

Microbiology Society response to the Irish Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science consultation on the Higher Education Research-Policy Engagement Framework

The Microbiology Society is a membership charity for scientists interested in microbes, their effects and their practical uses. It has a worldwide membership based in universities, industry, hospitals, research institutes, schools, and other organisations. Microbiology is the study of all living organisms that are too small to be visible with the naked eye. The Microbiology Society has over 430 members based on the island of Ireland, of which 270 are located in the Republic of Ireland. This membership is across all career levels and includes academic faculty, post-doctoral researchers and postgraduate students.

Our principal goal is to develop, expand and strengthen the networks available to our members so that the science of microbiology provides maximum benefit to society. We note that our submission reflects the views expressed by eight members of the Microbiology Society based in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Republic of Ireland. We present evidence provided by respondents and provide recommendations where appropriate.

1. Assessing what already is in place – exemplars of existing structures, networks and activities

1.1 The Department is interested in collecting experience of researcher engagement with policy practitioners at central or local government level. If you, or your organisation, have experience of formal or informal interactions which have been successful in delivering change then please provide a summary of the interactions.

The Microbiology Society has a strong base of engaged members in Ireland that are willing to contribute to Society policy activities. We welcome this consultation as a starting point for strengthening knowledge exchange between researchers and policy makers.

However, our members expressed that there are minimal opportunities to formally or informally engage with national policy activities in Ireland. While interactions between HEIs, research bodies and Government departments are apparent, there is no clear system in place for researchers to engage on an individual basis. Our members are aware of instances where Government departments have engaged with individual researchers, although these interactions occurred on an ad hoc basis. Microbiologists are enthusiastic and willing to engage, but the routes through which to do this are scarce and/or not communicated effectively.

Our members noted that when engagement does take place, it tends to be a top-down approach and driven by government, meaning there are limited opportunities for researchers to proactively engage or raise issues with policy makers. One member highlighted that while

there are opportunities available for researchers to feed into policy consultations, there is rarely any follow-up once evidence has been submitted. This mystifies the decision making process, and discourages further engagement.

1.2 What are the learnings from your experience for others?

It is worth noting that our members reported that most, if not all, of their policy engagement activities have been facilitated by the Microbiology Society. We are pleased to support our members by providing opportunities to engage with policymaking and will continue to act as a conduit for knowledge exchange. However, we strongly believe that more formalised engagement structures, which allow direct engagement between researchers and policy practitioners, are needed.

2. Navigating the boundaries – current and potential activities

2.1 If you have not engaged with policy practitioners/policy makers in the past – what are the key factors that prevented you from engaging with research for policy activity?

Our members unanimously agreed that the primary factor preventing them from engaging with policy makers is a lack of visible routes to engagement. It is unclear whether this is due to a lack of opportunities, or ineffective communication of opportunities. For example, our members were not aware of the opportunities listed in the consultation document, which suggests they are not communicated widely.

2.2 Please describe your experience of dedicated expertise to bridge the research/policy interface, including the role of broker organisations, intermediaries and Research Offices.

The Microbiology Society has over 270 active members based in Ireland, and representation of these members is embedded into our Governance structure; we have an ‘Irish Division’ dedicated to promoting all aspects of microbiology in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

We represent our members by acting as a conduit between the microbiology community and policy makers in Ireland. For instance, as the Government developed the successor to Innovation 2020, the Microbiology Society produced a position statement titled ‘Science for Ireland: Propelling Research and Innovation Success’, based on views gathered from our members in Ireland through a series of surveys, workshops and one-to-one interviews. This position statement included specific recommendations, calling for a long-term vision for science, society and the economy.

In 2022, and as a follow-up to this position statement, we wrote an open letter to the recently established Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to re-iterate our findings and call for an ambitious new research and innovation strategy.

These projects involved detailed analysis of the Irish research system, and we collated evidence and opinion from our members to produce a cohesive statement that was representative of the microbiology community in Ireland. However, once these documents were sent to the Irish Government there was very little feedback and it is impossible to know whether our recommendations were acknowledged or considered.

2.3 How might this experience be improved?

These projects were driven by our members based in Ireland, all of whom have direct experience of operating within the higher education research and innovation ecosystem. Opening up a dialogue between policy makers and researchers/HEIs/research bodies will encourage further engagement.

Researchers across the full spectrum of microbiology can provide insight and expertise on policy issues relating to their research and have new ideas that should be valued. While we are well placed to represent our members and amplify their voices, we strongly believe that there need to be more opportunities for researchers to engage directly with policymaking, whether that be through providing evidence and expert opinion on issues pertaining to their research area, or feeding into the policymaking process to enrich the research and innovation ecosystem. Expanding the number of routes to engagement and making them more visible, for instance through social media, events and mailing lists, would drive broader engagement among researchers.

3. Building capacity in the system – supporting development of individuals and teams

3.1 What supports are available to you/within your organisation to build engagement with policy practitioners/policy makers or to interact with non-technical audiences?

Our members reported a lack of specific support to encourage engagement with policy makers and practitioners within their organisations. While there is often institutional support to promote their research and to apply for more funding, our members expressed that support for translating research to policy is limited and there are no clear routes to participation.

While HEIs and other research bodies have an important role to play in supporting researchers to engage with policy, it is important to also provide opportunities for researchers to contribute to policymaking directly as individuals. This will allow for broader and more inclusive engagement.

3.2 In your/your organisations experience please comment on the appropriate design and timing of capacity development across the research or policy practitioner communities.

N/A

4. National level enablers

4.1 What are the barriers to engagement with policy development in local and central government?

The most immediate barrier to engagement with policy development is the lack of opportunities to engage and/or the communication and promotion of these opportunities. There is also a lack of transparency around how decisions are made, which mystifies the policymaking process. This makes it difficult for researchers to understand how their contribution influences decision making.

The current interactions occurring between government and the research system is not capturing the full breadth of research that occurs in Ireland. Microbiology research spans many different disciplines, and can contribute to a broad, diverse range of policies, for instance on healthcare, infection prevention and control, and climate change. There is, however, no system in place to feed information and expertise from research through to policy.

4.2 What enablers might support/facilitate greater engagement?

To facilitate greater engagement, we urge the Government to create a framework that opens up a dialogue between policy makers and individual researchers, which would ensure that the full breadth of available expertise is harnessed and applied to policy more effectively. This could be achieved through increasing formal and informal opportunities for researchers to feed into policymaking.

In the UK, there are a number of successful routes for researchers to engage with policy, including scientific advisory groups, government fellowships and internships, and Parliamentary Select Committee consultations. While the UK policy engagement framework is by no means perfect, it can provide some examples of tried and tested mechanisms to drive policy engagement and facilitate knowledge exchange in Ireland. These include:

- The Open Innovation Team (funded both by Government and Universities), that sits within the UK Cabinet Office and works across Government to support and strengthen collaborations with academics.
- The Universities Policy Engagement Network, a group of universities with research-policy brokering expertise, who provide a dedicated contact for policy makers to seek expertise and advice.
- Areas of Research Interest (ARIs), released to outline topical research questions to align scientific and research evidence with policy development. These help researchers and research organisations keep abreast of government priorities, and are updated to reflect changes in focus.