An Open Letter to the Government of Ireland

As scientists in Ireland and Irish scientists abroad, we are committed to making our contribution to Ireland’s recovery by doing the best and most innovative research possible. However, we are deeply concerned about the research policies implemented by the current government. The policy of sustained investment in scientific excellence that helped build a vibrant scientific community in Ireland over the past fifteen years has given way to a short-sighted drive for commercialisable research in a very limited set of prescribed areas. Along with an investment in research that is below the EU average, steadily decreasing core grants to universities, and a constant demand to increase student numbers, these policies are creating a perfect storm for scientific research and education in Ireland and are undermining our abilities to carry out worldclass research, to retain scientific talent in the country and also to educate future scientists and build a real and sustainable knowledge economy.

Innovation needs a strong core in basic research

A wealth of economic research shows that sustained investment in basic research pays huge dividends economically, not just through the generation of intellectual property and the development of new companies, but also by building human capital and by attracting companies that hope to benefit from a vibrant research community. Countries with long-established and functional research systems that successfully underpin economic development rely on a well-balanced mix between basic and applied research. The Irish Government’s current investment in applied research is welcome and forms an essential part of an overall strategy to generate economic return from scientific research. However, without a continued parallel investment in longer-term, fundamental research there will be no discoveries to capitalise on. By their very nature, such discoveries are not predictable and cannot be prescribed by what the government calls ‘oriented basic research’. Equally unpredictable are the areas in which important discoveries will be made. Basic research should be funded on the criterion of excellence alone to ensure a credible and sustainable scientific infrastructure.

High-quality university education requires strong basic research

The current science policies of the government are not only negatively affecting research but also science education in the country. A proper training in science requires hands-on experience in laboratories, with supervision and support from graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and other researchers. Because of the continually changing funding policy the numbers of research staff are steadily decreasing and we have now reached the stage where not all science students are getting the opportunity to do real experimental work during their studies. Thus, our ability to deliver a quality education is being seriously degraded. As a consequence, Irish universities are being dragged down in international rankings and this slide will inevitably continue if the current policies are maintained.

A call on the government of Ireland

Basic research and science education go hand in hand – aspirations for a knowledge economy must therefore recognise that a connected ecosystem is required to achieve this. Building such an ecosystem needs continuity in public support over a longer time-frame and the implementation of the necessary policies requires foresight and patience. We call on the government and funding bodies, in devising the successor to the Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2006-2013, to reconsider their current policies and rebalance the funding of science to strongly support not only applied or ‘oriented basic’ research in prioritised areas but also basic research across the full range of scientific disciplines.
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Emma Teeling, Professor, University College Dublin, ERC Awardee
Warren Thomas, Lecturer, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and Perdana University, Malaysia
Bennett Thomson, Researcher, Trinity College Dublin
Stephen Thorpe, Postdoctoral Researcher, Queen Mary University of London, Marie Curie Fellow
Benjamin Thébaudeau IQUA, Postdoctoral Researcher, Maynooth University, IRC EPS awardee
Patrick Timmons, Trinity College Dublin
Richard Timoney, Professor of Mathematics, Trinity College Dublin
Samuel Torsney, PhD Student, Trinity College Dublin
Andre Toulouse, College Lecturer, University College Cork
Daniela Tropea, Assistant Professor, Trinity College Dublin
Michael Tuite, Professor, NUI Galway
Mohit Tunwal, Researcher, University College Cork
Trevor Tyson, Research Scientist, Van Andel Institute, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Valerie Urbach, Researcher, Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Scientifique, France
Alexey Uliyanov, Researcher, University College Dublin
Alice Vajda, Postdoctoral Researcher, Trinity College Dublin
Ankit Verma IGGY, PhD student, Trinity College Dublin, Trinity award, FEMS PhD award, J.N. TATA scholarship
Stella Vlachou, Assistant Professor, Dublin City University
Yuri Volkov, Professor, Trinity College Dublin
Chelly van Vuuren, Researcher, NUI Galway
Joseph Várilly, Professor, University of Costa Rica
John Waddington MRIA, Professor, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
Siobhan Wade, Researcher, Trinity College Dublin
Charles Malcolm Walmsley, Honorary Professor, School of Cosmic Physics, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies
Aron Walsh, Professor, University of Bath, ERC Awardee
Colum Walsh, Professor, NUI Galway
Fiona Walsh, Lecturer, Maynooth University
Michael Walsh, Lecturer, University of Limerick
Naomi Walsh, Researcher, Dublin City University
Brian Ward, Lecturer, NUI Galway
Ash Watson Neuroscience Ireland, Researcher, Trinity College Dublin, IRC postgraduate awardee
Dorach Watson, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen, Lundbeck Prize Laureate
Graeme Watson, Professor, School of Chemistry, Trinity College Dublin
William Watson, Associate Professor, University College Dublin
Paul Watts, Lecturer, National University of Ireland, Maynooth
Denis Weaire MRIA, FRS, Professor, Trinity College Dublin, RIA Cunningham Medallist
Frank Wellmer, Associate Professor, Trinity College Dublin
John Wenger, Senior Lecturer in Chemistry, University College Cork
Antony Wheatley, Professor, NUI Galway
Andy Wheeler, Professor, University College Cork
Emma Whelan IAU, Postdoctoral researcher, Institute für Astronomie und Astrophysik, Eberhard Karls University Tuebingen, Marie Curie Fellow
Ken Whelan FIFM, Adjunct Professor, University College Dublin, School Biol. and Envir. Sci.
Sarah Whelan, Postdoctoral Researcher, Trinity College Dublin, HRB
Nicki Whitehouse FRSA; FRES, Associate Professor, University of Plymouth; Queen's University Belfast, ERC Awardee, AHRC (funding an Irish project)
Mike Whitfield, Postdoctoral Researcher, Trinity College Dublin
David Williams, Lecturer, Mullard Space Science Laboratory, University College London
Charlotte Wilson, Assistant Professor, Trinity College Dublin
Jean Wilson, Postdoctoral Researcher, EPA funded Research Fellow - Trinity College Dublin
Alice Witney, Assistant Professor, Trinity College Dublin
Kenneth Wolfe MRIA, Professor, University College Dublin, ERC Awardee
Katherine Woods asi, Postdoctoral Researcher, Olivia Newton-John Cancer Research Institute, Australia
David Wraith, Senior Lecturer, Maynooth University
Michael Wride FHEA (UK), Assistant Professor, School of Natural Science, Trinity College Dublin
Gerry Wrixon MRIA, FREng, Professor and Chairman School of Cosmic Physics, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies
Irena Yanushevskaya, Postdoctoral Researcher, Trinity College Dublin
Jon Yearsley, Lecturer, University College Dublin
Conor Young, Researcher, Trinity College Dublin
Paul Young, College Lecturer, University College Cork
Dominic Zerulla FInstP, Senior Lecturer, University College Dublin
Jesko Zimmermann, Postdoctoral Researcher, Trinity College Dublin
Daniela Zisterer, Professor, Trinity College Dublin
Giuseppe Zurlo, Lecturer, NUI Galway