

Royal Irish Academy Workshop

Does Ireland Need a Minister for Higher Education and Research?

July 2015



I. Background

The Royal Irish Academy workshop on the topic ‘Does Ireland Need a Minister for Higher Education and Research’ took place at Academy House on Friday 3 July 2015, from 12 p.m. to 4.30 p.m.

The purpose of the workshop was to investigate the most effective governmental structure for supporting the needs of Ireland’s higher-education and research sectors. The workshop offered both a national and international perspective on the merits of the current and alternative governmental structures for higher education and research, and posed the question ‘Does Ireland need a minister for higher education and research?’ Drawing on the discussion, the intention is that the main themes and issues identified over the course of the workshop will form the basis of an Academy advice paper to be disseminated to key stakeholders in higher education and research.

The background to the workshop and the engagement with this topic is that the Academy, through its Policy Oversight Group, initiated a survey of its membership to ascertain views regarding specific policy topics the Academy should focus on throughout 2015. The survey identified (a) the case for an Academy paper, with input from external stakeholders, on the benefits to higher education and research by the creation of such a ministry, and (b) the need to avail of the window of opportunity to produce such a paper prior to the general election and the formation of the next government, and the potential therein for any realignment of departments or higher education and research responsibilities and functions.

The workshop was opened by Professor Peter Kennedy, MRIA, international relations secretary of the Royal Irish Academy. Professor Brigid Laffan, MRIA, chair of the Academy’s Steering Group

on Governmental Structures for Higher Education and Research,¹ then delivered an introduction outlining the background and context to this workshop.

The first part of the workshop provided an international perspective, informing participants of some of the current governmental structures in place for higher education and research in Europe. The international speakers included Professor Jo Ritzen, Maastricht University; Mr Thomas Estermann, director for governance, funding and public policy development, European University Association; and Mr Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (UK) and former special advisor to David Willetts, minister for universities and science. This segment was chaired by Professor Laffan, and was followed by a question-and-answer session.

The second part of the workshop was a panel discussion offering the perspectives of Irish stakeholders who have worked under the current governmental structure. The speakers in this segment were Professor Patrick Clancy, University College, Dublin (UCD); Cllr Mary Hanafin, former minister for education and science; and Mr Ned Costello, chief executive officer, Irish Universities Association. This segment was chaired by Professor Gerry McKenna, MRIA, Ulster University.

This was followed by a general discussion between the speakers and the audience on the day's proceedings.

¹ The RIA Governmental Structures Steering Group is composed of Professor Brigid Laffan, MRIA (chair), Professor Mary Canning, MRIA, Professor David Farrell, MRIA, Professor Gerry McKenna, MRIA, and Dr Don Thornhill, MRIA.

2. Introduction

Professor Kennedy initiated the workshop, welcoming the speakers and the other participants to the deliberations on both international and national experience on the governance of higher education and research. He noted that the workshop had resulted from the evolving think-tank role of the Academy's Policy Oversight Group. The Policy Oversight Group had formulated the issues on the role of higher education and research into three questions, each of which was being addressed thematically by the Academy:

- The structure of governance of higher education and research;
- The funding of higher education and research;
- Culture 2025, the proposed national cultural policy.

Professor Laffan then set out the context for the workshop, expressing her appreciation to the other members of the Steering Group for Governmental Structures for Higher Education and Research while doing so.

She noted that the headline question for the workshop – 'Does Ireland need a minister for higher education and research?' – was an intentionally ambiguous one because it could mean a full Cabinet minister, a minister of state, a government department or a division of a department. The issue really is how the core executive can organise itself.

Professor Laffan cited the prime-ministerial nature of public administration in Ireland. The Taoiseach, as prime minister, has huge authority of office even if he/she has a small executive. It is important not to underestimate the fact that individuals matter. Relationships between Taoiseach, ministers, the Cabinet and senior civil servants are all important.

Ireland has no tradition of standardised, long-lasting Cabinet committees on the Westminster model. Committees tend rather to be ad hoc and problem-driven – 'Someone in the Taoiseach's department calls a committee together'. Committees tend to be war Cabinets, like the current Economic Council. The practice of segmented decision-making is sectorally driven.

The institutional devices for delivery of policy outcomes is the Department of Finance, interdepartmental committees and budgets. Without budgets there are no executive powers. However, it is clear that in Ireland individuals can trump institutions.

