

Reframing, Reacting, or Responding? The Climate Emergency and Higher Education in Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

In a debate on 9 May 2019, the Dáil (the primary house of the Irish parliament) passed a motion declaring a climate and biodiversity emergency, making Ireland the second country in the world to do so (Oireachtas Éireann, 2019a).¹ This declaration followed the discussion of a landmark

¹In the United Kingdom, the Scottish Parliament declared a climate emergency on 28 April, and the Welsh Senedd the following day 29 April. The devolved jurisdictions of Gibraltar and Jersey made declarations on 2 May and 3 May, respectively. Though a number of bills have been introduced in the United Kingdom Parliament, as of the time of writing, none have passed.

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cross-party *Report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action Climate Change: A Cross-Party Consensus for Action*. In this debate, the responsible member of the government cabinet, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Richard Bruton, commented that it:

is not the sort of emergency where some individual or Minister is given emergency powers which set aside normal parliamentary procedures or accountability to do something for a short time. This is an emergency where we have to orchestrate our whole community to adopt a different way of dealing with issues. (Oireachtas Éireann, 2019a)

Universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland have been identified in various policies as an important part of addressing this emergency, as they must contribute to the communities in which they are rooted. From a government perspective, the importance of higher education to the economy has recently seen the establishment of a new tertiary education ministry in 2020: the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Skills (DFHERIS). This would seem to imply that there is scope for a coordinated approach to the climate emergency across higher education policy and within HEIs in receipt of public funding. For all these indications that the Irish government was beginning to take the climate emergency seriously, Ireland nevertheless remains a “climate laggard” (Torney, 2020).

This chapter addresses the connections across the various policy realms (national, sectoral, and institutional), and what these amount to in practice. The first aspect can be outlining by describing the nature of the policy reaction taken by the Irish state at the national level, the audiences this was addressed to, how this connects with government policy for higher education, and then what is happening within HEIs themselves. While HEIs in Ireland have varying degrees of autonomy, they are not under strict *dirigiste* government control; accordingly, considerable variety across and within universities might be expected. This initial issue of the connections across policy remains descriptive, but is necessary groundwork for the next, more critical interrogation. The second important question which this chapter seeks to answer is to what extent this relatively recent flurry of policy making is a reframing of existing concerns within higher education, or does it amount to a response which rises to the level of seriousness of an ‘emergency’?

In order to address these questions, a range of types of policy—understood broadly, with as much focus on “policy making” as “policy made”

(Gibson & Bengtson, 2024, p. 8)—are engaged with, in order to describe the approach being taken by the Irish government and Irish higher education. Of course, the scientific activities of individual researchers and research groups are at the heart of how HEIs can respond scientifically to the climate emergency, not to mention the educational activities of those in higher education. Both education and research are the bread and butter of higher education. This chapter, however, considers HEIs themselves as political actors, involved in the crafting of institutional policies related to the climate emergency. The time-period considered in this paper is primarily from 2013 to 2023, in order to establish a snapshot of contemporary Irish higher education and climate change, and to allow consideration of some future directions that may be taken.

Supporting existing research on Ireland's status as a 'climate laggard', this chapter's consciously critical approach to climate policy in higher education allows us to show how generative as well as necessary a critical stance can be. As such, it is worth being aware of the distinction the title for this chapter proposes, namely between policies that reframe existing concerns in the light of climate change, more grudging policy reactions, and finally more proactive policy responses to the climate emergency. This allows for an evaluation of what interventions in policy space set out to do and the degree of ambition they evince. Such a distinction allows us, in this chapter, to show the nature of the reframing of and reaction to climate change made by the Irish state as explaining why Ireland remains a climate laggard (Torney, 2020). It also allows us to point towards the strong calls for a proactive response from Irish society as a counterweight, and finally it explains the mixture of reframing, reacting, and responding we identify on the part of HEIs and those working in higher education.

METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMING: POLICY ONTOLOGY

The standard, traditional approach to policy is to examine and evaluate a document, considering costs and benefits, assuming that its writing involves (mostly) rational actors whose motivations are transparent to the researcher (Diem et al., 2019). This is effectively the practitioner perspective, "a dominant account of policy which is still regarded as 'common sense' by many policy professionals" (Shore & Wright, 2011, p. 4). It frequently inheres a largely one-dimensional view of power, where conflicts are explicit, and we can study concrete observable behaviour (Lukes,

2005, pp. 16–17). Here the operating assumption is not just that those involved have the political power and will to implement policies, but also that they might improve these policies in response to researchers' findings. Such approaches have variously been termed "technical empirical" (Codd, 1988), "authoritative instrumentalist" (Shore & Wright, 2011), "traditional positivist" (Diem et al., 2019). The questions posed in this chapter, however, accept that there is often a gap between what is set out in policy, and what is occurring in reality. It's just as important to consider what is not put on the agenda, where potential issues are sidelined, and conflict is thereby made latent (Lukes, 2005, pp. 26–27).

