

Strengthening national capacity for policy engagement in Ireland: A review of progress

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Government decision making must be agile and robust, based on reliable real-time data and effective policy design and development processes, and supported by a cadre of highly skilled policy professionals. (OECD, 2023)

Introduction and context

This is an exciting time for research on public policy in Ireland. There has been a growing focus in recent years on strengthening important national infrastructures to improve Ireland's ability both to better plan for the future and to respond effectively to issues as they emerge. A key element in achieving this objective lies in developing a framework of action to support more aligned activity in the national research landscape in support of public policy in Ireland and to strengthen policy engagement.¹

Covid-19 taught us that the business of government needs science. However, policymaking at its heart requires making choices between

¹ Policy engagement in this context is understood to be an umbrella term describing the many ways that researchers and policymakers connect and explore common interests at various stages in their respective research and policymaking processes.

different options affecting different groups of stakeholders in different ways, and there are always trade-offs to be made. These are not technocratic choices only – political tensions will always impact and need to be addressed adequately. This is why consideration and understanding of these wider issues at play are central in gaining an appreciation of the overall landscape of decision-making and where the conversation about building a more effective policy engagement approach in Ireland becomes a significant national issue.

A highly functioning and effective research/policy interface requires a strong architecture with a clarity of leadership roles, objectives and tools. This is a complex agenda, involving multiple stakeholders working individually and collectively. Recent analysis (Doyle, 2021) made the case for developing a stronger policy engagement framework and proposed a new and more integrated architecture connecting the efforts in three key areas – policymakers (government and Oireachtas), higher education institutions and funders.

Given the nature of this national ambition, it is important to recognise at the outset that leadership will inevitably be distributed and to pay attention to the arrangements which allow the various stakeholders to talk to each other and to work together to jointly find ways forward to achieve progress. A particular focus has, rightly, been on the need to put in place the necessary bridges to allow the national policy/research dialogue to deepen and enrich over time.

The next section reviews a range of important recent developments which have significantly advanced this agenda across and between the Irish civil service and the higher education sector in particular. The following sections identify learnings which have emerged from discussions as important pointers for future action, and place a specific spotlight on how a more systematic approach to actively curating knowledge can assist in building the national capacity for policy engagement. The final section draws a number of conclusions from this analysis and proposes a set of potential next steps.

Building the national research/policy engagement interface – Taking stock of progress to date

Important steps are now being taken to put in place the necessary architecture to strengthen the link between the academic and policymaking communities. The Royal Irish Academy (RIA) publication *Research for Public Policy: An Outline Roadmap* (Doyle et

al., 2021) offered valuable insights into a suitable future approach and identified three development pathways as follows:

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

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

Pathway 3: Knowledge management and knowledge brokerage.

These three themes have provided a useful conceptual framework for designing current and future interventions, and for uniting what had previously been a range of somewhat disparate and fragmented activities. Important structural and policy initiatives are currently underway across and between both the higher education sector and the civil service sector in support of these objectives. It is useful at this point to review these developments in the following paragraphs.

Building the architecture in the higher education sector

Significant change is occurring in the Irish higher education sector, where the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) has given a strong focus and leadership for change and development. Important institutional initiatives are either in place or underway, which all impact on the research for public policy agenda, including:

- The establishment of DFHERIS and a specific commitment to the development of research for public policy in its *Statement of Strategy*.
- The establishment of an Evidence for Policy Unit within the department with a mandate to move this agenda forward. A key stakeholder advisory group has been helping to develop an overall framework within which the evidence for policy work can be taken forward on a systematic and consistent basis.
- The publication of *Impact 2030 – Ireland’s Research and Innovation Strategy* (DFHERIS, 2022), which set out national goals and objectives, focusing in particular on how we respond to the grand challenges faced by the country in the years ahead.
- The enactment of the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, which sets out the enhanced role of the authority, including in relation to the performance agreements with individual higher education institutions.
- Work is ongoing on a revised Science Advice Mechanism for Ireland.

