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Science Foundation Ireland : The First Years 2001 - 2005, Report of an International Evaluation Panel

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Science Foundation Ireland from 2001 to 2005

Independent Assessment of Research Agency's Performance

Minister Micheál Martin today (Thursday 15th December, 2005) launched the report into the first five years of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI). The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment requested Forfás to conduct this external evaluation, which was undertaken by a review panel of internationally distinguished scientists and engineers and chaired by Professor Richard Brook, Director of the Leverhulme Trust in London.

Presenting the report Professor Brook commented, "The Panel found that SFI has been a most positive driving force for change in the Irish research system in recent years. Impressive progress towards developing a strong research capability in biotechnology and in ICT (information and communications technologies) has been achieved in a very short time. Research of excellent quality is being funded by SFI and the existence of SFI funding is having a positive catalytic effect on the performance of research in Ireland in these two fields. SFI has established over 160 new research groups, 34 of them led by leading scientists who have come to Ireland from laboratories abroad. It also has currently seven Centres for Science, Engineering and Technology in the core thematic fields and with considerable industry involvement."

Launching the report, the Minister said, "I welcome this timely and detailed assessment of the work of Dr Bill Harris and his colleagues over the past few years. In setting up SFI to build a globally competitive national research system, identified as necessary by Technology Foresight and earlier studies, the Government realised the extent of the challenges that SFI faced. This report provides strong confirmation both of the need for SFI and of the contribution it has made, and continues to make, to strengthening our national research system, which is a fundamental building block for the knowledge economy to which we aspire. I am pleased, also, that the report acknowledges the key complementary role that the Higher Education Authority's research programmes play in providing necessary research infrastructure. This review urges greater coordination between publicly funded research programmes and I am confident that this aim is being achieving through the new governance mechanisms in place for public research, including the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Science and Technology which I chair. The Government remains strongly committed to the ideals and objectives of SFI and it is gratifying to receive this independent, international confirmation that SFI is well on the way to achieving these objectives. Support for SFI will continue to be a government priority in future years".

Commenting on the report, Mr Martin Cronin, Chief Executive, Forfás, said: "Science Foundation Ireland is a key element of Ireland's effort to move towards an economy driven by knowledge, skills and technology. A strong research capability in scientific fields underpinning our industrial strengths is absolutely vital if we are to maintain those strengths and to continue to build on them. This evaluation shows that we have come a long way in a very short time but that much still remains to be done.

Ireland owes a debt of gratitude to the SFI Board and to Bill Harris and his colleagues for what they have achieved and Forfás will continue to provide whatever assistance it can to them in the years ahead”.

The four major recommendations of the review panel are:

- Research excellence as the basis for making SFI's awards is the single most important factor in its success and it is of paramount importance that awards continue to be decided on the criterion of research excellence above all else
- It is essential for the Government to continue to take a long-term, strategic view of funding for research in Ireland
- All relevant research funding agencies must assume a shared responsibility for a coherent and coordinated approach to the development and consolidation of the Irish research system, and
- Commercialisation of SFI funded research should be supported through an integrated system built on a foundation of realistic expectations.