

Maximising the impact of research evidence on policy

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Abstract

In an increasingly complex and uncertain world, the need for evidence to inform public-policy responses is becoming ever stronger. This wide-ranging article provides an overview of government efforts in recent years to maximise the impact of evidence on Ireland’s policy system. It begins by setting out the context to government ambitions in this area, exploring the main drivers of the evidence for policy agenda. The role and activities undertaken by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, along with its partners, are outlined and the components of the national evidence ecosystem broadly described. Key challenges in respect of effective research–policy engagement are highlighted. Drawing from extensive dialogue and consultation with stakeholders, the article identifies opportunities for improving engagement between government departments and academia. In the context of significant recent developments, it concludes by looking ahead to the key elements of a stronger evidence base for policy system.

Keywords: academia, engagement, evidence-informed policy-making, Ireland, public policy, research.

¹ This paper was written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Introduction

Addressing public-policy issues grows ever more complicated in the face of unpredictable and rapidly changing global events and trends. The capacity of governments to adapt and respond to emerging challenges impacting upon economic and societal well-being is dependent on their ability to mobilise the information, expertise and skills necessary for formulating innovative and effective solutions to policy problems. The use of objective, reliable evidence in policy development helps to validate decision-making, demonstrate transparency and build public trust. Many countries, including Ireland, are striving to enhance the impact of data and research evidence within their policy systems. The prevalence of research for policy engagement initiatives over the last decade reflects this growing awareness and recognition of the value of research activity and expertise in supporting policy decision-making.

Against the backdrop of an expanding population, strong economic growth and external challenges, the Irish public service, has demonstrated high levels of innovation and agility. However, to meet future challenges and changing societal needs and expectations, a new approach to public services in Ireland is required (Moloney et al., 2024). In seeking to achieve optimal outcomes for citizens, current public service reform plans emphasise the central role that evidence will play in framing policies and programmes (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (DPENDR), 2021, 2023). Translating a commitment to strengthen Ireland's approach to evidence-informed policies and services into tangible change requires the right balance of capacity, coordination, supporting infrastructure, and, crucially, long-term institutional commitment within both the policy and research systems. Increasing both the supply of, and demand for, evidence to inform policy is the overarching goal.

This paper will reflect on national activity to address an increasingly urgent aspect of the policy process, complementing the other contributions in this special evidence-themed edition of *Administration*. In particular, the article outlines the efforts by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), and its partners, to promote better engagement between government departments and the publicly funded higher education research sector² with the intention of

² The higher education research sector comprises universities, technological universities, research-performing organisations and research funders.

improving the production and use of policy-relevant research. While researchers need clarity on evidence requirements of the policy system, it is equally important that policymakers have the capability of deciphering and effectively applying evidence in their work. Notwithstanding recent progress, challenges remain while opportunities exist for strengthening evidence-informed policy-making in Ireland.

The first section of the paper provides background information on the evidence-for-policy system in Ireland, setting out the policy context, drivers for change and key evidence structures. The next section focuses on research–policy engagement, outlining key insights from DFHERIS-led consultation and engagement with researchers and policymakers which identified barriers to working more closely on key policy challenges. This is followed by a section describing, broadly, areas for improvement, outlining key considerations in driving stronger links between the research and policy communities. The final section offers concluding remarks, setting out key ambitions for Ireland’s evidence-for-policy system and the essential elements to make it a reality.

For the purposes of clarity, some explanations are provided. The terms ‘evidence for policy’ and ‘research for policy’ are used interchangeably throughout this paper, referring to the generation of policy-relevant information to support the development of public policies. Both of the terms ‘policy-making’ and ‘policy development’ are used to mean the process of formulating, implementing and evaluating policies. ‘Policy practitioner’ refers to civil and public servants with a role in the policy process; ‘researcher’ means a professional working in Ireland’s public research system, across any discipline,³ who systematically collects, analyses and publishes research findings. Finally, while the outputs of independent researchers can contribute to all stages of the policy cycle, this article mainly focuses on evidence produced by higher education researchers and to a lesser extent, the support structures within the civil service.

