



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

STRATEGIC PLAN 2020-2024



**#LoveIrish
Research**



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**Government-led initiatives
recognise the importance
of research in maintaining
Ireland's prosperity and
competitiveness in Europe
and globally**

From the Minister of State



Ireland has built a reputation for excellence in research and development.

At the heart of this progress are talented researchers, dedicated funding agencies like the Irish Research Council (IRC), and the wider research community.

Our national endeavours have been guided by *Innovation 2020*, Ireland's five-year strategy for science and technology, research and development. It set out a roadmap to deliver on our vision to be a global innovation leader, focusing on the excellence of our research, the development of our talent, and the impact of our investment.

As we look to the future and the next national strategy, the achievements we have secured over recent years is the foundation on which we must build.

The Government is committed to delivering the resources and supports to keep us at the vanguard of research, innovation, and development in an era of rapid technological change. From *Project Ireland 2040* to *Future Jobs Ireland 2019*, Government-led initiatives recognise the importance of research in maintaining Ireland's prosperity and competitiveness in Europe and globally.

To achieve the best outcomes for Ireland and for the research sector, strong and sustained collaboration between industry, academia, state agencies and other partners is required. My hope for the coming years is to see our research community continuing to break new ground – working closely with the IRC to discover new ways of collaborating and to push the frontiers of knowledge for social, technological, and environmental progress.

I have no doubt that the IRC, guided by this strategic plan, will continue to make a critical contribution to the research and innovation landscape in the next five years.

I would like to commend the vision of all those who have worked to develop the strategic plan. Government looks forward to working with the IRC and the wider research and innovation community in Ireland to realise the goals of this ambitious plan.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Halligan". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

John Halligan TD

Minister of State for Training, Skills, Innovation, Research and Development

**This strategic plan sets out
a blueprint for the next
phase of development and
underscores the unique
role that the IRC has
in Ireland's research and
innovation ecosystem**

From the Chair



On behalf of the Irish Research Council, I am delighted to introduce this strategic plan for the period 2020-2024.

This plan builds on the very significant contribution the IRC has made to the Irish research and innovation landscape since its establishment. The plan defines how the IRC will consolidate its unique role as the national funder of excellent research across all disciplines, while at the same time providing an enhanced strategic focus on how it will approach both the challenges and opportunities that will arise in the years ahead.

Our country has emerged from a period of great economic challenge, and, through initiatives including *Project Ireland 2040*, we are now charting the next phase of national development. Significant national challenges continue to exist, and we are of course part of a global community that together must find ways to confront and successfully address the grand challenges of our time, which include climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the rapid evolution of technology.

Renewed investment in new knowledge, skills and talent across all disciplines will be critical to positioning Ireland to both grasp the opportunities and navigate the challenges we face in a globally competitive world. And in the coming years, we face increasing uncertainty and change, not least in relation to Brexit. Investing now for the years ahead will greatly advance Ireland's stated aim to be an innovation leader, as well as future-proofing our higher education system to deliver on the broader skills and knowledge agenda.

This strategic plan sets out a blueprint for the next phase of development and underscores the unique role that the IRC has in Ireland's research and innovation ecosystem. The plan recognises and seeks to foster the huge dual strengths of the IRC: supporting a diverse range of excellent individual researchers across all disciplines and career stages, while simultaneously enabling a similarly diverse range of stakeholders – including enterprise, civil society and the State – to establish fruitful channels for collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Leveraging the skills, knowledge and talent of excellent researchers to harness maximum benefit for enterprise and society, and demonstrating the various impacts of this leverage, are key strategic goals of this plan. One of the core values set out in this strategy is a researcher-centred approach, and this value will be reflected in a set of actions designed to ensure that the IRC delivers a consistently high level of service to the community and to stakeholders. Finally, underpinning everything we do in the years ahead will be a strong commitment to collaboration and partnership with national and international stakeholders, including, of course, our parent Department (Education and Skills), the Higher Education Authority, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, and other research funders.

The Council and executive staff look forward to realising the fruits of this strategic plan over the years ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jane H. Ohlmeyer".

