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MUSSI Working Paper Series No – 19 February 2024

How Irish Higher Education Institutions can Organise themselves to Unlock Research for Policy

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Aim of Paper

This paper aims to explore how Irish higher education institutions can organise themselves to unlock the potential of research on policy-making. It describes work underway in Maynooth University, sets out the emergence of brokerage arrangements to support the impact of research on policy in a national policy context and explores some international research findings in relation to brokerage and related activities. It also identifies and seeks to describe some particular brokerage arrangements established by individual higher education institutions, as well as some established by a number of higher education institutions in partnership sometimes with Governments. The aim is to seek to support the emerging discussion about these issues.

This paper is intended to be read in conjunction with two other pieces of work being advanced by the authors. Following a series of eight ‘open discussion meetings’ which were organised on a cross-disciplinary basis in Maynooth University (April to June 2023) to secure a better understanding, from the perspective of staff, of what Maynooth University might do next to help researchers unlock the full value of their work for public policy, they drafted a discussion paper to put some shape on and to place on the record the views which colleagues articulated during these meetings. This record was tested and further considered in two briefing and refinement meetings with the original participants and other interested colleagues, which took place September and October 2023, and it is planned to publish an updated paper in the near future. They are also finalising a related paper on how innovation and research for policy support each other.

Background

Governments worldwide are calling upon universities to demonstrate more clearly their value to society as anchor institutions and the societal relevance and impact of their research, scholarship and expertise. Many are using national research funding agencies to incentivise co-created research between academics and a wide range of beneficiaries¹.

¹ For example, Horizon Europe/European Research Council (ERC), US National Academy of Sciences (NAS), National Research Council Canada (NRC)/Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), German Research Foundation (DFG), French National Research Agency (ANR), Japanese MEXT Research and Development Agencies, Australian Research Council (ARC) and United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI), all have introduced various kinds of impact weightings in funding assessment criteria. Indeed, the ANU National Competitive Grants Programme (NCGP) now requires from every applicant a National Interest Test (NIT) statement, certified by Deputy Vice Chancellors of Research (DVCRs), explaining ‘to a member of the general public how the proposed research can be of value to Australia’.....‘why public money should be invested in such a research project’.... and ‘how Australia’s policymakers, communities and industries might draw on the research’.

The Irish Government is no exception. Irish universities are being asked to step up and play their role in scoping impactful solutions to wicked and increasingly existential local, national and global public problems. Of course, a significant body of work has already been undertaken or is in train. In this Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) (the Challenges, Public Service Fellowship and, Science Policy Research programmes); the Irish Research Council (IRC) (New Foundations and COALESCE programmes and ‘Roadmap on research for public policy’ (jointly with the Royal Irish Academic (RIA)); and the Irish Universities Association (through the Campus Engage programme) have led the way.

A new Government policy approach is now being advanced which is targeted at broadening and deepening linkages between academic researchers and policy-makers – to be layered on top of and to complement existing and already achieved knowledge exchange initiatives. This is clearly articulated in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science’s (DFHERIS) “Impact 2030: Ireland’s Research and Innovation Strategy”. Published in May 2022, this strategy seeks to strengthen connections between Government Departments and the public research system:

“Starting with the establishment of the new Evidence for Policy function in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, we will improve the articulation of public policy needs to the research community so that they can engage proactively and creatively on this shared agenda. We will ensure that the requirements of the policy system are clear so that researchers, including early-career researchers, can engage and make a difference. We will develop engagement and brokering mechanisms between those involved in policy development and implementation and relevant researchers. We will encourage greater mobility between the two sectors, for instance, through a future Public Policy Fellowship Programme, building on the existing SFI initiative.”

Impact 2030 has been welcomed and endorsed by the OECD who in a 2023 Public Governance Review titled “Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland” further advised:

“it would be beneficial to consider how the Researcher Career Framework can include a specific focus on policy development relationships and support academics across their careers to engage with the policy development system through induction, coaching and mentoring by (senior) academics...Government departments may include in their strategies a short statement on their areas of research interest, which will facilitate the research community’s understanding of what are the most pressing sectoral policy questions.”

More Detail on Irish Policy Developments

Mary Doyle (2023) sets out the existing position in some detail, both in terms of policy development and of implementation arrangements. The principal areas that she refers to are grouped and summarised as follows:

- Building the architecture in the higher education sector:
 - The establishment of DFHERIS, the bringing together of responsibility for research policy into a single Government Department and the establishment of an Evidence for Policy Unit within the Department
 - The establishment by the Unit of a key stakeholder advisory group that has been helping to develop an overall framework for evidence for policy.
 - The publication of Impact 2030 – Ireland’s Research and Innovation Strategy (DFHERIS, 2022)
 - The enactment of the Higher Education Authority Act 2022
 - The announcement of a revised Science Advice Mechanism for Ireland
 - A range of capacity building and university research for policy engagement work is being led by the Irish Universities Association through Campus Engage.
 - The publication of the work of the Expert Committee on ‘Creating Our Future.’
 - The announcement of the establishment of the Research and Innovation Policy Advisory Forum.

- Development of structures within the civil service:
 - The inclusion in the Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021) of a core theme focussed on delivering evidence-informed policy and services.
 - The leadership role has been clearly assigned to the Civil Service Management Board
 - A Civil Service Research Network has been established.
 - The publication by DFHERIS (and a number of other Departments) of a Statement of Research Intent and Priorities to highlight areas of research interest to researchers.
 - Other major work on mapping needs and resources and building capacity is ongoing under the auspices of the Research Network
 - The role of the Institute of Public Administration in building civil service capacity generally is being strengthened by the consolidation of learning and development resources in the Institute.

