RESEARCH-FOR-POLICY CONFERENCE 2025

CO-CREATING A STRONGER RESEARCH-FOR-POLICY ECOSYSTEM IN IRELAND

An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais, Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Maynooth University National University of Ireland Maynooth

Social Sciences Institute

UCD DUBLIN University College Dublin

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Conference summary

Purpose of the conference

The event brought together leaders from across the research and policy sectors to advance the national agenda on Evidence-Informed Policy Making. Organised jointly by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Maynooth University, and University College Dublin, the conference aimed to further the national conversation about how we build systemic, coordinated connections between research and policy.

Emerging themes

1. Build connectivity and structured relationships

Building on mapping projects currently underway, we must identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for improved coordination across Ireland's research-policy ecosystem. Participants stressed the value of deeper, more systematic engagement between researchers and policymakers. Achieving this requires creating cross-sector networks; improving the flow of information, expertise and data; and expanding fellowship and exchange models.

2. Develop skills, incentives and absorptive capacity

Researchers and policymakers need the skills, the incentives, and the time to engage with one another. So appropriate structures are needed within policy and research-performing organisations. This should be supported by boundary-spanning roles, and by embedding Evidence-Informed Policy Making in sectoral strategies.

3. Advance knowledge mobilisation

Knowledge mobilisation emerged as a core priority of future work. Participants recognised the need for experimentation, piloting, and "learning by doing". This will require collaborative design, shared leadership, cultural change across institutions, and an increased role for intermediaries.

4. Strengthen evidence synthesis and co-production of research

Increasing capacity to undertake systematic (and often rapid) evidence syntheses can improve the supply of reliable research evidence available to decision-makers. The policy relevance and impact of evidence synthesis is typically greater when research producers and users work together to co-produce knowledge about policy problems and their solutions.

Insights from presentations

- **James Lawless, TD**, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science, emphasised the Government's commitment to a research-policy ecosystem with clearer structures, better data access, and closer collaboration. He highlighted investments in Research Ireland, new science-advice mechanisms, EU partnerships, and skills-building, envisioning Ireland as a future European leader in Evidence-Informed Policy Making.

- **Professor David Budtz Pedersen** of Aalborg University outlined what a fully developed research-policy ecosystem can look like, and described the practical steps required to build capacity, structures, and culture.

- **Sarah Chaytor**, Co-Chair of the Universities Policy Engagement Network, described the UK's complex research-policy ecosystem and the role of universities within it. She stressed the critical importance organisational capacity-building, sustained connections across the ecosystem, and collaboration in the use of evidence.

- **David Mair** of the EU's Joint Research Centre described the emerging Technical Support Instrument project on Evidence-Informed Policy Making – a major opportunity for Ireland to strengthen its research-policy architecture.

Reflections on the day: a transcript

Mary Doyle, Secretary for Policy and International Relations, Royal Irish Academy

Thanks to everybody for staying in the room at this late stage of the day and for contributing so much to today's discussion. It is extraordinary to now have so many people actively engaged with this research-for-policy agenda.

A lot of material has been presented for consideration at this event and I have been reflecting all day, as you can imagine, on how to distil the really rich and valuable discussion that we have had.   So, I think I'll sum it up in in the words of one pretty infamous political slogan: "A lot done, more to do".

A collaborative approach

Initially, it is worth reflecting on the actual organisation and holding of this event – before we get into some of the more detailed issues that emerged in the course of the discussion. There are a number of things that seem to me to be exceptional about today's event.

The first is the decision to actually hold a conference on Evidence-Informed Policy Making, which is a massive step forward in advancing this important national agenda. Secondly, the fact that is that it was co-organised by two universities and a Government Department makes it unusual – maybe even unique. It is worth taking the time to recognise and acknowledge that reality and to acknowledge the work of the individuals that put it together. And also to honour their vision for greater collaboration and for experimenting with a different way of doing things across the research ecosystem in itself.