Background

Policy context

Evidence, broadly defined as policy-relevant information, can be used to support all stages of the policy cycle: development, implementation

³ The disciplines are arts, humanities and social sciences as well as science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

and evaluation.⁴ It comes in different forms and from diverse sources, including research, statistics and systematic reviews (European Commission, 2024). With policy decisions impacting citizen's daily lives, advice and recommendations from public servants to the government should be underpinned by a robust evidence base. Of course, in reality, policy development is often complicated and non-linear in nature with 'no hard-set rule to determine which course should be taken' (Civil Service Management Board, 2025, p. 63). Therefore, it must be acknowledged that evidence must be balanced against other key legitimacy and feasibility considerations.

Expanding the role and impact of evidence in Ireland's policy-making system has been a long-term endeavour. In 2012, Frances Ruane argued for a 'more systematic' approach to the use of research in policy-making, involving greater engagement between researchers and policymakers on pressing policy questions and the development of a 'meaningful research agenda' by both sides (Ruane, 2012, pp. 136 and 138). The coronavirus crisis marked a turning point for policy-making in Ireland. For the National Economic and Social Council, in its report on lessons for Irish public policy arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, the crisis represented 'an important shift to deepened engagement' between the public policy system and experts, stakeholders and citizens in the development of more effective policy responses (National Economic and Social Council, 2022, p. 4). The experience of the pandemic clearly demonstrated the role of robust evidence in the decision-making process and in doing so, underlined the value of investing in national research capacity, and aligning research expertise with policy challenges (O'Connor, 2022). Indeed, governments, around the world, are seeking to maximise the impact of academic evidence on policy processes with publicly funded research, increasingly, expected to demonstrate a 'real-world' impact (Ó Foghlú & Boyle, 2024).

Reflecting this emphasis on evidence for policy, several government publications, in Ireland, highlight the complexity of policy-making, stressing the need to ground decisions in reliable evidence. However, to achieve a more evidence-focused approach to policy, capacity and capability deficiencies must be addressed, while a greater level of

⁴ According to the Council of the European Commission, the term 'evidence' refers to information that is systematically and scientifically collected, analysed and evaluated to inform policy design, policy development, programme implementation, evaluation and practice.

engagement and coordination between government departments and academia is required. A brief overview of the policy context is provided below.

Impact 2030. Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy (DFHERIS, 2022) seeks to put research and innovation at the heart of Ireland's policy response to social, economic and environmental problems. Greater connectivity and collaboration between the public research system and government, along with new science advice structures, are cited as critical elements for maximising the impact of research on the policy agendas of government departments and agencies. The strategy calls for the improved articulation of departmental policy priorities to the academic community, underpinned by effective knowledge brokering mechanisms and mobility opportunities.

Enhancing Ireland's approach to evidence-informed policy development is an ambition threaded through current public service reform plans. The *Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy* calls for the development of mechanisms that will 'exchange evidence and research insights between the civil service and the research community in relation to policy priorities and major societal challenges' (DPENDR, 2021, p. 15). The *Better Public Services* transformation strategy (DPENDR, 2023) sets the ambition for the wider public service, placing a particular emphasis on evidence-informed policies and services designed for, and with, the public.

In line with the ambitions of the above strategies, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) undertook a review of Ireland's policy development system and its capacity to tackle complex societal issues. The assessment report, published in 2023, reflected on the policy process, noting that the 'university sector and academics are an important part of the policy ecosystem, both in terms of their capacity to produce research insights and their capability to build the evidence base' (OECD, 2023, p. 34). Furthermore, the review highlighted a desire among senior and mid-level civil servants for stronger linkages between government departments and academia. In calling for a more specialised skills base, the OECD argued for enhanced capacity in the public service to use evidence and data for policy development (OECD, 2023).

In May 2025, the Civil Service Management Board, published the *Policy Handbook: A 'Real World' Guide to Policy Development* to support policy professionals in their work (Civil Service Management Board, 2025). The handbook centres on three pillars of policy: evidence, feasibility and legitimacy. While evidence is only one

element feeding into the policy process, the handbook nevertheless states that developing good policies is more challenging without it.