The notion of Ireland being a 'laggard' testifies to this fact that while policy appears to make the intended actions of various state elements "legible" (Scott, 1998, p. 80), these may in fact be no more than a kind of state simplification. They may translate issues from the public sphere into acceptable form, reframing them, giving the appearance of action. For this reason, traditional policy research approaches are not appropriate to the nature and scale of the issue of climate change. Recognising at the outset the distance between what is said and what is done is in line with a variety of approaches to policy that can broadly be put under the heading of 'critical policy studies'. Examples of such modes of researching policy abound. One is Carol Bacchi's (2012) 'what's the problem represented to be' (WPR) approach, which recognises that "what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic". Another is Taina Saarinen's work on higher education policy, influenced by critical discourse analysis, where policy actors' "presuppositions seem to 'persuade that', or represent as existing, rather than 'persuade to', or convince the readers that it would be necessary to act" (Saarinen, 2008, p. 723). Gibson and Bengtsen push such analyses of policy to argue that every policy has what they term a 'policy ontology', wherein its "basic ontology or picture of the world is accepted as a given to which we must adapt ourselves" (2024, p. 8). Building off the insights of Bacchi, Gibson and Bengtsen suggest there is a narrowing whereby "the policy ontology of the problem sets out a policy reality system whereby whatever policy captures *is* reality" (2024, p. 15). A final point about critical policy approaches however, is that they are not merely relentlessly suspicious, dismissing documents as "mere rhetoric" which [have] very little to do with real life policy actions" (Saarinen, 2008, p. 719). There is in this the focus for converting what are identified as issues into "matters of concern" (Latour, 2004).

This also relates to the question of justifying such a critical policy approach, however. It may seem tactless, especially in the context of

climate change, to not relentlessly focus on the practical, and simply get on with it as policy practitioners or activists might desire. But there are dangers in this, namely in terms of what Elaine Scarry (2011, pp. 14–15) calls the “seduction against thinking in an emergency”. This establishes “a false opposition between thinking and acting; second, [...] a plausible (but in the end, false) opposition between thinking and *rapid* action”. As such, there is real need to critically interrogate not just what is said (policy), and what is done (action), but the thoughts and concepts informing both. With specific reference to the area under discussion, the climate emergency, there is also an important critical perspective on the political and economic which challenge the prevailing narrative found in the majority of policies in this area.

Policies that construct the problem as the need to *adapt* to ‘climate change’—itself a neutralisation and attempt to naturalise the underlying structural conditions that have given us “global boiling” (Guterres, 2023)—have made a political choice to largely maintain things as they are. Recognising this is the critical perspective that recognises the intentionally narrowed range of options made available to citizens and politicians, what Romain Felli terms “the great adaptation”. Such a view recognises that the “climate crisis is a crisis in the capitalist way of organising nature”, and as such the “climate crisis allows for the extension of the market’s grip” (Felli, 2021, pp. 3, 6). Similar critiques have been offered from within education, and the range of perspectives is captured in the labels for the different approaches, *inter alia*: environmental education (Hart & Nolan, 1999), education for sustainable development (Disinger, 1990), climate change education (Roussel and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020), climate change education for sustainable development (Anderson, 2012), or climate literacy (McCaffrey & Buhr, 2008). Of these, education for sustainable development (ESD) is the most prevalent, and it aligns with the general acceptance of the importance of ‘sustainability’ as a contemporary personal and policy virtue, aligning as it does with the UN’s ‘Sustainable Development Goals’. The attractiveness and general acceptance of ‘sustainability’ has contributed greatly to ESD as a policy-driven phenomenon (Jickling & Wals, 2008), and the representation of the ‘problem’ of the climate emergency has been defined for many in policy circles as one of sustainability.

Another important perspective to bring into play when discussing the role of higher education in a time of climate emergency is the danger of “cockpit-ism” (Hajer et al., 2015, p. 1651), which is “the illusion that top-down steering by governments and intergovernmental organisations

alone can address global problems”. The top-down, cockpit approach saw climate change like a state (Scott, 1998), and led ultimately to the failure of COP15 Climate Summit in Copenhagen in 2009. In contrast, COP21 in Paris in 2015 was arguably a relative success, as it did not assume the top-down perspective as the way to get things done. A lesson from this, as Rebecca Willis sets out, is that science cannot sideline democracy and politics, as “there is no smooth, agreed process by which scientific evidence can be translated into international action” (Willis, 2020, p. 22). An implication of this point of political coordination is that while universities and academic researchers are unable single-handedly to solve global problems, they *can* look after what they have control over, on the one hand, and be an influential voice, as they were for instance during COVID-19, on the other.

The combination of these methodological and conceptual issues inform the approach taken in this chapter. The Irish government’s policies as they relate to climate change are not assumed to be the final word, as documents frequently serve the purpose of not denoting what will be done, but merely responding to demands for something to be done. The approach taken is indicative rather than exhaustive, but policy is broadly construed in terms not just of documents and texts, but also changes to governance structures, funding priorities, and so on. As such, national and higher education policies are supplemented by the institutional perspective, to see what universities and other HEIs are doing, and what the academy itself sees as being significant. To draw out something of what ‘the academy’ itself as a whole considers to be important, like other authors in this volume, we analysed data from the most significant Irish research-funding agencies. For this institutional view, we draw on the valuable research of others in this area, whose results delve into greater detail on the nature of the policy and governance responses that have been and can be taken by individual HEIs.

NATIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY: REACTING TO CRISIS

Ireland has been called a “climate laggard” (Torney, 2020) because it has consistently fallen behind its EU commitments, and has been ranked among the lowest performing in the annual Climate Change Performance Index. Despite rising nine spots from 46th in 2022 to 37th place in 2023, out of 59 countries and the EU, Ireland has a poor record due to a medium rating in Renewable Energy and Energy Use, low in Climate Policy and

very low in GHG Emissions categories (CCPI, 2023). It continues to fall behind on its commitments (e.g. EPA, 2023). Having said this, since 2017 there has been a flurry of policy and action. The most notable development has been in renewable electricity, building off Ireland's position in the North Atlantic. For a country which was long considered absent of any natural resources save its people, Ireland is now recognised as possessing one of the richest wave and tidal energy climates in the world alongside wind power. Other notable developments include the reports of the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change 2018 and parliamentary committee established to consider the Assembly's recommendations, and the *Climate Action Plans* published annually between 2019 and 2023.

A possible explanation for the shift in policy zeal is down to a combination of EU and international pressure, public opinion, and the ascendancy of the Green Party to a three-way coalition government in June 2020. In 2018, the EU gave member states 18 months to develop 30-year strategies and submit by January 2020. By the start of 2023, Ireland was one of handful of countries not to have done so however—blaming the delay on the necessity to align the domestic policy with legislation (Boland, 2023). A recent study indicates that the overwhelming majority (70%) of Irish adults are worried about climate change—coming third after housing and healthcare as the most pressing issue. Almost 90% believe human activity is causing the problem, identifying energy and transport usage as the key causes (Timmons & Lunn, 2022). The Green Party had been in government previously, but as Torney argues, the deteriorating political and economic context around 2008–2010 coupled with the “failure of COP15 to produce a meaningful international climate change agreement gave nay-sayers a political opening to criticise the proposal for a climate law” (Torney, 2017, p. 254). While there is evidence of some policy diffusion via the UK (Torney, 2017, p. 263), arguably the Green Party's recent membership of the three-way ruling coalition coincided with the rising green zeitgeist.

Irish public policy on Climate Change dates to the early to mid-2000s and the publication of two overarching climate change policy documents, Ireland's first (2000) and second (2007) National Climate Change Strategies. However, the country rapidly descended into bankruptcy and had to be rescued by the IMF following the global financial crisis and Great Recession of 2008—ending political and public interest in Climate Change. In 2009, the EU—which had been a partner to Ireland's bail-out—enacted legislation underpinning its climate and energy package for

2020 (EC, 2009), with corresponding obligations for Ireland beginning to put pressure on the Irish government.

As the economy emerged from recession in the 2010s, there was more political space to consider and fund initiatives (see Box 3.1 below; note also the changing name of the relevant government departments, with the eventual replacement of ‘Energy and Natural Resources’ with ‘Climate Action and Environment’). Nonetheless, progress has been slow. Its geographic size and small population, along with a political structure favouring a clientelist political culture which benefits close citizen-political relationships, means Ireland thus experiences considerable difficulties moving beyond policy statements and translating ‘sound bites’ into measurable actions. It is also beholden to the “historical legacy of a predominantly agricultural society [which] gives the farming sector a [outsized] voice in national policymaking” (Torney, 2020, p. 48). For climate change this is no different. It is hindered by an over-reliance on oil and gas for heating, and failure to tackle emissions from agriculture and transport (EPA, 2023; Lynch, 2023) as well as very public opposition from certain sectors to carbon tax and rewetting of bog lands (Leahy, 2023), to name just a few contentious issues.

Box 3.1 Key national policy and legislative actions for climate change and sustainability

- 2000. *National Climate Change Strategy Ireland*. Department of Environment and Local Government.
- 2007. *National Climate Change Strategy 2007–2012*. Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.
- 2007. *Delivering a Sustainable Energy Future for Ireland*. Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources.
- 2012. *National Climate Change Adaptation Framework*. Department of Environment, Community and Local Government.
- 2015. *Ireland’s Transition to a Low Carbon Energy Future, 2015–2030*. Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources.

(continued)

Box 3.1 (continued)

- 2015. *Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act*. Irish Statute Book
- 2018. *The Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018–2030*. Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.
- 2019. *Climate Action Plan 2019 (CAP19): To Tackle Climate Breakdown*. Government of Ireland.
- 2021. *Climate Action Plan 2021 (CAP21): Securing Our Future*. Government of Ireland.
- 2022. *Climate Action Plan 2023 (CAP23): Changing Ireland for the Better*. Government of Ireland.
- 2023. *Climate Action Plan 2024 (CAP24)*. Government of Ireland.