Professor Jane Ohlmeyer
Chair of the Irish Research Council

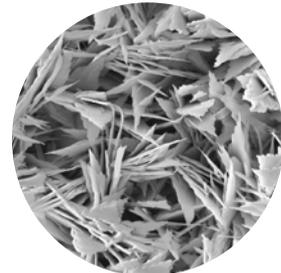
Introduction

The Irish Research Council has been a central feature of the research and innovation ecosystem for close to twenty years. As the metrics on the IRC's key achievements below demonstrate, it has made a very significant impact in establishing a vibrant research community in Ireland. In addition to the core value of excellence, a distinct ethos has underpinned the IRC's suite of activities. This ethos is best described as one of *openness* – across multiple parameters – for maximum societal benefit. It is reflected in the IRC's support for excellent ideas grounded in any discipline, laying down a pathway to new understandings and innovations. This ethos is also reflected in the way the IRC has enabled organisations and stakeholders, from the smallest civil society organisation to globally-leading corporations, to both benefit from and contribute to the skills, talents and ideas of individual researchers.

It is evident from the consultation undertaken as part of the development of this strategy that the IRC's role and underpinning ethos are perceived as being of key importance in the research landscape, promoting the balanced development of the system, and facilitating strong 'connectedness' between the research community and a diverse range of economic, cultural and societal stakeholders.

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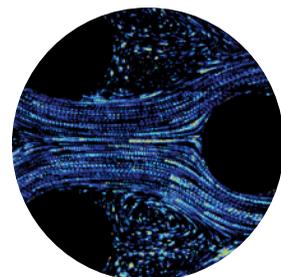
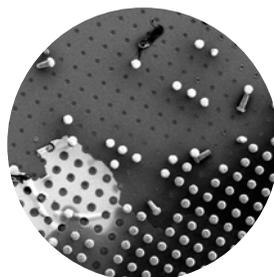
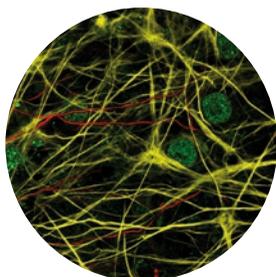
THE **UNIQUE ROLE** OF THE **IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL**



The **IRC** invests in **groundbreaking ideas**, along the spectrum between basic and applied research across **all disciplines** that will have **knowledge, societal and/or enterprise impact**.



The **IRC** invests solely in **exceptional individual researchers** at **all career stages**, cultivating **research independence** and **opportunities to engage** with a variety of **stakeholders**.



The **IRC** evaluates solely on the basis of **excellence** with respect to **researcher, idea and project design** through international peer review.

Building on our achievements to date

Recognising government strategies on research, innovation and future skills, the national and global societal challenges we face, and the ambitions of our higher education sector, this strategy identifies significant opportunities to further improve the impact and reach of IRC-supported research, and to deliver a consistently high level of service to users and stakeholders. In doing so, we build on the considerable successes we have achieved up to now.



To date, we have...

Enhanced knowledge exchange nationally and internationally, benefitting enterprise and the economy, and providing a valuable service to policy, civil and broader society.

Leading to...

Research awards made by the IRC in collaboration with

426
different enterprise/
employer partners

20
government departments
and agencies

128
civil society groups



To date, we have...

Funded career-spanning, innovative discovery or 'frontier' research across all disciplines, most recently via the Laureate scheme.

Leading to...

Over
100
disciplines currently funded



To date, we have...

Fuelled a critical pipeline of highly skilled researchers for the benefit of current and future science, public interest projects, enterprise and society.

Leading to...

The granting of
8,837
individual
research awards



To date, we have...

Strengthened links and mobility between research and practice through enterprise partnership schemes.

Leading to...

904

awards made in collaboration with enterprise/employers to date



To date, we have...

Established extensive collaborative partnerships and programmes with leading international research agencies, resulting in increased opportunities for Ireland's researchers.

Leading to...

Six Europe-based partnerships in place, with a further six new international initiatives coming on-stream



To date, we have...

Developed a leading position as an international advocate for gender-balance in researchers, research assessment, and integration of gender in research content.

Leading to...

Gender balance across the total cohort of live awards:

50.2% male 49.8% female*

* These figures are for all programmes aggregated. There are clear disparities, nationally and internationally, that become evident as the career stage progresses.



To date, we have...

Enabled substantial mobility of research talent to Ireland.

Leading to...

40%

of current awardees are non-Irish nationals

To date, we have...

