



Speaker biographies

Part 1: The research-for-policy ecosystem – system leader’s perspectives

Chaired by Dr Ciara Leonard, Head of Public Affairs and Advocacy, UCD



Dr Ciara Leonard is Head of Public Affairs and Advocacy at University College Dublin, where she leads national and international policy and advocacy initiatives and engages key stakeholders. She is Principal Investigator of the HEA-funded Policy Interface initiative at UCD which develops and strengthens links between researchers and policy professionals so high-quality evidence can more readily inform public policy.

Previously she worked in various public affairs, innovation and technology commercialisation roles in UCD, Ulster University and with InvestNI in Boston. Ciara completed her undergraduate studies at Queen’s University, Belfast in Economics and post-graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Queen’s University Business School and UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School. Her PhD research examined university-industry R&D collaboration in Ireland and the role of government.



Triona McCormack is UCD’s first Vice-President for Strategy and External Engagement. She is responsible for developing and implementing the UCD’s strategy and enhancing the university’s reputation. She leads the strategy, marketing & communications, public affairs and strategic partnerships functions of the university. Before taking up this role, she was Director of UCD Research where she was responsible for research strategy, development and operations. During her time as Director, UCD has increased its funding for research, developed leading positions in national research centres and tripled its funding from the EU.

Prior to joining UCD, Triona was the country lead for human capital consulting and head of the organisational effectiveness practice at Hudson Highland. She worked with organisations to translate from strategy to implementable action plans in a broad range of sectors including banking, telecommunications, public utilities and services. She is Chair of the Higher Education and Research Committee of the British Irish Chamber and a member of a number of national and international advisory boards. She is a graduate of mechanical engineering in UCD and Case Western Reserve University in the US.



David Budtz Pedersen is Professor of Science Communication and Impact Studies at the Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University (Denmark). His research focuses on the management, communication and impact of science and technology.

He is a regular adviser to the European Commission, the Danish Ministry of Science, and a Member of the Norwegian Research Council and the International Network for Governmental Science Advice. He takes a special interest in open, responsible and collaborative research focused on creating positive impact in society.



Professor Aoife McLysaght was appointed to the role of Government Science Advisor in October 2024 and is Assistant Secretary General in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Aoife is Chair of Evolutionary Genetics in Trinity College Dublin. She was educated at Trinity College Dublin where she was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in Genetics in 1998, followed by a PhD in 2002.

Aoife was a member of the international consortium that published the first draft of the Human Genome sequence in 2001; was the first to discover novel human-specific genes, in 2009; identified links between gene duplication patterns and human disease; and has made significant contributions to our understanding of the human genome, as well as the genomes of other animals, plants and viruses. Aoife has led a research team in Trinity College since 2003 and has been funded through a prestigious President of Ireland Young Researcher Award (PIYRA) and a European Research Council (ERC) Starting Researcher Award and Consolidator Grant.

Aoife takes a keen interest in communicating science to the public in an engaging and accessible manner. She has given many talks at public events, including music festivals, The Royal Institution (London), science festivals, and Brian Cox and Robin Ince's Christmas Science shows.

She is a frequent contributor in the media in Ireland and internationally. She was awarded the UK Genetical Society Haldane Prize for communicating genetics to a general audience. In 2018, with Alice Roberts, she co-wrote and presented the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures, broadcast on BBC.



Peter Clifford is Head of Strategy in Research Ireland. He leads on:

- organisational strategy development, strategic progress monitoring, and engagement with national strategies;
- data management, curation, and analytics informing KPIs, metrics, and reporting; and
- good practice and strategic insights.

Peter delivers influential thought leadership across the national research and innovation system, including on impact, research for policy, meta-research, AI, and greening research.

His work is underpinned by deep stakeholder engagement, adopting design thinking principles. In previous roles, Peter was a scientific programme manager at SFI, and a telecoms networks and applied mathematics researcher in academia.



Barry Vaughan is a Principal Officer in the Department of the Taoiseach where he has responsibility for matters relating to civil and public service reform. He is currently leading on an initiative to strengthen policy development across the civil service. As part of this campaign, a handbook to guide civil servants in the process of formulating policy was published earlier this year.

Barry has previously worked for the National Economic and Social Council and as a lecturer in criminology. He holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Warwick.



Professor Mark Boyle is Chair of Geography at Maynooth University and the Principal Investigator on the 'Unlocking the value of research for public policy making and innovation: Mapping Ireland's key brokering structures and supports' project, funded as part of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) (now Taighde Éireann) Science Policy Research programme. Working with Seán Ó Foghlú and John O'Connor he is leading at Maynooth University a research strand on research for policy. His substantive areas of research are meta-research, urban geography and diaspora policy.



Dr John O'Connor is a senior post-doctoral researcher at Maynooth University, where he is part of a research team working on a Research Ireland funded project mapping knowledge brokering structures and supports in Ireland. John is currently seconded to Maynooth University from the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority of Ireland where he has held a number of senior policy roles, most recently as Head of Standards and Certification. John has actively participated in EU, OECD and UNESCO expert advisory groups on education and skills policy. John holds a PhD in evidence-based policymaking in Ireland from University College Dublin.