The Citizen’s Assembly first convened during 2016–2018 as a form of deliberative democracy, and in line with a trend across several other European countries including Iceland, Estonia, Luxembourg, and Romania (Farrell et al., 2019). While such an assembly is not a way to bypass electoral politics, they are “a practical means by which elected politicians can explore the public mandate for action – developing ‘representative claims’ which people can support” (Willis, 2020, p. 88). Established by the Irish government in 2016, the process involves a random selection of 100 adult citizens to discuss and propose solutions to a set of contentious public issues. The Dáil passed a resolution establishing the Citizens’ Assembly, initially giving it five items to consider: abortion, the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population, fixed-term parliaments, how referenda are held, and how the state can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change. This “rather eclectic set of topics in part resulted from commitments made by Fine Gael [the primary coalition party] in its manifesto; but in part it reflected international pressures for action in key areas (notably on abortion and climate change)” (Farrell et al., 2019, p. 114). The topic ‘How the state can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change’ had four days of meetings in August 2017, with 1185 public submissions, and culminating in the Citizens’ Assembly making 13 recommendations for action.

That report's wide range of recommendations for action included putting change considerations at the centre of policy making, energy policy, transport policy, and agriculture and land use policy.² Within the first group of questions relating to policy, 97% of members of the Citizens' Assembly recommended that climate change should be at the centre of Irish policy making, while 100% recommended that the state should take a leadership role in addressing climate change across a range of mitigation measures; 80% said they would be willing to pay higher taxes on carbon-intensive activities (Citizens' Assembly, 2018). The radical nature of the recommendations made maps on to more recent opinion polling on what Irish society makes of climate change by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, 2022). Here results captured the views of the Irish adult population, across a range of responses from those who are most concerned and motivated about climate change (and with the highest belief in the scientific evidence), to those with the lowest belief in the evidence, and consequently less concerned and motivated. The results were that 36% of respondents were alarmed, 48% concerned, and only 12% cautious of the evidence and the need to do anything, and 3% outright doubtful. Other research qualifies these findings, however, as when presented with a range of issues, respondents place climate third in a list of concerns behind housing and healthcare (two lightning rod crises in contemporary Irish politics), but ahead of the economy or jobs, education and childcare, COVID, crime, taxation, Brexit (the UK's exit from the EU) and the question of a united Ireland, and lastly immigration (Timmons & Lunn, 2022, p. 10). Nevertheless, the results are considerably more radical and demanding than politicians and policy makers have allowed for.

Following the publication of the Citizens' Assembly report, a cross-party parliamentary committee was established to respond to the 17 recommendations. Convening such a cross-party committee signalled political support across the board, with little evidence of climate change being used as a 'wedge-issue' for electoral gain as has been the case in other jurisdictions. That parliamentary committee's report noted "the State's response to climate change has been insufficient" heretofore, and that citizens want the state "to take far more ambitious actions to make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change" (Oireachtas Éireann, 2019b,

² Another Citizens' Assembly in 2022 considered biodiversity loss, and published its report the following year (Citizens' Assembly, 2023). This means that to date two of eight Citizens' Assemblies have addressed climate change in some respect.

p. 2). Education was mentioned in this and the above-mentioned report as playing a critical role with respect to ‘climate change literacy’ and encouraging the uptake of ‘solutions’. Significantly it called for increased investment in research, warning it should not be “confined to any one aspect of academia, as contributions can and should be made from all relevant fields of academia (including science, social science and the humanities)” (Oireachtas Éireann, 2019b, p. 33).

Following this, the Irish government’s climate action plans have been the defining, national policy statements in response to calls for greater involvement and action by the state.³ The *Climate Action Plan 2019* (GoI, 2019) was the first major policy statement, accompanied by a set of 183 actions; while education is mentioned at various points, higher education and universities specifically are not. The most recent *Climate Action Plan 2023* (GoI, 2022a) does explicitly point towards a role for higher education, in its annex of actions identifying a number of policy initiatives (many identified in Box 3.2 below), and specific funding activities such as Science Foundation Ireland’s Co-centres Programme, which has a focus on climate, sustainable and resilient food systems. This points towards how higher education in Ireland is being represented (in policy at least) as a component of the Irish state’s response to the climate emergency.

HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY: REFRAMING OR RESPONDING?

Since the late 1960s, Irish higher education has been framed in terms of government-defined ‘national priorities’, primarily with the view that higher education ought to serve the economy. Such an approach prioritised a ‘human capital’ perspective, and resulted in the development of a binary system, with the historically academic universities on one side, and a technical/technological sector on the other (Walsh, 2014). The introduction of legislation for the university sector in 1997 enshrined in policy, the social as well as economic roles stating that the university should “support and contribute to the realisation of national economic and social development” (Oireachtas Éireann, 1997). This also resulted in the establishment of various research-funding agencies, such as Science Foundation

³These plans accompany *The Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018–2030* as a whole-of-government initiative. Alignment between the two policy agendas can be found on Ireland’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) data hub. See <https://irelandsdg.geohive.ie>.