- The Government is continuing to invest in building and enhancing capacity in evidence-based policy and services under the Civil Service Renewal Programme, including, in particular, the Irish Government Economic Evaluation Service and the Irish Government Statistical Service
- The civil service is supporting the development of cross-sectoral initiatives that aim to strengthen links between the civil service and the university sector in the area of public policy development.
- The publication of an OECD report on Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland (OECD, 2023).
- Institutional arrangements for funding research and innovation:
 - The advancement of Research and Innovation Bill 2023
 - Science Foundation Ireland has launched the SFI Science Policy Research Programme 2023
 - The Irish Research Council continues to play a vital role in funding excellent research across all disciplines.

There has been a range of significant developments across all of these areas since DFHERIS was established and those developments have continued since the publication of Doyle (2023). Key recent developments include:

- The publication of “Towards a Higher Education Research - Policy Engagement Framework: Public Consultation, Background Paper, July 2023” by the Department and a subsequent consultative process that is ongoing at the time of writing this paper.
- Government approval for the publication of the Research and Innovation Bill 2023.
- The hosting in November 2023 of a brokerage event “Building Bridges for Evidence-Informed Public Policy: Young people and substance use”, organised by Irish Universities Association and the Health Research Board.
- The launch of a new evidence for policy research programme by the Health Research Board in January 2024.

There is clearly a momentum for change across all of those involved in supporting and advancing research for policy in Ireland. It is now envisaged that a National Framework for Engagement will be established by the Department in 2024.

European Union Policy Developments

The European Union has also been very active in developing policy approaches to support research for policy. The Evidence-Informed Policy Making team is part of the Knowledge for

Policy: Concepts & Methods Unit at the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC.H1)².

The team's main aim is to support researchers and policymakers to build and establish better connections between scientific knowledge and policymaking. It strives to position the Joint Research Centre as a global thought leader in the science for policy field. Its priority lines and actions to fulfill them are as follows:

- Creating new knowledge about concepts and methods at the science and policy interface,
 - The Enlightenment 2.0 programme provides an evidence base to help maximise the policy impact of scientific knowledge, throughout the policy cycle. The multi-annual research programme seeks to understand the different drivers that influence political decision-making in the 21st century.
 - It develops professional development frameworks for both scientists and policymakers to use scientific evidence to underpin learning and development strategies.
- Building capacity in researchers and policymakers in knowledge management for policy,
 - It organises an introductory course in evidence for policy for Joint Research Centre scientists, summer schools.
 - It organises training for policymakers in using evidence.
 - It wrote a handbook on evidence for policy that marries the latest research to its best practice experience.
 - It runs a Training of Trainers programme to foster a network of facilitators across the European Union to train scientists to operate in the science for policy interface.
- Strengthening science for policy eco-systems across the European Union by providing advice on public administration reforms and co-creating new approaches,
 - It organises the "Strengthening and connecting eco-systems of science for policy across Europe" workshop series to take stock, discuss and exchange experiences. This helps us cocreate ideas and projects for the design and implementation of new structures, mechanisms, and instruments for strengthening evidence-informed policymaking across Europe.
- Nurturing a European and global community of those professionals committed to evidence-informed policy,
 - It is fostering a European network of active stakeholders in the science for policy ecosystems across Member States.
 - It actively engages with other key actors at the European Union level such as the Science Advice Mechanism, Science Advice for Policy · by European Academies, European Science Advisors Forum, and at the global level through collaboration with the International Network for Government Science Advice and other international organisations.

² https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/evidence-informed-policy-making/about_en

The Joint Research Centre has developed a distinct set of ‘Science4Policy’ competences³. These ‘Science4Policy’ competences aim to increase the impact of scientific knowledge for better policies. It has effectively designed a framework with the range of competencies necessary for researchers to engage with policymakers.

Maynooth University Context

The Maynooth University Strategic Plan 2023-2028 (October 2023) commits Maynooth University to the work of “imagining and creating better futures for all”; has as one of its three core pillars ‘impact’ and promises to scale “external engagement for real-world impact by strengthening mutually beneficial partnerships with enterprise, industry, Government and the community”. Furthermore, the Plan commits to the establishment of 5 cross-disciplinary research beacons to enhance the impact of research underway in Maynooth University. Clearly, action and implementation plans will be needed to take these commitments forward.

In support of such planning (while undertaken as a parallel project), Seán Ó Foghlú⁴ and Mark Boyle⁵ convened a series of eight open discussion meetings which were organised on a cross-disciplinary basis (April to June 2023) to secure a better understanding, from the perspective of Maynooth University staff, of what Maynooth University might do next to help researchers unlock the full value of their work for public policy. Following this, they drafted a discussion paper to put some shape on and to place on the record the views which colleagues articulated during these meetings. This record was tested and further considered in two briefing and refinement meetings with the original participants and other interested colleagues, which took place September and October 2023, and it is planned to publish an updated paper in the near future. They are also finalising a related paper on how innovation and research for policy support each other.

This work is feeding into active consideration in Maynooth University in relation to establishing a new strategic approach to support researchers in seeking to link with policymakers.

³ https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/visualisation/competence-framework-%E2%80%98science-policy%E2%80%99-researchers_en

⁴ Seán Ó Foghlú is working in the Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute with a view to strengthening the links between research in university and public policy development & effectiveness. He is also working closely with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in supporting it on the development and implementation of its policy approach in this regard. He is on secondment from the civil service, following 10 years as Secretary General of the Department of Education from 2012 to 2022.

