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Connecting early career researchers and policymakers: Insights from Young Academy Ireland's Evidence for Policy Summit 2025

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Introduction

Evidence-based policy-making refers to the practice of developing policies that are grounded in objective and rigorous evidence rather than ideology or anecdotal information. This approach prioritises the use of data, research findings and evaluations to inform decision-making processes in public policy (Baron, 2018). Policy-making is complex. Researchers can make valuable contributions to the policy-making process, for example by helping with policy design, by measuring the effectiveness of policy interventions and by disseminating findings to a wider audience (Ruane, 2025). Often policymakers are not specialists in particular sub-disciplines and can therefore benefit from linking in with researchers with relevant expertise. Internationally, there is increasing recognition of the importance of using the best available evidence to address societal challenges, particularly since the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic where the situation changed quickly, evidence was emerging rapidly and there was a need to make informed decisions in real time, and to combat mis- and dis-information (Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Changes, 2022). In Ireland, the role of the National Public Health Emergency Team during the COVID-19 pandemic is an example of where a national, centralised structure was rapidly set up to provide recommendations to government based on available knowledge and expertise, with researchers from different disciplines playing a key role (Doyle, 2021). For Northern Ireland, as part of the approach across the United Kingdom (UK), the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies provided centralised scientific and technical advice to support government decision-making throughout the pandemic.

While there has been progress in strengthening national capacity for policy engagement in Ireland in recent years (Doyle, 2023), an area that has not received sufficient prominence in these discussions is the potential role of early career researchers (ECRs).[1] There are thousands of ECRs across the island of Ireland with a diversity of experiences and perspectives, many of whom are taking the lead on critical, independent research on tackling the societal challenges we are now experiencing or will experience in the future. ECRs are often enthusiastic about providing evidence for policy but lack the network or contacts to meaningfully engage with the process. At the same time, engaging with ECRs in the policy-making process has the benefit of widening participation and challenging outdated views (Mihut et al.,

2025). Furthermore, involving ECRs in policy-making offers transdisciplinary benefits for both researchers and society, such as the development of soft skills, decision-making abilities, and social capital, as well as the improvement of prevailing systems in terms of transparency and accountability (John et al., 2023). However, there is currently no obvious mechanism for most ECRs to directly inform policy-making, and therefore the gap between cutting-edge research and policy-making persists.

Despite the clear need for ECRs in the evidence-based policy-making process, persistent institutional barriers, political resistance and limited evidence–policy interaction continue to hinder the effective use of research in decision-making (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies, 2024). A systematic review of international literature published in 2025 found that the major barriers to evidence-informed decision-making include fragmented advisory systems, limited data infrastructures and weak communication between researchers and policymakers (Suazo-Galdames, Saracostti & Chaple-Gil, 2025). Similar barriers have been reported in Ireland, with a key identified deficit being a limited national architecture which would enable positive engagement between researchers, policymakers and funders within this complex environment (Doyle, 2021). In Northern Ireland, there has been the additional barrier of extended suspension of the devolved government, which created a vacuum between researchers and policymakers for extended periods of time and, consequently, a challenging policy environment (The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2020).

In terms of processes that could apply to Ireland and Northern Ireland, Doyle describes a conceptual framework for strengthening the link between the academic and policy-making communities (Doyle, 2023), which is equally applicable to the task of strengthening the input of ECRs into the evidence-for-policy ecosystem:

1. Pathway 1: Building bridges, creating trust, offering opportunities.
2. Pathway 2: Joining up and scaling up what already exists.
3. Pathway 3: Knowledge management and knowledge brokerage.

[1] There is no universally agreed definition of an ECR, but it typically refers to persons with three to twelve years of professional experience.

Doyle noted that these three themes have provided a useful framework for designing current and future initiatives and for building upon past activities which may have been somewhat fragmented. Doyle further acknowledged that while Ireland has been successful in making major advancements in this space over a relatively short period of time, more work is required (Doyle, 2023).

In this forum paper, we provide the background to the establishment of Young Academy Ireland (YAI), an organisation uniquely well-placed to strengthen each of Doyle's proposed pathways on behalf of ECRs. In particular, YAI is exceptionally well-suited to act as a convener of early career research expertise in the evidence-for-policy landscape on the island of Ireland. We describe insights from YAI's first Evidence for Policy Summit, which aimed to connect ECRs and policymakers, and from which important lessons can be learned about the barriers to ECR participation in the policy-making process. Finally, we provide some suggested next steps for supporting greater involvement of ECRs in the national policy-making process, from an ECR perspective.