Ireland (SFI), and what would become the Irish Research Council (IRC). Higher education had long been under the auspices of a (variably named) Department of Education, but 2020 saw the establishment of a dedicated ministry, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

On the whole, however, successive Irish governments have been largely content to leave higher education to its own devices. It was the advent of influential factors such as globalisation, the Bologna Process, and economic crisis that led the state to take a more interventionist stance, resulting in “more intensive assertion of authority over HEIs by government departments and agencies, through increased regulation, revised funding instruments and a structural rationalisation agenda” (Walsh, 2018, pp. 489–90; see Gibson & Hazelkorn, 2017 for the dynamics of one such funding instrument). Nevertheless, the specific governing structures of higher education have remained more in line with ‘network governance’ than strong managerial, dirigiste approaches (Walsh & Loxley, 2015). Irish political culture and structures requires a ‘consensus’ approach, which “tends to prevent steamrolling policy changes in favour of a slower, deliberative process; zero-sum arguments are less common” (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2018, p. 265). This consensus appears most usually in the discussion of specific policy proposals, but beyond this, HEIs enact the reality of network governance. As such, though the higher education ‘sector’ has been active on climate change issues as institutions and as academics/researchers, its collective voice and impact have arguably been weaker. Unless speaking collective on the need for greater funding of higher education, HEIs have been content to follow their own priorities. This further diffuses public demands for action in various areas, as HEIs largely ‘go their own way’.

As noted, the main focus of higher education policy over the decades has primarily been as a beacon for mobile capital and talent (Hazelkorn et al., 2015). In recent years, this has turned to focus on skills and employability and sustainable social and economic development with an emphasis on regional balance. Use of the term ‘sustainable’ refers here to helping ensure Ireland can avoid the severe economic boom-bust legacy that has afflicted the country over the decades rather than simply a green agenda—albeit there is an interdependent relationship between the two. As such, the vocabulary of climate change and that of the more traditional government focus on economic priorities are muddled in a way that serves policy makers’ desire to be all things to all audiences.

STATE POLICIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Nevertheless, with specific reference to climate change, as with national policy, strategy and actions for the higher education sector have stepped up in recent years (see Box 3.2 below). These follow on from the priorities set in national policy discussed previously. The most significant of these focus primarily on the education role that HEIs serve in Irish society, focusing specifically on climate education. The *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030 (ESD)* (GoI, 2022b), co-sponsored by the Department of Education, the DFHERIS, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth was first published in 2014 and spanned 2014–2020. It followed the approach aforementioned:

The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development aims to ensure that education contributes to sustainable development by equipping learners with the relevant knowledge (the ‘what’), the key dispositions and skills (the ‘how’) and the values (the ‘why’) that will motivate and empower them throughout their lives to become informed active citizens who take action for a more sustainable future. (DoES, 2014, p. 3)

It recommended embedding actions for sustainability across teaching, learning, and research. In the first strategy, the emphasis was on introducing more undergraduate and postgraduate programmes relevant to sustainable development with targets being set and monitored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) towards their achievement (DoES, 2014, pp. 23–24).

Box 3.2 Key higher education policy and initiatives for climate change and sustainability

- 2014. ‘*Education for Sustainability*’—*The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland 2014–2020*. Department of Education and Skills.
- 2018. *ESD to 2030: Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development*. Department of Education.

(continued)

Box 3.2 (continued)

- 2020. Energy Efficiency and Decarbonisation Pathfinder Programme 2020 for the Higher Education Sector. SEAI.
- 2021. *Skills for Zero Carbon: The Demand for Renewable Energy, Residential Retrofit and Electric Vehicle Deployment Skills to 2030*. Expert Group on Future Skills Needs.
- 2022. *ESD to 2030: Implementation Plan 2022–2026*. Government of Ireland.
- 2022. *Impact 2030, Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.
- 2022. *SFI Co-centres Programme—Climate, Sustainable and Resilient Food Systems HE*. Science Foundation Ireland.
- 2022. *Green Skills for Further Education and Training 2021–2030 Roadmap FE*. Solas.

The second strategy was much more forthright. Accompanied by a 4.5-year action plan for 2022–2026, an interim review is planned for 2026 to evaluate progress and identify any additional actions required for 2030. In recognition of the international context, it sought to emphasise Ireland's alignment with the UNESCO SDGs and especially EU initiatives, e.g. the European Green Deal and Green Transition, Horizon Europe, and the European Strategy for Universities. Notably, it called attention to the European Declaration on Global Education to 2050: the Dublin Declaration which recommitted to “the importance of global education and public engagement” (GoI, 2022, p. 13). As the HEA stated in its submission to the consultation process, the strategy:

presents valuable opportunities to implement ESD through multiple channels, not only through sustainability-focused programmes and modules, but also through the integration of ESD across curricula; innovative research; student engagement and activism; campus management; community and industry engagement; and international linkages among others. Substantial progress has been made to date, and there are host of innovative and successful initiatives to learn from and build on. (HEA, 2021)

The picture in terms of research is currently somewhat more complicated, as the two existing major research agencies, SFI and IRC, are in a process of being merged to create a new statutory funding agency (Oireachtas Éireann, 2023). As part of this overall aim, a strategy, *Impact 2030, Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy* purported to be a significant inflection point in the development of research and innovation in Ireland. *Impact 2030* positions research and innovation at the heart of addressing Ireland's societal, economic, and environmental challenges. The claim was that an additional €1bn would be made available to fund research in 2022 (O'Brien, 2022)—though this funding has yet to materialise.

