

**Proposed Exchequer-Employer Investment Mechanism for Higher Education and Further Education and Training:**

**Submission from Irish Research Council**

The Council welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Department on the proposed exchequer-employer investment mechanism for higher education and FET.

The Council occupies a unique position in the Irish research eco-system, managing programmes that address all disciplines, all career stages, and partnerships with enterprise, employers, government departments and civic society. The Council's perspective is therefore informed by broad engagement, both with researchers and the variety of social and economic partners that utilise research expertise.

The Council welcomes consideration by government as to how the National Training Fund might be further developed to enhance investment in further education and training. The concept of 'skills' is broadening to increasingly emphasise areas such as creativity, novel thinking, problem-solving, collaborative working and interdisciplinarity. Ireland is well regarded internationally for the quality of its workforce and the responsiveness of its education and training system to skills needs, however maintaining international competitiveness and ensuring we can address complex societal and economic challenges will require building on our investment in human capital into the future.

In addition to its Government of Ireland postgraduate and postdoctoral awards, the Council runs programmes in collaboration with enterprise, civic society and government departments & agencies. Specifically, these programmes are:

- **Enterprise Partnership Postgraduate/Postdoctoral Scheme (EPS)**  
Under this scheme, researcher scholars or fellows based at their host institution work on a specific project in partnership with an enterprise (including not for profit employers), gaining valuable experience of academia-industry collaboration
- **Employment-Based Programme (postgraduate)**  
A more workplace-intensive research scholarship, awardees are based in and employed by an industry partner or other type of employer, allowing the scholar to gain valuable workplace and transferable skills as part of a postgraduate research project

- **Research for Policy and Society**

This programme makes awards to principal investigators to conduct research into topics identified by Government Departments or agencies as key challenges within their respective policy responsibilities. The programme thus facilitates the transfer of knowledge from experts in higher education into the policy-making arena, to build the evidence base and inform good decision-making.

- **CAROLINE Marie Curie Sklodowska Curie Actions COFUND**

This 5-year, €12.3m programme, co-funded by the European Commission, awards postdoctoral Fellowships to excellent researchers to conduct research in collaboration with NGOs or international organisations.

- **New Foundations (Engaging Civic Society) strand**

This strand of the Council's New Foundations programme, run in partnership with The Wheel, awards small knowledge exchange grants to researchers, working in collaboration with a community/ voluntary organisation partner.

In summary, the proposal as set out by the Department in the consultation paper involves employers paying an increased NTF levy, potentially generating additional funds for investment in further and higher education. The Department would consult enterprise/employers in relation to how that investment could boost skills and human capital for the workplace.

Central to the Council's role is the cultivation of the pipeline of excellent individuals for research careers, including in settings beyond academia. Situated within the Education and Skills family, and with the majority of funding currently being allocated to early-stage research careers, the Council's postgraduate and postdoctoral programmes address the development of high-level skills and knowledge. In light of our mandate, the Irish Research Council responds to this proposal as follows:

## **1 Higher-level skills and knowledge**

Postgraduate and postdoctoral research and training equips individuals with specific skill sets beyond those gained at undergraduate or taught postgraduate level. It is important therefore that consultation with enterprise and employers on the proposed mechanism includes scope for a dialogue on research skills and how the education and skills system can further develop the provision of skilled human capital with research-driven competencies.

## **2 Skills for the full spectrum of employers**

The Council acknowledges the importance of skills for enterprise, and is committed to playing an active role in this regard. However skills needs are wider than enterprise and the full range of employers, including public sector and civil society

entities should be consulted on their human capital skills and knowledge needs going forward.

### **3 Skilled people across all disciplines**

Increasingly, employers are seeking skills and knowledge across disciplines, including Social Science and the Arts. For example, the concept of STEAM (STEM + Arts) is increasingly being taken up by tech firms. Interdisciplinary teams are seen as key to enhancing workplace creativity and innovation, and reducing 'group-think'. The introduction of new technologies brings with it social, behavioural and privacy questions, enhancing the need for social scientists and indeed humanists to collaborate with technologists in product and service development. This approach has been strongly encouraged within Horizon2020.

Development, analysis and interpretation of the evidence base for effective decision-making within Government Departments and agencies to address complex societal challenges requires the public sector to have access to research skills and knowledge across all disciplines.

### **4 Addressing Societal Challenges**

*Innovation2020* recognises the need for the development of societal challenge-based research funding to address complex national and global issues. The Department's proposal makes reference to how the investment mechanism could benefit wider society. The Council proposes that consideration be given to measures beyond skills, to include initiatives that enhance Ireland's ability to explore and ultimately address pressing societal challenges, including but not limited to areas such as health, housing, Brexit and climate change. Employers, as key societal stakeholders, could contribute to a new funding measure through the proposed mechanism and participate in the formulation of key research questions. The Irish Research Council is well positioned to lead on the development of a new research approach, including consultation.

### **5 Broad-based higher education and research system**

Council's vision for the long-term development of Irish higher education and research is for a system which is broadly-based, with a combined strength across all disciplines. The Council recognises the need to respond to immediate and medium-term skills needs, however additional investment in higher education and research should contribute to the balanced development of the system also. A balanced ecosystem will address the breadth of economic and societal needs and develop the knowledge, understanding and insights required by citizens, employers and government.

ENDS

Irish Research Council

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