



Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann  
Royal Irish Academy



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL  
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

# RESEARCH FOR PUBLIC POLICY: AN OUTLINE ROADMAP

A ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY – IRISH  
RESEARCH COUNCIL DISCUSSION PAPER

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## INTRODUCTION

The challenges that Ireland currently faces arise not only from the post-COVID-19 pandemic landscape but also from shared global challenges such as climate change, food sustainability, and artificial intelligence and its role in society. The pandemic has demonstrated the immense resources and expertise within the Irish academic research base that can be drawn on to inform public policymaking and decision-making for the public good. Higher-education institutions (HEIs) are major research performers in Ireland, bringing together world-class expertise from the full range of disciplines in the natural and life sciences, engineering, computer sciences, arts, humanities, social sciences and medicine. This is a hugely significant resource for policymakers who seek to develop evidence-based policy.

As Ireland looks to rebuild in the face of significant domestic and international challenges, the academic research base is eager to contribute its talents and knowledge to inform the policy discussions on the many complex issues our country faces.

The purpose of this paper is to identify and bring together the key themes that have emerged from recent work led by the Irish Research Council (IRC) and the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) on the topic of 'Research for public policy: opportunities for Ireland' and to offer a framework for future development of this important issue. The framework 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.

## 2 FUTURE PATHWAYS EMERGING FROM THE IRC-RIA WEBINAR SERIES 'RESEARCH FOR PUBLIC POLICY'

To take this conversation forward, in the spring of 2021 the IRC and the RIA co-hosted a series of webinars on the theme 'Research for public policy'. The discussion series brought together key stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers and the public, to brainstorm ways of connecting the knowledge and expertise of higher-education researchers with the knowledge needs of policymakers and public interests.<sup>1</sup> The foundation for the series was a paper written by Mary Doyle entitled *Research for public policy and society: building a stronger architecture for Ireland*.<sup>2</sup>

A significant outcome from the series is agreement among all of the stakeholders that 'research for public policy'—namely, ensuring access and dialogue between policymakers and the best possible scientific and scholarly knowledge and insight, from different disciplines and approaches, independent of institutional or political interests—is an important agenda for action in Ireland.

Three development pathways were identified during the discussion:

**Pathway 1** Building bridges, creating trust, offering opportunities;

**Pathway 2** Joining up and scaling up what already exists;

**Pathway 3** Knowledge management and brokerage.

<sup>1</sup> The focus in this paper is on strengthening the engagement between research performers in the higher-education sector and the policy process. The paper acknowledges existing nodes of world-class research expertise within state agencies such as Teagasc and the Marine Institute, and sources such as the Economic and Social Research Institute, which undertake significant levels of publicly funded research. Higher-education institutions are unique, however, in the range of disciplines and expertise within their research communities, as well as their primary teaching and learning functions, which will create a future pipeline of talent that can be shaped to enhance research for public policy.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Doyle, *Research for public policy and society: building a stronger architecture for Ireland* (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy and Irish Research Council, 2021); available online at: [https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/research\\_for\\_public\\_policy\\_and\\_society-\\_m.doyle\\_1\\_1.pdf](https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/research_for_public_policy_and_society-_m.doyle_1_1.pdf) (accessed 22 June 2021).

The pandemic has highlighted how much of the interplay between the academic research base and the policy system happens outside of a structured dialogue platform. Too often, policymakers struggle to identify where in the system the expertise lies, or researchers are insufficiently attuned to the policy options and context within which their expertise is sought. The structures both for 'just in time' co-operation and evidence provision and for the supply of information, data, analysis, synthesis and evaluation in support of medium- to longer-term policy planning need to be improved. Ireland currently has few public policy think tanks; the academic career promotion structures and research funding evaluation measures undervalue public policy outputs and impacts; researchers typically have limited knowledge of the research and data needs of government departments; and there is a paucity of training of both researchers and policymakers on each other's needs and imperatives.

The proposals developed in this framework derive from discussions that took place in these webinars. Of necessity, the framework at this point cannot be entirely definitive, but it can provide the basis for the dialogue between the key stakeholders that is now necessary to take these complex issues forward by drawing on experience both domestically and globally.

