs to be investigated for its lack of mention of this. In this sense, we stress in the strongest possible terms that political representatives need to support the demands of the Postgraduate Workers' Organisation (PWO) and their Fair Researcher Agreement⁷, and the demands of the Irish Precarity Network (IPN)⁸ and to closely follow the work of the casualization working group in the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT).

Impact 2030 proposes a budget of around €270 million for the new agency (p.15), however questions around the funding of the sector remains. All in all, there is a risk that the new agency could be hamstrung once it is created by these factors and specifically the factors of

¹<https://www.iaa.ie/press-releases/funding-gap-measures-in-budget-2023-disappointing-other-measures-for-higher-education-welcomed/>

²<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/science/ireland-lagging-behind-in-funding-blue-skies-scientific-research-1.4118312>

³<https://twitter.com/TLRHub/status/1651157726272036864/photo/1>

⁴https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363520934_HEA_Bill_2022_Implications_and_Consequences

⁵https://irishprecaritynetwork.com/?page_id=12

⁶https://twitter.com/pwo_ireland?lang=en

⁷https://twitter.com/PWO_President/status/1600185290789818369

⁸<https://irishprecaritynetwork.com/>

underfunding of the sector, seeing that no clarity or long-term budgetary commitments are being made by the government that could solve the funding issues.

Academic Representation

There is an overall concern with the scheme that it lacks academic representation in the formation, management and oversight of the new agency. In the first instance, Head 15 which describes the membership of the Board should be more prescriptive in its inclusion of researchers. At the moment, it does not include a requirement for researchers to sit on the Board. As such, we propose the following three amendments, to be tabled one after the other from best to worst.

Head 15 (1) (b)

11 ordinary members, *a majority of whom shall be active researchers from a wide range of disciplines, and shall include casualized researchers and PhD researchers.*

Head 15 (1) (b)

11 ordinary members, *a majority of whom shall be active researchers from a wide range of disciplines, and shall include at least one casualized researcher and at least one PhD researcher.*

Head 15 (1) (b)

11 ordinary members, *a majority of whom shall be active researchers from a wide range of disciplines.*

This is important as the Board should be representative of the sector and the current scheme allows the Minister to handpick members as they wish, which may lead to a corporate domination of the Board. These amendments would better allow researchers to hold the agency to account, and furthermore, ensure that funding decisions are taken in a Board that acknowledges and respects all disciplines and also that the voices of casualized and PhD researchers are heard in this national agency. Head 11 delegates the power to the Minister to give directions to the agency, so corporate influence is already present - this needs to be counterbalanced as much as possible.

It would be furthermore appropriate to call on the Minister to use the National Research and Innovation Advisory Forum as mentioned in *Impact 2030* to oversee the creation of the new agency and gather feedback from the sector for the creation of the new agency. Finally, it might be worth exploring funding mechanisms that tie the proportion of casualized researchers negatively to funding under Head 9 (a) supported by Head 9 (k). The following are two practical amendments to include the plight of casualized researchers in the scheme.

Head 9 (k)

support equality, diversity and inclusion, *including the working conditions of researchers such as casualized academics and PhD researchers via mechanisms like but not limited to reducing funding in institutions where insecure working conditions are widespread*, in research and innovation;

Head 9 (k)

support equality, diversity and inclusion, *including the working conditions of researchers such as casualized academics and PhD researchers*, in research and innovation;

Corporate Ethos and Parity of Esteem

It is very concerning that the scheme is imbued with a corporate ethos. In Part 5, funding conditions are described, under Head 27. One of them, for example, is that “moneys provided are utilized effectively and in accordance with value-for-money principles and guidelines”. Under Head 28, the Minister prepares a corporate plan and consults the Board, Enterprise Ireland and Industrial Development Authority Ireland. This does not give a confident image for the future of blue skies research in Ireland. In the first instance, consultation should be done with third-level institutions and their representative organizations under Head 28 (3).

Head 28 (3)

(e) shall consult with institutions and their representative organizations.

This will do the minimum to ensure a diverse range of voices and stakeholders are heard in the drafting of the corporate plan. Nevertheless, it seems as if the new agency is focused on inputs and outputs in an economic way. It is a neoliberal approach and the reification of this will be corporate influence over what sort of research receives funding. *Impact 2030* proposes a budget of €270 million for the new agency, which is approximately 75% of the total funding available for national competitive research awards, and this is what the agency will be responsible for distributing. Research is research because oftentimes it is not profitable, but attempts to experiment - sometimes it fails, and sometimes it succeeds. Furthermore, blue skies research has often informed scientific research and vice-versa, and this is how progress is made. Funding should be curiosity-driven and not driven by immediate economic gains. A more inclusive wording of Head 28 (3) would read as follows.

Head 28 (3)

(e) shall consult with institutions and their representative organizations, researchers and their representative organizations, citizens and other bodies it considers appropriate.

The amendments under Head 28 for the corporate plan should be repeated under Head 29 for the annual plan.

Head 28 (3) (a)

(a) In preparing the annual plan, Research and Innovation shall consult with institutions and their representative organizations.

Head 28 (3) (a)

(a) In preparing the annual plan, Research and Innovation shall consult with institutions and their representative organizations, researchers and their representative organizations, citizens and other bodies it considers appropriate.