Leveraged through our alumni significant European funding, awards, prizes, and international research collaboration success, enhancing Ireland's international research and innovation reputation.

Leading to...

65%

of ERC awardees in Ireland under Horizon2020 to date are IRC alumni or mentors

Development of this strategic plan

Work started on the strategic plan in 2018, overseen by a working group comprising Council members and executive staff. Polwarth Consulting was appointed by the IRC to assist the executive in gathering feedback and perspectives on the role and performance of the IRC and the key challenges and opportunities facing the research ecosystem. The first phase of work included

- (a) structured interviews with a wide cross section of stakeholders in research and innovation and
- (b) analysis of detailed survey feedback gathered from the research community, across all disciplines and career stages.

In the second phase of work, the strategy working group undertook a series of reviews and discussions on the findings of the first round of consultation, and identified key challenges and opportunities that the strategy should seek to address. In parallel, Polwarth Consulting carried out an international review of the strategies of research funders in other countries with a similar mission to the IRC.

In the third phase of the process, a draft strategic plan was fleshed out from the phase 2 work. An iterative process of development and refinement followed on foot of Council input and discussion, and further consultation with our parent Department and the Higher Education Authority. From this process emerged the final shape of the strategic plan. In addition, an implementation plan, which will be published online, was drafted. The finalisation process was supported by briefings with key stakeholders on the outline framework and the critical enablers required to underpin successful delivery.

This strategy identifies
significant opportunities
to further improve the
impact and reach of
IRC-supported research

Our mandate, vision, mission and values

The Irish Research Council was formed in 2012, amalgamating the Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology (IRCSET), established in 2000, and the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS), established in 2002.

The IRC is an associate agency of the Department of Education and Skills, under the aegis of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), and has the following mandate:

- ▶ **To fund excellent research within, and between, all disciplines, and in doing so to enhance Ireland’s international reputation as a centre for research and learning**

- ▶ **To support the education and skills development of excellent individual early-stage researchers and to cultivate agile independent researchers and thinkers, while offering a range of opportunities which support diverse career paths**

- ▶ **To enrich the pool of knowledge and expertise available for addressing Ireland’s current and future needs, whether societal, cultural or economic, and to deliver for citizens through collaboration and enabling knowledge exchange with Government departments and agencies, enterprise and civic society**

- ▶ **To provide policy advice on postgraduate education, and on more general research matters, to the HEA and other national and international bodies. In giving us this role, Government requested that particular attention be given to the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.**

The mandate and unique role of the IRC generates a strong value-added dimension in the Irish research and innovation landscape. We fund exceptional individual researchers across the national research priority areas, but also across the many disciplines in the research ecosystem that fall outside these priority areas. The latter include the vast majority of research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS), but also in myriad fields within Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). In this way, the IRC is a key enabler of balance in the research ecosystem and of the broad-based development of the research landscape.

The IRC works successfully with both large and small organisations. Flexibility in its partnerships has enabled it to contribute to the creation of a fertile environment for research and innovation within which opportunities can be responded to and challenges addressed.

The IRC has taken a responsive and agile approach to the development of programmes, ensuring that barriers to participation for partnership are minimised and the process of developing research and innovation capacity is de-risked. For example, many SMEs that may not meet the criteria for enterprise development support at a particular point in time have availed themselves of the IRC's enterprise partnership programmes to drive innovation. Likewise, the IRC has for many years provided opportunities for links to grow between researchers and civil society, recognising the significant role of this sector in Ireland and the desire to develop evidence-based practice. The IRC's focus on excellent ideas across all disciplines frequently lays the foundations on which larger-scale projects will build, often with new funding from other national or international agencies.

The *IRC Strategic Plan 2020-2024* will underpin the continued delivery of our mandate within the Irish higher education and research system. This plan seeks to consolidate the unique role of the IRC in supporting all disciplines within the Irish research funding landscape and the suite of programmes that underpin this role. Furthermore, the plan articulates how the IRC will maximise its contribution to national progress and ambitions over the coming years.

Our vision

Our vision is for a connected, agile Irish Research Council that invests in the people, skills and ideas, across all disciplines, that will deliver new possibilities for the future, within Ireland and beyond.

