



# **Memorandum of Understanding between the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)**

**2018-2021**



THIS AGREEMENT made this 20<sup>th</sup> day of OCTOBER 2018

**BETWEEN:**

- (1) Higher Education Authority, established on a statutory basis under the Higher Education Act 1971, whose address is 3 Shelbourne Buildings, Crampton Avenue, Shelbourne Road, Dublin 4, D04C2Y6, Ireland (hereinafter referred to as "HEA").
- (2) SCIENCE FOUNDATION IRELAND, an entity established on a statutory basis under the Industrial Development (Science Foundation Ireland) Act 2003, whose address is Wilton Park House, Wilton Place, Dublin 2, D02 NT99, Ireland (hereinafter referred to as "SFI").

**WHEREAS:**

- (A) The HEA leads the strategic development of the Irish higher education and research system with the objective of creating a coherent system of diverse institutions with distinct missions.
- (B) SFI's mission is to progress Ireland's society and economy by supporting the best scientific and engineering research while building an awareness of the role, impact and opportunities science creates.

**Introduction**

It is in the interests of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) that, as two national agencies tasked with the development and implementation of national research policies and strategies, the organisations work together to ensure the coordination and complementarity of their activities. To that end, this Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signals the organisations' joint commitment to working together, and in partnership. In doing so, it is intended to optimise the quality of the research environment and the outcomes for all researchers who engage with HEA funded higher education providers and SFI funded initiatives.

The HEA and SFI are committed to the achievement of the key system strategic and operational objectives identified primarily in *Innovation 2020* and the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-2020*, but also in other national strategies relevant to both organisations. Cooperation between the two organisations will strengthen their joint capacity to facilitate an enhanced environment for researchers and their collaborative partners, as well as students. The MoU will help to maximise the returns on Ireland's public research investments through a coordinated and cooperative approach.

This MoU also recognises the benefits of ensuring that the staff and Board members of both organisations have a full understanding of the complex interrelationship between the roles of

the HEA and SFI, and that possible synergies and efficiencies can be realised: particularly with respect to engagement with researchers and research bodies. This understanding will be nurtured through the implementation of the MoU, which will embed interagency cooperation into the governance and day-to-day operations.

### **Influences on this MoU**

This MOU is developed within the broader policy context of higher education in Ireland. There are many influences on this MOU that will inform its implementation which include:

- The responsibilities of the HEA and SFI as set out in legislation (summarised in the appendix to this document) and reflected in the organisations' strategic visions and plans;
- The Action Plan for Education
- The Action Plan for Jobs
- HE System Performance Framework 2018-2020
- Innovation 2020
- Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025
- National Framework for Doctoral Education
- The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030
- Research Prioritisation
- HEA Strategic Plan 2018-2022
- SFI Strategic Plan: Agenda 2020
- The Performance Delivery agreements which HEA and SFI have with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI) respectively
- The European and other international developments in the areas of research e.g. Horizon 2020.
- The Irish Research Council Strategy Statement
- National Development Plan 2018-2027 /Project Ireland 2040

## **Purpose**

The MoU between the HEA and SFI provides an agreed framework for continued cooperation and communication between the two organisations in the interests of the higher education research system as a whole.

The MoU has been developed in the context of relevant statutory provisions, national strategies and Government policies. It also has due regard for the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies.

This MoU is not a legally binding agreement or contract. The agreement does not give a full listing of the two organisations' responsibilities. This MoU does not hinder the identification of further areas of collaboration beyond those identified later in the document subsequent to its agreement. This MoU is being developed in conjunction with MoUs that the HEA is developing with other state agencies, such as QQI and Solas, which focus on enhanced collaboration and partnership across the sector, and in parallel with the Research Centre Collaborative Agreement that SFI is developing with the SFI Research Centres host institutions.

This MoU will also set out a framework through which the HEA and SFI can satisfy their respective accountability responsibilities by sharing information and providing assurance to each other on a regular basis. To help HEA and SFI achieve their aims, effective accountability arrangements need to be in place at HEIs. These underpin monitoring of the sustainability of individual HEIs, minimise and deter fraud, and ensure public funding is spent in accordance with the principles detailed in managing public money.

Both parties recognise the importance of both formal and informal relationships between their respective functions and undertake to work collegiately within the spirit of this agreement where matters arise that are not specifically addressed within this MoU.

## **Parties to the Memorandum**

### **Higher Education Authority**

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is the independent statutory agency that leads the strategic development of Irish higher education and research with the objective of creating a coherent system of diverse institutions with distinct missions. This system seeks to be responsive to the social, cultural and economic development of Ireland and its people and support the achievement of national policy objectives.