In the scheme, the word “innovation” appears 368 times, “science” 44 times, “industrial development” 17 times, “enterprise” 11 times whereas “arts”, “humanities”, “social sciences” appear only 1 times each. This shows the corporate ethos of the scheme. Furthermore, this exposes that there is a serious risk to research activity in the social sciences if no parity of esteem is ensured and there is a continued strict dogmatism of the corporate ethos. We therefore further propose, to protect blue skies research and to stress the importance of supporting early-track academics like PhD researchers, the following amendments.

Head 8 (a)

to promote and support excellence in research *in all its forms* and innovation, within and across all disciplines *and across all career stages*, extending from *‘bottom-up’*, fundamental research *that includes discovery, blue skies research, and critical and theoretical scholarship*, to applied research activity through competitively awarded research and innovation funding.

Head 8 (e)

to promote parity of esteem and to advance equality of opportunity, diversity and inclusion in research and innovation

Head 9 (k)

to promote parity of esteem and support equality, diversity and inclusion in research and Innovation

We also propose the following amendments to make sure that the cooperation between this agency and other funding bodies does not come at the expense of third-level institutions.

Head 35 (1)

Research and Innovation Ireland shall, in so far as it is consistent with the proper performance of its functions under Head 9, *and only to the extent that these collaborations further support and fund competitive research and innovation*, endeavour to secure administrative co-operation.

In order to tame the corporate ambitions of the state and of this scheme, we propose the following amendment.

Head 8 (f)

to promote, develop and assist the carrying out of basic research in *a range of areas, including* strategic areas of endeavour that concerns the future *societal* development and competitiveness of the State.

Academic freedom may also be impacted through funneling research money into profitable causes, which is a way to pressure researchers into moving away from blue skies research. Based on the HEA Act 2022, section 120, and also cited in the *Impact 2030* document, we propose therefore that the principle of academic freedom be included in the Head 8 as a separate item.

Head 8 (g)

to preserve and promote the principles of academic freedom.

Trade Unions

Alongside the already-mentioned amendments on working conditions, we unreservedly support both the submissions of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI).

Head 8 (g)

To take overall responsibility for ensuring that the terms and conditions of employment, and engagement, for Researchers and others whose employment is supported by funding approved by R&I Ireland, is arrived at following a process of collective bargaining with the appropriate trade unions / ICTU.

Head 15 (1) (c)

One of the members appointed shall be a nomination from the ICTU.

Head 9 (d)

*through competitive funding calls, and notwithstanding the role and responsibility of higher education institutions and having regard also to the role of An tÚdarás in terms of supporting the development of research talent, Research and Innovation Ireland shall contribute to supporting the development of research talent and appropriately facilitating the contribution of researchers to teaching and learning *having due regard to the employment rights and opportunities for lecturing staff;**

Head 9 (o)

promote the attractiveness of research as a valued and viable career having due regard to the security and continuity of employment, the terms and conditions, remuneration and superannuation of researchers;

Open Research and Public Funding

The importance of public funding has been noted before and so has the importance of promoting open research as opposed to paywalled research which is oftentimes inaccessible to students and researchers and those who cannot afford it. Therefore, the following amendments are proposed under Head 8.

Head 8 (g)

to promote open research and public funding and ring-fenced funding for all research aspects of the third-level sector.

Public Reactions and Acknowledgments

We relied on the Irish Humanities public position paper⁹, in addition to the open letter, signed by over 1,400 researchers, penned by former Irish Research Council Chair Jane Ohlymer¹⁰ in the drafting of this document and also worked with the Union of Students Ireland (USI)¹¹ and have had regard to the Teachers' Union Ireland (TUI)¹² and Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)¹³ submissions.

Recommendations

In the first instance, we recommend stakeholder engagement through a public consultation, despite the government's seeming lack of impetus on this. The HEA Act 2022 was problematic on its own and through stakeholder consultation over 3 years was made better. The Research and

⁹ <https://twitter.com/IrishHumanities/status/1649021162117033985/photo/1>

¹⁰

https://www.change.org/p/research-and-innovation-bill-2023-open-letter-to-minister-simon-harris?recruiter=1305558765&recruited_by_id=cce7e470-e26f-11ed-8414-21202bda6bc3&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=petition_dashboard

¹¹

<https://usi.ie/featured/usi-opening-statement-in-joint-oireachtas-committee-on-research-and-innovation-bill-2023/>

¹² <https://www.tui.ie/news/tui-statement-to-oireachtas-on-research-and-innovation-bill-2023-.14727.html>

¹³

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_education_further_and_higher_education_research_innovation_and_science/submissions/2023/2023-05-09_opening-statement-frank-jones-spokesperson-irish-congress-of-trade-unions-ictu_en.pdf

Innovation Bill, 2023 should not be rushed through the various stages of the Oireachtas. There has been a lack of consultation, and certain alternatives, for example to this scheme like placing the IRC on statutory footing or clarifying the remit of the SFI were not even considered, and overall the announcement took the research community by surprise.

There should be in-depth discussions including but not limited to the Oireachtas Education Committee and the National Research and Innovation Advisory Forum with the unions Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Teachers Union Ireland (TUI), Postgraduate Workers' Organization (PWO), Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) and the Irish Precarity Network (IPN) and organizations such as the Irish Universities Association (IUA), Irish Humanities, Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and others.

We, finally, recommend the adoption of the amendments as listed above in order to protect the future of Irish academia, research and innovation.