



The Irish Research Staff Association and IFUT call for Emergency Measures to tackle the Labour Market Crisis of Researchers: Keep Talent in Research and Higher Education

Open Letter from the Irish Research Staff Association and IFUT to the

Government of Ireland:

- Joe McHugh T.D., Minister for Education and Skills. minister@education.gov.ie
- William Beausang, Assistant Secretary for Higher Education Policy and Research- Department of Education and Skills william_beausang@education.gov.ie
- Dermot Mulligan, Assistant Secretary for Innovation Policy and Programmes - Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation dermot.mulligan@dbei.gov.ie
- Muiris O'Connor, Assistant Secretary, Research and Development and Health Analytics Division - Department of Health - moconnor@hea.ie

Irish Universities Association:

- Dr. Patrick Prendergast, Chair, provost.office@tcd.ie
- Dr. Lisa Keating, Director of Research and Innovation lisa.keating@iua.ie

Irish Research Council

- Peter Brown, Director, pbrown@research.ie

Science Foundation Ireland

- Prof Mark Ferguson, Director General, emer.odriscoll@sfi.ie

Health Research Board

- Darrin Morrissey, Chief Executive, hrb@hrb.ie

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an extraordinarily negative impact on the university sector. However, this impact will not be felt equally by all categories of staff. We, the Irish Research Staff Association, are writing on behalf of various groups of research staff, including post-doctoral researchers and research assistants.

Researchers at Irish universities are particularly likely to be employed on short (one or two year) fixed-term contracts, many of which will expire in the coming months. In the meantime, the COVID-19 crisis is hindering our research efforts in numerous respects: during the lockdown we are not able to access laboratories, libraries and archives, we cannot conduct fieldwork interviews and it is impossible to present our research at conferences. The lockdown measures were all necessary to save human lives, and we fully support them. In

the context of the short employment horizons and strict timelines that we face, the measures however have also dealt a blow to our professional advancement.

Austerity measures implemented during the previous global financial crisis placed many researchers into untenable positions – the previously available route into academia, after a long period of time working as a postdoctoral researcher, was cut off, so the majority of researcher staff had to leave their preferred work sector. There were, and still are, no research scientist positions in Ireland that highly qualified staff could apply for in order to continue contributing to Irish economic growth, work in a sustainable career path and therefore avoid trying to survive on precarious rolling contracts.

The current crisis has made clear the urgent need for highly qualified research scientists to be embedded within the higher education sector. Past experience has shown that postdoctoral researchers will again suffer a shutdown of their current career plans and will have to leave the academic sector. The teaching pathway was already severely restricted before 2020, and as a result of the Covid-19-related funding crisis, universities have stopped recruiting new early career professorial staff. Without adequate financing, we will not be able to retain our highly qualified researchers, apply our research expertise to deal with the current crisis and ensure that sufficient human capacity will be in place to cope with related events in the future.

We note the joint statement from the SFI, HRB and IRC: <https://www.sfi.ie/research-news/news/covid-19/>. We welcome the IRC's willingness to consider "requests for costed extensions on awards where the research is severely compromised due to the COVID-19 crisis" and similarly note that the HRB will examine ways to support researchers who require budgetary assistance. However, these funding agencies do not provide clarity or further detail in their guidelines, and we are concerned that a strictly case-by-case approach will lead to arbitrary decisions. Furthermore, in the case of SFI, their "analysis indicates that SFI is not in a position to provide costed extensions on Grants at present, as this would require substantial additional budget that is currently not available and approval from the SFI Board". Only providing no-cost extensions will not enable the successful completion of many ongoing projects as HEI's are not in the position to fund continuing staff and resources costs.

In light of these developments, we are calling on policymakers to consult the Irish Research Staff Association and trade unions in higher education, in a bid to implement the following measures:

1. Emergency funding should be made available by the Government to provide for costed extensions wherever possible, thereby ensuring continuity of research.
2. Funding Agencies should have more uniformity in their policies, converging toward higher standards, taking into account international best practice.
3. At a minimum, greater detail and clarity should be provided about the criteria that extension decisions are made on.

Precarious employment in the academic field is a serious ongoing concern and goes far beyond the current worldwide emergency context. Long-term plans to tangibly tackle the related issues should be considered by policy makers and developed in collaboration with researchers, higher education and research institutions.

Research staff play a vital role in universities' contribution to society. With the fallout of the pandemic, Ireland risks another lost generation of research staff if supports are not put in place.

Yours sincerely,

Members of the Irish Research Staff Association:

- University College Dublin Research Staff Association (UCD-RSA) <https://www.ucdrsa.org/>
- Maynooth University Researchers Association (MURA) mura@mu.ie
- Trinity Research Staff Association (TRSA) <https://www.tcd.ie/about/trsa/>
- University College Cork Research Staff Association (UCCRSA) <https://www.ucc.ie/en/rsa/>

Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) <https://www.ifut.ie/>