⁵ Prof. Mark Boyle works in the Geography Department and is also part of the Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute. He headed up the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place in the University of Liverpool from 2017-2021. He also undertook training in 2022 with Campus Engage is an ambassador for this work.

An Overview of the Research on What Works

In the context of these developments and the forthcoming National Framework for Engagement, it is timely to look at the development of the co-ordination, brokerage and intermediary activities, and their strategic underpinning, underway within higher education institutions and to see how they might be advanced further in as coordinated and coherent an approach as possible.

Oliver, K, et al (2022) looked at what works to promote research-policy engagement. They sought to identify research-policy engagement activities and to look at evidence for impact – these were not exclusively within higher education institutions, but many were. They found that “Overall, the picture is of a vast and increasing mass of rudderless activity, which is busy rather than effective. Without clear goals, and without strategic coordination, it is impossible to pick out any signal over the noise.” They also note that “Most activity, and probably most money is still spent on disseminating and communicating research, which, as a sole strategy, has long been known to be ineffective at producing policy and practice change, or societal impact” and “Recent research suggests that interpersonal links are indeed important in the production and use of relevant evidence, but need to be underpinned by long-term strategic and institutional support, however, few of the relational initiatives we found were designed or operated in this way. We found few initiatives which could be described as attempting to operate at this higher systemic level.”

They recommend an approach with steps as follows:

- “First, for those wishing to design and implement new initiatives and interventions, we suggest engaging with the existing literature on (a) what policy is and how it works, (b) ethics and values of engagement, and (c) evaluations and interventions of academic policy engagement practices, to help clarify what you are doing, why, and how it can be informed by existing studies and perspectives.”
- “Second . . . you can use existing evidence to plan and execute engagement effectively. For example, you should establish the extent to which a new initiative complements or competes with projects in the current landscape.”
- “Third . . . you can take seriously the existing evidence on ‘what works’ in relation to comparable initiatives, use it to produce a clear plan of action that can be evaluated, and establish how an evaluation of this work will aid comparable projects.”

MacKillop & Downe, 2022, of the Wales Centre for Public Policy (as noted by Breckon J. and Boaz, A. 2023) drawing on a comparative study of evidence intermediaries in South Africa, Canada, and the UK, outline three common elements that inform the work of evidence intermediaries:

- The centrality of evidence in their everyday work, mission, and practices. This may seem obvious, but the evidence is a vital defining feature. Some thinktanks and lobby groups, for instance, may talk a lot about evidence, but really prioritise values, beliefs, and political interests; evidence is secondary.
- Focus on knowledge brokering. They are not just academic units who do some communication of their work for impact, but give equal weight to communication and knowledge exchange - including staff, tools, structures, relationships and practices.
- Closeness to government, despite being separate from it. This is partly linked to point two – the importance of knowledge brokering. But it is also one of the challenges – that these organisations need to juggle independence with proximity to government (who sometimes fund them).

Transforming Evidence is based in the United Kingdom and is a community that shares research and expertise about how evidence is made and used, across policy and practice domains⁶. Breckon J. and Boaz, A. 2023, was published as part of the work of Transforming Evidence. This report notes the remarkable growth in evidence intermediaries (with a range of titles) bridging research with policy and practice. They seek to address what they identify as a confusion about what exactly these organisations are and what they deliver. They note the activities of such intermediaries, building on MacKillop & Downe, 2022, while noting that closeness to Government is not always the case. They note that intermediaries often function, not as separate bodies, but within organisations such as a university. A key issue that they identify from reviewing research is that intermediary bodies often do not create new research themselves.

They identify three generations of knowledge brokerage, in seeking to describe the processes, structures and relationships of knowledge brokering.

- For the first generation, evidence is turned into products such as websites, reports, or toolkits. This is often seen as a backwards first step in communication – pushing

⁶ <https://transforming-evidence.org/>

research out the door, an inferior move compared to second and third generation. However, few evidence intermediaries can afford to keep their evidence impenetrable.

- For the second generation, social relationships dominate. Intermediaries give more attention to two-way sharing of knowledge among their target audiences, developing networks and partnerships.
- For the third generation, system-informed approaches recognise that intermediaries are embedded within wider, dynamic, and complex systems. Taking a systems-informed approach includes strategic leadership, rewarding impact, and creating infrastructure and posts (Oliver et al, 2022).

They conclude with a set of recommendations in relation to intermediary bodies. These include the need for intermediary bodies to collaborate more and compete less and that such bodies could develop smarter evaluations and new sources of insight. They also suggest that there is potential for intermediary bodies to be more inclusive, i.e., to work more with other actors in civil society and outside of central government.

Some examples of intermediaries

Developments in higher education institutions in Ireland

The significant policy developments in Ireland are noted above. A range of important policy engagement work is being led by the Irish Universities Association and with the support of the Technological Higher Education Association, through the Campus Engage initiative. This has led to a large cohort of academics, researchers and other staff collectively engaging with concepts about effective mobilisation of higher education research for public policy, including effective engagement, including with policymakers.

Within higher education institutions themselves, there are a range of approaches and practices to support research for policy. In many cases, there are staff assigned in research offices with a brief to support research for policy engagement – such staff have often become the institutional experts in this area and can provide great assistance to researchers. There are also arrangements in many institutions to seek to support this engagement within academic Departments or in research centres and institutes.