It can be observed, however, that kinds of issues being tackled in the relevant state policies (Box 3.2) remain in the realm of what is deemed politically acceptable (e.g. sustainability, economic innovation), minor redirections of existing capital funding requirements (e.g. retrofitting), or the institutional interests of a newly founded government department (e.g. further education). This indicates a reframing of already existing concerns and imperatives, rather than the response that the scale of the issues confronting us should invite.

THE ACADEMY AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Instead of focusing solely on higher education as a policy sector, however, it is worth paying attention to what higher education itself is doing in the area of climate change. One possible way is to consider what the funding priorities for researchers in higher education are. While there have been attempts by government to explicitly set funding priorities, most clearly a targeted funding mechanism in the shape of the research prioritisation exercise, this was primarily in response to the economic crash of 2008, and such an approach has not become the standard model for how the Irish government approaches higher education research funding (Gibson & Hazelkorn, 2017). Instead, research is funded largely through the two (as yet unmerged) funding agencies, SFI and the IRC. SFI is the largest competitive funding agency, focusing on science and engineering, and the IRC has a focus on both STEM and AHSS. SFI, established in 2000, with a board comprising academic and non-academic members, channels public funding towards research activity in strategic areas and “from the outset was focused on developing economically strategic areas for research and drawing prestigious international scientists into the Irish research system”

(Walsh, 2018, p. 405). Nevertheless, funding proposals are reviewed by international independent reviewers with the knowledge relevant to the proposal. The IRC largely follows the academic-led model as is found in agencies such as the European Research Council, with a board comprised of academic researchers from different disciplines. The focus of the IRC is largely on the ‘human capital development’ of academic researchers, funding postgraduate/PhD researchers and early career academics (along with more established and senior funding streams) and discipline-specific panels considering funding applications in line with the ‘academic excellence’.

Looking at research funded by the two largest research agencies in the past ten years gives some sense of the kinds of topics that researchers who have been successful in receiving funding are interested in.⁴ For the IRC, only the number of projects is identifiable, which is to say of the 5503 projects funded by the IRC since 2013, 194 appear to have a clear focus on climate change-related topics. Of the 3235 projects funded by SFI since 2013, 84 appeared to have a direct bearing on climate change. In funding terms, that means approximately €2.16bn awarded by SFI in that period, €77m (3.5%) of that total went to climate change-related topics. While these facts relate only to project titles, this of course is a crude snapshot rather than exhaustive overview. Nevertheless, this may tell us something about the priorities of researchers applying for funding, especially PhD and early career researchers in the case of the IRC (though with the caveat of the possibility of survivorship bias). It certainly tells us about the priorities of those selecting the topics they believe are worth funding (Fig. 3.1).

Considering how HEIs have responded is subject to some of the issues found in the overview of government policy, such as the tension between what is “legible” in policy (Scott, 1998) and what amounts to a substantive commitment. For considering state policy, this is to be found in the distance between discursive commitments and fiscal, Euro commitments to fund these. For HEIs the question is slightly more difficult. HEIs can set out in policy terms their own commitments, such as in university

⁴For both IRC and SFI, we looked at the project titles supplied by researchers the last 10 years of funding (2013–2023). The chosen search terms were [climat*], [environment*], [sustain*], and [warming]. While the databases for the IRC and SFI contain largely comparable data, the SFI data contains more information relating to specific funding amounts, but stops at 2022. IRC data up to 2023 is available. Both resulting datasets were manually cleaned to remove duplicates, as well as false positives such as ‘sustained attention’, ‘digital environment’, or ‘sustaining Ireland’s cultural heritage’.

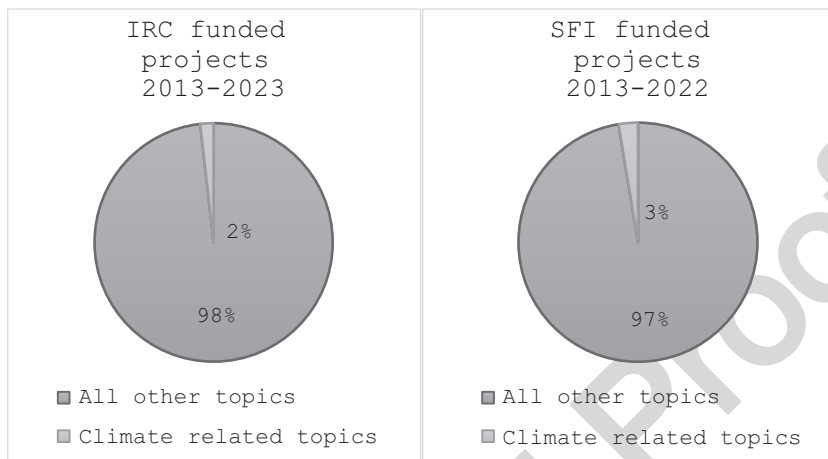


Fig. 3.1 Total of projects funded by IRC and SFI involving (analysis of project names)

strategy statements. One way of considering whether these policy commitments amount to action can be seen in Table 3.1, which sets out those Irish HEIs who have clear and identifiable strategy commitments to climate change—either in their institutional policies or in terms of separate climate/sustainability policies. The question then of whether these policies are backed up at the senior management level, of an identifiable VP position is one way of ‘testing’ the nature of a HEI’s commitment to addressing climate change. There are to be sure limitations with this approach as well, in that larger institutions may have more resources at their disposal, allowing for the appointment of a member of their senior management team. Even with that, it is noteworthy that the only institutions with members of senior management with a climate-relevant brief are all based in the nation’s capital, Dublin.

