



Government Policymakers & Higher Education Researchers  
Building Bridges for Evidence Informed Public Policy: Youth Wellbeing

# An Evidence for Public Policy Brokerage Event Report

**When:** 1 March 2023 (10am-1pm)

**Where:** Tangent, Trinity College Dublin



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,  
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige  
Department of Children, Equality,  
Disability, Integration and Youth

**HEA** | HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
AUTHORITY

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## Background

On the 1 March 2023, 46 policy makers and 36 higher education researchers and professional staff from the higher education sector came together in Tangent Business School, Trinity College Dublin, in an effort to build bridges and better align emerging research, and existing research evidence for youth wellbeing policy, with Government policy priorities.

This event was organised by Campus Engage, Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), and funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

The evidence for public policy brokerage sessions for the event were chaired by Ms Mary Doyle, Visiting Fellow, Public Policy, Trinity College Dublin; Dr Fergal Lynch, Senior Lead, Government and Public Policy Engagement, University of Galway; and Seán Ó Foghlú, Senior Fellow in Public Policy, Maynooth University. In addition to their chairing duties, Mary, Fergal and Seán very generously provided thoughtful and considerate contribution in the preparation of this event.

## What were our objectives?

In 2022, major national policy developments to better mobilise higher education research for public policy development were introduced. These are now embedded in Ireland's new Research & Innovation Strategy, *Impact 2030*, and Science Foundation Ireland's *Creating Our Future*, Expert Committee Report, Key Recommendations, 2022. The establishment of a new Evidence for Policy Unit within the Department of Further, Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (D/FHERIS) is a clear indication of intent to better link public research outputs with public policy formation and implementation. In addition, the recently published *General Scheme of Research & Innovation Bill, 2023*, articulates that a new research & innovation agency for Ireland will 'support institutions in providing research evidence to support policy making and implementation and support or undertake the collation and dissemination of research evidence, insights and synthesis for such purposes'.

The overall objective of the event was to kick-start an engagement process between policy makers and researchers on the important topic of youth wellbeing. The event was a new initiative for both organisations and had the overall objective of informing youth wellbeing policy with the best available research evidence. In addition, both DCEDIY and the IUA were keen to understand how a proposed "research for policy brokerage" method and format would work in practice, and understand, through an evaluation process with attendees, whether it could have potential application for other policy challenges that would benefit from higher education research insights.

Working together, the DCEDIY and the IUA set out to encourage closer relationships between higher education researchers and policymakers from across the field of youth wellbeing. Our aim was to build trust, and an understanding of existing and future policy needs.



In the background paper for the event we set out what we felt were the benefits of the event to both policy makers and higher education researchers. For policy makers we proposed the event would give them the opportunity to:

- access to high quality, and scientifically robust knowledge relevant to delivering on youth policy responsibilities;
- build their network of highly experienced and expert researchers from across Irish higher education, to inform their work;
- focus on the subject of Youth Affairs in a holistic way and learn about what other colleagues in DCEDIY, National Disability Authority (NDA) and Tusla are working on and where possible synergies may exist.

For researchers, we proposed the event would give them the opportunity to:

- build their network of policy officials;
- inform policy officials of their latest research findings;
- support policy officials to draft and implement impactful policy; to better inform the future direction of their own research based on dialogue and new understanding of gaps in evidence for public policy challenges, foresight needs etc.

## The participants

In total, 90 people registered and 82 people attended on the day, including speakers.

**This was an overall attendance rate of 91%.**

While initially we considered the event as relevant to DCEDIY, Tusla and the National Disability Authority, as the preparations developed, we saw merit in extending the invitations to policy makers from departments other than DCEDIY, which also had a key interest in youth wellbeing.