Young Academy Ireland

YAI is an interdisciplinary organisation of ECRs dedicated to collaborative research, societal impact and advancing cross-sector engagement across the island of Ireland, encompassing both Ireland and Northern Ireland (Royal Irish Academy (RIA), 2025). YAI was established in 2023 under the auspices of the RIA and is part of the global Young Academies movement, becoming the fifty-first member globally (Global Young Academy, 2022). YAI aims to provide a cross-disciplinary platform for ECRs from diverse sectors – including academia, industry, civil society, government and non-governmental organisations – to collaborate, share ideas and contribute to addressing pressing societal and global challenges. YAI's mission emphasises transdisciplinary dialogue, public engagement and inclusion, creating a dynamic environment where members can develop innovative solutions, influence policy, and contribute to cultural and research development on an all-island basis. The inaugural YAI cohort comprised forty members with another cohort of twenty joining in March 2026. Membership is for a term of four years (RIA, 2025).

As part of its *Strategic Plan 2024–28* (RIA, 2024), YAI has identified five interlinked 'grand challenges' central to supporting and enhancing the research and cultural life of the island of Ireland:

1. Achieving sustainability.
2. Creating a fair and inclusive society.
3. Securing the future of academia.
4. Supporting public involvement and engagement with research.
5. Providing transdisciplinary expertise for public policy.

Of particular relevance to this paper is the fifth 'grand challenge' – providing transdisciplinary expertise for public policy. With this ambition in mind, YAI, with the support of RIA, has set out to establish an 'evidence-for-policy network' which will create a space whereby ECRs and policymakers, North and South, can exchange ideas and perspectives that would enable better translation of evidence into public policy.

The first step in this process was the organisation of an Evidence for Policy Summit, with the overarching aim of introducing YAI as conveners of early career research expertise and as a source and network of evidence suitable for policymakers as well as gaining ideas and perspectives on how to move forward. A planning workshop was held in February 2025 to scope out the most effective way for YAI to bring ECRs and policymakers together for a learning and networking event. An examination of the programmes for government, North and South, revealed some common themes where the work of ECRs could prove valuable in the policy-making process. Two of these themes, *A Fair and Inclusive Society* and *Sustainability*, also aligned with YAI's Grand Challenges, and the summit was consequently organised around these topics. The following section outlines the insights from the Evidence for Policy Summit, which took place on 10 September 2025 at the RIA in Dublin.

Insights from the Evidence for Policy Summit

Translating evidence into policy is a persistent challenge for researchers and policymakers alike. This is particularly true for ECRs who are often at the forefront of research yet removed from the policymakers best placed to translate this evidence into action (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies, 2024). We sought to address this challenge by bringing together a diverse group of policymakers and ECRs from Ireland and Northern Ireland to explore how we can improve the collaboration between policymakers and ECRs working on policy relevant topics on the island of Ireland.

The day began with welcomes from Dr Niamh Wycherley, Chair of YAI, and the event lead organisers, Dr Kieran Walsh and Dr Karina Doorley. The keynote speaker for the day, Prof. Michael Sanders, Professor of Public Policy and Director of the School for Government at King's College London, offered a rousing start with what he called 'a series of non-random observations' on having impact as a researcher. These stemmed from his diverse experiences as a researcher, policymaker and UK Government advisor.

Prof. Sanders reminded attendees that there are many routes to impact – research, getting involved in the political system, protest and joining grass-roots organisations are all ways to change policy. His examples emphasised that evidence is as much about stopping policies that do not work as introducing policies that do, and that those who are responsible for scaling a policy can be more impactful than those who introduce it. Prof. Sanders stressed that translating evidence into policy is about working with and through people but also being willing to put in the work or the 'shoe leather' by sending letters, visiting communities, building relationships and crucially, meeting people where they are at. He offered practical suggestions for how researchers can help harried policymakers engage with their research, such as writing one-page policy-relevant briefs, being flexible when opportunities arise, conducting multiple strands of work and working *with* policymakers to address the issues of the day. He acknowledged, however, that the 'lighthouse' of public attention may seldom or just briefly shine on their particular research area.

Some of Prof. Sanders' points were picked up in the panel discussion that followed. The panel was chaired by YAI member, Dr Jennifer McMahon and comprised researchers and civil servants from across the island of Ireland: Prof. Alan Barrett (Economic and Social Research Institute), Prof. Sara Burke (Trinity College Dublin), Dr Johnathan Dalzell (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland) and Leonora Harty (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Ireland). The panel considered how a culture clash between researchers and policymakers can needlessly hinder collaboration. Examples of efforts by governments, North and South, to draw on the expertise of researchers and innovators were also discussed. Practical steps put forward to connect evidence producers with evidence users included having a clear dissemination strategy, taking opportunities for placements in government departments and participating in public

consultations and knowledge brokerage events. However, it was acknowledged that there is an element of chance – of being the right person, with the 'right' evidence, in the right place, at the right time. The panel expressed enthusiasm that, as a group with research expertise and convening power, YAI could play an important role in bridging the evidence-to-policy gap.