Our mission

Our mission is to support excellence in research talent, knowledge and engagement by:

- ▶ Funding excellent discovery and enterprise research across all disciplines and showing the benefits for Ireland of this investment

- ▶ Supporting exceptional individual researchers and their development

- ▶ Responding to emerging research and societal challenges and proactively assisting stakeholders to address complex issues

- ▶ Positively contributing to innovation, reform and best practice in the Irish higher education and research ecosystem

- ▶ Demonstrating a consistent, impartial and transparent approach to the award of funding, delivered to a high standard of service

- ▶ Actively seeking to collaborate with others, in Ireland and internationally, to enhance the research ecosystem

- ▶ Building support for discovery research among the public, the research community and other stakeholders.

Our values

In delivering on its mandate, the Irish Research Council's core value is **research excellence**: across all disciplines, determined on the basis of independent peer review, in an open, objective, transparent and trusted manner. In addition, we uphold the following values:

- ▶ **Independence** – we are autonomous and independent in our funding decisions, while operating within the government's policy framework

- ▶ **Leadership** – we proactively contribute to enhancing the evidence base for policy-making within the higher education and research system, and more broadly across the work of government

- ▶ **Researcher-centred** – we put talented researchers at the centre of everything we do and are committed to supporting them to reach their potential

- ▶ **Partnership** – we recognise that partnership with agencies nationally and internationally, with Government departments, enterprise, civil society and cultural institutions is key to maximising the benefits and impact of research for Ireland

- ▶ **Professionalism** – we are committed to the highest standards across our practices and policies and to a spirit of openness, demonstrated by regular internal and external review and evaluation.

Strategic goals and key actions, 2020-2024

In order to realise its mandate, vision and mission, the *Strategic Plan 2020-2024* has five key goals and associated actions which express our core values:

- 1. Enable excellence in people, skills and ideas across all disciplines for discovery and enterprise research.**

- 2. Be a partner of choice nationally and internationally to support excellent research that addresses the challenges of our time.**

- 3. Demonstrate the value of the research we support, ensuring that the knowledge and innovations generated are shared and exchanged to the maximum extent.**

- 4. Make a tangible contribution to innovation, evaluation and reform in the higher education and research ecosystem.**

- 5. Achieve and maintain excellence and optimise the IRC's capacity as an organisation.**

The first goal is a constant commitment that drives and defines how the IRC works to nurture research talent, knowledge and skills in Ireland in partnership with higher education and research institutions, enterprise, civil society and government. The other goals have always characterised the IRC's work, but they receive particular attention in this plan. They are designed to further build bridges between research and society, demonstrate the full breadth of outcomes from the investment we make on behalf of the taxpayer, and enhance the evidence base for policy and reform. The final goal acknowledges the need to build further capacity within the IRC itself to fulfil our mission and to consistently meet high standards of service to the research community and stakeholders.

These strategic goals and their associated key actions are set out in more detail in the following pages.

Strategic goal 1

Enable excellence in people, skills and ideas across all disciplines for discovery and enterprise research.

The IRC will continue to make a significant contribution to Ireland's education, research and skills needs. We will do so by growing the pipeline of exceptional researchers across all disciplines and career stages.



Attracting world-class researchers to Ireland

Patricia Palmer, Maynooth University

The IRC Laureate awards boost our potential to attract world-class researchers, of any discipline, to Ireland. Professor Patricia Palmer recently returned from the UK (from King's College London and previously the University of York) to take up a post in Maynooth University and apply for new frontier research funding opportunities. In 2019 she was granted a prestigious Advanced Laureate award for a major humanities project to map the full range of cultural activity, across languages and ethnic groups, in early modern Ireland.

KEY ACTIONS

- 1.1 Consolidate the IRC's role in enabling excellent discovery research across all career stages and disciplines.
- 1.2 Enhance Ireland's track record in world-class research by embedding the Laureate awards within the annual funding cycle of the IRC.
- 1.3 Undertake a comprehensive review of the management of our programmes with the objective of enhancing synergies and opportunities for streamlining.
- 1.4 Embed evolving independent peer review best practices in the assessment of all funding applications and across all disciplines.
- 1.5 Continue to develop researchers with the skills and talent that enterprise and employers need, and further develop enterprise programmes in line with demand.
- 1.6 Promote the highest ethical and governance standards for the investments we make, reflecting international best practice across key areas including responsible research and innovation, the remuneration of early-career researchers and open research.
- 1.7 Build on the IRC's leading track record in promoting gender equality and the integration of the gender dimension in research, in step with evolving international best practice.
- 1.8 Work with other research funders and key stakeholders to develop and implement policies that promote diversity and inclusion in the research community.
- 1.9 Drive the internationalisation of early-career researchers across all disciplines via European and international mobility programmes and opportunities.