There are many good examples of research and researchers impacting on policy development and the authors see many examples of this in their work in Maynooth University. Within higher education institutions a wide range of research centres and institutes have also been established, many quite a while ago. Many of these are established with funding from Science

Foundation Ireland and with the co-operation of a range of higher education institutions. While many institutes and centres may have the influencing of policy as one of their aims, some have been particularly focussed on this – such as the Geary Institute for Public Policy in University College Dublin, MaREI (the SFI Research Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine) in University College Cork and the Whitaker Institute for Innovation and Societal Change (recently inactive) in the University of Galway. The model for these institutes and centres is one where there is research underway, usually in a defined area. They also have a declared focus on impact on policy and this role can include supporting the impact on policy of research from elsewhere in their institutions (i.e., more than just the research that they have directly underway themselves).

Another existing example linked to a higher education institution is Evidence Synthesis Ireland⁷ which is based in the University of Galway and is an all-Ireland initiative funded by the Health Research Board and the Health and Social Care, Research and Development Division of the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland. It is building evidence synthesis knowledge, awareness and capacity among the public, health care institutions and policymakers, clinicians, and researchers on the island of Ireland.

Building on the research noted above that intermediary bodies often do not create new research themselves; it is hard to find such bodies operating within higher education institutions in Ireland. That is not to say that some of the functions of intermediary bodies are not being undertaken within higher education institutions, but rather that particular bodies have not been established to bring together an institutional and coherent approach to such facilitatory function.

Perhaps, the closest such intermediary body that has operated in a higher education institution in Ireland may be the Policy Institute in Trinity College Dublin⁸. The activities of the Institute included lecture and seminar series, as well as publishing papers with short, rigorous, but accessible analyses of policy issues. The web presence of the Institute is not up to date and there does not appear to have been significant activity in recent years.

In recent months there has been a reorganisation underway within the Irish Universities Association with a view to positioning the Association, through the collective work of the Vice-Presidents for Research, to support research for policy to an increased extent.

The SFI Science Policy Research Programme was launched in September 2023 to develop and support science policy research in Ireland. Projects are to be funded under the programme which will look in detail at practices in Ireland.

⁷ <https://evidencesynthesisisireland.ie/>

⁸ <https://www.tcd.ie/policy-institute/about/>

Some Examples of Developments Internationally

This section aims to consider some examples of interesting and relevant activities in other countries. These examples are being included, building on references in the research papers and some individual contacts and experience that the authors have. They are not intended to be exhaustive but rather to give a flavour of the activity underway (based mostly on the public information provided online) with a view to informing further engagement.

There are ten examples described. Of these, eight are located within higher education institutions and two are located across two or more institutions. Of the examples, there are

- 1 in Wales
- 3 in England
- 2 in Canada
- 1 in the United States of America
- 1 in South Africa
- 1 in Australia
- 1 in Finland.

Of the eight located in higher education institutions, 2 appear to have strong partnerships with Government in how they are run and the other 6 are more formally positioned within higher education institutions.

Overall, they seem to have a similar range of functions consistent with the approach set out in the research. Many seem to have started with a focus on knowledge management, communications and awareness and they have moved into the development of sustainable networks with policy-makers, as well as often having a developmental role for their own researchers. Few of the bodies directly undertake research, but some so, while offering services and advice across their own institutions.

Two very interesting and relevant aspects of many of them are their strategic leadership roles within their own institutions and their role in thought leadership within the region or country. Clearly, they have sufficient recognition and have developed the relationships to undertake such roles. At the same time, one body with such roles has since been closed down.

Two of the bodies have roles across higher education institutions and linking with Government. One example, in Finland, has developed over many years and is embedded in the policy eco-system. The other, in New South Wales, is much more recent and is in the process of establishing itself.

The details on all these bodies are included in Appendix 1.

Reflections for further consideration in Ireland

This paper has focussed on developments in higher education institutions and how they might be advanced in the context of the developing national policy approach about which consultation is underway at present. The Government's approach, which is targeted at broadening and deepening linkages between academic researchers and policymakers, is very welcome. While this approach is being layered on top of and complementing existing and already achieved knowledge exchange initiatives, there is a relatively green field in terms of how higher education institutions organise themselves internally and on a cross-institutional basis to develop and establish effective infrastructures, building on what works in other jurisdictions, that will deliver on the ambition of Impact 2030.

The reflections below are set out with a view to deepening the debate underway about these issues at present and to outline possible topics that might be looked at further.

Building researchers' understanding of what policy-making is and how it works.

It appears that there is a need for researchers in higher education to have the opportunity to reflect on the range of ways in which policy-making works and also on the range of ways in which researchers have engaged with policy-makers. There is a lot of good practice nationally and internationally on briefing on these issues. It is particularly helpful to look at examples of researchers and policy-makers working together and to get the perspectives of everyone involved.

There can be an initial tendency for researchers to focus on the political aspect of policy-making – which is often more in the public domain – and, while this is important, it is far from the only aspect of policy-making.

Ethics and values of engagement/independence from policy-makers

There is a perception among some in the research community that the research for policy agenda can arise from higher education institutions operating new management and administration models and coming under pressure to commit more categorically to serving what Governments deem to be the 'national interest', by contributing towards solutions which Governments deem to be efficacious, to the twenty first century social, economic and environmental problems. Alongside academic freedom, questions of societal purpose, accountability, and value have emerged. There is an ongoing debate, particularly in the social

sciences, concerning the means and ends and responsibilities and accountabilities of academic research.

The authors consider that there are opportunities for continuing collective reflection within higher education institutions on these issues where there is an institutional method established and that this has the potential to assist researchers involved.