Part 2: Sectoral initiatives and multi-sectoral collaboration

Chaired by Seán Ó Foghlú, Senior Fellow in Public Policy, Maynooth University



Seán Ó Foghlú is a Senior Fellow in Public Policy working in Maynooth University to support the links between research and policy making. He is also working in collaboration with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science with a view to developing linkages with other universities.

He was Secretary General of the Department of Education for 10 years until February 2022. The first eight and a half years was with the Department of Education and Skills which included responsibility for the further and higher education sectors. He has 30 years of experience in Irish civil and public service, including four at Assistant Secretary level in the Department of Education and seven years as chief executive of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

In his career he has extensive experience as a senior official in policy development, strategic planning, evaluation of policy and service delivery, team-leading of functional areas and projects, and implementation of key policies.



Professor Michelle Norris is Full Professor of Social Policy and Director of the Geary Institute for Public Policy at UCD. Her teaching and research interests focus on housing policy and urban regeneration. She has served as an independent member of the National Economic and Social Council, which advises the Taoiseach on economic, social and environmental policy. She has also been a member of the boards of two of the main agencies responsible for providing social housing in Ireland – the Housing Finance Agency and Land Development Agency – and of the Housing Commission. She was one of the lead authors of the Housing2030 report on improving affordable housing outcomes. In 2025, she was appointed as a member of the Royal Irish Academy.



Sinéad Mullen is the Senior Planner with responsibility for coordinating delivery of the OPR's strategic planning research programme. With over 27 years' experience as a professional planner, Sinéad has worked within local government sector and private practice, across all three main areas of Planning (Plan-making, Development Management and Enforcement). Sinéad holds a BSc Environmental Planning and Postgraduate Diploma in Town and Country Planning from Queen's University Belfast and a Postgraduate Diploma in Public Management from the Institute of Public Administration. Sinéad is a Chartered Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute.



Dr Teresa Maguire was appointed as Director of Research Strategy and Funding in 2020 and is responsible for all HRB research funding programmes, partnerships and collaborations, a diverse programme of policy-related work and evaluation of the HRB's investments. Teresa has experience of working with numerous health policy and practice partners to both prioritise and specify evidence gaps and to design research calls to address them. Prior to taking up her current role as Director, Teresa spent almost 5 years on secondment in the Department of Health to support the establishment of a new Research Services & Policy Unit tasked with supporting evidence-informed decision making in the Department and advancing a broad-based health research strategy.



Dr Inez Bailey has over 30 years' experience of working in public policy as an advocate, an innovator and a researcher. This work has involved extensive engagement and collaboration with government bodies, community organisations and academia, aimed at improving people's lives. Inez leads the Centre for Effective Services (CES), a not-for-profit all island organisation. CES' purpose is *to support the implementation of excellent public services through evidence-informed policy and practice*. She is Chair of The Wheel, Ireland's national association of community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises and a graduate of the University of Sheffield (EdD) and Maynooth University (BA, MA, Dip).



Dr Claire Hickey is Head of Socio-Economic Research with the Parliamentary Research Service (PRS) in the Houses of the Oireachtas. Claire is responsible for managing the legislative analysis service, which includes research to support Committees in their scrutiny of government legislation and Private Members' Bills, as well as research and analysis of published government legislation. She is also responsible for managing PRS research about the operation, policies and procedures of parliament and manages the PRS' academic engagement programme. Prior to joining the Oireachtas, Claire held a range of senior research and evaluation roles in community and voluntary sector organisations and has also worked as an academic researcher.



Sarah Chaytor is Director of Strategy & Policy and Joint Chief of Staff for UCL Research, Innovation and Global Engagement and established the UCL Public Policy programme to strengthen connections between UCL's research and public policymaking. Sarah co-founded and is a Co-Chair of UPEN, the Universities Policy Engagement Network. As Director of Programmes, she provides strategic direction and oversees UPEN's £6m UKRI award. She is a Visiting Professor of Practice at Newcastle University, Vice President (Policy & Partnerships) at the British Science Association, and a Co-Director of the Research on Research Institute CIC. She previously led the Research England-funded Capabilities in Academic-Policy Engagement (CAPE) programme and the ESRC-funded International Public Policy Observatory.

Part 3: Joining the dots... building momentum for action

Chaired by Fiona O'Byrne, Assistant Secretary, DFHERIS



Fiona O'Byrne is Assistant Secretary at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, where she leads policy and strategy for Further Education, Apprenticeship, and Skills. Her career spans public service, the private sector and the non-profit sector, including roles in analytics, and consultancy.



James Lawless is Ireland's Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, appointed on 23 January 2025. Prior to this, he served as Minister of State at both the Department of Transport and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

James was elected to Dáil Éireann to represent Kildare North in 2016 and again in 2020. Before entering national politics, he served on Kildare County Council and was elected Mayor of Naas, the county town, in 2015.