## 2.1. Key pillars in the research for public policy roadmap

This is a complex landscape, but at its heart is the reality that although multiple sources of valuable policy advice exist in Ireland, the pathway for contributing to policy formation remains relatively narrow in comparison with some other European countries. The challenge is to create an adept and responsive system that enhances the public good by addressing several needs that have been identified, as follows:

- identifying sources of research for public policy generated by Irish HEIs and other contributors that may currently be overlooked or underused;
- producing engaged research for policy transformation on cross-cutting societal challenges;
- providing the training and rewards to encourage researchers in HEIs to engage in research for public policy;
- connecting researchers and policymakers to embed engaged research within strategic policy planning and formulation;
- ensuring 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; and
- creating a space, supported by academics and government departments, for engaging the public in research design and creation.

A range of relevant issues and actions were identified during the discussions, and this framework offers a roadmap for potential action at both the national and the institutional level.

The establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), with its commitment to develop a new national strategy for research, innovation, science and technology during 2021 and its forthcoming national research engagement campaign, offers an exciting opportunity to identify the future research needs, policy questions, structures and supports to strengthen the policy–research interface in support of Ireland's national ambitions.

## 3 DESIGNING STRUCTURES FOR POLICY ENGAGEMENT IN IRELAND

The first step in progressing this agenda is to design effective structures to identify research demand from government and research supply from HEIs and other sources over the long term. There is currently no place where policymakers and higher-education researchers can come together to develop the process of continuous expert policy advice and evaluation in response to key national strategic issues. There is no single solution to this issue in the Irish context, but the European model provides some useful guidance and experience and is set out below as an input to the discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Recordings of the 'Research for public policy' webinars are available to view online at: <https://www.ria.ie/policy-international/working-groups/research-infrastructures/research-public-policy> (accessed 21 June 2021).

### 3.1. The European Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism

The Scientific Advice Mechanism (SAM) is a service created by the European Commission that provides independent, high-quality scientific advice directly to European Commissioners to inform their decision-making on policy issues.<sup>4</sup> The SAM is composed of three main structural elements: a secretariat in the Commission's research and innovation department, the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors (GCSA) to the European Commission and the Science Advice for Policy by European Academies (SAPEA) project.<sup>5</sup> It serves under the aegis of the European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth.