If this approach is too stringent in demanding certain kinds of commitments of HEIs, it is useful then to consider an alternative perspective. In a detailed case study of one university in terms of its governance in responding to climate change, Mary Gallagher-Cooke (2022) sets out the existing routes available to Irish institutions to become a ‘generous university’ (in our terms one which responds to climate change). These are found across Board- or Governing Authority-level policies, management policies, and

Table 3.1 Institutional policies relating to climate change

	<i>Climate a priority in university strategy</i>	<i>Separate climate strategy?</i>	<i>Leadership position</i>
<i>Atlantic Technological University</i>	“Sustainability”	–	–
<i>Technological University Dublin</i>	“Planet”	–	VP for Sustainability
<i>Trinity College Dublin</i>	“Civic action”	–	VP for Biodiversity and Climate Action
<i>University College Cork</i>	“Our Place, Our Footprint”	–	–
<i>University College Dublin</i>	–	–	VP for Sustainability
<i>University of Galway</i>	“Sustainability”	–	–
<i>University of Limerick</i>	–	“Sustainable University Strategy 2022–2030”	–

Source: Authors’ own, compiled from institutional data

academic policies; the full range captured is indicative of just how much room for manoeuvre universities have. Taking just management policies, Gallagher-Cooke identified the following areas as having the potential to make a significant contribution through, inter alia: financial policies and reporting; energy and emissions policies; green and ethical procurement policies; food policies; water policies; waste and circular policies; commuting and remote/hybrid working policies; corporate travel policies; biodiversity policies and strategy; sustainability in IT and data management; record management; conflict of interest policies, employee induction, probation, promotion; employee learning, training, development, and conference allowance; employee volunteering; employee wellbeing, physical and mental health policies; employee secondment and sabbatical policies. Looking to the future, other resources for change are identified in the autonomous governance of institutions, in terms of either existing policy instruments to amend or new ones to be introduced (Gallagher-Cooke, 2023, p. 13). Many of these are available to HEIs, and do not require mandated action by the state, just the will to make a transformation beyond business as usual.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: FROM POLICY ANNOUNCEMENT TO POLICY ENACTMENT

The distance between what is said and what is done in policy may be chalked down to the ‘expressive function’ (Sunstein, 1996) of creating or recreating norms.⁵ Given the stakes, however, this interpretation seems unnecessarily charitable. Rebecca Willis (2020, p. 70) calls for being wary of the “feelgood fallacy” in policy responses to the climate emergency, the “danger that people and organizations channel their energy into the easier sell, encouraging the positives rather than fighting the negatives”. Willis saw Ireland’s Citizens’ Assemblies as avoiding just this trap by recommending “higher taxes on carbon-intensive activities” (p. 90). A more critical perspective would be to recognise that while such *calls* for action avoid that trap, the actual proof needs implementation. The critical policy perspective taken in this chapter is justified, since the show of “‘new politics’, which seemed to provide the basis for progress on climate issues at the elite level, was stifled by a government that wanted to proceed at a slower pace”; while there may be some evidence for moving beyond such policy stifling in recent years, nevertheless this is a “cautionary tale for supporters of more progressive environmental policy” (Fitzgerald et al., 2021, p. 47). The Irish state needs to move beyond its traditional mode of policy announcement, towards requiring policy enactment and effectiveness.

As of today, however, the claims made by government have not amounted to much for higher education. Indeed, if only looking at the €307m annual shortfall in core funding of universities which the Irish government itself identified, the Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris announced a mere €60m increase following the release of the 2024 Government budget in October 2023, with the majority of funding aimed at hard-pressed students in the shape of additional supports (O’Brien, 2022). There continues to be little evidence of follow-through on the grand announcements for Irish higher education beyond the claims made in policy.

As such it may make sense for those in higher education to retain a considerable degree of scepticism regarding ‘cockpit-ism’. The specific role played by the Irish state in ‘stifling policy’ points towards other actors. Indeed “[d]epending on the extent to which certain institutions can operate independently of the executive, these could include central banks,

⁵We’re thankful to Mary Gallagher-Cooke for this reference.

government agencies, scientific or advisory bodies, and (in less liberal democratic contexts) the courts” (Fitzgerald et al., 2021, p. 48). This group could and should include HEIs and the academy more widely. The fact is that unlike in many other jurisdictions, Irish higher education is a trusted actor to speak on scientific issues, as COVID-19 illustrated (Gibson et al., 2023, p. 213). Recognising this, discourses of climate delay (Lamb et al., 2020) are less likely to result in politically distracting debates.

