

Government policies favouring research for economic returns can overlook existing strengths in arts and humanities



*There is an argument that the best way for governments to allocate resources for research is to prioritise those areas most likely to deliver economic returns. **Andrew Gibson** and **Ellen Hazelkorn** explain how, shortly after its Great Recession, Ireland prioritised research fields aligned with industrial sectors rather than disciplinary excellence or societal challenges. By starting with an orientation toward the economy and failing to evaluate the entire research base, Ireland overlooked areas of significant strength such as the arts and humanities; an oversight tellingly addressed by a later iteration of its strategy. What's clear is that prioritisation without full evaluation can undermine wider national and societal objectives, as well as institutional and academic morale.*

Although the Great Recession affected numerous countries around the world, few were as profoundly impacted as Ireland. In the depths of the crisis, [real gross domestic product collapsed by 10%](#), and [unemployment ran to almost 15%](#), priming the context for the Irish government to implement radical policy decisions across a number of areas. Most significant for researchers was the implementation of the Irish government's National Research Prioritisation Exercise policy, which marked the end of what had been a strategy to build a broad base of expertise in higher education. In its stead stood a narrow view of research for economic outcomes. Almost ten years later, the government adopted a more rounded strategy, [Innovation 2020](#). So, what do these different approaches tell us?

In the wake of the crisis, a series of reviews commenced that sought to redraw the higher education landscape, one of which was the government's [policy of research prioritisation](#). Its overarching objective was to identify priority areas best matching what was termed Ireland's "international competitiveness". This was narrowly conceived in terms of an orientation towards Irish enterprise, with what it termed "research for knowledge" or fundamental research taking a back seat. Most crucially for academics this policy of prioritisation would, for the first time, link what the government regarded as "priority areas" to resource allocation. The animating principle for research, now, would be return-on-investment.

International competitiveness was defined according to four criteria: 1) priority areas would have large global markets in which Irish-based enterprise competes; 2) public investment in R&D was necessary in these areas and could complement existing private sector research; 3) Ireland has "objectively measured strengths" in these areas; and 4) they represent a national or global challenge to which Ireland should respond. 14 areas were chosen, including: Future Networks and Communications; Data Analytics, Management, Security, and Privacy; Digital Platforms, Content, and Applications; Connected Health and Independent Living; Medical Devices; Sustainable Food Production and Processing; Marine Renewable Energy; Smart Grids and Smart Cities; Manufacturing Competitiveness.



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The process threw up several challenges to the process itself, and to arts and humanities researchers.

First, in choosing research fields aligned with industrial sectors rather than disciplinary excellence or societal challenges, it was probably inevitable that some fields would effectively be excluded. Hence, when the research priority areas were published in 2011, not one directly related to the arts and humanities. The review documentation explains that the evaluation panels were provided with lots of information on which to base their decisions. However, by starting with an orientation toward the Irish economy, they were *a priori* selective in the kind of evidence under consideration. In practice, this meant the review prioritised without evaluating the entire research base.

Second, if using the criterion of “objectively measured strengths”, Ireland *does* have strengths in arts and humanities research, contrary to assumptions in the prioritisation review. This can be demonstrated at the national, individual, and institutional levels.

The SCImago ranking, an exclusively bibliometrics-based ranking, uses citation data in 27 different disciplines, aggregated to build a country ranking of research. Malaysia and Italy are countries which have used SCImago to evaluate research performance, and Ireland’s prioritisation exercise itself used similar citation data. Using this proxy, those disciplines in which Ireland performs best can indeed be mapped to the research prioritisation areas. However, Ireland also demonstrates a relatively strong performance in the arts and humanities field, with only six disciplines being ranked higher.

Using success in European Research Council (ERC) grants, Ireland’s performance is also shown to be very credible. Ireland’s ERC-awarded researchers are indeed found in subdomains that map onto the 14 priority areas chosen in the prioritisation exercise. Interesting for our own purposes, however, was the fact that researchers in arts and humanities [do as well as researchers in the government’s priority areas](#).

This analysis can be replicated at institutional level. The seven universities and 14 institutes of education in the Irish public higher education system, wherein the majority of research is undertaken, had themselves identified arts and humanities research at the centre of their own priorities. Thus, the prioritisation exercise had introduced a new principle of government deciding research priorities, overturning institutional autonomy through universities’ commitments to arts and humanities research.

For arts and humanities researchers, the exercise challenged their (self-)perception of their importance to Irish academic life, as well as to Irish society and the economy. Emphasis on economic determinism underplayed the contribution of the arts and humanities to our understanding of the human experience, literature, and culture which have been the soul of Ireland's cultural legacy and its tourism strategy. The period of reflection led to the formation of the [Irish Humanities Alliance](#), as well as spurring a deeper conversation about "engaged scholarship" and the need for arts and humanities researchers to reach beyond the campus.

Thus, when the new strategy came to be written in 2016, it was quite a different document. Admittedly, there had been lots of battles behind the scenes, but the public version paid homage to Ireland's broad and rich research tradition.

Ireland presents an interesting, and startling case. Those [promoting the instrumental view](#) will point to statistics which show that targeted funding has pushed Ireland to the top of the rankings in different areas such as nanotechnology, immunology, and materials science. Others, however, will note that Ireland turned to the arts and humanities to help pull itself out of its deepest recession, by [promoting its cultural attributes at home and abroad](#).

What's clear is that prioritisation without full evaluation can undermine wider national and societal objectives, capacities, and capabilities, as well as institutional and academic morale. Maybe the lesson has been learned: the value of research comes through in myriad ways, not simply through new products. Because of this, there needs to be space and flexibility within any plan or strategy that leaves room for felicitous and surprising developments that come from fundamental research, across all disciplines, and certainly including the arts and humanities.

*This blog post is based on the authors' article, "[Arts and humanities research, redefining public benefit, and research prioritization in Ireland](#)", published in *Research Evaluation* (DOI: 10.1093/reseval/rvx012).*

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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