The Irish tradition is also one of addressing a problem by layering – until very recently addressing a problem by changing the people in charge and creating an agency.

Professor Laffan concluded by noting that the workshop was a brainstorming exercise towards a collective output. It was recognised that there was no ideal form for governance of higher education and research, but it is valuable to look at external comparators. While each country is locked into its own political context, the experience of other countries suggests an external menu for review.

3. An external perspective – what lessons can we learn from abroad

3.1

Thomas Estermann, director of Governance, Funding and Public Policy Development, European University Association, addressed the workshop with regard to the variety of governance structures across Europe for delivering higher-education and research policy goals. Noting the huge diversity, Mr Estermann described his contribution as consisting of reflections rather than an attempt to proffer answers. He first set out the taxonomy of ministries currently prevailing across Europe:

Type of ministry	Countries applicable
Ministries for higher education and research (science)	France, Luxembourg, Sweden, Belgium-France, Norway
Ministries for education and research	Italy, Denmark, Portugal
Ministries for education	Poland
Ministry for education, culture and science	Netherlands
Ministry for education and culture	Finland
Ministry for education, culture and sport	Estonia
Ministry for science, research and economics	Austria
Other combinations (departmental structure)	Business innovation and skills – United Kingdom Education and skills – Ireland

Mr Estermann then outlined the responsibility for higher education and research within the European Commission, noting that governance within the Commission has recently been

reshaped. The main directorates-general concerned are the Directorate General for Education and Culture, and the Directorate General for Research and Innovation. But many competencies rest with other directorates-general as well. Centralised competencies are addressed via vice-presidents and the collegiate body. Many decisions need to go through the collegiate body.²

Mr Estermann then took Austria as a single example of the changes in locale of higher education and research responsibilities:

Dates	Lead department
1970	Ministry for Higher Education and Science
1996–2000	Ministry for Science and Transport
2000–06	Ministry for Education
2006–13	Ministry for Higher Education and Science
2013–present	Ministry for Science, Research and Economics

He noted that there were a number of changes since 1970, some for political reasons – i.e. the portfolio of an individual minister – rather than organisational reasons. The Ministry for Science and Transport was one such created for political reasons. He further noted the personal aspect, instancing the minister for science and transport as having very good communication with the science community.

He further noted that bringing together different ministry competencies has its challenges, and ministries can become preoccupied with organisational changes.

Mr Estermann also pointed out that intermediate bodies are an important feature of the higher-education and research structures because of the autonomy principle applying. Examples of these are:

Intermediate bodies with broad responsibilities in funding, accountability, quality, policy and analysis	Ireland, United Kingdom, Romania
Intermediate bodies with specific responsibilities either in funding, criteria setting or strategic advice	Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Latvia
Intermediate bodies for funding research	Almost all European countries except Greece and Malta

² See Communication from the President to the Commission, *The Working Methods of the European Commission, 2014–2019*, C (2014) 9004, 11 November 2014 for fuller details.

He concluded his presentation with the following reflections:

- There is huge variety in the governance of universities across Europe;
- In some countries the system is stable, in others, there has been a high degree of change;
- People are very important, even more so in smaller systems;
- When the university sector has to deal with many ministries and structures, coordination is not always ideal;
- Bringing ministerial cultures together is also difficult.

While Mr Estermann had no general conclusion about a best model, he did suggest the following questions for consideration:

- How can visibility of higher education and research be assured?
- How can a strong higher-education and research portfolio within the government be achieved?
- How are competencies for universities (education and research) coordinated?
- How is the staffing of a relevant ministry/department organised?
- What is the fit between policy competencies at national and European level?

3.2

Professor Jo Ritzen, UN University, former Netherlands minister for science, education and culture, former president of Maastricht University, gave his presentation: 'Does Ireland Need a Minister for Higher Education and Research? Yes, and Why.'

In his introductory remarks Professor Ritzen expressed his pleasure to be back in Ireland, noting that his first visit was in 1966. He described Ireland as having undergone 'major development, with bumps', noting that Ireland had the highest economic growth in the EU, but also the worst banking crisis in the EU with a loss to the exchequer of thirty per cent of GDP.

He observed that he could see Ireland wants to move on from its deep depression 'via innovation, so you organise yourself for that'.