After lunch, YAI members provided practical examples of just how ECRs can produce evidence that informs policy across a diverse range of areas. Six YAI members (Dr Maeve O'Rourke, Dr Andrea Ciribuco, Dr Dervla Kelly, Dr Jennifer McMahon, Dr Niall Farrell and Dr Deirdre Robertson) presented short overviews of their research in human rights, linguistics, addiction, youth mental health, energy poverty and behavioural science, respectively. They shared their experience of, and commitment to, producing research for the good of society, engaging with policy and policymakers and the influence of their research on policy, offering a reminder that researchers are more than data producers or analysts – they are advocates, campaigners, champions and communicators. The examples demonstrated successful engagement of ECRs with policymakers, valuable lessons learned and ideas for enhancing the research to policy pipeline.

The final section of the day brought together the collective expertise of ECRs and policymakers in an interactive workshop to explore what an ideal evidence-to-policy ecosystem should look like, and how it might be achieved. Participants reflected on key barriers and facilitators to ECR engagement with policy, and identified opportunities and practical actions to support future progress.

Learning from discussions between early career researchers and policymakers

Overall, three key areas for action were identified through these discussions. Firstly, a need for capacity-building, among both ECRs and policymakers, was emphasised. Knowledge gaps were identified in multiple steps in the evidence-to-policy pathway such as how policy is constructed, how high-quality research is undertaken and how best to communicate the findings of research to policymakers. A suggestion that government departments could publish and circulate research priorities on an annual basis was well received, with attendees pointing out that the publication of research priorities already happens in some

government departments. Attendees agreed that there was a lot that they could learn from each other, with mentoring potentially playing a key role here.

Secondly, a need for networking was felt to be critical. Many policymakers, especially early career civil servants, were not well connected to researchers. Moreover, many ECRs felt completely disconnected from the policy-making process. There was support for a centralised network where policymakers could contact a list of ECRs for specific questions, and vice versa, where ECRs could proactively disseminate findings from their research to relevant policymakers. Networking events such as the Evidence for Policy Summit were believed to be important in establishing these formal and informal connections. Knowledge brokers to help aid the translation of evidence into actionable recommendations for policymakers, were also felt to be missing in the system.

Thirdly, without funding and more structural supports from universities and governments, it was felt that such initiatives would not be sustainable. There was agreement that if funders, universities and governments are serious about evidence-based policy-making, then there needs to be a commitment to making this a priority area (e.g. more bespoke funding for evidence-for-policy networks), acknowledging the impact of policy engagement and publishing research priorities for government departments.

The key findings from the Evidence for Policy Summit broadly resonate with those from the international literature. A paper published by a team of international ECRs outlined three recommendations for facilitating the engagement of ECRs in policy-making (John et al., 2023). These recommendations were as follows:

1. Recognition (academia needs to place greater value on policy engagement, recognise ECRs as stakeholders, fund transdisciplinary research).
2. Training (provide training in science communication with policymakers, emphasise capacity-building).
3. Mentorship (support and mentor ECRs, build a diverse talent pipeline, increase visibility and awareness of roles in policy).

In their paper, John et al. (2023) concluded that scientific academies, societies and networks play a critical role in raising awareness and

transparency regarding policy advice mechanisms, providing training and increasing visibility and mentorship opportunities. The important role of young academies internationally in this regard was emphasised.

In addition to these common areas for progress, insights from YAI's Evidence for Policy Summit suggest that ECRs and policymakers would benefit from more networking opportunities on the island of Ireland.

Next steps

YAI is now working to push forward the establishment of an Evidence for Policy Network based on learnings from the Evidence for Policy Summit. A critical first step is to establish lines of communication between ECRs and policy-making communities and to understand the needs of each. This could begin by creating a mailing list through which research needs and policy-relevant research would be disseminated. A potential further step would be an adapted 'Meet a Researcher' scheme, an initiative pioneered by Young Academy Finland, originally set up to connect ECRs with schools and now being piloted to connect ECRs and policymakers (Young Academy Finland, 2026). To address knowledge gaps among ECRs around the policy-making process and policy cycles, interactive training events jointly organised by YAI, RIA and policymakers could also be invaluable. Initiatives such as these would tackle knowledge deficits and provide networking opportunities for ECRs and policymakers on the island of Ireland, ultimately enriching the evidence-for-policy landscape.

Conclusion

Evidence-based policy-making is essential for tackling societal challenges, however, there are significant ongoing challenges to the effective implementation of this process throughout the ecosystem. Persistent institutional barriers, political resistance and funding challenges continue to hinder the effective use of research in decision-making. ECRs can play a critical role in this process as they represent a large and diverse community, are at the cutting edge of research, but are often not well-connected to the policy-making process. Similarly, policymakers seek the best available evidence but can struggle to obtain it in a timely manner. Further action is required to better connect ECRs and policymakers in Ireland and Northern Ireland and this includes capacity-building and mentoring, networking, and

structural and financial supports. The vision for the Evidence for Policy Summit was to create a space whereby early career researchers and policymakers, North and South, could exchange ideas and perspectives and to inspire a shared blueprint for improving the pathways between ECRs and policymakers. As this important national resource develops, YAI looks forward to acting as a convener of early career research expertise, and as a source and network of evidence suitable for policymakers across the island of Ireland.

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