Another aspect of the limits of the existing approaches is in terms of the relentless focus on ‘sustainability’ as the most politically acceptable approach, given that it maintains that only relatively minor adjustments are necessary. While there is not much use calling for ‘more radical’ approaches simply as a kind of reflex, what is most important is that they are the correct and proportionate approaches. It may be that ‘sustainability’ served a purpose in getting some of the issues on the wider agenda, but it is past time to move further. To date, the problem has been represented to be an issue of adjustment, which attempts to smooth over the contradictions in a political-economic model that has not yet confronted the extreme cost of the externalities it inflicts on our world. In terms of the one-dimensional approach to power Lukes (2005) identifies, accepting the basic premise that sustainability and our current politico-economic structures are fit for purpose no longer follows—and in Ireland there is sufficient evidence to show this is the case. In their detailed critique of education for sustainable development, Selby and Kagawa (2010, pp. 42–44) set out a contrasting vision of climate change education (CCE) that acknowledges that “climate crisis that is already upon us” and is likely to deepen further, and so among other things CCE “needs to offer alternative conceptions of the ‘good life’, combat consumerism, and help learners explore and experience alternatives to a growth economy”. They also call for ‘a localisation of focus’, which is where HEIs might find a role.

This has implications for how the university is organised, and the kind of research given attention, calling into question the usual focus on “natural – and especially climate – sciences provided the framing for the problem”, with the social sciences only then being “called on to imagine what the response should be” (Felli, 2021, p. 45)—primarily within a pregiven framework. While “most proponents of ESD seem to have found a space where they feel they can more or less shrug off the need for deep critical reflection”, to reverse the dominant “instrumental and exploitative ‘nature as resource’ philosophy, CCE needs to embrace a philosophy of intimacy with, and embeddedness in, nature not least through the cultivation of the

poetic” (Selby & Kagawa, 2010, pp. 39, 44). Through the sustainability perspective it was decided what the ‘problem’ should be, and what the policy ontology was, with this framing by definition excluding an engagement with alternatives through the social sciences and humanities, thus “ignoring society’s capacities for innovation and imagination – and even the indeterminacy of the future itself” (Felli, 2021, p. 5). Pushing beyond sustainability will allow not just for a clear-eyed confrontation of the issue, but also may allow a variety of research and education perspectives to enter where previously they had been sidelined.

There is scope within higher education to decide its own approach, and to set its own priorities, without waiting to be directed or instructed. HEIs have a range of policy options at their disposal, just as the academy has long had ways of steering the direction of future research through funding calls and the establishment of research programmes. Not everything in the university can or will be transformed entirely to address the climate crisis, but unnecessary barriers can at the very least be removed. Academic forms of association and organisations (networks and associations) are powerful social modes of organisation available to higher education and the academy, and which are an independent route to political and policy influence. Society is not the state, and the university needs to remember that whatever its reliance on the latter for (ever decreasing) funding, it is to the former that its responsibilities lie. As yet, Irish higher education (either from the state policy direction or from within HEIs and the academy itself) has seemed content to reframe its existing concerns and priorities, incremental shifts in focus, and the development of a comprehensive suite of policies. As ever in the Irish context, however, implementation lags behind. The need for action *and* the need for careful thinking about the kinds of action that should be taken should be combined, and Irish higher education is well placed to do this difficult work.

The variety of ways in which relevant topics are discussed—‘sustainability’, ‘decarbonisation’, ‘the green campus’, ‘climate and biodiversity’, ‘sustainable development goals’, ‘national challenges’—is indicative of a complex picture of existing and new concerns. For future research in this area, it may prove useful to proceed with this chapter’s evaluative typology—reframing, reacting, responding—in order to focus on the most effective and transformational policies which are possible. It is perhaps inevitable that there will be a certain amount of ‘reframing’ of existing pressures in higher education, for instance in speaking of energy concerns which have as much to do with efficiency or value for money in

public spending in terms of a ‘green transition’, or including the word ‘climate’ in abstracts in the hope of attracting research funding for projects with only an incidental relation to global boiling. HEIs are not immune from such forms of greenwashing in this respect. The nature of the policy structure in Ireland, as in other countries, also inevitably implies that HEIs will frequently have to ‘react’ to directives and legislation, and develop institutional ways to enact these policies. These are probably on the whole beneficial, but only if they are not understood as the last word in this area. It is the final type of policy action we identify however, namely proactive responses, where there is most cause for attention—and hope.

Indeed, in policy and practical terms, the clear indication of an appetite for a strong response on the part of Irish civil society (e.g. via the Citizens’ Assemblies) should be interpreted by those involved in the governance of HEIs as a green light to push even further with the positive, proactive changes they are considering. Higher education is well understood as having a significant role as a producer, repository, and translator of knowledge for society. Perhaps given less consideration, however, is the role of higher education as an ontological exemplar, creating a space for experimentation and openness and modelling new ways of being. Both research and policy should continue to focus on doing justice to the public demand for a response, thinking in the climate emergency, and exploring ways to make change possible.

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