In attendance, were 42 representatives from: DCEDIY; Department of Justice; D/FHERIS; Department of Education; Department of Health; Department of Public Expenditure and Reform; Department of an Taoiseach; Department of

Social Protection; Tusla; National Disability Authority; Health Research Board; Health Service Executive; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; National Educational Psychology Services; and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

From the higher education sector, there were 40 participants, including 31 researcher experts in youth wellbeing from across University of Limerick, Maynooth University, University College Dublin, University College Cork, University of Galway, Technological University of Dublin, Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, Southeast Technological University, IUA, Royal Irish Academy and HEA.

## The plenary session



After an opportunity to network over morning coffees, the event began with an introductory address by **Laura McGarrigle** (Assistant Secretary General, DCEDIY). Laura set out the aims of the event and

emphasised that DCEDIY was keen to learn from the event, not least about higher education research outputs in the area of youth wellbeing, but also in relation to how knowledge brokerage more generally can enhance engagement between higher education researchers and policy makers to accelerate change. Laura outlined Government's development of a research infrastructure on children and young people over the last twenty years.



**Professor Norelee Kennedy**, Vice President Research & Innovation, University of Limerick welcomed guests and emphasised the Irish universities' ambition to work with government to address critical societal

challenges, and to advance research evidence for public policy partnerships for societal impact. Professor Kennedy emphasised the need to build capacity, and create connected infrastructures

across universities and government departments; to build an engaged research and innovation ecosystem, and bridges between society and public policy making for future-proof solutions. This will demonstrate the role of research and innovation in our everyday lives and democracy.



**Orla Corrigan**, Principal Officer in youth affairs unit in DCEDIY presented on the key challenges for youth policy in Ireland today. Orla outlined the sources of youth policy, be it in the specific youth policy strategies and/or

in the many strategies, which are not specifically youth related but include measures that address young people. Orla also spoke on the challenge of data gaps in relation to youth wellbeing and the consequential challenge of evaluating the outcomes and outputs of Government's youth policies. The presentation also touched on the challenge of deciding what age range captures a "young person" with several EU and international sources citing different age ranges. Orla asked a number of research questions to the higher education sector, including whether there is a consensus about the best approach to youth policy and asked what are the current debates in academia regarding youth policy.



**Trudy Duffy**, Principal Officer in the evidence for policy unit in D/FHERIS presented on the government and D/FHERIS aims to support evidence informed decision making across the civil and public service.

In particular, she focused on the Government's national research strategy published in 2022 "Impact 2030" and its plans to support policy and research engagement. She informed attendees on the ambitious plans in the strategy to place research and innovation at the heart of addressing social, economic and environmental challenges. Impact 2030 includes actions to support increased collaboration between policy practitioners and the higher research education sector and enhancing science advisory structures. Trudy also explained how Impact 2030 would put structures in place to enhance engagement between policy practitioners and the higher education research sector.

## The Brokerage Session and Method

The objective of the three brokerage sessions was to build awareness of current research evidence on youth wellbeing, and to inform and encourage future partnerships between researchers and policy makers on policy foresight, and new and emerging research agendas. The brokerage sessions were chaired by Mary Doyle, Dr Fergal Lynch and Seán Ó Foghlú, each of whom has very senior experience in both the civil service and in the higher education research sector.

Each of the 50 minute research evidence for policy brokerage sessions included a short input from a policy 'challenger', and responses from higher education researchers, who highlighted latest research empirical evidence, trends, policy options in relation to the specific challenge. These inputs were intended to stimulate debate and dialogue amongst all attendees in each brokerage session.

The three themes were selected by the Research and Evaluation Unit (REU) in DCEDIY in advance of the event, following a series of engagements with policy colleagues working on a wide range of issues relevant to the lives of young people. REU asked their colleagues to identify key policy challenges, but also to reflect on the issues, which they believe could benefit from further research and analysis. REU would also like to





thank colleagues in the National Disability Authority and Tusla for their contribution to this process.

While a broad range of topics and issues were named, three thematic areas were identified as the focus for this brokerage event, each containing a small number of specific policy challenges.

