



## **Royal Irish Academy submission to DFHERIS Statement of Strategy**

**17 December 2020**

The Royal Irish Academy (RIA) is an all-island, independent forum of peer-elected experts from the sciences, humanities and social sciences. Members (who currently number c.500) are elected on the basis of their world-class contribution to scholarship and learning. Drawing on its members' expertise, the Academy makes a significant contribution to public debate and policy on issues in higher education, science, research and culture.

The establishment of the Department of FHERIS offers an exciting opportunity to refresh the national strategic priorities for higher-education and research, the national system of research funding, and to highlight and engage with the reservoir of expertise and talent housed and nurtured within Ireland's higher-education system. It also provides an excellent opportunity to strengthen the links between further and higher education in terms of the overall policy framework, governance responsibilities, qualifications framework, access and pathways between the two, and strategic investment for the tertiary sector as a whole.

The RIA would like to highlight five issues that the department will need to consider over the course of its new statement of strategy.

### **1. Links between policy and evidence**

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has shown the importance of evidence-based decision making and the need for policy to be better informed by research. The RIA strongly supports measures to build greater connectivity between the knowledge and expertise within Ireland's higher-education institutions and the policy and political communities. The RIA's Parliamentary Pairing Scheme, nomination and support of Irish experts' participation in the European Commission's Science Advice Mechanism, leadership of numerous European policy working groups, and engagement with the nascent Oireachtas Friends of Science, are some of the ways it is working to build academic-policy connections and harness the expertise of Irish science in the service of national and global goals. The RIA will

continue to progress thinking on the future architecture of science–policy engagement in Ireland through its Spring 2021 collaboration with the Irish Research Council, entitled ‘Research for public policy’.

## 2. Investment in research

The new department provides an opportunity for investment in research to be planned in a coherent and integrated manner by bringing together the main funding agencies. This has the potential to ensure that investment decisions are informed by a consistent set of criteria and will ensure that there is a level playing field for all disciplinary areas to maintain critical breadth and depth in research expertise.

Investment in fundamental or basic research is essential for Ireland’s future. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the necessity of investment in basic and applied research to equip society with the knowledge and know-how to respond to unexpected challenges. It has also demonstrated the equally pressing need to prepare society to engage with and understand the scientific and technical basis and solutions to societal challenges such as climate action developed through research. A key task for the department will be to ensure that scientific progress accompanies social progress. This task is two-fold: first for scientists to consider how to build citizens’ understanding and knowledge of their particular research field; second, for government to consider how better to prepare society to engage with this knowledge. Many such opportunities arise through the education system—see for example, the Academy’s recent work with the Federation of European Academies (ALLEA) on climate-change education—but the RIA also urges consideration of a forum through which a permanent dialogue between citizens and scientists can take place. The RIA will continue to use its all-island and independent status to support consultation and discussion with civic society on significant political, social and cultural issues, and would welcome the opportunity to work with the department in developing a forum for citizen–science dialogue.

A key priority for the new department will be the development of a new national strategy for research and innovation (the successor to ‘Innovation 2020’), including an analysis of future challenges to 2030. There is a need for Ireland to invest in the future, through a commitment to research, higher education and innovation, to deliver the knowledge, expertise and talent it will need to respond to global and national challenges.

It would also be beneficial for the department to initiate a review of research system governance, including public research funding structures, to ensure a structured, coherent and transparent system of decision-making and engagement. While agency-level evaluations and reviews occur, Ireland would benefit from a multi-agency, integrated review of the

functioning and impact of the system through which competitive R&D public funding is prioritised, allocated, managed and evaluated.

### 3. Higher education policy

There is a need for a new policy framework for higher education to be developed. The existing national policy dates from 2011, and the policy landscape has significantly changed since that time, through the development of technological universities, stronger linkages with the further education sector, the enhanced development of online teaching (accelerated by the pandemic), and the establishment of the new department, and because of Brexit.

The RIA has the potential to contribute towards the development of future higher-education policy. The RIA's all-island Higher Education Futures Taskforce (est. September 2020) is actively considering options and opportunities to enhance the all-island higher-education system to 2030, with reference to five thematic areas:

1. vision and value (what is the difference higher education will make to Ireland and the world in 2030),
2. future models of higher education (including student engagement, teaching and learning, assessment),
3. region and place,
4. equality, diversity and inclusion and
5. research and innovation.

The taskforce will report in mid-2021 and will consider external and global forces such as the progress of the European Research Area, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic upon models of higher education, and climate action, as well as national drivers including the policy objectives of creating an island of talent, innovation, and inclusion. The RIA will keep the Department informed of its progress in this area.

### 4. Early career researchers

Early Career Researchers (ECRs) face a particular set of challenges, which have been exacerbated in many instances by the current pandemic. ECRs have specific concerns over employment opportunities, access to research funding opportunities, job security, and mentoring and professional development opportunities. The RIA will continue to support ECRs through the provision of specific research collaboration and networking grants, including the Charlemont awards. In addition, the Academy is currently focusing on providing a specific voice for ECRs in the higher-education landscape through the establishment of a 'Young Academy' for the island of Ireland. This Young Academy will join the existing network of more than 40 similar bodies that have already been established internationally.

It will provide an important platform for ECRs to have their voice heard on the higher-education issues that most affect them.

#### 5. Higher Education Authority Act

The updating of the legislation underpinning the Higher Education Authority will be a key priority for the new department. The new legislation will provide the basis for a modern regulatory authority for higher education that has the necessary statutory powers that it needs to fulfil its key role in higher-education policy, funding and governance. The establishment of the Irish Research Council on a statutory basis as part of the legislation will be an important development for the research community. The RIA looks forward to engaging with the department about the aspects of the proposed legislation that will affect its governance and reporting relationships.

The RIA welcomes the opportunity to inform the development of the new strategy statement and looks forward to working with the new department over the course of that strategy.

**For further information** on this submission please contact the Academy's CEO Dr Tony Gaynor ([t.gaynor@ria.ie](mailto:t.gaynor@ria.ie)) or Sinéad Riordan, Head of Policy and International Relations ([s.riordan@ria.ie](mailto:s.riordan@ria.ie))