Where there is an intermediary body, it is vital that it maintains its own independence and integrity, particularly from the political system. The Mowat Centre example demonstrates that political views can change which can lead to the intermediary body losing effect or being closed down.

How higher education institutions organise themselves for research for policy.

The authors are quite taken by the picture painted in some of the international research of a vast and increasing mass of activity, which is busy rather than effective and the statement that without clear goals, and without strategic coordination, it is impossible to pick out any signal over the noise.

Accordingly, they consider it appropriate to explore long-term strategic and institutional approaches to these issues within each higher education institution and potentially across all institutions.

The question that arises for us is how to design such an approach, or range of approaches, and how implementation should be advanced. Particular care needs to be taken to ensure that any developments become embedded as part of the institutional structures and are established separate from these. There are examples of policy institutes in Ireland, noted above, where they have had an impetus for a while but then cease to function.

Benefits of more coherence

There are important advantages to both researchers and policy makers in establishing and implementing long-term strategic and institutional approaches within higher education to support research for policy, particularly through an institutional intermediary body.

For researchers it could:

- Offer them a valuable opportunity to engage in practical problem-solving with policy makers, addressing societal challenges and using solutions-oriented research.
- foster a deeper understanding of how policy development works in practice, through direct engagement with policy makers on a live topic.

- offer them a chance to participate in stimulating and relevant conversations, including for those who would not necessarily see themselves as policy researchers.
- bring together researchers who would not otherwise be involved in the conversation, including those from opposing or different perspectives, and especially those from different disciplines.
- offer researchers an opportunity on a systematic basis to learn from each other about effective engagement with policy-makers, rather than needing to develop approaches on an individual or small group basis.
- offer potential opportunities for new programmatic funding for research over time.
- help to enhance the impact and research performance of higher education institutions internationally as indicated by metrics on the wider impact and dissemination of their work.
- promote an enhanced interest and engagement from students where real-world policy examples can be brought to their studies.

For policy makers, it could:

- offer an efficient connection with relevant researchers on key policy topics.
- provide speedy access to current academic knowledge and research on a given issue, both nationally and internationally
- create a valuable platform for engagement and debate with researchers who have developed a deep understanding of a policy issue over time (something which policy makers with a wide and complex portfolio of responsibilities may lack)
- bring a valuable cross-fertilisation of local, national, and global data, perspectives and ideas, which is especially valuable when injected at the earliest stages of policy analysis.
- provide an important source of expertise from the academic/research world by encouraging their participation in relevant advisory groups as well as membership of State boards.
- offer a means by which problems and trends in a policy area are identified quickly and highlighted to policy makers for attention at the earliest possible stage.

In summary, this could lead to the availability of a valuable source of facilitation, with practical information and advice, as well as helping to source research data and experience. Its key benefit would be a cross-fertilisation of ideas, information, and practical understandings of the real-world policy environment, which would form a valuable addition to the existing resources available for policy decisions.

History in establishment of intermediary bodies

It is interesting that where intermediary bodies have been established there can often be an establishment story and that this has impacted on how the body is structured and operated. It

can be that there was an individual, or a small group of individuals, who came up with the initial concepts and led implementation, at least initially. Finding out where the initial impetus came from to establish an intermediary body can be very informative about the positioning of the body in the institutional, policy and political ecosystem. The authors consider that while it is important to get impetus in this area, it is also important to make sure that communities are on board with developments and that individuals or small groups of individuals are not over identified with initiatives in this area. This is linked to the need to ensure that the bodies are embedded in their institutions and in the policy ecosystem.

Positioning of unit in a higher education institution

It appears to the authors from the examples set out that where an intermediary body is established within a higher education institution, it tends to be established as part of the Research Office or formally linked to this. A body is often also linked to communications and engagement functions in an institution. Intermediary bodies with an institutional perspective have not tended to be established within a research institute which focussed on a particular area.

Focus beyond policy-makers

Most of the intermediary bodies appear to be focussed on supporting links with policy-makers primarily. However, the research work feeding into this paper indicates that such links most usually build on a range of wider links. There are also many researchers who primarily work with stakeholders who are not policy-makers and see their own research impacting on policy though working with those stakeholders. There certainly appears to be a question arising from the research above about the need for intermediary bodies to have a broader outlook than just with policy-makers.

Steering, advisory, engagement groups

Where an intermediary body is established, it commonly has at least two supporting groups. The first – often referred to as a steering group – is often led by the research lead in the higher education institution and is constituted to have membership from across the institution. This group often has management oversight for the body. A second group is often one which connects with policy-makers and other stakeholders and is often referred to as an advisory group.

It would seem that these two areas of engagement – one within the institution and one more broadly – would need to be considered in the establishment of any intermediary body.

Activities/functions

There is quite a range of supportive activities and functions that arise from the authors' engagements and the research and examples of practice described above. Some of these activities are often already underway already within parts of higher education institutions in

Ireland and there are opportunities to consider the extent to which some of all of them might be brought together more coherently with an emerging strategic approach.

Notably, some of the research warns that while most existing activity relates to disseminating and communicating research and that this as a sole strategy, has long been known to be ineffective at producing policy and practice change, or societal impact. The research further suggests that interpersonal links are important in the production and use of relevant evidence but need to be underpinned by long-term strategic and institutional support.