At the European level, key landmark agreements have emphasised the importance of using scientific evidence to help address shared challenges and crises. In December 2023, Member States adopted European Council conclusions on strengthening the role and impact of research and innovation in European Union (EU) policy formation, noting that evidence from across all disciplines, including the humanities and social sciences, is critical to devising effective policy responses to major challenges (European Commission, 2023). In addition, the Ministerial Declaration of Ghent of the European Public Administration Network, signed in February 2024, referred to the value of capacity building for evidence-informed policy-making throughout the government and of strengthening engagement between policy and scientific institutions (European Public Administration Network, 2024).

More recently, a number of commitments in the *Programme for Government 2025* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) underline the importance attached to evidence for policy, proposing to:

- establish a formal pathway for third-level researchers to inform government policy on critical issues based on internationally recognised research;
- scale up exchange programmes and secondments between academia and government, to enhance policy-making;
- support groundbreaking research that bridges academia, industry and government, leveraging Ireland's tertiary sector expertise;
- encourage academic and research involvement in public life and in contributing to the solution of societal challenges such as healthcare, housing and infrastructure.

Hence, strengthening research–policy linkages and maximising the impact of research capacity on policy responses is a strategic imperative across government. This growing focus on evidence reflects public sentiment in Ireland for research-informed and future-orientated policy development to deliver better policy outcomes. However, there are several drivers – considered in the next section – behind the efforts to develop a more collaborative and evidence-informed approach to public policy.

Drivers of evidence for policy. In the context of global uncertainty and volatility, the need for evidence to improve policy responses has perhaps never been greater. The key factors driving the evidence agenda are summarised below.

A robust evidence base to underpin policy decision-making. The pace, breadth and depth of change facing the world in the decades ahead presents a significant challenge for policy practitioners, who must quickly develop a deep understanding of these complex societal concerns, to anticipate and prepare for their impacts (European Parliament and European Strategy and Policy Analysis System, 2024). Access to, and utilisation of, reliable data and research evidence helps inform effective policies, while also demonstrating transparency, accountability and clarity around decision-making to the public.

Maximise the return on exchequer investment in the public research sector. According to the *Research and Development Budget 2023–2024*, projected spend by government on research and innovation was expected to reach €1,114 million in 2024 (DFHERIS, 2025a). Expenditure is used to support the higher education research sector, inclusive of over 15,000 full-time equivalent researchers and support staff across twenty-one institutions. A strategic ambition under *Impact 2030*, is to maximise the return on state investment in Ireland’s research sector and fully leverage expertise within the sector for the public good.

Building trust in government. Data from an OECD trust survey shows that the use and communication of evidence to inform policies and decision-making is key to engendering public confidence in government. Survey responses reinforce the view that ‘using better, transparent and verifiable evidence in decision-making’ is a critical lever for improving trust (OECD, 2024, p. 12). At the national level, the role of research evidence in fostering public trust was a key theme emerging from large-scale public consultation on future research and innovation. Findings from the *Creating Our Future* initiative, which received over 18,000 submissions, highlighted a desire among members of the public for both longer-term thinking in the policy process, and for publicly funded research to support policy responses at the local and national levels (Government of Ireland, 2021a).

Building trust in science. While Irish citizens are, for the most part, still positively disposed towards scientific opinion, more recent geopolitical shifts and disruptive influences at home and abroad have fostered a level of public scepticism towards science and open research. The European Commission reaffirmed its commitment to free and independent research through the *Choose Europe* initiative, which seeks to attract scientists from regions facing political, funding and academic constraints (European Commission, 2026a). Recent national developments, including the appointment of the Government Chief Science Advisor and the proposed Global Talent Programme (DFHERIS, 2024, 2025b), signals to researchers, policymakers and the public that research is recognised as critical to our economic and societal well-being.

Cross-disciplinary funding for societal challenges. The Research and Innovation Act 2024, a transformative piece of legislation for Ireland's research funding landscape, mandates Research Ireland to 'support the undertaking of research and innovation that informs the development of public policy' (Research and Innovation Act 2024, section 9).⁵ Ireland's new agency, will therefore play a central coordination and funding role in ensuring that research activities make a bigger contribution to policy decision-making. In driving this ambition, Research Ireland will work to promote greater engagement between government bodies and the research system. The agency engages regularly with DFHERIS-led structures, to progress shared objectives. Its first strategy, published in March 2026, reflects a clear ambition to provide opportunities for the research community to connect to government priorities, bringing expertise from across disciplines to bear on policy solutions. In shaping Ireland's approach to evidence-informed public policy, the agency promises to 'work with individual Government Departments to support and facilitate their research ambition...providing supports and brokering connections between Government, policy practitioners, end-users and the research community' (Research Ireland, 2026, pp. 32–3).