1

SNAPSHOT



Individual awards from early-career stage leading to ERC success

Maria McNamara, University College Cork

Awarded ERC Starting Grant in 2015
(Physical Sciences and Engineering pillar).

Early-career support from the IRC included a postdoctoral fellowship (2006) and an INSPIRE MSCA International Fellowship (2009).

Larisa Florea, Trinity College Dublin

Awarded ERC Starting Grant in 2018
(Life Sciences pillar).

Early-career support from the IRC comprised a postgraduate scholarship (2009), hosted by Dublin City University.

Barry Molloy, University College Dublin

Awarded an ERC Consolidator Grant in 2017
(Social Science and Humanities pillar).

Early-career support from the IRC included a postgraduate scholarship (2001) and a postdoctoral fellowship (2007).

Strategic goal 2

Be a partner of choice nationally and internationally to support excellent research that addresses the challenges of our time.

The IRC will be at the centre of a vibrant interdisciplinary ecosystem that engages national as well as international partners, and that enables research-informed policy development, practice and decision-making. In doing so, we will further develop partnerships with European and international stakeholders to promote the international engagement of Ireland's researchers.



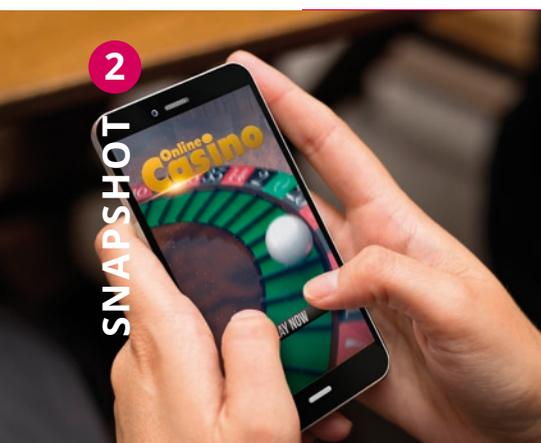
Developing talent and ideas for international collaboration and leadership

Investing in excellent researchers and ideas at home enhances Ireland's ability to participate and indeed lead in large-scale international research collaborations.

IRC alumni in Waterford Institute of Technology's TSSG centre are part of two large-scale European research collaborations that commenced in January 2019. Dr Michael Barros is working on the €6m GLADIATOR project, which aims to tackle one of the most aggressive forms of brain cancer using miniature, implantable devices. Dr Steven Davy is working on CYBELE, a €14m Horizon2020 project spread across 14 countries and coordinated by WIT-TSSG. The project focuses on the use of ICT for smart agriculture, and in particular the use of supercomputers to crunch large quantities of data that can help improve future farming practices.

KEY ACTIONS

- 2.1 Extend partnerships with government departments and agencies who wish to foster research for policy-making, and enhance the research talent pipeline in key areas of policy need.
- 2.2 Develop the IRC as national research champion for the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda.
- 2.3 Lead in the development of the Irish research system as an international exemplar for interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration.
- 2.4 Create new pathways for interdisciplinary research engagement with enterprise and employers to enhance their capacity to meet complex challenges and new opportunities.
- 2.5 Open up new opportunities for international research collaboration across all disciplines.
- 2.6 Provide targeted support for Irish membership of research and infrastructure networks supported by the European Union and maximise the benefits for researchers in Ireland.
- 2.7 Continue to engage with and influence the European research and innovation landscape through membership of programme committees and via collaboration with national and international stakeholders.



Excellent research generating long-term policy impact

Research funded by the IRC under our policy-oriented programmes is designed to bring the benefits of expertise and knowledge to policy-makers working on a wide range of societal challenges.

The following are examples of recent projects in this area.