The third thing I would say is that it's important to recognise the richness and diversity that is in the programme for today. I've been quite struck all day by the various inputs. We have had a Ministerial contribution and keynote addresses from David Budtz Pedersen and Sarah Chaytor. We have also heard from David Mair of the Joint Research Centre of the EU who told us about the EU-supported Technical Support Instrument (TSI) project on Evidence for Policy, which is currently getting under way.

Those inputs have been complemented by the actual, on-the-ground lived experiences of a range of people from policymakers to academics and funders. Again, I would say that this has not been a usual set of conversations in the Irish context. So, worth thinking about that and how today gives us the confidence to move forward together.

Advancing the research-for-policy agenda

So, coming at this from my own background and story – those of you who know me will know that I spent just over four decades working in the civil service. And a lot of that time was spent in the Department of the Taoiseach. So I had, if you like, a bird's eye view of the system – both of the civil service systems and the wider policymaking landscape. I was always convinced that we could do better; that in particular we could do more to strengthen the evidence base of our policymaking by taking the time and making the effort to have conversations about how Ireland could collectively develop better policy using the resources that we have available to us. I continue to believe strongly that we could use our research and data resources more sensibly, more efficiently and more productively so as to make things better for individuals working within the ecosystem and for our society more generally.

When I retired in 2018, Professor Jane Ohlmeyer offered me a Visiting Fellowship at the Long Room Hub Arts and Humanities Institute in Trinity College. During my time there I wrote a paper entitled "*Research for public policy and society: building a stronger architecture for Ireland*," which was published in 2021 – just four years ago. And here we are today, making another major step forward on this agenda. You know, there is a part of me with a slight disbelief that, these few years later, we have come on this journey and in particular that we've come into this room having developed so

much thinking and done so much in the building of that architecture in a relatively short period of time. This point was made strongly by Minister Lawless in his contribution.

A coalition of the willing

And now, it is worth thinking about what we wanted to achieve in today's conversations to further that journey. So, like a typical policymaker, I looked back to the origins to see what the hopes and aspirations for today were. At its core, the organisers wanted to convene key decision-makers from right across Ireland's research-policy ecosystem to further the national conversation about how we build systemic coordinated connections between research and policy, so that high-quality evidence can more readily inform all stages of the policymaking process in Ireland.

We have certainly given that a good airing today, and we have heard and learned from each other in the formal sessions and also in the informal sessions. I've been struck all along by the positive tone in the room. I think what David Budtz Pedersen called "the coalition of the willing" has emerged, so we are moving past the initial phase of this enterprise and onto the next phase. There is an emerging further set of work now to be undertaken. While there are a wide range diverse interests in the room, nevertheless it is clear that a shared agenda has emerged.

Three pathways forward

How best then do we take this forward? I would like to suggest going back to work which I did with some colleagues which led to a publication by the Royal Irish Academy entitled "R*esearch for public policy: an outline roadmap,*" also published in 2021. I'm just going to very briefly talk you through the three pathways which we identified then and, again, I was very heartened today to see that many of the themes we identified then are the themes that we're working with now.

Our first pathway was "*building bridges, creating trust and offering opportunities*" – a theme that seems to have very much that resonated with us today. Our second theme was "*joining up and scaling up,*" and there was some discussion around that today but I think that that set of issues is one that we probably haven't given as much thought to but we are going to need to in the next iteration of this work. And the final pathway that we identified back in 2021 was "*knowledge management and knowledge brokerag*e" which I now know should be called knowledge mobilisation. So what I'm really saying here is that these pathways have evolved further and I would suggest are the ones that we should work with as we move forward.

Insights from our speakers

So just talking a little bit about what we have learned today, I just wanted to pick out a couple of things from our keynote speakers. So, David Budtz Pedersen did us a great service by sharing his learning about what an ecosystem could look like, what an approach to building that ecosystem could encompass and the kinds of practical steps that need to be taken now to make progress on this agenda. Sarah Chaytor in her presentation also gave us three things to think about which we will work with in the coming months and years. She talked about building capacity in organisations, sustaining connections across the ecosystem and enabling collaboration and evidence use. So again, no great surprise to us but good for us I think to see these put forward based on international experience which gives us confidence as we move to the next phase.