In response, expert researchers from across the Irish higher education system, were identified by professional staff within universities. Identification was based on a set of core criteria including recent, relevant published articles, and funding awarded on the specific thematic areas identified by department policy officials.



### **Theme 1: “Looking Forward” – how can we support youth well-being in early adulthood.**

Chair: Dr Fergal Lynch, Senior Lead, Government and Public Policy Engagement, University of Galway.

Policy challenger: Nessa McKeivitt, Research and Evaluation Unit, DCEDIY & Jane Ann Duffy, Equality Unit, DCEDIY.

#### **Research presentations:**

- Educational disadvantage: transitions from school to employment, further, and higher education - Dr Joanne Banks, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.
- Mentoring for young people in care – Prof Pat Dolan, UNESCO Professor Children and Youth, University of Galway.
- Helping parents support youth mental health – Prof Eilis Hennessey, School of Psychology, UCD.

In a discussion about youth wellbeing, the group emphasised the need for a joined-up and integrated policy approach for young people that is cross-government and integrated. At the same time, some participants noted that targeted initiatives are required to ensure maximum impact for particular cohorts of young people that need additional care. There was discussion as to whether a dynamic ‘living’ Youth Policy Strategy might be a good idea, which would be updated on a regular basis and would not cover a specific term. Contributors also highlighted the importance of prevention and early intervention in the progression of problems of young people.

The value of Growing up in Ireland (GUI) data was highlighted, as was its potential for further development. Likewise, it was proposed that more comprehensive data sets on children and their families, such as those available in Norway, could be considered. The group also discussed the importance of youth-initiated mentoring, and youth-created voice, as well as the need for accessible information, programme support for parents of young people with vulnerabilities and particular needs.

There was a call for targeted support for young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and disabled young people, in terms of career guidance and access to information about their options for their future in school, further education and in universities. The group also noted the variability in the quality and frequency of guidance counselling, with an overly heavy emphasis on CAO for those who may not necessarily be suited to higher education. This group also saw a value in ensuring the input of practitioners (e.g. teachers, social workers, youth workers) that work “at the coalface” with young people, who see whether policy is working or not, and should be a key source for informing and monitoring policy implementation. Participants were conscious of parental concerns about ‘labelling’, and to work on reducing stigma and normalising the types of wellbeing support being offered. These are particularly effective when co-designed with parents.

## **Theme 2: Young people, LGBTI+ and wellbeing**

**Chair:** Mary Doyle, Visiting Fellow, Public Policy, Trinity College Dublin, member of the Royal Irish Academy.

**Policy challenger:** Louise Ward, LGBTI+ Unit, DCEDIY



### **Research presentations:**

- Findings from My World Survey - Professor Barbara Dooley, Acting Registrar & Deputy President, UCD.
- Young people's experience of sexuality - Dr Debbie Ging, Associate Professor of Digital Media and Gender, School of Communications, Dublin City University.
- LGBTI+ inclusivity in education - Dr Aoife Neary, Senior Lecturer in Sociology of Education, School of Education, Assistant Dean Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, Faculty of Education and Health Sciences, University of Limerick.

The group highlighted the need for sustained research and evidence to advance policy in this area, which is still at a relatively early stage of development in Ireland. The group identified key themes including the generally poorer outcomes for LGBTI+ youth in areas such as health and mental health, and the need for better access to information for young people, teachers and parents. The group discussed the importance of young people "seeing themselves", and including LGBTI+ issues at school, at primary and secondary level, and that policy and curriculum development is required at all stages of the education system. In addition, the group discussed the need for teacher

education and flexible approaches to deploying school resources in support of young people. An important focus on policy and research is the support of teachers and school leaders who have particular needs in this area. They need time and space to feel comfortable addressing issues, based on a whole school approach, and supported by Government policy. One suggestion from the group was that a consortium of researchers at national level could be put in place to bring together the existing data and evidence and learning from research in this space and make it accessible to the public policy debate. The need for a multidisciplinary, and multi-organisational approach to identifying key issues and finding solutions based on effective interventions was also discussed.