He considered the headline question for the workshop could be rephrased as 'What do we know about the impact of the structure of the Cabinet on economic growth?' He saw the organisational structure of higher education and research as leading to education and science 'institutions', to performance universities and public research, and on to labour productivity and innovation *and* to economic growth.

Professor Ritzen asserted that competencies and 'inventions' (whether patented or not) matter for economic growth; funding matters for competencies and 'inventions'; 'institutions matter for competencies and 'inventions'; the minister matters; and the organisation of the ministry and the strengths and weaknesses of higher-education and science decision-making matter.

The ministry should be organised such that:

- It is close to the private sector (hence: research *and* technology/innovation);
- It can attract highly knowledgeable people to become ministers and able politicians, such that the political domain can agree on long-term planning and not be deflected too much by the desires and political accidents of today;
- The Cabinet can give full autonomy to the higher-education and science/research sectors;
- There is likely to be a separate minister for higher education/research/innovation, but in a setting with an independent science/research organisation, with substantial block grants to universities and public research organisations.

In the Netherlands, for example, the ministry is close to the private sector. This continuity is important for innovation. In the German *Länder*, by contrast, the rapid see-saw policy in location of the ministry function is bad for both university and public research performance.

The university sector only works well if it is autonomous, and if there is complementarity between public and private research. Higher-education graduates are the major agent of sustainable growth and of productivity. As far as investment in research goes, Ireland is in the mid-range of the table. Investment matters. Investment counts for university ranking. In Ireland more investment is needed to produce better research outcomes. Quality is important.

Autonomy matters. University autonomy (financial, policy, organisational, staffing) delivers better university research. With regard to structures, you can have different kinds of autonomy. Maastricht University, for example, is financially independent and can borrow what it deems necessary when it deems it necessary. The more autonomy the better the connect to the local labour force.

Measurement of the institutional performance of individual universities is fuzzy. A country moves its ranking through knowledge and the application of knowledge. Higher education/science is not party political – party-political discourse can lead to too much emphasis on small points. In Sweden, Norway and Finland it is treated as an investment matter and not as a party-partisan one. This means that there is broad agreement on these policies.

The knowledge of the minister can aid the attainment of a high score among universities in international rankings (note: international rankings are associated with innovation level). But the average term of office of a minister in a ministry is a constraining factor on the development of the expertise of the minister – 1.6 years is the average duration in the EU. Qualified civil servants who enjoy the trust of the minister can also play an important role.

And a final question: can a separate minister secure a higher budget for higher education and research?

Professor Laffan thanked Professor Ritzen, especially for being prescriptive in his presentation and thus enhancing the discourse.

3.3

Mr Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (UK) and former special adviser to David Willetts, minister for universities and science, spoke to the workshop on how higher education and research funding is provided in the UK. He clarified that his role as a special adviser was that of a temporary political adviser.

He described the current system of governance of higher education and research in the UK as originating in the Robbins Report on Higher Education, 1963.³ The functional responsibility for higher education and research now rests with the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). While research is a UK-wide responsibility, the teaching within higher education is a devolved function, so BIS's responsibility for higher-education teaching is England-only. BIS itself is a department with very wide responsibilities, including the Shareholder Executive.⁴

He further stated that it is important to note the shift in the UK from maintenance grants to loans, with a tripling of the undergraduate fee cap to £9,000. This shift is continuing, with loans replacing grants. He further referenced England as having the most autonomous universities in the UK, noting the decision to uncap student numbers in universities in England, so that in 2015, for the first time, English universities will be able to recruit as many students as they like, the objective of this being to stimulate economic growth.

The scale of the budget for higher education and research in the UK is an allocation of £4.6bn for research, £1.6bn for teaching components, a similar sum for maintenance of poor students, and £2.9bn for skills – so an overall budget of approximately £11bn, in principle a reasonable allocation for a government ministry.

He cited the experience of being an adviser to Mr Willetts as the minister of state for universities and science in a coalition government. In practice, the minister had a relatively independent role, as Vince Cable, secretary of state for business, innovation and skills, was more interested in industry.

Following the 2015 UK general election, there was a consensus view that the first Conservative government since 1992 would shift higher education back to the Department for Education, but this had not happened, although the post of minister for universities and science, held by Jo Johnson, had shifted to number three in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, ranking behind the secretary of state and the minister for business and enterprise; consequently, the minister for universities and science does not attend Cabinet. Mr Hillman posited the question as whether the lack of attendance at Cabinet might develop as an issue. He further noted that the perception of Prime Minister Cameron was that he was not much inclined to reorganise ministries, and that he tended to keep individual ministers in office for a reasonable amount of time.

