

Royal Society/ Royal Irish Academy Workshop, 6 September 2019

Opportunities and challenges for research and innovation in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

Background

The Royal Society and the Royal Irish Academy co-hosted a roundtable focusing on the opportunities and challenges for research and innovation across the Island of Ireland. This note reflects some of the issues discussed at the meeting, and provides options for the research community and policy makers across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to consider.

Science relies on the exchange of ideas and collaboration across borders. This is particularly relevant in the case of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland where joint research projects, businesses and organisations have grown and developed. It is an important time to reflect on this unique cross border relationship, and to consider what future opportunities and challenges there are for scientific research and development. Science is a global endeavour, and it is vital that scientific collaboration between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland continues to be supported.

People

- Maintenance of an open border between Ireland and Northern Ireland to allow for the continued unimpeded cross-border flow of people, goods and services.
- Where possible, streamline visa requirements for overseas students and academic staff coming to work and study in Northern Ireland. This includes allowing overseas graduates to remain in Northern Ireland post-graduation in areas of skills shortages.
- Create a bespoke suite of programmes including bilateral funding agreements to support north-south, east-west academic research mobility, innovation and skills/talent development and appropriate research infrastructure.
- Encourage support for all-island bodies such as the RIA to create further opportunities for all-island and UK-Ireland dialogue, interchange and collaboration.

Research and development

- Secure continued Northern Ireland participation in, and influence upon, Horizon 2020 and its successor, Horizon Europe.
- Maintain access to EU structural funding programmes (ERDF, ESF, PEACE and INTERREG) and ensure a strong focus on research and innovation, so that the economy of NI and the Border Region of Ireland can continue to grow and prosper. In the event of such funding no longer being provided through EU structures, it should be provided directly and ring-fenced by the UK government e.g via the Proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund or equivalent.
- Explore the possibility of developing and enhancing UK-Ireland bilateral research funding schemes with other countries, such as the expansion of the US-Ireland Research and Development Programme to extend to additional thematic areas in science and engineering and to include the humanities and social sciences. Similar programmes should be developed with other growing economies across the world.

HE strategy

- Maintain close collaboration and provide mechanisms for close cooperation with key European partners to continue the delivery of excellent research in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.
- Seek the continuance of regulatory and standards equivalence with other EU countries and promote a negotiated outcome that allows for the continued recognition of professional qualifications between the UK and the remaining 27 EU member states.
- Promote increased and coordinated investment in research and innovation, through government initiatives in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic to support cross border collaboration and innovation that will drive economic growth.

Specific required actions include:

- The development of joint north-south research centres, academic and research appointments and joint research studentships, to enhance the profile and international impact of HE and research across the island of Ireland.
- The development of regional research-enhancement funding by UK Research and Innovation to expand Northern Ireland's research capability.
- Ring-fencing of the research component UK Shared Prosperity Fund to enhance research capability in the NI HE sector.

- The development of all-island research-equivalent trade / study missions to build new overseas research capacity collaborations.

Future international funding arrangements in the first place should look to create opportunities for collaborations with those countries with which the UK and Ireland have an existing well-established and impactful scientific research history. The Royal Irish Academy Brexit Taskforce noted the sparseness of research funding programmes to incentivise north-south and east-west research programmes other than those provided through EU research and innovation, and regional development programmes and the US-Ireland research development partnership.

- New future funding arrangements in the UK should include schemes to foster north-south research collaborations on the island of Ireland in recognition not only of the demonstrable scientific value and impact of such collaborations but also their critical contribution to community building and enabling peace and reconciliation on the island.
- New future funding arrangements in the UK and Ireland should foster north-south and east-west research collaborations across the sciences, engineering, humanities and social sciences.
- Existing bi-lateral relationships such as those that exist between national academies in Ireland and the UK offer an immediate mechanism through which to deliver scaled-up collaborative research funding schemes.

The strategic use of the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund or equivalent programme which has an emphasis on 'place' will be an important factor in addressing some of the issues raised above.