The need and opportunities of access to longitudinal data to underpin research in this area was also identified as an important issue. Finally, the group also highlighted that in addition to identifying issues and problems that young LGBTI+ people face, it is equally important to identify and amplify the positive messages, and to research the positive outcomes and effective interventions in other jurisdictions.



## **Theme 3: Civic engagement and future of democratic engagement**

**Chair:** Seán Ó Foghlú, Senior Fellow in Public Policy, Maynooth University

**Policy challenger:** Bairbre Meaney, Participation Unit, DCEDIY

### **Research presentations:**

- Fit for purpose – How can the Irish political system adapt to meet the needs of young people?

**Dr Shana Cohen, University of Cambridge**

- Civic and political engagement among marginalised urban youth in three cities.

**Dr Bernadine Brady, University of Galway**

- Enabling child and youth participation in policy making.

**Prof Laura Lundy, UCC**

This group reflected that this policy area is very broad and involves shared responsibility across relevant Departments and agencies. Researchers in the group expressed a desire to impact policy in this area and identified several areas for future deeper engagements with policy makers, such as encouraging dissenting voices among young people and encouraging the promotion of empathy in a community and societal context. The presentations highlighted low youth participation in formal democratic structures in Ireland, and possible initiatives to address this, including - participatory budgeting, involvement in local politics, and improving communication on policymaking and civic education in schools and universities. The Lundy Model for effective youth engagement was also discussed. The importance of teacher training, fostering the ability to listen to all opinions, and the need for broader skills such as literacy and deliberation were also emphasised. Trust and respect between researchers, policymakers, and young people were identified as key factors in successful engagement.

The nature of civic engagement was also discussed – the initial discussion seemed to primarily link to the political system as it formally exists, but dialogue broadened this extensively to engagement within society of which political engagement is a subset. The importance of having access to data on extent of youth democratic engagement over time, was also noted. There was huge support from researchers for the developments undertaken by the State to date in relation to creating infrastructures to engage young people in matters that affect them in Ireland, and the interest of other countries in what Ireland is doing right was also noted. There is a lot to build on, but a lot more to be done, and to reflect on how to encourage and support the engagement of young, marginalised people. This can include initiatives in schools, higher education, volunteering and in youthwork. Greater investment and development in these areas is needed.



## Evaluation, how did attendees find the session?

After the event, IUA and DCEDIY sent a survey to both researchers and policy makers to seek out feedback on how we could improve research evidence for policy knowledge brokerage delivery. The feedback from the survey was very positive and helpful, with 36 responses in total.

### *Feedback from policy officials*

The feedback from policy officials indicated that the brokerage methodology was successful, and that there was great energy and enthusiasm in the room. But did the event meet its objective to provide access to high quality and scientifically robust knowledge relevant to delivering on youth policy responsibilities? 19 out of 20 policy respondents said it did provide a useful opportunity to build their network of experienced researchers. The same number said they found the event useful for informing their work on youth wellbeing policy.

**A great opportunity to hear from a wide range of researchers**

Highlighted differences in how 'participation' and 'engagement' were understood and the confusion that exists about what DCEDIY are trying to achieve. Also clarified the need to delineate responsibilities the DCEDIY can take on and those that are cross government or at a societal level.

**Excellent opportunity to learn about new and emerging research.**

**One insight was that the mechanisms to improve youth outcomes will not necessarily involve direct work with young people - it may be a parenting support programme or an early intervention programme with primary school-aged children. However, policy makers in those areas don't see themselves as having a role in youth policy.**





We also got some very helpful suggestions on key enablers to support better engagement between the higher education research sector and public policy makers.