Among these activities and functions are the following:

- Having capacity building briefing opportunities for researchers (at different stages of their careers) on how policy-making works and updating them on the work of Government and on policy developments on a regular basis.
- Building on this, mapping how policy-making works in Government Departments and sectors (building on on-line Government resources such as Who Does What), regional assemblies and local authorities.
- Having regularly updated information on the networks of researchers in higher education institutions involving policy-makers available within higher education institutions.
- Support for the development of networks and partnerships of researchers with policy-makers and avoiding duplication of effort.
- Drafting tool-kits (building on several useful national and international ones) and hosting regular briefing sessions for researchers and doctoral students on how to engage with policy-makers.
- Bringing together communications about research for public policy into a single website for higher education institutions and sharing good practice through celebrating impact case studies.
- Developing a range of seminars across a wide range of areas of interest and relevance to public policy to engage with policy-makers.
- Support for the development of smarter evaluations and new sources of insight to assist policy-makers.
- Support for engagement with policy-makers as part of a wider more inclusive set of engagements with wider groups of stakeholders.
- Offering policy-makers a clear pathway to access advice on particular issues.
- Reflecting further on the value in higher education institutions of public policy research and engagement with Government, and developing practices to reflect on the outcome to these reflections.

- Supporting the engagement of researchers with state boards and working and advisory groups established by Government.
- Introducing an approach to facilitate existing and recently retired civil and public servants (and potentially other stakeholders) in advising on and engaging in activity in higher education institutions on a systematic basis.
- Supporting early career academics in learning about engagement with public policy.
- Supporting research centres and institutes, and priority areas of research within a higher education institution, to have a focussed impact on policy.
- Supporting futures thinking and reflection among researchers and policy-makers.
- Liaising with support networks to establish and support good practice in research for policy across higher education institutions.
- Supporting researchers in seeking opportunities to be seconded to Government organisations and supporting policy-makers in being seconded to higher education.
- Supporting policy impact sabbaticals for researchers with teaching loads within higher education.

The activities suggested are intended to be consistent with the set of ‘Science4Policy’ competences of the Joint Research Centre noted earlier.

In considering the activities mentioned above, there may be options in relation to the prioritisation of areas of activity. While some of the activities would be across all areas of a higher education institution, there could be a focus on areas where there is potential to develop a critical mass of activity in particular areas (often cross-disciplinary) and thus to enable a step change in activity and enhanced impact.

It is notable that some of the intermediary bodies have a much narrower role than others. For example, there may just be a small group of people working on knowledge transfer (often within an institution’s Research Office) as opposed to a bigger body seeking to establish a coherent strategic approach for a range of activities in a higher education institution.

Evaluation

A consistent theme of the research summarised in this paper is the need for existing and emerging research for policy activities to be evaluated effectively. Many of the intermediary bodies publish case studies and periodic reports reporting on their activity. There is a need to further develop the evaluation framework as part of the stepping up of research for policy activities.

Co-ordinated Approach among High Education Institutions

While this paper focuses on arrangements within higher education institutions, it also notes some arrangements among higher education institutions. There are not as many examples of

intermediaries operating across universities and linking across all of Government. There are particular examples in sectors working with a range of stakeholders. This is a role that Government itself might be the one to seek to establish or to have the arrangements in place led by a Government Department with responsibility for the area.

In Ireland, there are initial steps underway by the Irish Universities Association to encourage coherence and the Technological Higher Education Association is also active in this policy area. These developments build on the work of Campus Engage. The Institute of Public Administration has also been to the forefront in bringing together dialogue between the researcher and policy-making communities through its Administration publication over many years.

There is potential that this work could lead to the development of a more co-ordinated approach over time and potentially find a new balance with the competition that can be underway between institutions.

While there have not been any developments towards an intermediary body, such a body could bring coherence to the system and reduce competitiveness among higher education institutions. In any case, the effectiveness of any such system broker would depend on effective approaches within each higher education institution.

Conclusion & Next Steps

The consideration of these issues is timely in the context of the consultation underway by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on a National Framework for Engagement is to be established by the Department in 2024. There is a real push to enhance the research for policy connections in Ireland and the momentum here keeps getting added to.

While there is a lot of discussion underway about what either policy-makers or researchers should do, there has not been the same discussion about how higher education institutions should organise themselves internally and collectively to do so. This paper aims to set this emerging discussion in context and to support its continuation with a view to assisting higher education institutions in realising their potential for input into policy-making. There is a relatively green field in terms of how higher education institutions organise themselves internally and on a cross-institutional basis to develop and establish effective infrastructures and avoid duplication, building on what works in other jurisdictions, that will deliver on the ambition of Impact 20230. It points towards the need to:

- consider how the organisational arrangements (in particular, the public policy connecting role of Research Offices) within higher education institutions might be re-

engineered to support strategic long-term institutional approaches and support for researchers, and

- reflect further on how higher education institutions might work together in advancing this important impact agenda, reducing competition, and avoiding duplication.

It is important that there is active consideration of these issues to ensure that higher education institutions make as effective a contribution as possible to the implementation of the National Framework for Engagement after it is published later this year.

Appendix 1

Detail on Developments Internationally

Wales Centre for Public Policy

The Wales Centre for Public Policy⁹ is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Welsh Government. The Centre is based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network. The Centre undertakes three main kinds of work. It:

- supports Welsh Government Ministers to identify, access and use authoritative evidence and independent expertise that can help inform and improve policy;
- works with public services to access, generate, evaluate and apply evidence about what works in addressing key economic and societal challenges; and
- draws on its work with Ministers and public services, to advance understanding of how evidence can inform and improve policy making and public services and contribute to theories of policy making and implementation.