Paul Morrin is Assistant Director General, Central Statistics Office. He is responsible for developing and coordinating the CSO's Statistical System Coordination work programme; promoting and building an awareness and acceptance of the CSO's role across the public service; secondment of analytics staff to the public service and developing structures to formalise the coordination role. These initiatives are part of the evolving National Data Infrastructure, which has standards, skills and services components. This directorate is also responsible for the production of customised policy and multidimensional publications, CSO data/quality management and researcher access to microdata.

Paul holds an undergraduate degree, MSc and PhD in Economics, and has been working in CSO for 32 years, including a period of 13 years on secondment to the Department of Social Protection.



Professor Caroline McGregor is the Director of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society (ILAS) at the University of Galway. She is also Senior Research Fellow at UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) and Professor of Social Work (Political Science and Sociology). Caroline has over 30 years of experience of researching in the field of applied social science. Her teaching and research interests include support and protection across the lifecourse, socio-legal practice, child protection and family support. Caroline has extensive experience of academic-professional partnerships and has a particular interest in leading and advancing policy impact and community-engaged research.



Gerry Clabby is Principal Advisor in the Environment and Climate Research and Advisory Section of the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment. Gerry has specific responsibility for the provision of technical and scientific advice to support national policy across a wide range of climate and environment areas, for research and innovation, and for EU programmes (including the LIFE Programme and EU Innovation Fund). The section is also leading the development of a National Environmental Policy Statement and carries out an independent environmental assessment function for the Department in respect of certain matters.



Dr Diarmuid O'Brien is the CEO of Research Ireland, which is the primary research and innovation funding agency for Ireland providing investment across all research disciplines.

Prior to this, Diarmuid was the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Innovation at the University of Cambridge where he was responsible for innovation, enterprise partnership, research commercialisation, entrepreneurship, venture investment and engagement with local and national government on innovation and place. Previously, he was also the Chief Executive of Cambridge Enterprise, the innovation services organisation which supports the University of Cambridge.

During his time at Cambridge, Diarmuid led the creation of a number of initiatives to unlock innovation and offer enhanced support for translational funding and company creation, including Founders at the University of Cambridge and the Technology Investment Fund. He co-founded and Chaired Innovate Cambridge, a highly collaborative initiative defining and delivering an inclusive innovation future for the Cambridge ecosystem.

Previously Diarmuid was Chief Innovation & Enterprise Officer of Trinity College Dublin where he had responsibility for new campus development, innovation and enterprise partnerships. He has held other senior management roles in research centres (CRANN, AMBER) and several university-founded start-up companies, including NTera, Xoliox, and Deerac Fluidics.

Diarmuid was a Research Fellow at Princeton University. He holds a PhD in Physics from the University of Sheffield and a degree in Materials Science from Trinity College Dublin.



David Mair joined the European Commission in 1995 and the Joint Research Centre (the Commission's science and knowledge service) in 2011. He is currently Head of Unit responsible for the JRC's work on democracy, science for policy, collaboration & knowledge-sharing ("Science for Democracy and Evidence Informed Policymaking").

Between 2011 and 2016 he was Head of Unit responsible for the JRC work programme, science advice to policy and foresight. From April 2015 to December 2015 he was Acting Director. From 1998 to 2011 he worked in DG Health and Consumers on consumer policy strategy, regulatory enforcement and research, data and statistics, as Head of Unit between 2007 to 2011 for consumer market monitoring and analysis, Consumer Markets Scoreboard and work on consumer behaviour. Before that he worked for DG Taxation, the UK Treasury, UBS and the British Army. He studied History at Cambridge University.



Mary Doyle joined the Irish Civil Service in 1978, following a degree in European Studies at the University of Limerick. Prior to her retirement in 2018, she was a member of the Management Boards of the Departments of the Taoiseach, Health and Children and Education and Skills. She was also a member of a wide range of national bodies including the National Statistics Board, the National Economic and Social Council and the Board of Science Foundation Ireland.

Following her retirement, she has continued to be active in the area of evidence for policy. She has published papers on the potential for strengthening the national architecture for evidence-based policy. She holds a Master's degree in Public Service Management from Trinity College, 2002. In 2021, she became a Member of the Royal Irish Academy and was elected as Secretary for Policy and International Relations at the Academy in 2024.



Professor Eeva Leinonen is President of Maynooth University. An international researcher and former Vice-Chancellor of Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, Eeva was appointed by the Governing Authority of Maynooth University in March 2021.

Professor Leinonen has held the role of Vice Chancellor of Murdoch University, since 2016, having previously been Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) at the University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia. Prior to moving to Australia in 2012, she was Vice Principal (Education) at King's College, London.

Originally from Finland, Professor Leinonen has a background in linguistics and psychology. She engages with researchers in Finland and Italy in ongoing research into pragmatic language development in children and contextual processing deficits of children and young adults with autistic spectrum disorders.