A key element of steering the strategic development of the Irish higher education and research system is the HEA's management of the Higher Education System Performance Framework. The purpose of the Framework is:

- To hold the system accountable for performance for the delivery of national priorities and monitor performance of the system as a whole;
- To articulate all the expectations of the system to Government and the wider public;

- To contribute to system and policy development by highlighting structural and other deficits including data capacity;
- To allow HEIs to identify their strategic niche and mission and agree a performance compact aligned with funding with the Higher Education Authority.

The HEA has further responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of the higher education system and its institutions. In exercising its mandate, the HEA works to ensure that:

- Responsibilities with regard to governance and accountability are clearly understood and set out in an overall governance framework for the higher education system;
- Institutions comply with all governance and legislative requirements and report annually in this regard;
- It has due regard to institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

The HEA manages an overall budget of approximately €1.3bn and provides a foundation investment for research excellence within the block grant provided to institutions. Although institutions have the discretion to spend the grant as they wish, it is estimated that around €164m of HEA core funding in 2017 supported institutional research capability. This covers the full breadth of disciplines and types of research (e.g. research for knowledge, research for policy and enterprise-facing research) and underpins the capacity for institutions to apply for research funding from other research funding agencies, such as SFI, IRC, HRB and others nationally as well as internationally (e.g. H2020, ERC etc).

The HEA's data collection and analysis capability underpins its role as the central evidence hub for the Irish higher education system. The organisation uses this intelligence to provide robust policy advice to the Minister and Department, and other stakeholders (e.g. other Government Departments).

The Chief Executive of the HEA is also the Chief Accounting Officer for the Irish Research Council (IRC) which is an associated agency of the DES and operates under the aegis of the HEA. Established in 2012 and with an annual Exchequer allocation in the region of €34m, the IRC is mandated to support excellent frontier research across all disciplines and career stages. The IRC also has an explicit role in supporting research with a societal focus and has established partnerships across Government and civic society. The IRC operates within the policy framework of the DES and the HEA but has independence in funding decisions and is governed by an independent Board appointed by the Minister.

### Science Foundation Ireland

Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) funds oriented basic and applied research in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which promotes and assists the development and competitiveness of industry, enterprise and employment in Ireland. As outlined in Science Foundation Ireland's strategy, *Agenda 2020*,<sup>1</sup> and in *Innovation 2020*,<sup>2</sup> the Foundation is committed to focus on scientific excellence, to couple that with an equal focus

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<sup>1</sup> [SFI Agenda 2020; Published 2012](#)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.knowledgetransferireland.com/About\\_KTI/Reports-Publications/Innovation-2020.pdf](http://www.knowledgetransferireland.com/About_KTI/Reports-Publications/Innovation-2020.pdf)

on impact and to enhance exchange between academia and industry, thus realising the benefits of the scientific effort for the Irish economy and Irish society.

Current Irish government policy mandates that the majority of public research funding be aligned with areas of strategic opportunity for the State. These areas have been identified on the basis of an assessment of Ireland's economic potential as set out in the recommendations of the National Research Prioritisation (NRP) Steering Group, published in 2012 (NRP [report](#)) and adopted as Government policy. The majority of public funds for research must be directed towards the fourteen priority areas within six broad enterprise themes as described in *Innovation 2020*. With the evolution of research priorities, new and emerging Strategic Areas of Opportunity related to science or engineering may be prescribed with due regard to (a) economic and social benefit; (b) long term industrial competitiveness or (c) environmentally sustainable development. An exercise including extensive consultation was recently undertaken to develop the evidence base to inform the refresh exercise of research prioritisation. The final report identifies 14 Refreshed Priority Areas for 2018-2023, which are the constituents of six designated enterprise themes. Proposals received for funding by SFI must either be aligned to one of the 14 [Refreshed Priority Areas 2018-2023](#) that are positioned within six enterprise themes (ICT, Health and Medical, Food, Energy, Manufacturing and Materials, Services and Business Processes) outlined in [Innovation 2020](#), or to any other area under [SFI's legal remit](#) where there is convincing evidence that there will be significant potential for economic and/or societal impact.

### **Intersection of roles of the HEA and SFI**

The work of the HEA (including the IRC) and SFI intersects in several areas and collaborative work is already underway and should continue to be a particular focus, specifically in relation to:

- Evidence gathering;
- Funding of researchers in Ireland;
- Provision of funding leading to awards at Levels 9 and 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications;
- Funding of research infrastructure in Ireland;
- Developing and guiding research policy in Ireland;
- Accountability for public funds.

### **The scope of this MoU**

The scope of this document relates to those HEIs that receive funds from both HEA and SFI.

In developing this MoU, the HEA and SFI have agreed the following three core commitments and associated actions as the main focus of this MoU's implementation for the period 2018-2020. This does not preclude, as noted above, the addition of commitments and actions subsequent to the signing of this MoU.