DFHERIS Research for Policy activity. Based in DFHERIS, the research for policy team⁶ leads key actions under *Impact 2030* to strengthen connectivity between government departments and

⁵ The Act refers to the agency as *Taighde Éireann*.

⁶ Before an organisational restructure, the team was part of DFHERIS' Evidence for Policy Unit.

Ireland's research sector. DFHERIS has established core structures to foster research-policy engagement. This includes the Civil Service Research Network (CSRN), established following approval by the Civil Service Management Board in December 2022. Chaired and managed by DFHERIS, the network is comprised of research leads from all government departments, the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES), the Central Statistics Office and the Revenue Commissioners. Its primary focus is to provide a forum for member organisations to share best practice, experiences and insights in respect of research for policy and departmental practices. CSRN activities are underpinned by a thematic work programme which focuses on areas identified by members. The network has been valuable in building a community of practitioners across diverse policy remits and a key point of connection for emerging research-sector activity, networking, research-funding opportunities and capacity building. DFHERIS also works closely with the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and on specific evidence-focused objectives across key civil service reform strategies.

Building effective two-way engagement across the research-policy interface requires a co-created and informed approach. To that end, DFHERIS has engaged representatives and stakeholders from across the public research system to form a deeper understanding of the challenges and experiences of researchers seeking to share their research insights and meaningfully engage with societal and policy partners. In doing so, the department has sought to build awareness of, and support for, emerging higher education-based structures, research networks and policy engagement activity.

This engagement and consultation activity has been critical to connecting key components, building a community of practice and progressing a cohesive approach to the development of the evidence ecosystem. Insights from these interactions and consultation efforts are provided in a subsequent section of the paper.

European activity and the Technical Support Instrument project.

The development of national structures and activity is situated within the context of wider international efforts to strengthen evidence in policy processes. DFHERIS is actively engaged with European counterparts via dedicated networks and initiatives, ensuring that national activity is informed by, and feeds into, international best practice.

In 2025, DFHERIS successfully applied to participate in a multi-country research project on evidence-informed policy-making. The project is funded by the European Commission under the Technical Support Instrument programme, which supports Member States in the design and implementation of reforms. DFHERIS will lead Irish participation in this thirty-month project, in partnership with key stakeholders across the research and policy sectors.⁷ The project represents a timely opportunity to assess the national evidence ecosystem: evaluate the impact of measures, highlight challenges and identify steps to strengthen Ireland's approach. The broad contours of this evidence ecosystem are described in the next section.

National evidence for policy ecosystem. A well-connected and networked evidence for policy ecosystem is required to produce relevant and reliable evidence. Developing a cohesive ecosystem in Ireland can be a challenging endeavour. A discussion paper on developing a national approach to research for policy noted: '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' (Doyle et al., 2021, p. 3). To bridge the gap between researchers and policy professionals, clear channels are required to network, build trust and align work.

The national evidence ecosystem is complex and multi-layered with a multitude of diverse stakeholders and contributors. For the purpose of providing high-level context, the figure below (Figure 1) sets out four key interrelated components: the civil service, higher education sector, funding bodies and science advice.⁸

Civil service. Evidence for public policy can be delivered in different forms, drawn from a wide range of sources. Within the civil service, a system of evidence support structures has evolved which targets a more robust approach to policy. To strengthen the evidence base for policy development, departments have grown their expertise and research capacity. Key evidence structures within the civil service are summarised below.

⁷ Department of the Taoiseach, DPENDR, Central Statistics Office, Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, Institute of Public Administration, Irish Universities Association, and Technological Universities Association.

⁸ For clarity, the Research for Policy team is mainly, but not exclusively, concerned with promoting the level of engagement between the higher education and civil service components of this ecosystem.

Figure 1: Main components of the evidence ecosystem in Ireland.



