

Research

The management challenge

With consistent strategic commitment and increased funding now available to the research sector, a new challenge is emerging, namely, how to effectively structure and manage research organisations, partnerships and processes to ensure maximum ROI. This is a key issue facing state funders, universities, institutes of technology and research institutes.

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Throughout 2006 and into 2007, the Government continued to signal its strategic commitment to research with the launch of the DETE-sponsored Strategy for Science, Innovation and Technology (€3.8 billion to 2013), the fourth round of the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (€190 million to 2010), the Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation Health Research report, and the extension of the R&D tax credit.

However, as funding has increased, so too has the challenge of ensuring that it is effectively utilised to maximise return on investment. Key issues are now emerging around how to best structure and manage the organisations, partnerships and processes that support the conduct and commercialisation of research. While these challenges naturally vary depending on the institution, many common needs also exist.

There is a strong need among research organisations for robust governance and management structures. An appropriate balance must be struck between providing a flexible environment for researchers and ensuring strong management guidance from organisations. Partnerships and collaborations amplify the need for clarity in this area.

Intellectual property (IP) is another key area. The recent holder of the EU Presidency, Finnish Prime Minister Vanhanen, called for a “more efficient and Europe-wide policy on intellectual property rights”. It is clear that work is needed to clarify and simplify the IP rights of all parties to research, both the public and private sectors. This should begin with the implementation of The Irish Council for Science, Technology and Innovation’s Codes of Practice, which were published in 2004 and 2005.

In relation to technology transfer, the establishment of state-of-the-art technology transfer offices by all universities and institutes of technology may not be realistic from a funding and practicality perspective (as identified in the UK-based Lambert review 2003). Given the limited size of the Irish research landscape, it may make sense for some technology transfer services to be shared across third level bodies, for example, the areas of licensing negotiation, IP marketing and management, and spinout creation.

Collaboration in the area of commercialisation is key. Irish research organisations should seek to engage with national and international associations to share learning and best practice. Example of such bodies include the Association of University Research and Industry Links (of which Dr. Pat Frain, Director of NovaUCD, was recently appointed Chair) and ProTon Europe (modelled on the US-based Association of University Technology Managers).

It is well known that investment is urgently required in our research infrastructure, for example, in health research the much needed establishment of GeneLibrary Ireland. However, once this infrastructure is established, there is a further challenge to ensure that it is accessible and facilitates partnership between the key research partners of academia, government and industry. Effectively managed access programmes should provide and promote the use of these facilities by all research players.

The National Access Programme (NAP) at the Tyndall National Institute is a good example of this type of programme, providing funded access for Irish-based researchers to the centre’s facilities and expertise. Arrangements are also in place with industry for access to Tyndall’s Central Fabrication Facility. Similar arrangements should be developed at other institutions.

The Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation has identified a target of producing 1,000 PhDs every year by 2013. To help ensure this target is achieved and maintained, appropriate career paths and support and incentive structures must be developed to appeal to the increased number of professionals choosing research as a career path.

In addition, the value and benefits of research must be more effectively communicated to the public. This will be especially important to ensure the ongoing support of the taxpayer for the levels of investment required under the Lisbon agreement. Institutional outreach activities and effective communication at individual researcher level will play an essential part in ensuring the ongoing relevance and buy-in to research by the public.

The challenges facing research organisations and funders are shifting from being funding-focused to management-focused – including effective governance, collaboration, commercialisation support, access to infrastructure, career development and communications. In order to ensure that Ireland Inc. receives an appropriate return on its investment in research, it is vital that the organisations at the heart of the Irish research system rise to this management challenge.

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Article at a glance

Given the increased investment in research, focus now needs to shift to ensuring greater value for money.

Key challenges emerging around the structure and management of research organisations, partnerships and processes.

Critical that these challenges are addressed to ensure the most effective use of increased funding.