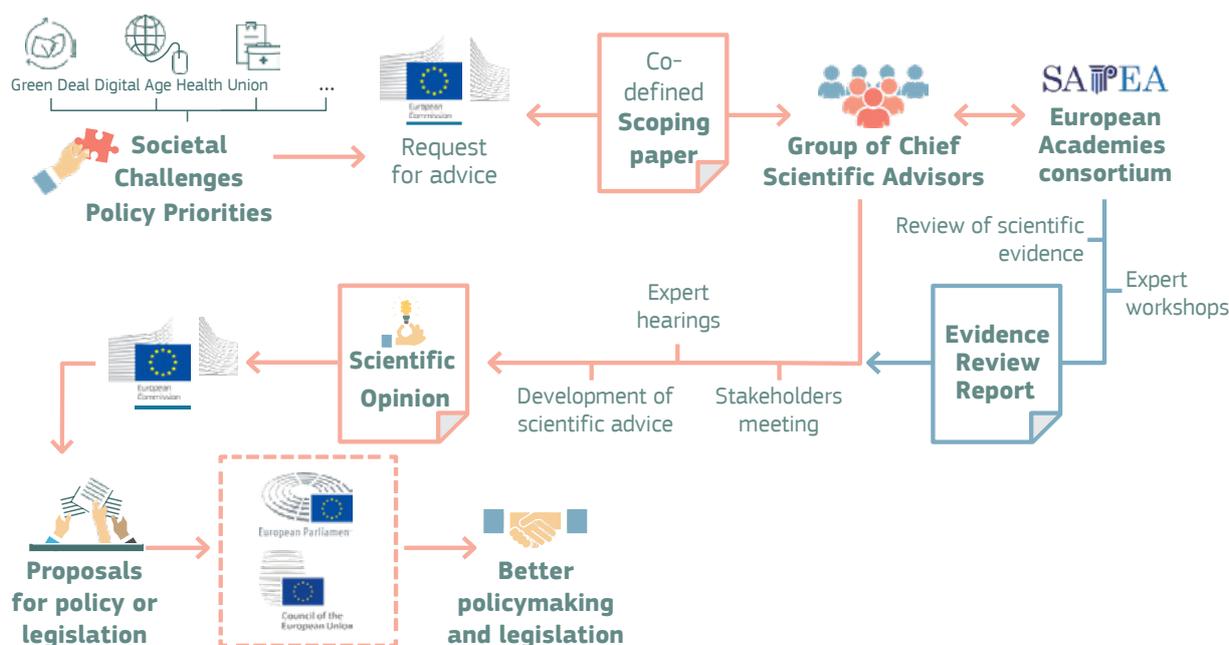


Fig. 1—Diagram outlining the operation of the European Commission's Science Advice Mechanism.

Members of the European Commission may initiate the evidence review process through a request to the Commissioner. After a research question has been formulated and a scoping paper agreed between the Commission and the GCSA,<sup>6</sup> the SAPEA is typically given responsibility for the evidence review (the collection and review of evidence) report; these reports may, in addition to reviewing the evidence, identify policy options.

### 3.2. Science advice in Ireland: possible models

#### Model 1: Adapting the European SAM to an Irish context

Considering the structure at EU level allows us to reflect on the shape that a similar science advice mechanism might take in Ireland. An Irish model would likely retain the three main structural elements of the European Commission's SAM, as follows:

- a central government lead that helps to channel and manage requests for advice, works with the group of chief scientific advisors and is the recipient of the final scientific opinion—this role could be fulfilled by the DFHERIS or another central government department, such as the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER);

<sup>4</sup> See *A Royal Irish Academy discussion paper on science advice in Ireland and Europe* (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 2020) for a fuller discussion of these structures; available online at: [https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/ria\\_discussion\\_paper\\_on\\_science\\_advice\\_in\\_ireland\\_and\\_europe.pdf](https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/ria_discussion_paper_on_science_advice_in_ireland_and_europe.pdf) (accessed 22 June 2021).

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, 'Scientific Advice Mechanism: from questions to answers. How the European Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism produces scientific advice to support policymaking' (Brussels, 2019); available online at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research\\_and\\_innovation/groups/sam/guidelines\\_how\\_samProduces\\_scientific\\_advice.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/groups/sam/guidelines_how_samProduces_scientific_advice.pdf) (accessed 17 May 2021).

<sup>6</sup> There are seven chief scientific advisors (CSAs), who are appointed in their personal capacity and act independently and in the public interest. An independent identification committee assists the Committee in the selection of the CSAs, and member states have the opportunity to nominate excellent researchers for this role; many national academies, including the RIA, are active in this process.

- a group of chief scientific advisors—identified by an independent selection panel, composed of multidisciplinary representation from the sciences, arts, humanities and social sciences; and
- an academic knowledge brokerage via a collaborative network, as is the case with the European CSAs, managed through the HEIs and the RIA, such as a national policy challenge platform or a higher-education research for policy network, on the lines of the UK's Universities Policy Engagement Network—this would perform the function of the SAPEA in the European model.

In this model the SAM would report to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

### **Model 2: Establishing a national policy challenge platform**

Another approach to connect the expertise in the academic research community to the Irish government's policy and information needs in a structured and transparent manner is a national policy challenge platform. A two-way structure would enable research-performing organisations (including HEIs) to upload summaries of research projects/papers that have policy significance and government departments to indicate areas of interest, whether immediate or anticipated. There is tremendous potential here for progress, and one could envisage the following:

- The platform would bring together academics, research funders and government departments and be chaired by the DFHERIS, with the potential to be integrated into overall public service reform and innovation agendas with the aim of better foresight planning.
- The platform would identify and agree the main themes and sub-themes for an 'areas of research interest' exercise to help researchers identify policy areas aligned to their specific expertise. These could be drawn from a range of sources, including government departments' statements of strategy, their data and research strategies, and national research engagement exercises. This should not duplicate advice being provided by or areas of work being undertaken by existing bodies.
- Each main theme would have two co-leads (ideally one would be a government department data and research lead).
- The thematic sub-groups' members would be put forward by the platform participants but would include a mix of specialist experts, academics, policymakers and civil society.
- The sub-groups' work could be supported by a research for public policy fellowship scheme. Such schemes are a common feature of science advice systems in the US (the American Association for the Advancement of Science-funded policy fellowships) and the UK (the Economic and Social Research Council-funded Areas of Research Interest Fellowships), typically funded through public research councils or academic societies.