Data and evaluation support is provided across the civil service by IGEES and the National Statistical Service. Operating across all departments, IGEES has been instrumental in embedding a culture of evaluation, while the National Statistical Service had improved the availability and utilisation of data for policy development.

With government departments evolving incrementally and organically over the years, there is considerable diversity across the civil service sector with regard to departmental resources, structures and evidence needs. This is evidenced from the differing organisational arrangements and positioning of specialist staff. Many departments have dedicated research units with staff to conduct research, oversee research programmes and/or deliver knowledge brokerage. Specialist research staff in other departments may be distributed across policy or evaluation units.⁹

⁹ According to an initial DFHERIS scoping survey of all government departments in 2023, approximately 180 staff across the civil service were engaged in activities relating to specialist research, knowledge transfer, research funding and the commissioning of projects.

Several departments have established advisory councils (e.g. the Artificial Intelligence Advisory Council and the Climate Change Advisory Council) which are a form of structured collaboration between external experts and policymakers. These councils, often with members drawn from academia, provide strategic advice to officials on a range of issues to inform policy decisions.

Science advice. In January 2025, a new Government Chief Science Advisor was appointed as a first stage in establishing new science advice structures to connect excellent scientific expertise to challenging policy issues. Recognising that science advice in policy formation is complex, a National Science Advice Forum was established in 2026, to expand and deepen the expertise needed to advise on all scientific matters, with experts drawn from across a range of disciplines. These new structures reflect a critical step and commitment to linking scientific expertise with government priority areas and advancing science advice capacity across government.

Alongside the new national science advice structures, several departments are supported by sectoral specialist organisations (e.g. Teagasc, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Institute of Public Health) and technical experts (e.g. the chief medical, nursing and veterinary officers). It is essential that departments draw on subject-specific advisory mechanisms, both internal and external, for science advice on policy questions.

Higher education research sector. There is a significant level of activity underway within the Irish higher education sector aimed at enhancing the impact of research evidence on policy development. To help bridge the research–policy interface, a wide range of brokerage-type functions and supports are provided by higher education institutions (HEIs).

Centralised functions within HEIs, many of which are building on the success of well-established institutional initiatives, support academic researchers in their interactions with policy practitioners and communication with non-technical audiences. For example, institutes for policy and research centres serve as hubs for collaboration, knowledge exchange and engagement. In addition, functions focused on policy engagement and engaged research have been established with specialist staff (e.g. Research Impact Officers and research communication professionals) tasked with promoting

research impact and providing supports (e.g. resources, training, funding guidance and networking events) to the academic community.

The placing of senior civil servant secondees in a number of HEIs has helped to forge closer links between the civil service and the higher education sector as they share experiences and insights with researchers on how government works in practice. Thus, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges associated with policy development and the role that academia can play in this process. The secondment of civil servants into the higher education system has also generated a high level of research for policy activity and capacity-building within the HEIs.

Finally, higher education representative bodies, including the Irish Universities Association and the Technological Universities Association play a vital role in building connectivity between the research and policy communities and provide a critical touchpoint for engagement and design of research for policy activity.

Research funders. Research funding is a powerful lever for encouraging and incentivising research engagement and building capacity in policy-relevant areas. Several departments are key research funders, with DFHERIS; the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment; the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment; and the Department of Health, together, managing 96 per cent of total government investment in research and innovation activity. Many departments also collaborate on research calls operated by sector-specific research funders under their remit (e.g. the Environment Protection Agency, Teagasc and the Health Research Board). Alongside sectoral schemes, departments have engaged national research-funding agencies to administer calls which support engagement on broad policy-relevant issues. Several of these programmes were introduced by the former Irish Research Council (i.e. COALESCE and New Foundations) and the former Science Foundation Ireland (i.e. National Challenge call and the Public Sector Fellowship scheme) and continue to be managed by Research Ireland.