³ *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister Under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961–63 (1963)*, www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html (accessed 20 July 2015).

⁴ The Shareholder Executive is the shareholder of businesses owned or part-owned by the government. It manages government interventions in the private sector in order to secure best value for the taxpayer.

Mr Hillman noted that higher education itself was never a primary ministry, but he believes there is logic in keeping higher education close to the labour market. Where to put the science function is something of a conundrum.

He posed the question to the workshop, ‘When people in universities say they would like to be in the Department of Education, are they sure they are opting to be together with nursery education, etc?’

The Robbins Report had suggested a system of governance that brought schools and universities together, but schools and universities are very different institutions. Not least because universities are autonomous and so need an intermediary body.

A White Paper on higher education in England, *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*,⁵ had been published in June 2011 but was never implemented, although one of the outputs it gave rise to, Professor Tim Wilson’s *A Review of Business–University Collaboration*,⁶ was published in February 2012.

Taking account of the rich range of perspectives discussed and the organisational churning and changing that had taken place, Mr Hillman summarised the main points he wished to make as:

- Every structure has problems;
- Political personalities matter;
- The protection of autonomy matters.

3.4

The panel for the topic ‘An External Perspective – What Lessons Can We Learn From Abroad’ then took questions from the audience, and the following points ensued from the discussion.

Autonomy

- The battle for autonomy in Ireland is being lost, even though any well-functioning higher-education system is autonomous.
- Accountability is the counterpart of autonomy, but in Ireland micromanagement, under the guise of political accountability, prevails. How do we reconcile institutional autonomy with political accountability?

⁵ Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (2011) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf (accessed 20 July 2015).

⁶ Tim Wilson, *A Review of Business–University Collaboration* (2012), https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32383/12-610-wilson-review-business-university-collaboration.pdf (accessed 20 July 2015).

- The financial crisis has given rise to funding cuts, but has not given rise to any stepping back from administrative responsibilities, to a consideration of what the system is and how it functions. Parliaments are very ill at ease with autonomy. Societies have increasingly less trust in politics, yet politicians want to be seen more.
- Between 1995 and 2002 there were two major autonomy reforms in Austria. It is possible to have reform regardless of the administrative structure.
- There is a strong connection between micromanagement and funding constraints. The European University Association Autonomy Scorecard⁷ measures the autonomy of the higher-education system, and Ireland's score has gone down since the crisis began.
- In England the autonomy well runs quite deep. There is an *alphabetical spaghetti* of oversight, but the system is not overly meddlesome. The government styles itself as a quango-killing government. An overarching single body running the universities would be like an intrusive minister.

Funding/long-term systemic goals (i.e. for delivery beyond electoral cycle)

- A political champion is necessary to deliver such change.
- A university where the staff appoint the leader, such as at Trinity College, Dublin, is not generally innovative because the people chosen generally represent the status quo, not the future. The contrast between universities in the Netherlands (more innovative) and neighbouring Nordrhein-Westfalen (less innovative) was cited. Subsequently, the point was made that much German research is done in institutes outside the university system.
- The important thing is to empower teachers and researchers.
- The best approach for delivering research and innovation is to attain the three per cent of GDP investment target (public plus private), to create and sustain autonomy, and to support equality of opportunity that goes together with greater innovation.
- Achievement of the three per cent of GDP investment target should be a particular target for Ireland.
- In the UK universities have been required to prove their research has real-world impact. In England there have been Treasury cuts to funding higher education alongside a tripling of fees, though in fact this has resulted in more students from poor backgrounds than ever before.
- Higher education does not have salience in general-election results.
- Strategic investment is vital, and it is necessary to campaign for this given some shift within the European Commission from grants to loans to support research.

Professor Laffan concluded the question-and-answer session by noting the focus on autonomy, accountability and funding, and by thanking contributors for their rich insights.

⁷ Report and presentation on the European University Association's Autonomy Scorecard available from <http://www.eua.be/university-autonomy-in-europe> (accessed 20 July 2015).

