



Why investment in the humanities and social sciences matters

Knowledge is key to economic and social growth. Developing that knowledge is crucial – and the 10 years of the Irish Council for Humanities and Social Sciences are testament to that

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TOMORROW WILL see the celebration of 10 years of the Irish Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS). The Council was established in 2000 in response to the need to develop Ireland's research capacity and skills base in a rapidly changing global environment, where knowledge is key to economic and social growth. The IRCHSS funds leading research in the humanities and social sciences. The primary strategic objective of the IRCHSS centres on building an expertise-driven research system to enhance Ireland's innovation capacity and skills base.

Through its membership of the European Science Foundation, the Council is committed to integrating Irish research in European and international networks of expertise. The Council has competed successfully for EU funding to leverage the national investment and to forge closer links with similar bodies across Europe.

Over the past ten years IRCHSS has supported research across a wide range of areas including economics, education, film studies, government and political science, law, media and

communications and sociology.

Scholars of the humanities have enriched our understanding of our own lives through drawing lessons from our past, as well as developing new perceptions for our understanding of anthropology, Irish language studies, literature, history and philosophy. Taken together their research offers many new and innovative approaches that have already had or will have profound effects on society.

The funding has focused primarily on individuals providing various types of support through scholarships and fellowships. A total 1,373 postgraduate scholarships, 299 post-doctoral and 217 senior fellowships have been awarded.

In addition there have been 243 research project grants. It is important to understand that prior to the establishment of IRCHSS there was no dedicated funding stream to support this type of research.

The numbers alone cannot convey the wealth and breadth of research that has been done by scholars and researchers. For some this involves establishing how society can improve its response to the challenges of our young, elderly, poor and the other

vulnerable parts of our society. Others seek to enhance civic engagement by all members of society through provision of lessons from our history or demonstrating the workings of democracy.

A major project "Mapping the Irish State", lead by Niamh Hardiman in the UCD **Geary** Institute, examined the establishment, growth and evolution of Ireland's State administration since the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 by establishing an online database. This now enables researchers to develop our knowledge and understanding of the evolution of the Irish State and its public institutions. The database records detailed information about central government departments, State agencies and other relevant public bodies and institutions. For a society that depends so much on the State this is a highly valuable resource.

In the area of law, a project by Ursula Kilkelly in UCC evaluated the extent to which the Children's Courts operate in line with national and international standards. Overall, the research involved observation of almost one thousand cases. Among its

findings was the fact that young people's right to privacy is not always protected and all children do not receive quality legal representation.

The 1641 Depositions are witness testimonies mainly by Protestants, but also by some Catholics, from all social backgrounds, concerning their experiences of the 1641 Irish rebellion. This body of material is unparalleled anywhere in early modern Europe and IRCHSS funding has enabled this to be digitised and now available online.

This provides a unique source of information for the causes and events surrounding the 1641 rebellion and for the social, economic, cultural, religious, and political history of seventeenth-century Ireland, England and Scotland. This project, under Jane Ohlmeyer in TCD, through a relatively small initial investment of €250,000 from IRCHSS, leveraged significant further funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, the European Commission and enterprise partnership (Eneclann, a Trinity College campus company and IBM Ireland)

These are three examples of what the investment in the humanities and social sciences can achieve. The IRCHSS tomorrow will launch a book entitled *Mosaic* that gives a wide range of examples of the impact of this investment.

The question is often asked of the value of the humanities and social sciences. The fellowships enable the development of critical thinkers who can take up employment in many sectors. In terms of impact there is both economic and social impact – this is the agency that actually funds research in economics. The three examples above give a clear picture of the impact of this type of research investment; it is different from that of the engineering and life sciences, but not of lesser value to society.

Back in 1999, Maurice Bric as part of the recommendation to establish the IRCHSS put it as follows: "a society which neglects its culture or its history is like an amnesiac individual: ignorant of the past, unable to interpret the present, uncertain about the future".

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