Scoping and defining the challenges

Research–policy engagement

Policy engagement is a term ‘describing the many ways that researchers and policymakers connect and explore common interests

at various stages in their respective research and policymaking processes' (University of Oxford, 2026). Previous sections in this paper have endeavoured to provide a broad overview of this activity and the continuously evolving and complex national evidence ecosystem. The ambition for the evidence for policy agenda is set out across national and organisational strategies and reflected in the expansion in structures and initiatives targeting research–policy linkages. While these developments are welcome, the challenge now is to move towards better integration of this architecture, where efforts and resources are invested effectively. With many approaches to promoting engagement and varying levels of disparate activity, there must be a 'clear sense of what participants want to achieve and why' (Oliver et al., 2022). DFHERIS consulted extensively with stakeholders to better understand the objectives of researchers and policymakers and identify ways to improve coordination of effort in respect of engagement activity. The intention was to capture views on perceived barriers and opportunities to strengthen linkages between academia and government departments with the aim of supporting a 'rigorous, professional and evidence-informed approach to policy development' (Government of Ireland, 2021b, p. 14). This consultation process included:

- a public consultation targeting researchers across HEIs, research centres and research-performing organisations;
- 'design thinking' workshops involving researchers and policymakers which explored opportunities for capacity development and structural engagement;
- engagement with key networks, including CSRN members and emerging higher education networks to capture real-world experience of evidence–policy collaboration;
- research–policy focused conferences and events led or co-hosted by DFHERIS.

Based on insights from this consultation and scoping activity, the next section of the paper outlines key areas for consideration in promoting linkages and improving the uptake of evidence in the policy process.

Key pinch points for engagement

Misaligned time horizons. Policy practitioners are often required to deliver policy solutions within constricted timeframes. In addition, policy development does not follow a clear or sequential path and may

consist of varying stages, components and stakeholders. For their part, researchers must balance policy-focused work against the demands of the academic calendar and resource considerations. Hence, the window of opportunity for research engagement and collaboration can be limited. Managing expectations in the context of tight timescales and competing demands is essential and requires clear communication from the outset.

Structures for engagement. Researchers emphasised the need for greater clarity on connection points within the civil service and opportunities for engagement, noting that the lack of formal and informal structures (e.g. networks, broker organisations and intermediaries) can be a significant blockage to relationship-building. This can be particularly challenging for both early-stage researchers and new entrants to the policy system. In the absence of a structured approach to engagement, research–policy interactions are often ad hoc with no defined channel or mechanism for addressing barriers to collaboration.

Skills development. Capacity gaps across the research and policy sectors were highlighted by many stakeholders. It was felt that there should be a particular focus on enhancing the critical skills of researchers, specifically the translation and communication of evidence for policy audiences. At the same time, policymakers need to be equipped with the skills for defining research questions, and for evaluating and applying evidence in decision-making. Efforts to address these gaps has begun, with initiatives like Evidence Synthesis Ireland, offering tailored training for researchers and policymakers to support the supply and use of rapid evidence for policy development. In conjunction with CSRN colleagues, DFHERIS engaged Evidence Synthesis Ireland in the roll out of pilot workshops for policy practitioners from across the civil service. With growing demand for evidence skills development, a key next step is to engage training providers to scale up and provide supports on a continual basis.

Funding supports. Dedicated research funding schemes and support mechanisms are critical enablers for engagement, facilitating access to resources for networking, planning and conducting policy-relevant research. Specifically, stakeholders point to a need to expand access to supports for rapid-evidence briefings, engaged research and mission-orientated research and long-term investment to sustain engagement activities within the research and policy communities; for example, funding for networking/brokerage events.

Communications. In the absence of central coordination structures, there is a perceived need for improved communications around engagement opportunities and policy needs. This includes greater clarity on departmental policy priorities and objectives and increased visibility of opportunities for research–policy engagement. Several government departments have made progress in terms of identifying and publishing their evidence needs, complemented by dedicated knowledge brokerage events to encourage greater engagement with researchers working in the relevant policy areas. Despite this, more needs to be done. Researchers, especially early career researchers, often lack a clear understanding of the policy development process and how their evidence contributed, or could contribute, to policy decision-making.

Research impact and incentives to engage. Determining the impact of research evidence on policy decisions is inherently difficult. The development of effective metrics is challenging as the impact of research can be indistinct or incremental. Furthermore, work carried out by researchers in some disciplines can, by its nature, be more translational or clearly aligned to policy than other fields of research. In this context, several stakeholders were of the view that research information systems within HEIs may not fully capture the impacts of research projects.