1. Cooperation on policy development and complementarity in programmatic activity;
2. Assurance on institutional regulation and accountability;
3. Enhanced sharing of information and communications.

### **Commitment #1: Cooperation on policy development and complementarity in programmatic activity**

Given the complementarity of missions, and similar funding recipients, the two organisations will engage proactively as they develop (under the direction of DES and of DBEI respectively) future approaches to Ireland's science, research and innovation policies and Ireland's place in the wider European and international eco-system.

The HEA and SFI are committed to working in partnership with providers and other parties, to develop quality programmatic activities in accordance with policy and sector developments, identified national requirements and developing practice internationally. Structured engagement by the organisations with key stakeholders will support the coordination of work by the HEA and SFI as well as providing an opportunity for sectoral input into the policy approaches adopted. This will support the mutual complementarity of the organisations' evidence gathering, data analysis functions and policy development. Additionally, the HEA and SFI are committed to increasing efforts to share their learning from engagements at a European and International level.

#### Associated actions for commitment #1:

- i. The two organisations will work together to ensure complementarity of research policy and programmatic activity, in particular to support the provision of awards at Levels 9 and 10 in accordance with the National Framework for Doctoral Education, and will consult with one another in the development of research policy advice, and of mechanisms and infrastructure to support research policy implementation;
- ii. The two organisations will work together to provide a cohesive and joined up approach to funding research and innovation in higher education institutions, and in achieving the nationally agreed research and innovation targets as outlined by Government (e.g. Innovation 2020, System Performance Framework 2018-2020);
- iii. The organisations will consult and agree text on references to the other in published form which are actionable, or which entail interpretations of each other's policy;
- iv. The two organisations will collaborate in the production of commissioning of research that addresses questions of mutual interest;
- v. The HEA will remain an active member of the SFI International Steering Committee for Science Policy, and SFI will be represented on any similar HEA steering group(s);
- vi. The two organisations will collaborate on the development of existing and emerging data collection systems;
- vii. The two organisations will consult with each other and share information on the development of relevant implementation plans in relation to the points above.

## **Commitment #2: Assurance on Institutional Regulation and Accountability**

This MoU is consistent with the principles of optimal regulation whereby public bodies, wherever possible, should be able to rely on each other's systems of oversight and assurance. This approach will minimise the accountability burden placed on Irish HEIs, whilst maintaining an appropriate and proportionate level of accountability for public funds.

HEA and SFI will require assurance that a HEI's systems and processes to ensure accountability are in place and work effectively. This assurance will largely come from the HEIs' own systems of self-regulation and control and the Governance Framework for Higher Education. This Framework makes clear the central oversight role of the HEA in monitoring governance practice across the system, the respective responsibilities of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the mechanisms in place to ensure good governance practice and accountability of State funding. In addition, HEA rolling governance reviews and, if necessary, further testing will be undertaken where more detailed assurance is required in relation to the quality of data and compliance with terms and conditions of funding, including any audit and/or assurance activity commissioned by SFI in relation to SFI funded activities.

### *Associated actions for commitment #2:*

- i. Each organisation will carry out a programme of assurance activity sufficient to meet its objectives that public funding is spent with regularity and propriety;
- ii. The two organisations will work together to ensure complementarity of assurance activity and in line with the responsibility that the HEA has for effective governance and regulation of the HEIs, will make use of the HEA's systems of oversight and assurance in the first instance, in order to minimise the accountability burden placed on Irish HEIs;
- iii. The two organisations will work together to ensure improved Research Centre governance within the HEA Governance Framework, and SFI will share any learnings in the context of the proposed SFI Research Centre Partnership agreement;
- iv. Each organisation undertakes to inform the other of any information of which it becomes aware that could place the other organisation's funding objectives at risk, such that intervention might be required to safeguard public funding objectives.

### Examples where this might be required include:

- Changes in the level of funding provided to the HEI that could place its financial sustainability to deliver teaching or research at risk;
- Material non-compliance with the terms and conditions of HEA's funding;
- Material non-compliance with the terms and conditions of SFI funding;
- An HEI being subject to a public interest disclosure relating to public funding;
- Discovery or notification of fraud within an HEI affecting public funding;
- HEA's risk assessment determination that the HEI is no longer a going concern;
- Matters pertaining to Research Integrity, Research Ethics, Use of Animals in Research etc.



### **Commitment #3 Enhanced sharing of information and communications**

Within the context of this MOU, HEA and SFI identify themselves as statutory independent organisations operating under the auspices of different Government departments, as collaborating organisations with separate but complementary roles; and as organisations whose actions impact upon external environments both public and private, of which they must be cognisant. The following actions are intended to ensure that the two organisations develop a practice of sharing information on a collaborative basis. This will be facilitated by sharing key documentation and communications issued as requested and as relevant; making available dates on which significant relevant engagements are anticipated with higher education providers; and ensuring that the Chief Executive / Director General of both organisations meet with the Board of the other organisation at least once a year, and that their senior management teams meet periodically, as specified below.