Crystal Fulton, University College Dublin

Research on problem gambling

Dr Fulton was awarded a research project grant by the IRC under a co-funding strand with the Department of Social Protection. She was awarded an impact prize by UCD in 2018. In April 2019 she appeared before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality to discuss the findings of her ongoing research and the implications for policy and legislation on problem gambling.

Sean Redmond, University of Limerick

Research on data collection in the area of youth justice

The findings of Dr Redmond's project, funded under the IRC's Research for Policy and Society programme (2016), will be used by the Department of Justice and Equality to inform changes in data collection practices across the youth justice system with the objective of providing better evidence to enable the design of more effective youth diversion services.

Strategic goal 3

Demonstrate the value of the research we support, ensuring that the knowledge and innovations generated are shared and exchanged to the maximum extent.

The IRC will continue to fund research that has impact and that is ambitious in its goals for scientific discovery, knowledge creation and enterprise development. We will make the value of this work known to the wider audience it deserves, and we will seek to ensure that the knowledge that is created can be used for economic, social and cultural benefit.



Partnership on Engaged Research for Societal Impact

Campus Engage, based within the Irish Universities Association, has a mission of supporting higher education and society to work together. A key part of its work is the *Engaged Research for Societal Impact* project, funded by the IRC. Under the Campus Engage-IRC partnership, the second of two phases of work is close to completion, resulting in a number of outputs and tools which are helping to put Ireland at the forefront of engaged research internationally. A major report was launched in 2017 in which an impact framework for engaged research was set out. Building on this work, Campus Engage has produced a number of 'how to' guides for key stakeholders. Many case studies of good practice in engaged research have been gathered, and a series of training workshops has been held.

KEY ACTIONS

-
- 3.1** Establish and implement a new broad-based, comprehensive impact framework for IRC-funded researchers.
-
- 3.2** Regularly publish and disseminate quantitative and qualitative information on the impact of the awards we fund across all disciplines.
-
- 3.3** Actively follow the careers of researchers we have funded at an early-career stage, and so get a better understanding of the long-term benefits of such funding in helping career development.
-
- 3.4** Launch an IRC alumni network to strengthen and cultivate long-term relationships with researchers we have funded.
-
- 3.5** Promote open access of IRC-funded outputs and data sets across all disciplines.
-
- 3.6** Increase understanding among stakeholders and the wider public of the role and contribution to Ireland of discovery and enterprise research. We will do this through the #LoveIrishResearch campaign and also by developing new outreach activities.
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3
SNAPSHOT

Generating skills, talent and entrepreneurial impact for industry and employers

The IRC's enterprise-facing programmes support the talent pipeline for all of Ireland's key industry sectors. Participating company partners range from multinationals, such as Intel, Pfizer and Medtronic, to SMEs and start-ups.

The Government launched the first National Space Strategy for Enterprise in June 2019. This sector is an example of one that provides major opportunities for research and innovation-intensive SMEs over the coming years. A number of space-tech companies are current or recent partners on the IRC's enterprise programmes, including Ubotica, Enbio, Techworks Marine, Parameter and Eblana Photonics.

IRC alumni have also leveraged cutting-edge knowledge to found high-potential enterprises in their own right. Current examples include ApisProtect, founded by former IRC awardee Dr Fiona Edwards Murphy. The company, which uses Internet of Things technology to monitor honeybee colonies, secured venture capital investment of €1.5m in November 2018, enabling the creation of 25 jobs. Another example is IRC alumnus Dr Martin O'Reilly, co-founder of Output Sports, which has developed wearable sports performance monitoring technology. In June 2019, Dr O'Reilly won the Dublin region award of the national Irish Best Young Entrepreneur (IBYE) competition.

Strategic goal 4

Make a tangible contribution to innovation, evaluation and reform in the higher education and research ecosystem.

The IRC will support appraisal, innovation, reform and policy development in higher education and research. In doing so, we will work together with the Department of Education and Skills and the Higher Education Authority, and with higher education institutions and other stakeholders in the research ecosystem.