In deciding on location and leadership arrangements, consideration would need to be given to ensuring that they are aligned with existing mechanisms, which would include the National Economic and Social Development Office and advisory bodies such as the National Competitiveness Council, the Climate Change Advisory Council and the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council.

A series of parallel activities are also proposed to create a supportive and sustainable environment for research–policy interactions by building wider networks, developing understanding of research and policy dynamics and needs, and supporting public participation in research–policy dialogue. For example, an annual academic–public sector network could develop and showcase joint policy–academia working on a specific major policy topic, such as post-COVID-19 recovery, climate change or the future of the arts in Ireland. The major topic could be defined in rotation by members of the research community and government departments, with an audience of both constituencies and public participation.

### **3.3. Detailed proposals for action at sector and institution level**

Although important work needs to take place on establishing a successful national dialogue, the long-term success of the proposals in this roadmap depends also on a number of more detailed actions, both on the side of government and on the side of HEIs and other research-performing organisations. These are set out below.

### 3.3.1. Government

The 2021–2023 DFHERIS Statement of Strategy is strongly supportive of the potential offered by enhanced policy–academic co-working. In the implementation of its strategic objectives, the DFHERIS is encouraged to consider:

- leading a cross-government initiative to identify and include an 'areas of research interest' section within a publicly available data and research strategy;
- promoting connections between government departments/agencies and funders under its aegis to leverage new strands of research activity through the appropriate funder programmes;
- initiating discussions with government departments with a significant research budget to understand better how higher-education-based research supports their policy objectives and how this work translates into public benefit;
- leading on discussions with the DPER to consider how the Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy can encourage greater two-way flows between higher education and the policy community through public sector fellowship programmes and similar mobility programmes; and
- providing demonstration funding for academic–public sector networks to showcase joint policy–academia working.

### 3.3.2. HEIs and other research performers

- On knowledge brokerage,<sup>7</sup> the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), Campus Engage and the RIA would work together to complete a scoping exercise to establish the potential for a multi-institutional and multidisciplinary higher-education research for policy network, on the lines of the UK's Universities Policy Engagement Network and the Research England-funded Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) project. The scoping exercise would consider the potential for a collective interface bringing together existing policy-facing institutes in the higher-education system.<sup>8</sup>
- Organisations should provide targeted supports across the stages of the researcher career—coaching, mentoring, training, brokering—on engaging with policymakers, responding to policy research tenders and communicating research outputs, to enhance the range and capacity of researchers who value and wish to engage in policy-oriented research. Campus Engage could usefully take this forward through the provision of training materials and tools. Such supports could also be embedded in the Researcher Career Framework.
- A review should be undertaken of academic careers and promotional frameworks to enhance recognition and reward of public service and public policy engagement.
- The public research proposal evaluation frameworks administered by research funders should be adjusted to recognise better the value and impact of public policy outputs. Many researchers have focused on enterprise-facing research as it was clear that this would be viewed favourably in evaluations. Research income is also an important metric. The Engaged Research for Societal Impact Framework of Campus Engage could form a useful starting point for this.

### 3.3.3. Public research funders and other agencies

- Public research funders should seek to ensure that all opportunities to engage with policymakers are taken up by the researchers they fund and that the outcomes/outputs can be exploited for policy benefit. A national research for public policy framework could be developed to inform a co-ordinated approach to this across public research funding agencies.
- Innovative cross-agency approaches could be considered that focus on building greater emphasis on policy connections for schemes that traditionally have not had a focus in this area through, for example, the provision of specific allocations within grants to enable policy work.
- Address the limited opportunities for academics, parliamentarians and policymakers to experience 'life on the other side' through the scaling up of existing mobility and exchange programmes (or secondments) between higher education, the political system and policymakers (such as the RIA Oireachtas Science Pairing Scheme, the IRC Oireachtas Shadowing Scheme and Science Foundation Ireland's Public Service Fellowship).