4. A national perspective – does Ireland need a minister for higher education and research?

This second segment of the workshop was a panel discussion offering the audience the perspective of Irish stakeholders who have worked under the current governmental structure. The speakers in this segment were Professor Patrick Clancy, associate professor, School of Sociology, UCD; Cllr Mary Hanafin, formerly minister for education and science; and Mr Ned Costello, chief executive officer, Irish Universities Association. This segment was chaired by Professor Gerry McKenna, MRIA, Ulster University.

4.1

Professor Clancy spoke on the theme ‘Higher Education Research in Ireland: Changing Climate, Changing Structure’. He described his response to the topic question ‘Does Ireland need a minister for higher education and research?’ as being ‘Yes, question mark.’

He noted that while university research is currently viewed as a principal component of national innovation policy, the primary economic engine of advanced societies, this new mission needs to be reconciled with earlier objectives, since university missions tend to retain their legitimacy and compete with each other to retain their salience.

Looking at the evolution of research in Irish higher education, he noted that it was only in the 1970s that Ireland began to give serious consideration to research. In the 1970s/1980s there was much analysis and little funding.

The 1990s were a decade of change:

- Change in government policy, manifested in the Report of the Science, Technology and Innovation Advisory Council (STIAC, 1995), the White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation (1996), and the adoption of the objective of developing a ‘national system of innovation’ to encompass the enterprise sector, the state sector and the third-level sector;
- Change in university policies on foot of the CIRCA Report – *A Comparative International Assessment of the Organisation, Management and Funding of University Research in Ireland and Europe*.
- Change on foot of the impact of Atlantic Philanthropies funding.

This, in turn, gave rise to the research initiatives set in train in 1999–2001:

- The Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL), 1999, first of five rounds, with its assessment criteria of institution's strategic plan, quality of research content, impact on teaching and learning;
- The establishment of Science Foundation Ireland, with its focus on the areas of strategic research likely to yield economic benefits: ICT and biotechnology (energy technologies);
- Establishment of the Research Councils – Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences in 2000 and Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology in 2001.

By the early 2000s there were four research pillars of Irish higher education: the block grant – the 'foundation pillar' for teaching and research; PRTL, with its focus on institutional research strategies; the research councils, for individually inspired applications; and the largest pillar, the mission-oriented research of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and government departments.

The quantum of mission-oriented research was large, with about one third of budget going to non-mission-oriented research.

More recent developments have seen a decline in the block grant. Researchers are ever more dependent on direct funding. There has been a shift from indirect to direct funding, from direct to mission-oriented funding. In parallel with a decline in funding there has been a rise in fees – happening quickly as a result of the recession. However, changes made during the recession have left an unbalanced funding and control structure, and decisions taken in the recession may not necessarily be revisited or rescinded – e.g. will PRTL be revived? Will the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI) control virtually all of the research budget?

Professor Clancy concluded by suggesting that a full (senior) minister for higher education and research might offer better coherence and outcomes. He noted that the quality of information outputs from the DJEI has diminished since Forfás was abolished, and that the research mission had been downgraded because of other demands on the DJEI budget. He recognised that there would be a downside from the separation of higher education from first and second-level education, but did not consider this to be a great risk.

4.2

Cllr. Mary Hanafin, minister for education 2004–08, ex-chief whip and minister of state for children, advised the workshop that she would respond with a firm 'no' to the workshop topic question: 'Does Ireland need a minister for higher education and research?' She gave the workshop her perspective on the political reality.

She pointed out that the basic unit of organisation within the Irish civil service was that of a minister in his/her department. In her view, a department of higher education and research

would have neither the money nor the clout to deliver. Instead, she favoured a whole-of-government approach towards this policy and operational area.

Cllr. Hanafin noted that ministers were appointed for a variety of reasons, e.g. geography, gender. The critical set of relationships that a minister had was with the Taoiseach, the minister for finance, and with other ministers. A whole-of-government approach, under the direction of a champion for higher education, allowed the effective exploitation of those critical relationships.

Cllr. Hanafin referenced her own experience as minister of state for children as ‘a complete mishmash’. In order to set it up, bits of other departments had to be dismantled for assignment to that office. For example, while that office had responsibility for three detention schools for young offenders, responsibility for diversion projects still rested with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. She further noted that the biennial *State of the Nation’s Children* report for 2014 had yet to be produced by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and noted also current reportage (July 2015) that gardaí have told the Health Information and Quality Authority that probes into alleged child abuse have been hit by delays in reporting the claims by social workers.