The need for adequate incentives for researchers to collaborate with policymakers were highlighted during consultation. Several stakeholders felt that better recognition of research for policy activity in career structures would encourage a greater degree of engagement. For example, it was argued that the assessment criteria used in the academic promotion process still focus heavily on traditional impact metrics, with insufficient weight for policy-relevant activity.

An evolving research–policy engagement programme

There is a significant level of work ongoing across the system to enhance data, evaluation and research activity for better policy development. DFHERIS engagement with stakeholders to date indicates that there are several broad areas of focus with opportunities to improve engagement between government departments and academia. These are outlined below.

Structural supports for engagement

Impact 2030 seeks to strengthen links between the research and policy systems, and improve the visibility of public-policy priorities so that

researchers, at all career stages, can help shape solutions to economic, environmental and societal challenges. Structural supports, which refer to clear and transparent pathways for researchers and policy practitioners to connect, communicate and transfer knowledge, have a critical role to play in strengthening linkages.

The Joint Research Centre (JRC), in its work on evidence ecosystems in the EU, note that scientists and policymakers lack regular and well-supported opportunities to meet and exchange knowledge (JRC, 2024). This appears to mirror the experience of national stakeholders across both the research and policy communities, with calls for the co-design of brokerage, communication and networking mechanisms. An evidence-informed approach is critical to underpinning the development of effective structural supports. Research currently underway, through Research Ireland's Science Policy Research Programme and the Technical Support Instrument project, will provide a deeper understanding of existing brokerage structures and gaps.

As noted earlier, there is much activity within Irish HEIs designed to promote engagement; however, this is disparate across the sector with scope to bring forward a more coherent strategic approach. To address this, there may be scope to utilise emerging structures (e.g. the Higher Education Research Advocates and research impact networks) to share and better coordinate engagement activity across the research sector.

Balance must be struck between support for individuals and support for institutions. Building an evidence ecosystem that supports new entrants, whether policy practitioners or early career researchers, and reduces dependencies on pre-existing relationships, is vital to sustained knowledge exchange. DFHERIS seeks to work closely with and support partners across the evidence ecosystem on the development of sustainable solutions, focusing on effective communication of evidence needs, promoting engagement on areas of mutual interest and making relevant information easily accessible for stakeholders.

Capacity development

The ability of researchers and policymakers to interact with each other is dependent on the correct mix of expertise, knowledge and skills. In this context, capacity development is concerned with efforts to enhance abilities for engagement to generate more policy-relevant research. Of course, increasing the supply of research evidence will not

significantly impact policy development unless policy practitioners and researchers possess the necessary skills to communicate, engage and interpret this knowledge.

At the European level, it is recognised that science for policy requires the expertise of professionals with the right competences and incentives to connect policy-making processes with scientific knowledge and expertise (European Commission, 2022). To meet policy challenges effectively, the JRC proposes that capacity gaps in the research and policy sectors need to be addressed, and in response it has produced complementary competency frameworks to support capacity-building. The competencies covered by the frameworks for researchers and policymakers broadly relate to policy-making, communication, collaboration and engagement (European Commission, 2026b). In Ireland, efforts to promote capacity development should leverage international best practice, including JRC competence frameworks and toolkits, and engagement with European colleagues through emerging communities of practice.

Awareness and refinement of learning and development offerings, tailored to the needs of both researchers and policymakers is critical for strengthening the skills base. For example, evidence synthesis training designed to equip policy practitioners with the skills needed to understand and critically appraise evidence and data will assist in building confidence in engaging the expertise available across the research system. Training in areas like research communication, policy development and advocacy would help to prepare researchers for engaging with policymakers. Flexible course offerings which allow learners to incrementally build capabilities should assist with uptake and ensure both researchers and policy practitioners continually adapt to new methods and innovative technologies.

Secondment and staff exchange opportunities, a form of engagement, help to promote mutual learning between policymakers and researchers and provide a deeper understanding of the inner workings and challenges across sectors. *Impact 2030* (DFHERIS, 2022) aims to encourage researcher mobility and pathways across sectors, while the current *Programme for Government* commits to scaling-up exchange programmes and secondments between academia and government. Thus, it is an explicit objective of government to improve opportunities for research–policy mobility and exchange arrangements; for example, to build on the success of the public policy fellowship programme which promotes knowledge exchange and intersectoral connectivity.