- A range of important policy engagement work is being led by the Irish Universities Association and Campus Engage.
- The publication of the work of the Expert Committee on ‘Creating Our Future’, which was charged with accurately conveying the voice of Ireland and with bringing forward recommendations to government in order to inspire future research and future-proof Ireland’s research system (Creating Our Future Expert Committee, 2022).
- The establishment of the Research and Innovation Policy Advisory Forum was announced recently by Minister Simon Harris, who has indicated that he will chair this forum. This is an important part of the overall machinery for implementation of Innovation 2030 and the wider national research effort (DFHERIS, 2023b).

Development of structures within the civil service

Meanwhile, other important institutional changes are taking place within the civil service designed to help to build the bridges, as recommended by the RIA. These include:

- The inclusion in the *Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy* (Government of Ireland, 2021) of a core theme focused on delivering evidence-informed policy and services. The plan includes an important commitment to developing mechanisms in conjunction with higher education institutions and research funders to exchange evidence and research insights between the civil service and the research community in relation to policy priorities and major societal challenges.
- The leadership role has been clearly assigned to the Civil Service Management Board, comprised of the secretaries general of government departments and agencies, chaired by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.
- A Civil Service Research Network has been established, chaired by DFHERIS and including all departments, to move this issue forward.
- DFHERIS is intending to publish a *Statement of Research Intent and Priorities* to highlight areas of research interest to researchers (hopefully other departments will follow suit).
- Other major work on mapping needs and resources and building capacity is ongoing under the auspices of the Research Network.

- The role of the Institute of Public Administration in building civil service capacity generally is being strengthened by the consolidation of learning and development resources, including at senior level, in the institute.
- The government is investing in building and enhancing capacity in evidence-based policy and services under the Civil Service Renewal Programme, including in particular the Irish Government Economic Evaluation Service² and the Irish Government Statistical Service.³
- The civil service is supporting the development of cross-sectoral initiatives that aim to strengthen links between the civil service and the university sector in the area of public policy development. This includes the secondment of two former secretaries general to Maynooth University and the University of Galway, who also provide support to DFHERIS in progressing the programme of work in this area.
- The recently published OECD report *Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland* is very relevant to the design of the next steps within the Irish public service (OECD, 2023).

Institutional arrangements for funding research and innovation

- The General Scheme of Research and Innovation Bill 2023 has been published (DFHERIS, 2023a), providing for the establishment of the new Research and Innovation Funding Agency and the amalgamation of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland. *Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Report on Pre Legislative Scrutiny of the Research and Innovation Bill, 2023* has now been published (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023).
- Science Foundation Ireland has launched the SFI Science Policy Research Programme 2023 with the aims, inter alia, of enabling training of policy researchers and provision of support to academics to conduct focused research in science funding policy in order to build capacity. SFI's Public Service Fellowship initiative is also an important contribution to this work.

² See <https://www.gov.ie/ga/eolas-eagraiochta/8f949-irish-government-economic-and-evaluation-service-igees/#about-igees>

³ See <https://www.cso.ie/en/aboutus/lgdp/cgt/ocg/csogroups/irishgovernmentstatisticalserviceigss/>

- The Irish Research Council continues to play a vital role in funding excellent research across all disciplines and in particular to catalyse research addressing the grand societal challenges through a range of programmes.

Given the progress which is now being made, it is useful to reflect on how best to support a positive and structured dialogue to move forward in the next phase of this work.

Enhancing the dialogue between the research and the policymaking communities – Some practical approaches

Because this is a complex agenda, moving towards the alignment and mobilisation of a range of players with very different cultures and outlooks is not an easy or straightforward task. However, some important thinking and guidance on the development of the research infrastructure in an Irish context are emerging. The following section draws on learnings from a recent RIA webinar and from work in relation to climate action – and in particular a recent seminar organised by the Environmental Protection Agency. These events, among others, have helped to identify relevant issues to assist in designing and prioritising activity in the next phase.

In September 2022 the RIA hosted a webinar on ‘Sourcing Science Advice: What Can We Learn from Europe and Beyond?’. A range of speakers contributed to the discussion from an international and an EU perspective. The key message was the need to tailor action to meet Ireland’s specific needs. A number of practical approaches were identified which have contributed to building healthy ecosystems at national, European and global level.