Cllr. Hanafin affirmed that establishing a new department does not mean more money or standards. And with regard to any proposed department of higher education and research, she noted that the Department of Education and Skills ‘will fight you every step of the way’, and that if workshop participants thought it was possible that such a department was to emerge in receipt of all monies invested in higher education and research via SFI, that was ‘not going to happen’.

She further suggested that if there were to be a department of higher education and research, it was likely to be a department with not much more money and some agencies, and that the minister would lack clout around the Cabinet table. The HEA would constitute a very big component of that department – that is, in the context where there already is a strong natural tension between the HEA and minister. The continuum of education in Ireland is important; the link between second and third level ‘Being with schools is what it is about’. Parental interest in the progression of their children gives backbenchers an interest and stake in issues and likely political support for the minister for education and skills. Sixteen years ago Ireland was bottom of the research league table. Since then there have been five cycles of PRTL. PRTL and SFI allocations are internationally peer-reviewed, and parents are aware of fourth-level education.

On the issue of autonomy Cllr. Hanafin asserted that that did not happen often, but as minister for education and science she ‘had to thump tables to protect humanities research’ when UCD proposed to stop teaching Old Irish – on the basis that if UCD did not teach Old Irish, who would? Finally, she counselled that the most effective approach would be to get the parties contesting the general election to prioritise higher education in their manifestos. That way it would be included in the Programme for Government and addressed through a whole-of-government approach.

4.3

Mr Ned Costello, chief executive officer, Irish Universities Association (IUA), gave the final presentation to the workshop, noting that his remarks were largely made in a personal capacity, but with reference where appropriate to the corporate view of the IUA. He noted that his perspective on the workshop proposal was ‘somewhere between that of Mary Hanafin and Patrick Clancy’.

He spoke of the evolution of structures supporting national research policy, noting that since 1983 the enterprise department has had the lead role in the research area in Ireland. He noted that the 1980s saw science-policy expertise develop, but not programme funding. However, a strong axis was created between higher education and research policy in the development agencies. He further noted that a regulated university sector was a relatively new development in Ireland, with the passing of the Universities Act, 1997.

There was a step change via the establishment of Science Foundation Ireland in 1998 and with the decision by Atlantic Philanthropies to massively support investment in what became the PRTL. The latter coincided with the Celtic Tiger economic boom, which provided the revenue for public investment to, inter alia, leverage the PRTL funds. A third important stimulus was the decision to formulate a national Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation (SSTI), which came to fruition in 2005–06. An interdepartmental committee was a key driver of the strategy.

Mr Costello’s personal assessment of the SSTI process and the developments that preceded it is that they created a quite mature structure for coordinating and implementing policy across the higher education–enterprise continuum. They were less successful in developing a coherent front across the other fields of publicly funded research.

Post-financial crash, what the era of austerity has shown is that it is infinitely easier to develop whole-of-government policy during an era of expansion than of austerity. In the aftermath of the crash, there has been:

- A general increase in regulation;
- In higher education, under the national strategy, greater emphasis on central steering of the system (and indeed on the concept of a system);
- In enterprise policy, an overriding emphasis on employment;
- Somewhat linked to this, but distinct in its own right, a narrowing of research-policy focus towards shorter-term outputs and outcomes;
- On the financial front, significantly reduced funding for higher education and reduced funding for research;
- Structural change in the dissolution of Forfás and its absorption into the DJEI.

Taken together, these factors represent a significant shift in the thrust of overall national policy, and raise the question of whether government policy trumps structure.

The creation of a new ministry for higher education and research would effectively mean splitting and realigning portfolios. This creates the possibility that while higher education and research might be hived off from their current homes, they might end up being bundled with some other function, as has tended to happen: the Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands phenomenon. It might also be remarked that in an Irish context new ministries historically have tended to have short lives.

A further issue is the critical mass of any proposed ministry – the scale of its budget and staffing complement.

On scale, such a proposed department fares fairly well; once one goes past the big spenders – Education, Health, and Social Welfare – departmental budgets drop dramatically, and the hypothetical department would stand shoulder to shoulder with departments like Justice and Transport.

The question of administrative mass is more problematic, since both higher education and research are heavily agencified. This would imply a very small department in headcount terms. Structurally, it would be difficult to see how this would be viable unless some or all agency personnel were absorbed into the body of the department. For example, it might give rise to considerations of merging the HEA with the new department, adding further complexity to the task of creating the new structure.

