

## **Time for a Department of Higher Education & Research : COVID-19 makes it clear we need a voice for science at Cabinet**

### *An Open Letter to the Members of Dáil Éireann*

Five years ago over 1,000 Irish scientists wrote to government urging a rebalancing of funding toward basic research. Basic discovery research is exactly the type that produces the scientists, skills and serendipitous solutions we need when faced with an unexpected challenge like COVID-19. Half a decade on from that letter little has changed for the better. The crisis in Irish research has deepened and risks becoming fatal if not addressed. To avoid further years of drift that the nation cannot afford we the undersigned believe Ireland needs to establish a dedicated cabinet-level Department for Higher Education & Research. We fear the country will pay the price in future crises and miss opportunities for innovation if government doesn't recommit to proper investment and attention for higher education and research urgently.

Ireland needs a dedicated government Department, with a full Cabinet Minister, mandated to support science, research and higher education and to champion the sector. The case for this reform was comprehensively set out in a 2016 RIA paper and it is now long overdue. Currently falling between multiple departments with different core focuses the sector has no clear owner at Cabinet. This change of focus would enhance Ireland's recovery prospects and its ability to develop a green and sustainable economy.

Now more than ever and into the future we need outstanding researchers. Without them, Ireland will become a backwater when it comes to science and discovery, to the detriment of our reputation internationally, including with multinationals. Government must prioritise the funding of higher education and research, as crucial to building national recovery and ensuring future prosperity and preparedness. Globally competitive research is the only way to solve challenges related to energy, health and the environment, with great rewards for those that invest. As today with COVID-19, our sector wants to be a partner to government in helping map out and underpin the best ways forward for Ireland. In a new evidence-based world developing the knowledge and skills base of our country is essential to fuelling its economic recovery and growth.

With investment in research that is well below the EU average, decreased core grants to universities, and a growing demand to increase student numbers, current policies have created a perfect storm for higher education and research in Ireland. Without renewed focus it will undermine our ability to carry out world-class research, to retain critical talent here and to educate future generations that will build a real and sustainable knowledge economy.

Young people are now more than ever engaged with science because of COVID-19 and we must capitalise on that, with the best possible support for science education at all levels. However today core public funding per third level student is 40% of what it was a decade ago, and yet every year the sector has been asked to take more and more students, with a further 35,000 students expected over the next ten years. This year additional investment in the sector is €151m short in real terms of where it should be based on 2016's Cassells report.

To make up the shortfall in public funding for public education, universities now generate the majority of their income privately, from international students and from tourism, conferences and

other events on their campuses. However, COVID-19 will severely impact all these revenue streams. Preliminary assessments by the HEA indicate loss of income and additional costs in excess of €500m. If the sector is left to face this challenge alone, with the State ignoring it the way it has over the last decade, then it will buckle.

Ironically, in the midst of the global COVID-19 crisis Ireland's earlier investment in scientific research is paying dividends. We have a corps of competent scientists to inform COVID-19 policy and decision-making and to engage with the public: epidemiologists, virologists, immunologists, clinical academics in infectious diseases, data modellers and others. On campuses and in labs across Ireland our colleagues carry out the tests for the virus and study how it and the disease it causes can be mitigated. The public can today see directly why having world-class scientists matters. As Irish researchers it is gratifying to see the academic sector playing such an important and useful role in these difficult times.

However government commitment to Irish research has wavered badly over the last decade - both in terms of funding and focus. This is exemplified in the international rankings where Irish universities have been falling dramatically. The lack of a stand-alone Chief Scientific Adviser is another indication of recent deprioritisation. By failing to invest in research, government is driving a national brain drain. Last year only one Ireland-based researcher received a European Research Council Starting Grant. As a country we are falling behind. Our competitors are the small advanced economies, all of whom prioritise and spend more on research than we do currently. Government pledged to get national R&D investment to 2.5% GNP by this year, but never got close.

Ireland's drive toward a knowledge economy, combining an educated workforce with our stable political and economic policy climate, needs a champion at government level to ensure the ecosystem and infrastructure is in place to make it a reality. As the largest English-speaking country within the EU there are huge opportunities to drive deep long-lasting international investment here in high value sectors. However to do so we need to be able to educate, retain and recruit the best.

As the country moves towards the formation of a government we urge all parties and deputies represented in Dáil Éireann to make the establishment of a cabinet-level Department of Higher Education & Research a priority. Investment in the sector a generation ago is paying dividends now in both our COVID-19 response and our knowledge economy. But all that is at risk. Establishing a Department of Higher Education & Research will underpin our current economic model and our recovery from COVID-19 in the difficult years ahead. It will prepare us to face both the unexpected crises of the future, as well as the unimagined opportunities. It can no longer wait.