



**Opening Statement to
Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science
on the
General Scheme of Research and Innovation Bill 2023**

Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to participate in the pre-Legislative scrutiny of the Research Bill 2023. The IUA member universities that I represent here today account for approximately 85% of publicly funded research in Ireland and have competitively secured over 90% of SFI and IRC's research grants, and so are significant stakeholders in the development of this Bill.

In the interest of time, I will confine my remarks to a number of key points, noting I am happy to provide further details should the Committee require.

- The IUA welcomes this Bill, which provides a comprehensive approach to legislation on the public research and innovation system. The strategic intent of the Bill, built on the aspirations of Impact 2030 to broaden research funding in Ireland to enable it to address Ireland's societal, economic and environmental challenges, is very positive.
- The new legislation, while welcome, must however be accompanied with the required investment to achieve these national ambitions. The recent government

publications, the [HERD Survey](#) and the [R&D Budget](#) show Ireland languishing at the bottom of European tables. It is essential that, side by side with this Bill, the government increases its spending on research if it is to realise its target of being an Innovation Leader in Europe by 2030.

- The types of research an agency funds defines that agency and its role in the national system. The clear intent of the Bill as per Head 8(a) is *“to promote and support excellence in research and innovation, within and across all disciplines, spanning fundamental research to applied research activity through competitively awarded research and innovation funding”* and this is exactly what Ireland needs. However, inconsistent language throughout the Bill and a lack of clear definitions cause confusion. For example, while “applied research” is defined in Head 3 “fundamental research” is not, rendering the range of the Objects, and the remit of the agency itself, ambiguous. In Head 8(f), the use of the term “oriented basic research” (again not defined) has the potential to narrow the range of Head 8(a). Research excellence, cited 5 times in the Bill, is not defined but is the major criterion on which funding decisions will be made. We would ask the Committee to recommend that clear definitions and consistent language are inserted in the final Bill so that the new agency has the capacity to deliver on its core objectives. The importance of this cannot be overstated.
- The provisions in the Bill that outline the governance structures set a good framework for the agency but it is essential that there is sufficient diversity in the

governance model of the new agency to be fully reflective of Ireland's research ecosystem and include a broad spectrum of individuals with expertise reflecting the national and international research and innovation ecosystem. We propose that a competency-based approach is used in line with best governance practice so as to ensure that the agency has the capacity to fund research excellence across all disciplines and career stages and for that research to "make as big a difference as possible to as many people as possible", as recently stated by Minister Harris.

- The Bill explicitly provides for enterprise interests to be included in the Board. We welcome this but it does not sufficiently address the broader societal and environmental scope of the agency. We would suggest that the Committee recommend that other research end-users are also represented on the Board in order to ensure that the wider objectives of the Bill are fully reflected in the governance structure.
- Head 29 provides for the preparation of the Agency's Annual Plan. We suggest that the Committee recommend that the Department reconsider the appropriateness of subsection (6) which conveys significant powers on the Minister in relation to the Annual Plan. The importance of keeping research funding decisions independent of political influence was called out clearly by the current Tánaiste in a speech to the IUA's Future of Ireland series when he said: "I am absolutely opposed to... the current political attempt to bring ministers and government

departments back into the decision-making structures for research awards”. While it is entirely appropriate for the Minister to set policy and sign off on the strategic plan for the research agency, we urge the Committee to recommend that the Minister would not have a veto on the annual plan of the agency.

- Our universities are at the heart of regional development all across the country. They are pivotal to the establishment and success of our knowledge economy and are centres of excellence for a whole range of growth clusters including ICT, bio-pharma, med-tech, agri-food and the creative industries. It is essential that this Bill enables the new research funding agency to continue to underpin the capacity of all universities to maintain their role as regional powerhouses of economic and societal development.
- I would like to finish by saying, our universities are key stakeholders for the new agency as the performers of the research it will fund. A strong partnership approach between the agency and universities, as critical stakeholders to drive research and innovation, will be critical to the success of the new agency and to the government’s ambition to make Ireland an island of innovation and talent based on a “world-class research system”.