For example, in an EU context the Joint Research Centre and its Knowledge for Policy Unit are working to enhance the dialogue between the two very different communities of scientists and policymakers. Specifically, they are taking a range of actions to input to and strengthen this agenda, including commissioning focused research on important topics, developing and publishing practical toolkits, and hosting workshops to support better relationship-building and communications. Of particular relevance is the recent *Science for Policy Handbook* (Šucha & Sienkiewicz, 2020), which provides advice on how to bring science to the attention of policymakers and is an important contribution designed to help researchers to navigate this terrain.

It was clear from this webinar that valuable resources are available globally and within the EU to assist Ireland in this work – including the experience of similar national and international efforts, practical tools and toolkits which have been developed and published, and relevant competency frameworks which are now designed and available.

Looking closer to home in terms of environmental and climate challenges, the *Climate Action Plan 2023: CAP23 – Changing Ireland for the Better* (Government of Ireland, 2023) devotes an entire chapter to the development of a whole-of-government approach to research and innovation to help in addressing climate change. This work has been taken forward by a range of activities, including the seminar on ‘Environmental Science to Policy’, organised by the Environmental Protection Agency (2023) on 5 October 2022, which gave stakeholders the opportunity for an in-depth consideration of these issues as they apply to the environment and climate areas.

Out of these events, a number of common messages have emerged as follows:

The need to look to the future in a structured and systematic way

The exploration of the role of strategic foresight in supporting more long-term policy considerations is an important one. The recent work by the OECD on Ireland’s public policy and strategic foresight capacity, published in May 2023, is of particular interest in this regard. A minimum fifty-year time horizon will undoubtedly be required if Ireland is to prepare for the changes to come in respect of climate change and from other directions.

Actions need to be tailored to meet Irish needs

Key to success will be creating a joined-up, national science advice ecosystem which is tailored specifically to Irish circumstances and includes a feedback loop to assess impact on societal challenges in real time.

The importance of setting out clear structures for leadership and setting strategic direction

It is essential that clear and appropriate leadership roles are set out in building a strong framework within which national research and science activities can be better mobilised and aligned in support of national policy.

Inclusion of transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research perspectives is vital

In designing a system which works for Ireland and which ensures access to the widest range of knowledge and experience, it is an essential requirement to include transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research as well as all disciplines in the endeavour.

Focusing on building capacity is a priority in the next phase

There is a need to invest strategically in building capacity in both the research and the policymaking communities to support an effective interface and a positive dialogue over the longer term. It will be important in this context to identify practical and proactive ways in which to move from the current set of relationships, which are built on individual relationships between policymakers and scientists, to a system based on institutional trust which values and supports long-term, sustainable policymaking and implementation.

Strengthening multi-stakeholder approaches to support policy development is important

A range of approaches are needed in order to devise ways to structure multi-stakeholder approaches to more effectively support policy development. This will involve finding new and innovative ways for policymakers and scientists to work together in support of policy objectives and a greater focus on *ex post* evaluation. In addition, ensuring that engaged research and civic society are a core element in the design of the ecosystem from the outset will be important.

Developing Ireland's capacity for policy engagement – Putting a focus on knowledge in the next phase

It is increasingly recognised that Ireland's research expertise represents a significant national strategic asset, and that enhancing the modes of connectivity and dialogue across the research and policy communities will significantly strengthen the quality and depth of the knowledge and insights available to policymakers charged with responding to complex policy challenges. It is clear also that significant thought is now being given to how best to further design and develop this national capacity. A focus on the themes of knowledge

management⁴ and knowledge brokerage,⁵ which the RIA identified in the *Roadmap* document, is particularly useful and important at this juncture.

More systematic approaches are clearly required in order to effectively access and utilise knowledge – that involves knowing what, where and to whom policymakers can turn to access the knowledge and expertise required to contribute to policy deliberations on any given issue. Knowledge management and brokerage provide a systematic focus on the mechanisms through which to forge links, relations and connection points for the research and policymaking communities. This needs to be developed at a number of levels – at national level, but also within and between government departments and agencies on the one hand and the higher education institutions on the other.

