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5<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Dear Minister Harris,

We are writing in response to your invitation for views on the Consultation Report on the reform of the Higher Education Authority Act. We welcome the Report and are broadly supportive of the suggestions and in particular the acknowledgement that “The HEA and HEI’s have a key function in relation to both basic and applied research”. We feel it is important to emphasize that this function should apply equally to all areas of research and that this be reflected in future legislation. The Programme for Government commits to “Ensure support for foundational and discovery research” and yet at present there is an imbalance between funding opportunities for fundamental and applied research. Two of the past four Nobel prizes in Physics have been in our particular area of research (black holes and gravitational waves) with two awardees (Thorne and Penrose) being close colleagues of our group. In Ireland, however, this research is deemed ineligible for funding by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) since their legal remit excludes fundamental basic research (unless linked to international bodies such as the Royal Society).

The recent improvements in research funding via the Irish Research Council (IRC) have helped to address this imbalance. Both bringing the IRC postgraduate scholarship stipend in line with the SFI rate and the reintroduction of the IRC Laureate Awards are very welcome, and partially fill a gap left by discontinued Principal-Investigator led schemes such as the highly-successful Research Frontiers Programme. We hope further improvements to funding basic research can be made in the near future.

In the short term, there are two apparently minor changes to the existing IRC schemes that would substantially improve the competitiveness of Irish research:

1. Bring the salary of the IRC postdoctoral scheme in line with the IUA Researcher Salary scales to be competitive with SFI and similar European schemes.
2. Adjust the timing of the IRC postdoctoral scheme to be in line with the standard international cycle, whereby postdoctoral researchers are typically recruited in the first two months of the year with a view to taking up a position at the start of the next academic year. It is our experience that exceptional candidates more often than not accept offers given at this time rather than take the risk of waiting on IRC results even if a position in Ireland is their first choice. This simple zero-cost change would align the timing of the scheme with that of other prestigious international awards such as the EU’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowships and avoid unnecessary loss of talent from the Irish research landscape.

Ireland has identified research as fundamentally important to our future as a knowledge-led economy. We believe that fundamental basic research such as that we conduct plays a key role in attracting talented youth into scientific degrees. Scientifically, we have the capacity to attract top global research talent, but it is only by recognising this importance through adequate and appropriately-directed funding of all research areas that our ambitions as a society can be realised.

Sincerely yours,

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