*More events like the brokerage event with more time for networking at them. Constructing a series of workshops spaced out over months so that clusters can regroup and re-energise; sustain particular collaboration over time.*

*More frequent two-way relationships, through brokerage events such as this at times a reliance on contractual relationships (commissioned research), while very important, can stymie mutual learning.*

In the evaluation survey, we specifically asked attendees how we could improve the format of the event. The following is useful information, as we aim to disseminate how this format can be altered to enhance its effectiveness and impact for others. Again, 19 out of 20 people felt the format worked and that overall the event was a great success. They also provided some useful suggestions on how we could make it better.

The following are comments on how to improve the coordination, brokerage method, for further research for policy brokerage events from policy makers.

- More time allocated to engagement with audience needed in opening section.
- Better time management on opening session, presentation, inputs.
- Greater attention could have been paid to the gaps in infrastructures across systems, including knowledge management, synthesis, and brokerage at a systems level.

- In general, more time needed for the breakout brokerage sessions.
- While attendees were asked to select their preferred breakout room, additional attention needed to make sure the right mix of expertise is in the room - to answer potential specific policy related questions.
- Researcher's 5-minute presentations could have been further refined to provide more specifics on evidence informed policy options, recommendations based on their empirical evidence.
- The informal part of the event was very welcome, but for people who did not know other attendees it would have been good to have some structure so that people introduced to others.

*Follow-up session to promote practical solutions/tools to 'build bridges.'*

*I would be interested in brokerage sessions that look at how we focus a methodologies to access seldom hear and hard to reach voices and to look at how we track the quantity and quality of engagement with the public in this policy space. It's not just enough to say we consult/engage if the type of consultation and engagement masks a very limited or strategic approach to engagement*

**Plenary session; felt that there should have been research/academic voices at this session as it was very civil service focused. Could alternatively include some of the 5 minute academic overviews at this stage**

*More time for engagement and non-formal networking*

### Feedback from researchers

In addition, feedback from research community also indicated that the event was a success.

# 100%

of survey respondents replied that the brokerage session did provide a useful opportunity to enhance their network of relevant policy officials.

**The strong moderation and presentation on opportunities allowed for meaningful conversations - thanks**

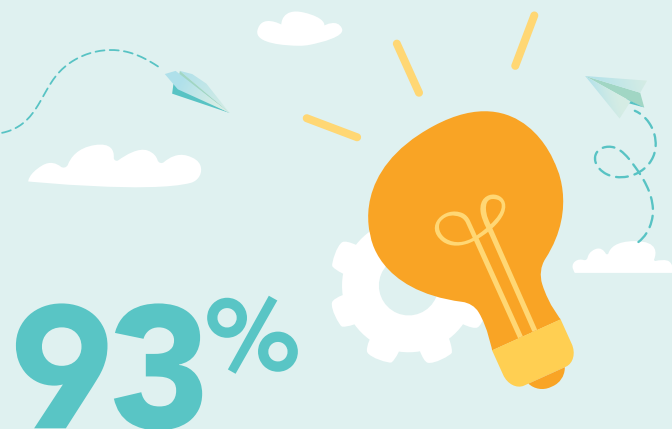
*I was able to speak about my research and other people could hear that and link in*

# 73%

of respondents felt that they gained insights to inform the future direction of their research. While others felt the session was too short to build insights, but new connections meant potential for this.

*Yes in terms of learning about currently priority policy areas and including the focus on measuring outcomes, engagement and participation. The Civil Service Research Network is also an interesting development.*

**Overall, it was too short to really build insights, but connections meant that there's a potential for this to happen**



# 93%

of respondents felt that the brokerage event format worked, with the recommendation for more time provided for dialogue in the breakout sessions.