KEY ACTIONS

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- 4.1** Facilitate the development of the evidence base for higher education and research policy through the IRC's policy-oriented funding programmes.
-
- 4.2** Support the development of policy and practice on 'engaged research' in Ireland.
-
- 4.3** Critically appraise the health of the research and innovation ecosystem, with particular attention to identifying gaps in support and emerging risks.
-
- 4.4** Collaborate with other national funders to identify potential for coordination on funding processes and procedures with the aim of enhancing the Irish research funding system.
-
- 4.5** Positively influence the national strategic and policy framework for research through collaboration and engagement with relevant Government departments, agencies, and committees.
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Harnessing expertise and knowledge to enhance our education system

In addition to contributing new knowledge across all disciplines for the curriculum, research supported by the IRC is helping to enhance the experience for the system's most important resource: our students. The following projects exemplify this.

Pamela Gallagher, Dublin City University
Research on enhancing participation in higher education through technology

The DEPTH study (Designing for Enhanced Participation through Technology in Higher Education) is funded by the IRC under the COALESCE programme (2018). It will take a user-centred approach to develop guiding principles for a technology-friendly inclusive campus and the actions required to implement them. The findings will impact on inclusive higher education practice, and will inform access to higher education and promote inclusion and better participation in higher education for students with disabilities and for all.

Pádraig MacNeela, NUI Galway
Research on 'smart consent'

Dr MacNeela was awarded a research grant in 2015, funded by the HSE under the IRC's Research for Policy and Society scheme; his work focused on evaluating smart consent interventions for young people. The Smart Consent project in NUI Galway has been a key input to the development of the new national Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions, launched by Minister of State for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell O' Connor TD, in April 2019.

Strategic goal 5

Achieve and maintain excellence and optimise the IRC's capacity as an organisation.

The IRC will foster organisational excellence as a strategic objective. We will optimise our capacity and systems in order to deliver the best possible service to researchers and other stakeholders and to ensure successful achievement of each of the goals set out in this strategic plan.



KEY ACTIONS

- 5.1** Optimise the IRC's staffing resources and associated structures to enable successful implementation of this strategic plan.

- 5.2** Equip staff with new knowledge and skills to respond to evolving requirements and opportunities.

- 5.3** Strengthen mechanisms for regular engagement with research performing organisations (RPOs), to deliver best practice in research management and administration and to maximise opportunities for programme development.

- 5.4** Drive the transformation of IRC business processes and systems.

- 5.5** Continue to assure the highest standards of governance in the work of the IRC executive and board.

- 5.6** Leverage international best practice for research funders by actively engaging with Science Europe and other funder networks.

- 5.7** Ensure that the IRC meets the highest standards of compliance with national and European data protection legislation.

Making the strategy a reality: critical enablers

The successful implementation of the *Strategic Plan 2020-2024* will strongly depend on a set of wider enabling factors, namely funding and resources, the establishment of the Irish Research Council on a statutory footing, and the context of a new national framework for research and innovation.

Funding and resources

New funding will enable the IRC to generate the full benefits envisaged for this strategic plan and will enhance Ireland's capacity to make the best use of the research skills and talent that are available. A very welcome increase of c. €9m in the IRC's Departmental allocation since 2017 has, *inter alia*, allowed the game-changing Laureate awards for open frontier basic research to be established. However, and as noted by the mid-term review of *Innovation 2020*, facilitating annual calls will require further investment in the IRC's core budget. Increasing Ireland's output of postgraduate researchers to support the broad-based development of the research and innovation system will also require increased funding.

This strategic plan challenges the IRC to evolve as an organisation, in terms both of the overall resources at its disposal and the mix of skills and expertise within its staff cohort. Growth and change will enable the IRC to realise the full impact of this strategic plan, including the overarching ambition to deliver a consistently high level of service to the research community and wider stakeholders. The business transformation and workforce development agendas of the HEA will be key enabling processes for the IRC over the coming years.

Statutory footing

The Irish Research Council was established in 2012 under the aegis of the Higher Education Authority. The underpinning legislation for the Authority, having been introduced in 1972, will be replaced in the near future by a new HEA Act. This process provides an opportunity to establish the IRC on a statutory footing within the HEA. The move will strengthen Ireland's long-term commitment to research and innovation and emphasise the importance of supporting exceptional individual researchers across all disciplines and career stages. A statutory basis for the IRC within the HEA Act would also recognise the fundamental place of research in supporting the future health of our higher education system.

