



Advisory Council for Science
Technology and Innovation
An Comhairle Eolaíochta

Press Release

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New science career structure needed - says Government advisory body

Researchers need to be able to move between academia, industry and public sector says report

The body that advises the Government on science and technology policy has recommended a major restructuring of science careers in Ireland. This is to provide necessary incentives to encourage people to take up a career in science.

A report from the Advisory Council on Science, Technology and Innovation says an increasing number of world-class researchers are being trained in Ireland and that a more defined career structure is required to ensure industry and academia can take full advantage of this.

Welcoming the report Dr. Jimmy Devins, Minister for Science, Technology and Innovation said:

"I strongly welcome the report of the Advisory Science Council launched today. The development of a structured researcher career path that is consistent across industry, academia and the public sector would help to secure Ireland's future as a knowledge economy.

"This will help to strengthen Ireland's research and innovation by encouraging the transfer of knowledge, skills and technologies between academia and enterprise. In a more challenging global economy, it is ever more important that Ireland can compete internationally on the basis of our world-class research and innovative capability, as envisaged in the Government's Strategy for Science Technology and Innovation 2006-2013", the Minister added.

The chair of the Advisory Science Council Mary Cryan said: "There is substantial funding for quality research. We need to plan to ensure that our researchers can develop their skills and experience over a career to optimise the benefits of this funding. Such career development will assist Ireland to remain competitive in global markets which are becoming increasingly knowledge intensive."

The report, entitled "Towards a Framework for Researcher Careers", was produced by a Task Force of the Council following several months of consultation with stakeholders including academics, industry and the public sector and researchers.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Structured Career Progression

Continuing to assure world-class research excellence will require an appropriate career structure enabling the professionalisation of researcher careers. Progress through the levels would be competitive, transparent and peer reviewed and should reward and facilitate both national and international mobility and between HEIs, enterprise, the public sector and research institutes.

- A researcher careers competency framework is proposed to ensure mobility between sectors.

The first level of a researcher career would involve an initial postdoctoral research contract during which researchers would acquire supervised, practical experience. This period would typically take four years.

The next level would be that of research fellow, when researchers could apply for their own independent external funding. A new Research Fellow Programme should be established and funded from existing agencies.

Research Fellows seeking academic careers could then apply for prestigious positions as Senior Research Fellows, with contracts of indefinite duration (subject to the availability of funding).

Increasing Researcher Mobility

- Increased research funding has created more work opportunities in HEIs, but this accordingly means much fewer researchers are going abroad and gaining valuable experience. This is limiting the amount of private sector and foreign experience researchers are getting and is reducing the numbers who become part of international networks - something which is crucial to the development of researcher careers.

Those who fund research can help in this regard through their funding policies. If they agree to fund a researcher carrying out a particular piece of work in Ireland, they should continue this funding should the individual decide to go overseas for a period to continue this work.

- Researchers in third level institutions at similar levels should have comparable terms and conditions, including pension provision. These levels should also be comparable to those prevailing in enterprise and in the public sector.

Skills for Enterprise

- It is anticipated that a substantial number PhD level researchers will find positions outside the third level sector and researchers should be taught business skills such as how to commercialise research results, as well as receiving management and marketing training.

- Masters and PhD students should also receive training in planning their careers. They should be given improved career information, and should be directed towards gaining international and enterprise/public sector experience during their graduate studies.

Women in Research

- Women account for just 5 per cent of full professors in higher education institutions, while just 8 per cent of associate professors are women. The report calls on the Higher Education Authority and higher education institutions in general to set a target of reaching the EU average of female participation rates at senior academic levels by 2018. Issues such as childcare, flexible working arrangements and other research supports should be addressed to help bring this about.

“Increased funding for research is very welcome and it has greatly increased the numbers of researchers employed in third level institutions”, said Dolores Cahill, the leader of the task force that produced the report. “Many of these researchers, however, are being retained in third level institutions which simply will not be able to continue employing these numbers.”

“Researchers will develop their full potential and the economy will benefit fully only if researchers move easily between academic institutions and the private sector, and between Ireland and other countries. A defined researcher career structure within HEIs will better prepare researchers for roles in enterprise and the public sector. A varied career path from HEIs into enterprise and the public sector is likely to be the norm for researchers, “ commented Cahill.