What benefits, then, might be gained from having a dedicated department of higher education and research? Mr Costello advised the workshop that he found this to be a difficult question to answer – indeed, that there is no perfect answer to this structural question.

At a minimum one would probably envision all of the higher-education sector as currently defined, along with Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council, to be transferred into this new department. The transfer of mission-oriented research linked to other major spending departments – for example, Health and Agriculture – to a standalone department would be a major structural and strategic issue. The crux of the debate is whether research should be seen as a distinct area of focus in itself, or one which should be driven by sectoral missions.

It is also worth considering the question of whether or not a single consolidated research budget would have better prospects for improvement or, at the very least, surviving further cutbacks, as has been the case in previous years. Since the crisis began, the survivability of funding linked to specific departmental missions has been better than the general research spend.

Turning to the pros and cons of the hypothetical structure for higher education overall, the creation of a dedicated ministry would inevitably throw the spotlight onto the issue of the sustainable funding of higher education. It would also eliminate the juggling that inevitably has to go on in a comprehensive education department, involving the competing demands of primary, secondary, further and higher education. But it would not avoid the need for a balancing act as and between higher education and research funding, or the overall interdepartmental competition for resources.

The creation of the structure would also raise serious questions about the balance between central regulation and steering on the one hand, and institutional autonomy on the other. One potential benefit would be the creation of a more durable pool of experience and expertise.

Finally, there is the question of interconnections. There are important connections, for example, in the area of transition from second to third level, which would be harder to deal with effectively under a changed structure. Prospectively, dealing with the sustainability question will prompt further thinking about the relationship between further and higher education – something that is easier to do under the current structures.

From an IUA perspective, there are three key challenges facing the university sector – the three Rs:

- Resourcing
- Regulation
- Research

The question of sustainable resourcing requires political and societal choices to be made, supported by detailed policy-design work. These subsist regardless of departmental structure, although the creation of a dedicated department would probably accelerate their being confronted.

On regulation, from an IUA perspective the issue is one of striking the right balance between necessary transparency and accountability on the one hand, and, on the other, the flexibility and agility modern universities need to deliver successfully for students and society. Would a dedicated department tip that balance in an adverse direction?

On research, however, a critical issue needs to be addressed and which the IUA has highlighted in its response to the consultation on the new SSTI. This issue relates to the need for improved structures for coordination and steering of policy at national level. In this respect the IUA has proposed the establishment of a new Research and Innovation Advisory Council, situated under the aegis of the Department of An Taoiseach, with strong involvement of the actual research performers in higher education and industry.

The IUA has also called for a strengthening of the research ecosystem, with key components to include a base of excellence in all disciplines, and effective knowledge-exchange mechanisms spanning the public and private spheres.

In that context, the IUA further suggests that we need to adopt a more ambitious national vision for our overall investment in research and innovation, moving from our current level of approximately 1.2 per cent of GDP to a figure closer to 2.5 per cent. The plan and a timetable to achieve this require a fully joined-up approach, with key inputs from stakeholders in higher education and industry.

5. Closing session

Dr Don Thornhill initiated the concluding exchange of views by asserting that while he agreed with Professor Clancy's and Professor Ritzen's *analysis*, he strongly agreed with Cllr. Hanafin's *conclusions* on the workshop topic question. His view was that in the context of increased resources, restoration of the four pillars of higher education and research – the universities block grant, PRTLl, research councils and SFI funding – was the framework to aim for rather than focusing on the headline appointment of a minister for higher education and research.

Other points made in the closing session:

- There is ample evidence that research is under threat in Ireland – two universities assert all researchers are trainee academics.
- Once the DJEI has full responsibility for research budget, will it surrender it?
- The problem is identified, but not the solution – how to restore the four pillars and maximise the research spend.
- Responsibility for research would have more clout if located in the Taoiseach's department.
- There is an intrinsic relationship between research and higher education, and it is necessary to sustain this in a balanced and interconnected system.
- Fixing core funding would help with support for research – the overhead rate, for example, is too low and needs addressing.
- We need to educate people to take up jobs in the whole economy, not just within academia.

Professor McKenna thanked the panel and audience for a remarkably good exchange of views, with large issues discussed in an open way.

Concluding the proceedings, Professor Kennedy thanked contributors and participants for a very provocative debate sharing interesting points of view.

