

Chairperson: Prof. David Riley

Please reply to:

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Mr John Halligan, TD
Minister of State
Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation
23 Kildare Street
Dublin 2

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Re: Funding for Basic Research

Dear Minister

The Institute of Physics in Ireland has previously been in contact with you in relation to the funding of basic research. We very much welcome the Laureate Awards programme which was introduced earlier this year by the Irish Research Council (IRC). The intention of this programme was to make a minimum of 24 awards valued between €400k and €600k in its first round of awards and was targeted at early and mid-career level researchers in any discipline across both the sciences and humanities. This is an important first step in addressing the critical situation for the funding of basic research since the withdrawal of the Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) Frontiers programme in 2012.

As the government is finalising its budget for the coming year we are anxious to ensure that any continuation of the Laureates programme or other proposed programme for basic research has a sufficient budget to be effective. While the Laureates programme is very welcome it excludes mid to late career scientists (anybody over 40) and also, as the awards are relatively large, its impact is somewhat limited.

We would suggest that funding for basic research should be of the order of €20 million annually and that this budget should be pegged at a level of around 12% of the current SFI annual research budget.

As we have noted in previous meetings and correspondence with you, physics is an essential field of knowledge, underpinning progress across all other sciences and engineering and contributing significantly to the economy. However, there is a crisis in the funding of physics research in Ireland : researchers nationwide in fields including, but not limited to, astrophysics and particle physics cannot access funding for their research – even the basic funding necessary to present results at international conferences (travel, subsistence and conference fees). Without additional support physics research in Ireland, and ultimately the research and growth that it underpins, faces a precarious future.

A small amount of funding would make a very large difference to physics researchers in Ireland.

The Institute of Physics in Ireland (IOPi) would like to suggest two proposals to address this situation:

- The first is a fund for grants of the order of €20,000-€200,000 to be awarded solely on the basis of academic excellence in any area, totalling around €10M annually. This should be separate from the Laureates programme and open to all researchers regardless of career stage. This would allow researchers to explore completely new areas at a relatively low cost while holding out the strong possibility of significant returns in terms of research output, new linkages with other international groups and in paving the way to larger grants from bodies such as the European Research Council. Such grants are the norm in other countries and are considered the lifeblood of basic research.
- The second is for a small travel fund of the order of €0.5M annually. One easily implementable solution to the current problem of many STEM PhD supervisors having no travel funds would be to double the annual €2500 that IRC funded PhD students currently receive and allow supervisors to use up to half it. This is based on €5000 per physics researcher per annum for around 100 recipients. This would require no additional administration.

These two funds together would be of enormous benefit to Irish physics, supporting the basic research that is essential for the future of Ireland and allowing Irish researchers to leverage external sources of research funding.

If you require any further information or clarification, please do not hesitate to contact the IOP at the above address.

Yours sincerely



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Chair IOP Ireland

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