Through secondments, PhD placements and its Research Apprenticeship programme, the Centre also helps to build capacity among researchers to engage in policy relevant research which has impact.

The Centre has a staff of 14 people. It also has an Advisory Group which provides advice on the Centre's long-term development and strategic direction. Members of the Group are distinguished individuals with substantial experience of working at senior levels in academia, government, public services, business and other sectors, and a commitment to the use of rigorous evidence to inform and enhance policy making and practice. They act as critical friends who offer constructive challenge, support and advice, and act as ambassadors for its work. It also has a Public Services Reference Group offers advice about evidence needs and comments on the Centre's activities and outputs, providing constructive challenge, promoting active involvement in the work, and championing the adoption and application of the evidence we generate. The Group includes people working at senior levels in local government, health and other public services, Assembly Sponsored Bodies, and the voluntary sector.

The Centre is one of three intermediaries examined in detail in MacKillop & Downe, 2022.

The Centre has recently published a report highlighting many of its achievements in its first 10 years¹⁰.

⁹ <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/about/>

¹⁰ <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/WCPP-at-10.pdf>

Institute for Policy and Engagement, University of Nottingham

The Institute for Policy and Engagement, University of Nottingham¹¹ connects Nottingham's researchers with the public and policymakers to share insight and solve problems. It works with academic experts from across the university who want to create real impact by providing training, advice and expertise. Through these partnerships it aims to tackle together the most compelling challenges locally, nationally and globally. The Institute runs many projects, both large and small, across its three main strands: policy; public engagement; and research advocacy. The Institute has a staff of 12 people. The Institute published a 2022/23 annual report¹².

Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern, Chicago

The Institute for Policy Research (IPR), Northwestern¹³ is an interdisciplinary public policy research institute founded in 1968 at Northwestern University in Chicago. Its mission is to stimulate and support excellent social science research on significant public policy issues and to disseminate the findings widely—to students, scholars, policymakers, and the public.

IPR offers a range of services to faculty and students, divided broadly between administrative and communications supports. As part of Northwestern University, IPR is housed under the Office for Research, but it also works closely with other schools and departments, in particular, the School of Education and Social Policy, Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, Pritzker School of Law, Feinberg School of Medicine, and Kellogg School of Management, in addition to collaborating with funders and external organisations and institutions. IPR has a team of 13 people, other than research staff. It is also directly involved in running several research teams in particular areas and has additional staff for these.

Knowledge Mobilization Unit – York University, Ontario

The Knowledge Mobilization Unit in York University in Ontario¹⁴ works as part of Innovation York. Innovation York facilitates and maximises the commercial, economic, and social impacts of research & innovation, and creates a culture of engaged scholarship and experiential learning. Agreements, knowledge mobilisation, commercialisation, industry partnerships, and entrepreneurship are all supported by Innovation York.

The Knowledge Mobilisation Unit advances social innovation through engaged scholarship and assists the university's partners in community, government, and industry to address society's most persistent social, environmental, and economic challenges. Working closely with partners in the community, from NGOs to the United Way, from York Region to local and international partners in government, the Knowledge Mobilization Unit is a leader, garnering extensive

¹¹ <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/policy-and-engagement/home.aspx>

¹² <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/policy-and-engagement/Documents/Reports/Annual-Report-2022-23.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/index.html>

¹⁴ <https://innovationyork.ca/knowledge-mobilization/>

national and international recognition and numerous awards for its work in mobilising knowledge for broader socio-economic impacts. York's knowledge mobilisation infrastructure supports multidirectional connections between researchers and research partners, encouraging the development of evidence that informs decisions about public policy and professional practice. A recent example is York's contribution to the development of CIVICLabTO, an effort that brings the city of Toronto together with students, faculty, and researchers from higher education institutions to address complex challenges through research and educational opportunities. There are two staff members in the Unit.

Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool

The Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place¹⁵ brings together academic expertise from across the University of Liverpool with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions. It has a particular focus on former industrial cities in the process of regeneration, such as the Liverpool City Region.

Its aim is to support evidence-led urban policy, informed by high-quality research and underpinned by an acute understanding of place. It participates in civic activity and partnerships to address a range of urban challenges and delivers a diverse portfolio of research and consultancy, influencing and impacting place-based policy. It has four key purposes:

- **Lead:** lead debate on how to respond to contemporary urban challenges and opportunities, informed by critical, high-quality research.
- **Convene:** create spaces where research, policy, practice, and community stakeholders can come together, build relationships and foster collaboration in response to urban challenges and opportunities.
- **Broker:** identify opportunities to connect high-quality academic research at the University of Liverpool with urban policy actors and those with a stake in particular urban challenges and opportunities.
- **Inform:** act as a conduit for research and evidence to frame and inform urban policy-making.

It has a staff team of eight people.

The York Policy Engine, York University

The York Policy Engine¹⁶ is a cross-faculty initiative, supporting all academic disciplines at York University. It is based in the Research, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange Directorate. The York Policy Engine aims to connect people, ideas and evidence to drive policy change in the pursuit of the public good. Through support to staff and the PhD community at York, it aims to

¹⁵ <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute/>

¹⁶ <https://www.york.ac.uk/policy-engine/about/>.

strengthen academic-policymaker engagement and the adoption of evidence generated at York into policy. It has a staff of 6 people and a steering group which is representative of the main areas of the university.