Another thing I would pick out is the very helpful vision that John O'Connor gave to us in his presentation, where he talked about what we are trying to achieve because it can be quite difficult to define it on occasion. He identified the core objective as "timely access to research-based evidence by receptive policy makers with absorbtive capacity to incorporate evidence into decision-making processes". He then complemented this concept by talking to us about motivation, capability and opportunity as key aspects of implementation.

Key themes

In conclusion, I want to highlight what I heard as some of the key themes. You'll be glad to know there's only four or five of them!

So the first one is the importance of connectivity. It seems to me that mapping of the ecosystem in Ireland is the crucial next step now and that we should be able to do that both with the TSI project and with the knowledge brokerage project that the people in Maynooth are working on. There are also other projects that are in place which will contribute to this understanding and certainly in about a year or 18 months we should have a much better sense of what our existing ecosystem looks like.

A second key theme, and a very challenging one, is that of structured conversations and how we build those bridges between the various pillars. We clearly need to think about how we communicate better in all directions – supply and demand for want of a better description – and how we communicate the results of research, how that gets into policy. We've heard great examples of support structures including Research Centres and Fellowships. We could think further about how these important people flows might be better developed to move in both directions. There is a whole series of potential actions here with which we will need to engage more strategically.

A third big theme that emerged, again no surprise, is building absorptive capacity on all sides. So again trying to figure out, because you can't do everything at the same time, what would be the really helpful next steps. It seems to me that the role of funding agencies is crucial here, and I am thinking not just Research Ireland or HRB, but the wide group of funding streams available into the research system. They all play a vital part in deciding what gets done and by whom. So if we are to advance on this agenda, we do need to recognise them collectively as a key part of the overall strategic development of the infrastructure. We look forward certainly to the forthcoming Research Ireland strategy which will be really important, and welcome very much the commitment given today by Diarmuid O'Brien to this work.

And the fourth theme that I heard was this issue of knowledge mobilisation, which obviously is central to achieving our objective. There are too many strands involved to really talk about at this stage of the day, but if the people in this room believe that this is a key part of the overall agenda, then we can move forward with a focus on collectively designing effective approaches to this complex area. And it seems to me that in developing our approaches we will have to engage in some learning by doing, by trying things, by experimenting a little bit. You know and I know that this is not necessarily part of our culture, which can be extremely risk-averse for understandable reasons but it is one that I think we do have to try and develop a little more. I think the whole agenda around knowledge mobilisation is one that we should put our collective minds to as it is shared across a wide range of organisations and will need a strong collaborative approach and leadership in order to make progress.

Right place, right time

Finally, I want to just make two more points about where we are at this point and what we should be thinking about for the future. And somebody earlier in the day talked about right place, right time and I believe that we are indeed in the right place at the right time. Departmental leadership by DFHERIS, the TSI project now and the projects that the funding agencies have funded, are all important ingredients in developing a more coordinated approach. At sectoral level, there is an upcoming HRB research conference in the health sector and an upcoming conference in the education sector. Important work is already underway in the environment and climate sectors. So the sectors are beginning to get themselves organised, which is great. What this today has helped us to do is to develop further our next stage actions.

And in doing this, I would draw attention to something which I think isn't often recognised as being important. Which is that in all of our busyness we struggle to create the space for thinking in the longer term. This is something that we have to get better at as an ecosystem. We need to find within this overall agenda for action, a space to give people time to think about what things might look like in, say, 20 years' time potentially, and what we think we might need to know. That resonates with something which was said very early in the day – that difficult-to-define space which is around "bad

decisions avoided". But that's really important in thinking about the next stage actions because this work is a key part of strengthening our democracy and a very important part of the agenda for action.

So, in conclusion I would like to say thanks again to the people who organised today's event. Thank you all for coming, and I think you've given us collectively lots of food for thought. Let's hope we can maintain and grow the momentum for this work over the next period.