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<sup>7</sup> In the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council has funded two Areas of Research Interest Fellowships designed to enable 'genuine co-creation (of projects, analysis and programmes of work) between researchers and those making and informing policy'. This is an initiative that funders could encourage through research-funding instruments, building on recent existing initiatives such as the Science Foundation Ireland Public Service Fellowship, the RIA Oireachtas Science Pairing Scheme and the IRC Oireachtas Shadowing Scheme, but with a greater focus on creating multidisciplinary programmes across the sciences, arts, humanities and social sciences.

<sup>8</sup> The IUA and Campus Engage are happy to explore this with David Price, CAPE lead, and to carry out a short review of the existing policy-facing institutes in the university sector as the basis for a higher-education policy network. The THEA is also happy to be part of this dialogue and will examine the capacity in the technological university sector. The RIA will contribute to this work with a specific focus on the mechanisms through which academy networks directly participate in the European Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism, the science policy work of the European Academies' Science Advisory Council and the interaction of academy networks with United Nations policy discussions through the International Science Council.

- Review the research underpinned by the Higher Education Authority core grant to generate greater public awareness of how it has fed into public policy to date. This might be done by a 'call for submissions' competition where researchers are asked to submit examples/case studies of where their research impacted public policy.<sup>9</sup> The Knowledge Transfer Ireland Impact Awards model could be expanded to include a specific category recognising research impact in the sphere of public policy engagement.
- Develop guidance and resources for the policy system to assist in developing, framing and articulating research questions in a way that speaks to researchers. The IRC and Campus Engage would be well placed to lead this.
- Sustained, predictable public research funding programmes are key to developing meaningful longer-term policy–research interactions with strategic impact. The DFHERIS should consider specifically resourcing its funding agencies to accelerate a long-term funding programme for policy-orientated research.

## 4 CONCLUSION

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Research is a strategic national asset. The engaged research–policy dialogue is an important agenda for Ireland as it seeks to utilise all of the resources available to it to meet current and future challenges to the best of its ability. This is also an area where, if we can get it right, Ireland can be a leader within the EU and beyond.

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<sup>9</sup> Subcategories could include those funded through core funding, for example, or a question could be included to determine sources of funding for all submissions.

## APPENDIX I

### Research for public policy: a discussion series by the Irish Research Council and the Royal Irish Academy

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#### Discussion 1: 'Research for public policy: opportunities for Ireland', 27 January 2021

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**Chair:** Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, MRIA, Trinity College Dublin

- Speakers:**
- Dr Mary Canning, President, Royal Irish Academy
  - Simon Harris, TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
  - Professor Jane Grimson, MRIA, Trinity College Dublin
  - Professor Peter Clinch, UCD; Chair, Board of Science Foundation Ireland

#### Discussion 2: 'Research for public policy: developing the architecture for dialogue', 10 February 2021

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**Chair:** Professor Orla Feely, MRIA, University College Dublin

- Speakers:**
- Orla Nugent, Higher Education Authority
  - John Shaw, Department of the Taoiseach
  - Mary Doyle, Public Policy Fellow, Long Room Hub, Trinity College Dublin

#### Discussion 3: 'Research for public policy: the vital role of leadership to make it happen', 24 February 2021

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**Chair:** Patricia Reilly, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

- Speakers:**
- Dr Joseph Ryan, Technological Higher Education Association
  - Dr Liza Keating, Irish Universities Association
  - Jim Breslin, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

The recordings of these discussions are available to view online at:

<https://www.ria.ie/policy-international/working-groups/research-infrastructures/research-public-policy>

For further information on the webinar series, please contact [policy@ria.ie](mailto:policy@ria.ie)

## APPENDIX 2

### Membership of the Irish Research Council–Royal Irish Academy Research for Public Policy working group

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Peter Brown, Director, Irish Research Council

Dr Mary Canning, President, Royal Irish Academy

Professor Daniel Carey, PL&A Secretary, Royal Irish Academy

Mary Doyle, Visiting Research Fellow, Long Room Hub, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Tony Gaynor, Chief Executive Officer, Royal Irish Academy

Jennifer Kenneally, Senior Programme Manager, Royal Irish Academy

Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, Chair, Irish Research Council

Sinéad Riordan, Head of Policy & International Relations, Royal Irish Academy

Secretariat: Jennifer Reilly, Royal Irish Academy; Dr Felicity Maxwell, Irish Research Council (October 2020–February 2021)



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