Structures established under *Impact 2030*, like the CSRN, offer mechanisms for identifying synergies in areas of policy interest across departments and agencies, and for improving the coordination and communication of evidence needs. Through the CSRN, DFHERIS will continue to facilitate engagement between Research Ireland and departmental research leads with the aim of increasing the number of exchange opportunities and raising awareness of funding calls.

Recognition for researcher engagement with policy activity

Engagement with higher-education stakeholders points to the often immediate and competing demands on academics' time (e.g. preparing funding applications, working on research projects, teaching responsibilities and other roles/management duties). Such pressures leave little time to reflect on research impact, engage in policy-related activity or avail of capacity-building opportunities in this area. The situation is compounded by existing recognition frameworks which tend to favour traditional academic metrics over policy engagement efforts in career development and promotion structures.

The need to better incentivise engagement and assess policy impact are practices highlighted in a number of reports. For example, calls were made in a discussion paper to strengthen the research for policy architecture by examining how incentives are designed and revising career frameworks and impact assessments within Irish HEIs (Doyle, 2021). The OECD's 2023 review of policy development in Ireland also called for an updated researcher career framework to incorporate policy development relationships and support for academics in areas like induction, coaching and mentoring (OECD, 2023, p. 36). Internationally, momentum around reforming research assessment metrics is also building.

In 2022, the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), a group comprising research, funding and assessment organisations from around the world that is working to improve how research is assessed, published the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment. The agreement emphasises the importance of recognising the diversity of research activities, describing the 'valuable contributions that researchers make to science and for the benefit of society, including diverse outputs beyond journal publications' (CoARA, 2022, p. 5). Broadening assessment criteria to consider other research outputs, like policy contributions, is central to CoARA's vision. The Irish chapter of CoARA, comprised of nine HEIs and three research-funding organisations, promotes this reform

agenda in Ireland's research sector. Such efforts recognise that embedding research evidence as an integral part of the policy development process requires a stronger focus on encouraging, recognising and rewarding policy engagement activities.

Looking ahead and conclusion

In an era of rapid global and domestic change, the ability of governments to respond more coherently and strategically to societal challenges is dependent on stronger policy processes. It is widely recognised that research evidence can play a critical part in public policy-making, contributing to better policies and services. Partnering with Ireland's publicly funded research system to help address complex societal challenges is therefore a key government objective. The research for policy agenda looks to create opportunities for policy practitioners to collaborate with academics on research projects that will enhance the evidence base for policy-making. From the perspective of researchers, policy engagement provides a valuable route to maximising the impact of their existing and planned research activity for the betterment of society.

Recent years have witnessed a focus on building connectivity between Ireland's research and policy communities; however, narrowing the gap is a challenging task. The evidence for policy agenda is closely linked to public service reform which, by its very nature, is a complex and incremental process of change. Despite this, there is much to be optimistic about in light of several significant developments. The establishment of Research Ireland, the appointment of the Government Science Advisor and the publication of the *Policy Handbook* by the Civil Service Management Board, should help provide considerable impetus to the drive for evidence-informed policy-making. Given these developments, it is timely to take stock and consider the opportunities for further strengthening Ireland's approach. It is clear from stakeholder feedback that there is a strong desire to see greater levels of ambition and progress. Inaction will only continue the rather ad hoc, uncoordinated and personalised approach to policy engagement. Moreover, it will not bring about the cultural change needed, within government departments and HEIs, to produce and use policy-relevant research. Rather, further efforts are required to develop a more collaborative, structured and sustainable approach between researchers and policymakers. Of course, demonstrating the value and contribution of research evidence in

devising effective policies will help engender public trust in government. Looking ahead, the ambition should be to build a well-connected, world-class evidence for policy system underpinned by a strong culture of cross-sectoral collaboration and a long-term focus. A more supportive environment in Ireland, for researchers and policy-makers alike, is needed to develop the necessary partnerships and capabilities. Over time, structured linkages with academia, coupled with a more specialised skills base, can maximise the impact of research evidence on policy, and in doing so, enable government departments to deal more effectively with the challenges facing the country and its citizens.

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