#### Associated actions for commitment #3:

- i. Both organisations agree to share, for information, their approved Annual work plans;
- ii. Both organisations will share information on mutually relevant forthcoming announcements, publications and programme calls as relevant;
- iii. Senior officers of both organisations will hold liaison meetings quarterly, the scope of which will cover the subject matter of this memorandum and any other relevant developments;
- iv. A nominee from each organisation will ensure that communication and information is exchanged on a timely basis between the organisations;
- v. The Chief Executive (HEA) and the Director General (SFI) will provide a comprehensive briefing to the board of the other organisation on their respective research policies and activities at least once annually;
- vi. Where information is shared between parties, such information is to be treated as commercial and confidential and not disclosed beyond HEA or SFI unless agreed in writing. Where either party wishes to engage with an HEI as a result of information shared by the other party, this should not be done until the other party has had the opportunity to notify the HEI in question that information has been shared. Both parties will be compliant with GDPR and all other necessary legislation;
- vii. HEA and SFI are both subject to the Freedom of Information Act. Both organisations will co-operate to enable each to meet its obligations under the Act. In particular, both organisations will consult the other about any disclosure of information that may affect their respective responsibilities.

## Sign-Off and Review

This MoU is jointly signed by the Chief Executive of the HEA and the Director General of SFI and it takes effect from the date on which it is agreed and signed by the two parties. It will continue in force until revoked in writing by the other party or superseded by a future agreement. It is expected that the MoU will be reviewed in 2019. Any amendments required to ensure that it remains fit-for-purpose, and that it reflects emerging national priorities, roles and circumstances of both organisations, will be published by mutual written consent.

The MoU will be published on the respective websites of HEA and SFI.

All relevant members of both organisations will be familiarised with the content of the MoU and all interactions between the two organisations and with other named parties will be conducted in a manner that is consistent with its objectives.



*Dr. Graham Love  
Chief Executive  
Higher Education Authority*



*Prof. Mark Ferguson  
Director General  
Science Foundation Ireland*

19-10-18

Date

20th October 2018

Date

## Appendix: Roles and responsibilities

### ***Higher Education Authority (HEA)***

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) was established with the enactment of the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971. It is the statutory funding authority for the universities, institutes of technology, and for a number of other designated institutions; and the statutory planning and policy-development body for higher education and research in Ireland. As per the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971, the statutory responsibilities of the HEA include:

- furthering the development of higher education;
- assisting in the coordination of State investment in higher education and preparing proposals for such investment;
- promoting an appreciation of the value of higher education and research;
- promoting the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education;
- promoting the democratisation of the structure of higher education;
- maintaining a continuous review of the demand and need for higher education;
- allocating funding provided by the Oireachtas to universities and other designated higher education institutions.

In addition, as per the Universities Act, 1997—and in furtherance of the HEA’s general functions—the organisation’s role encompasses reviewing universities’ strategic development plans, and equality policies.<sup>3</sup> The Institutes of Technology Act, 2006 expanded the remit of the HEA to include the institutes of technology and Dublin Institute of Technology, and also added to the list of functions of the HEA ‘promoting the attainment and maintenance of excellence in learning, teaching and research in higher education’.

In addition to its legislative functions, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* charges the HEA with an enhanced role in:

- the strategic development of the Irish higher education sector (inclusive of its structural reconfiguration);
- the strategic oversight of the sector, including the agreement of compacts with higher education institutions through strategic dialogue and the introduction of a performance-related element into core funding;
- evaluating performance at institutional and system levels; and
- providing accountability to the Minister for Education and Skills in respect of the achievement of the key system-level objectives detailed in the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016*.

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<sup>3</sup> The responsibility, conferred on the HEA in the Universities Act, 1997, to review the quality assurance procedures of universities was transferred to QQI in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012.

### ***Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)***

Science Foundation Ireland is the Irish government's largest competitive funder of scientific research in Ireland.

Science Foundation Ireland invests in academic researchers and research teams who are most likely to generate new knowledge, leading edge technologies and competitive enterprises in the fields of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). The agency is charged with supporting outstanding research that will underpin economic development and assist international and indigenous industry to grow and flourish in Ireland. The Foundation also promotes and supports the study of, education in, and engagement with STEM and promotes an awareness and understanding of the value of STEM to society and, in particular, to the growth of the economy.

SFI makes grants based upon the merit review of distinguished scientists. SFI also advances co-operative efforts among education, government, and industry that support its fields of emphasis and promotes Ireland's ensuing achievements around the world.