Africa Centre for Evidence, University of Johannesburg

The Africa Centre for Evidence¹⁷ was established in 2016 as a research Centre based at the University of Johannesburg. The Centre has been at the cutting edge of evidence-based research, whose primary aim is to assist policy makers and stakeholders in both public and private sectors with evidence-informed-decision-making. To this end, the Centre's approach to evidence-based research takes the form of four main Portfolios. These are:

1. The art and science of using evidence;
2. Evidence capacities;
3. Evidence communities; and
4. Evidence synthesis.

As well as drawing on the work done within the Centre, it also endeavours to draw on expertise from the wider Humanities and Social Sciences research community, including expertise outside the academy. The Centre's mission is to contribute to reducing poverty and inequality in Africa by increasing the use of evidence in decision-making. Its vision is of an Africa not haunted by the spectres of poverty or inequality.

The Centre is one of three intermediaries examined in detail in MacKillop & Downe, 2022.

The Mowat Centre, University of Toronto

The Mowat Centre¹⁸ was an independent public policy think tank located at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto and Ontario's non-partisan, evidence-based voice on public policy. It closed in 2019.

It undertook collaborative applied policy research, proposed innovative research-driven recommendations, and engaged in public dialogue on Canada's most important national issues. The policy areas of expertise were intergovernmental economic and social policy, state transformation, energy policy and not-for-profit policy.

The Mowat Centre sought to inform and revitalise Canada's public policy agenda from the Ontario perspective. Its research focussed on the federal policy frameworks and strategies that will most strongly affect Ontario's prosperity and quality of life in the next century.

¹⁷ <https://www.uj.ac.za/faculties/humanities/research/research-centres/africa-centre-for-evidence/>

¹⁸ <https://mowatcentre.munkschool.utoronto.ca/>

The Centre implemented its agenda by:

- Conducting research, publishing, and presenting findings (min. four reports per year).
- Convening and facilitating events to discuss policy issues.
- Offering educational courses to practitioners and the broader public on policy developments and their relevance in Ontario.

It had a staff of 14 people, an editorial board, and an advisory board. It published a number of annual and impact reports¹⁹. The Centre is one of three intermediaries examined in detail in MacKillop & Downe, 2022.

Some examples of intermediaries involving a number of universities and other partners

James Martin Institute for Public Policy, Sydney, New South Wales

The James Martin Institute for Public Policy²⁰ is a formal partner of the NSW Government. It is a unique joint venture between government and six leading Australian universities. Launched in 2021, the Institute works closely with government ministers, departments, and other decision-makers to help address their most pressing policy priorities, enabling them to harness a wide range of expert advice. The Institute is an independent, non-partisan policy institute with charitable status.

The Institute has five workstreams:

- Collaborative projects – the Institute works with government partners on some of the most complex, long-term, multidisciplinary policy challenges facing NSW and Australia. It uses its collaborative project model to connect experts into critical stages of policymaking by bringing together government and university colleagues into collaborative project teams, convening Expert Advisory Groups, and holding workshops and consultations.
- Rapid response – In recognition of the pace and complexity of policymaking, the Institute works intensively with government departments on highly targeted short-term projects. For example, it worked with the Department of Premier and Cabinet to develop options on how government can better harness artificial intelligence for the public good. It drew out insights and connected leading experts with policymakers by facilitating a multistakeholder expert workshop in December 2022, and undertook supplementary consultations with experts and desktop research. The Institute delivered a short policy brief to the Department in early 2023, outlining key insights and pathways for effective government use of AI.

¹⁹ <https://mowatcentre.munkschool.utoronto.ca/annual-reports/>

²⁰ <https://jmi.org.au/>

- JMI Policy Challenge Grants – In late 2022, the Institute’s inaugural grants programme awarded six grants for applied public policy research to outstanding research teams. Grantees enter into a partnership with the Institute, receiving financial and dedicated support to maximise the public policy impact of their research, including through tailored engagement with policymakers.
- JMI Policy Fellowship – Policy Fellows join the Institute to pursue independent policy-relevant research, under the Fellowship’s two current streams, the public service stream, and the academic stream.
- The Policymaker is the Institute’s solutions-oriented digital publication. The Policymaker publishes dozens of thought leadership pieces annually. It has provided a platform for Nobel Prize winners, First Nations leaders, senior policymakers and researchers, experienced government advisors and emerging thinkers to share groundbreaking policy ideas and creative solutions on key public policy challenges facing Australia.

The Institute publishes an annual report²¹ and has a team of 19 as well as a Board of Directors and a Research Advisory Group.

Finnish Academy of Science and Letters

The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters²² is a broad-based learned society founded in 1908 with the principal aim of promoting scientific research, acting as a bond between those engaged in advanced research and supporting better utilisation of high-quality research in decision-making. The Academy of Science functions as a connecting hub within the national science-policy ecosystem. It builds collaboration on several different levels, and with a wide range of stakeholders both among the scientific community and societal decision-makers. The Finnish science-policy ecosystem is pluralistic and de-centralised, consisting of a wide range of scientific research institutions, science brokers, and decision-makers utilising scientific knowledge.

The Academy’s central objective is better utilisation of high-quality research in decision-making, both within the government and a broader network of societal actors. It connects researchers with decision-makers and builds new channels and tools for better societal dialogue. The Academy works in this area by:

- supporting researchers in increasing the societal impact of their work.
- working as a connecting hub by building new connections in the science-policy interface and facilitating the interaction among key stakeholders.

²¹ https://jmi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/JMI_2023-Annual-Report.pdf

²² <https://acadsci.fi/en/science-and-policy/>

- experimenting and developing new operating models for better evidence-informed decision-making.

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