

Science Council focuses on actions for sustainability of research centres

The Advisory Council on Science, Technology and Innovation (ACSTI) today made a series of recommendations on how best to support research centres in Ireland with a view to optimising future potential social and economic returns from State investments in research, development and innovation (RD&I).

The report, entitled, *Sustainability of Research Centres*, looks at the makeup and oversight of the research centre landscape in Ireland and the appropriate models for funding of individual State-supported research centres (i.e. those research centres that have received/are receiving a stream of funding from a Government department or agency).

Sean Sherlock T.D., the Minister for Research and Innovation commented, "As part of the next stage of the evolution of Ireland's national research system, we need to focus on maximising the economic impact of taxpayers' investment in research, development and innovation. The Minister added, "For the research centre landscape to retain its value, we need more jobs to be created from this investment."

Minister Sherlock concluded by saying, "I would like to sincerely thank the Council and the Task Force that worked on this report and all of the stakeholders that engaged in the consultation process."

Tom McCarthy, Chairman of ACSTI said, "Over the years there has been recognition of the need to consolidate publicly funded RD&I activity into research centres and networks, as a way of building critical mass in research excellence. The recommendations in this report are aimed at optimising the return on State investment from research centres. They are based on a premise that while not all State-supported centres can or should survive indefinitely, those that are funded should be funded in a manner that supports them in delivering on their objectives. Collectively the recommendations set out in this report provide a vision for the future research centre landscape and a framework to achieve this through oversight and a set of funding model guides."

Martin D. Shanahan, Chief Executive, Forfás said, "That recommendations in this report are aimed at ensuring that we maximise the use of State funding invested in research and development. It builds on work, targeting State funding for research & development at 14 areas which were identified as offering the most potential, in the National Research Prioritisation Exercise."

Key Findings

Research Centre Landscape

- Categorising the Irish centres according to their central mission provides for a simpler language with which to discuss the characteristics of the research centre landscape - both in the public system but also importantly with external stakeholders. It is recommended that stakeholders recognise that the current set of State-supported centres fall into one of four groups: Academic Centres, Academic-Industry Centres, Industry Focused Centres, Mission & Sector focused centres.
- In order to provide clarity to the research centres, to the research funding and policy system and to external stakeholders, it is imperative that the emphasis on the balance of academic and commercial outputs expected from different centres is made clear. Thus, it is recommended that a common set of indicators is developed for the centres and that indicator targets that clearly indicate the balance between academic and commercial metrics should be set for each centre.

- Adequate funding for centres is needed to achieve an appropriate level of scale and the appropriate set of skills to support the centre’s capability to maximise its opportunities for delivering on its research objectives. Given the current fiscal situation in Ireland it is considered that the best potential returns on the State investment in research centres will come from appropriately funding a smaller number of centres, rather than spreading the constrained funding budgets too thinly.
- Based on inputs from industry, and in taking guidance from other comparator locations, it would appear that the development of research and technology organisations (RTOs) centres is a natural part of the progression in developing a well rounded national innovation system. RTOs are focused on applied research directed at medium term industry needs as well as shorter term technology development and technical services for industrial clients (they fit in the Industry Focused Centres Group). It is in this context that it is recommended that a funding scheme should be initiated by State funders to support the possible transition of existing centres and/or the introduction of new centres with a view to developing a small number of RTOs over the next 10-20 years.

Oversight

- It is now considered timely to establish even greater levels of strategic oversight of the performance of the research centre portfolio in order to sustain an optimised network of performing research centres. In the light of a constrained national budget for R&D&I and the dispersion of that budget across several Government departments it would be advantageous to establish a “whole of Government” oversight mechanism. It is recommended that on behalf of Government, the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation should establish groups as required to take on this oversight role and to collect and analyse data relating to the performance of the research centre landscape.

Sustainability of Individual Research Centres

A broad range of funding models have emerged in recent years through which individual State-supported research centres operate. In this context it was considered timely to provide guidance on these funding models and determine where policy interventions may be required. Such guidance is aimed at ensuring clarity for research centres, for State funders and policy makers, and for external stakeholders, in an unavoidably complex and evolving system.

- Funding Diversification
 - National funders should use the archetypal models developed in this report as a guide to setting expectations on the different funding sources that centres should pursue. The proportion of overall funding that centres should strive to achieve from each source should also be set by national funders.
 - State-supported centres should be incentivised to increase their level of non-exchequer income, as appropriate to the key objectives of a centre.
 - Incentives and initiatives need to be continued to drive increased industrial interaction with State supported research centres.
- People
 - The report also contains guidance on the support for operational staff, research staff, and research support staff.

- Equipment
 - Funding mechanisms should be put in place to support and sustain equipment sets (including maintenance funds and funding for specialist operators).
- Base/Core Centre Funding
 - It is recommended that higher education institutions (HEIs) and national funders design and document a set of potential options for base/core centre funding opportunities for centres completing a fixed term funding period.