*Yes I thought it worked well but more time in break-out sessions would have been beneficial. Also maybe more time to engage with people who were in other sessions? A kind of world café perhaps?*

*The breakout sessions were good, but needed more time, and I think to hear more from policy officials at the beginning of these would have been useful. It all felt a bit rushed in general, but I know that's difficult to ask for more of people's time.*

The following is a list of responses from our request of the researchers in attendance to provide feedback on how we can improve the coordination, brokerage method, for further research for policy brokerage events:

- Coordinate the brokerage sessions so there is greater diversity of expertise in the room, so for example, attendees can hear multiple disciplinary perspectives on policy challenges, including practitioners.
- Provide a coffee break after the morning plenary.
- Provide more time for the feedback from the Chairs, again this comes down to asking attendees to take a full day, or half a day to participate.
- Give more time to the brokerage session.
- Make the breakout group smaller, 3-5 people for more focused discussion.
- Please provide more of these events and keep the dialogue going.
- Give more time to Q&A, and just keep doing these events, both researchers and policy officials will become more familiar with the format and purpose, and better target messages, plans, and next steps.
- Circulate the biographies of all attendees in advance.

- Invite more senior policy officials from more departments and perhaps introduce these individuals to the group in the breakout sessions.

## Reflections of the Chairs

**Mary Doyle**, Visiting Fellow, Public Policy, Trinity College Dublin, member of the Royal Irish Academy.

**Seán Ó Foghlú**, Senior Fellow in Public Policy, Maynooth University.

**Fergal Lynch**, Senior Lead, Government and Public Policy Engagement, University of Galway.

The brokerage event proved to be a rewarding and valuable experience. It brought a welcome opportunity for reflection and exchange of views between researchers and policy officials in a substantial area of public policy. It demonstrated that a short, well-prepared, carefully planned engagement can get to the heart of challenging policy issues, and bring together key actors who would not typically have the opportunity to exchange views in this way. The effectiveness of the event was greatly assisted by the detailed planning that went into organising it. This involved thinking on what themes to address and then drafting a short background paper to set up these themes for discussion. Furthermore, a lot of planning



also went into sourcing academics and policy-makers to take part, in particular the academics to set up the discussions in the three sessions.

The event allowed a Government Department to present its priorities and key research questions in a collaborative setting, and for research experts in the area to highlight their work in response. The smaller group discussions were particularly valuable, enabling discussion of work underway and identification of areas where gaps exist.



As is so often the case, the informal discussions before and after the event were especially useful in building connections and presenting opportunities for further engagement on specific topics. These were rightly built as an integral part of the event.

Inevitably, there are things that could be done differently in future such events, including the balance of time between initial inputs and group-based discussions, so as to maximise the opportunity for debate and discussion. This reflects much of the feedback from other participants. Future events could, for example, have a shorter context setting session at the opening, and allow time for (perhaps-) a larger number of smaller groups with longer time to consider the research/ policy matters being discussed.

It is always difficult to achieve optimum participation of researchers and policy officials, while keeping the event at a manageable size. A clear lesson is that given the extent of policy issues that are shared across Government Departments and agencies, it is important to reflect this in the spread of invitations. Similarly, thought needs to be given on how to support researchers within and across the academic community in Ireland to come together to discuss and develop topics of common interest.

In terms of discussion at the three groups, common themes emerging were the welcome interaction between participants, the valuable exchange of information and ideas, and how even a short discussion can help identify interesting perspectives and avenues for further research. The three sessions were very useful in synthesising many valuable messages and in highlighting gaps in information or research. They also put a welcome focus on the existing and potential sources of data and information available to guide both policy and research.

An important consideration for the future will be to distinguish clearly between 'findings' and 'recommendations' in research. The most productive engagements tended to be on research findings, which could help identify trends and overall directions, rather than on recommendations which might be more prescriptive at too early a point in the discussion.

Overall, there is a strong case for maintaining the momentum created by this first brokerage event, and to involve more researchers and policy officials in them. Events of this kind offer a unique approach to policy debate and collaboration and have the potential to become a valuable mechanism for the future, if they can become established as a recognised means of policy discussion.







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