A recent example of how to plot the way forward on this agenda was the event jointly organised by the Irish Universities Association/Campus Engage and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) in March 2023 entitled ‘Building Bridges for Evidence Informed Public Policy: Youth Wellbeing’. The reflections on the day by the three chairs (Campus Engage, 2023) contained in the report set out some useful insights as follows:

This event demonstrated that a short, well-prepared, carefully planned engagement can get to the heart of challenging policy issues, and bring together key actors who would not typically have the opportunity to exchange views in this way. The effectiveness of the event was greatly assisted by the detailed planning that went into organising it. This involved thinking on what themes to address and then drafting a short background paper to set up these themes for discussion. Furthermore, a lot of planning also went into sourcing academics and policy-makers to take part, in particular the academics to set up the discussions in the three sessions.

⁴ Knowledge management is the process of critically managing knowledge to meet existing needs, to identify and exploit existing and acquired knowledge assets, and to develop new opportunities (Quintas et al., 1997).

⁵ The concept of knowledge brokerage revolves around an understanding of the ontologies, cultures and languages of both the policy community and the science community, in order to effectively link the two bidirectionally (Gluckman et al., 2021).

The event allowed a Government Department to present its priorities and key research questions in a collaborative setting, and for research experts in the area to highlight their work in response. The smaller group discussions were particularly valuable, enabling discussion of work underway and identification of areas where gaps exist.

A clear lesson is that given the extent of policy issues that are shared across Government Departments and agencies, it is important to reflect this in the spread of invitations. Similarly, thought needs to be given on how to support researchers within and across the academic community in Ireland to come together to discuss and develop topics of common interest.

Focusing in this way on ‘what works’ gives valuable insight into the design and implementation of the next phase in strengthening policy engagement in Ireland.

Conclusions and next steps

The framework set out by the RIA in *Research for Public Policy: An Outline Roadmap*, which focuses on building bridges, on joining up and scaling up, and on knowledge management and brokerage, continues to represent a very useful and relevant framework within which to align efforts across a range of stakeholders.

Ireland is currently in the process of making significant efforts to design the new arrangements for policy engagement and has been very successful over a short period of time in making major advances in developing this national infrastructure. Important gains have already been made in terms of identifying key issues and putting new structures and processes into place.

What has clearly emerged from this work is that knowledge management and brokerage is a key enabler of evidence-informed policymaking and that boundary actors and organisations are needed to bridge the divides between different knowledge communities and policymakers. A trusted and effective set of brokerage arrangements at the science–policy interface can play a crucial role in addressing problems such as imbalances in knowledge between the different parties and in clarifying policy options, amongst others. So, the next phase of work on this architecture in Ireland would include a

particular focus on building the structures for knowledge management, knowledge brokerage and knowledge synthesis.⁶

This means putting in place a framework for knowledge management and brokerage expertise in both the higher education and policymaking processes. There are likely to be institutional and national levels within this framework. The framework will need to identify the need for brokering within each government department and higher education institution. There is also a need to look at the national element of the framework that would link up all of these developments in a coherent way. This national role has been described as ‘beyond simply communicating evidence, towards identifying options, helping policymakers understand the likely impact of choices, and providing advice from a scientific viewpoint’ (Topp et al., 2018).

Ireland already has a strong set of arrangements in place to support the relationships between higher education and the enterprise and innovation sectors, including through the work of Enterprise Ireland and the Industrial Development Authority, Knowledge Transfer Ireland, and the network of technology transfer offices and the research offices in higher education institutions, amongst others.

With some careful thinking and (a little) re-engineering, the role of the research offices in the higher education institutions can become the central asset in driving forward this work from the higher education perspective. There is also a range of other intermediary agencies who can help in this work. Campus Engage is currently engaged as part of its mission, as is the Centre for Effective Services. The changes already in play across the civil service can be designed to dovetail and complement these developments and, together, they will form an important part of the new national infrastructure which is collectively being built.

We know that how organisational structures are arranged really matters. With investment and innovation, Ireland now has a major opportunity to build a strong and vibrant national research infrastructure well connected to the world of policymaking that will strengthen the collective ability to identify and respond to the issues and challenges which Ireland currently faces and which will emerge in the years ahead.

⁶ Knowledge synthesis is a term used to describe the method of synthesising results from individual studies and interpreting these results within the context of global evidence.

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