Successor national strategy for research and innovation

This strategy will be in force when Ireland adopts a new strategic framework for research and innovation, to take effect at the beginning of 2021. The successor national strategy will be formulated against the backdrop of new challenges and opportunities. These include the international research and innovation landscape post-Brexit, and the launch of Horizon Europe (2021-2027), the ninth framework programme of the European Union. At national level, the new national research and innovation strategy will nurture an evolving research ecosystem, including the further development of the technological higher education sector. The IRC will be an important element of the infrastructure for implementation of the successor to *Innovation 2020*, and our new strategy will provide a renewed opportunity to enhance the impact of the IRC both in its own right and in coordination with other agencies and stakeholders.

Implementation of the strategy

A separate implementation plan for this strategy has been published by the IRC and is available on our website, www.research.ie.

The implementation plan sets out key deliverables for each of the 34 key actions set out above, together with associated timeframes. The strategic plan will form the basis of the annual workplan prepared by the IRC executive.

The executive will report twice yearly to Council on progress and will prepare an annual implementation progress report for the Department of Education and Skills and the Higher Education Authority.

An external mid-term evaluation of implementation of the strategy will be carried out and the IRC will publish a refreshed implementation plan for the second half of the strategy period.

**Growth and change will
enable the IRC to realise
the full impact of this
strategic plan.**

Photographs:

Cover

Clockwise: Professor Christine Casey, Dr Vijaykumar V. Jadhav, Dr Paul Hynds, Professor Patricia Palmer, Professor John Atkins, Dr Tanya Ní Mhuirthile, Maeve Casserley, Professor Michael Zaworotko, Mohamed El Amri, and Dr Sarah Guerin

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John Halligan TD, Minister of State for Training, Skills, Innovation, Research and Development

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Professor Jane Ohlmeyer,
Chair of the Irish Research Council

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Photos by IRC-funded researchers:

Chiara Mizzoni, *A group of FARC fighters watch a game of afternoon football at a demobilisation and transition camp in Icononzo, Colombia*

Sven Batke, *This bromeliad plant is in the same family as pineapples but instead grows on top of 60m tall tropical trees*

Ross Lundy, *Copper oxide nanoblades*
Maria Velasco, *The cerebellar network between neurons (red), astrocytes (yellow) and microglia (green) in a mouse organotypic slice culture*

Ross Lundy, *Deforest gold micro-mushrooms on copper meadow*

Sajad Alimohammadi, *Refractive index matched PIV applications: Velocity profiles for flow around an array of cylinders*

IRC Researchers of the Year 2019:

Professor Laoise McNamara

Dr Jeremy J. Piggott with President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins

Professor David Farrell with President Higgins

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Dr Martin O'Halloran

Dr Ciarán Casey

Left to right: Professor John Atkins, Professor Christine Casey, and Professor Michael Zaworotko

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IRC-funded researchers at the Employment-Based Programme launch 2019

Professor Judith Harford at Gender Equality in Higher Education: Ambitioning Change symposium, October 2018

Left to right: H. E. Stéphane Crouzat, Ambassador of France to Ireland, and Dr Eavan O'Brien, Assistant Director of the IRC, at the Ulysses launch 2019
IRC International Strategy launch, 2018
Professor Maria Baghramian

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Dr Maria McNamara, Dr Larisa Florea, and Dr Barry Molloy

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IRC-funded researchers at the International Strategy launch, 2018

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Left to right: Niamh Kavanagh and Dr Adam Kelly

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Left to right: Professor Kieran Walsh and Professor Maura McAdam at a GenderNET meeting, March 2019

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Two delegates at Bratislava Declaration of Young Researchers event, March 2017

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Irish Research Council staff and postdoctoral interns:

Back row, left to right: Dr Aude Cincotta, Linda Rose, Dr Deirdre Quinn, Kerry O'Leary, Mariana Reis, Dr Suz Garrard, Robert Lindsay, Dr Felicity Maxwell. Front row: Dr Anne-Julie Lafaye, Rosemary Sweeney, Dr Eavan O'Brien (Assistant Director), Peter Brown (Director), Dr Maria Morrissey, Dr Chiara Loda, Gemma Duke. Not pictured: Liz-Anne Worrall (Assistant Director), Dr Jennifer Cassidy, Leanne Doyle. Permanent staff numbers: 11.

Most photos were taken for the Irish Research Council by Marc O'Sullivan Photography and Fennell Photography.



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