

Irish Scientists for Basic Research

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 world-class 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.