



An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais,
Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

Report of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Under Section 2 (5) of the European Union (Scrutiny) Act 2002 for the period from July to December 2023

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Introduction

Under the terms of the European Union (Scrutiny Act) 2002, Ministers are required to submit reports to the Oireachtas every six months on developments at European Union level in their area of responsibility.

This report has two parts. The first part summarises the key policy and legislative developments within the remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (D/FHERIS) that arose during the period from July to December 2023 when Spain held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The second part provides an overview of Belgium's Presidency, which runs for the first half of 2024.

Part I – Developments in the EU during the Spanish Presidency (July to December 2023)

The policy areas that fall within the responsibility of D/FHERIS are generally dealt with in the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (EYCS) Council in its Education formation; and in the Competitiveness Council in its Research formation. Some aspects of skill and training policy are progressed through the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO).

In addition, the Department has responsibility for the administration of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Globalisation Fund (EGF).

1. Education and Skills

Formal meetings of the EYCS Council are normally held over two days, with Day 1 dedicated to Education and Youth and Day 2 dedicated to Culture and Sport items. The Youth, Culture and Sport items fall within the responsibility of other departments. Informal meetings are arranged at the discretion of the Presidency, and usually focus on specific topics. Preparation for the EYCS (Education) Council and informal meetings of Education Ministers takes place in the Education Committee, which is serviced by Ireland's Brussels-based Education Attaché.

The EPSCO Council did not consider any items with direct relevance to training and skills during the Spanish Presidency.

Meetings of the EYCS (Education) Council

Ministers met on two occasions during the period July to December 2023:

- Informal Meeting of Minister with responsibility for Education – 19 September in Zaragoza; and
- EYCS Council (Education) – 23 November in Brussels.

1.1 Informal Meeting of Minister with responsibility for Education - 19 September 2023

Ireland was represented at senior official level. The meeting was chaired by the acting Minister for Education and Vocational Training, Pilar Alegría, and the the acting Minister for Universities, Joan Subirats. Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas represented the European Commission.

The first working session examined the topic of inclusion in higher education. In their interventions, Ministers and heads of delegation spoke of the need to ensure that higher education systems, specifically institutions, include and support learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with additional educational needs and with disabilities. Examples of positive initiatives and successful policies from the Member States were highlighted, such as ring-fenced funding; interventions at the point of enrolment to support access; adaptations to organisational and administrative processes; as well as the role of guidance and mentoring supports.

The second working session focused on the fundamental role that education and training plays with regard to common European values and democratic citizenship. Ministers and heads of delegation highlighted how values and citizenship are reflected in curricula, as well as the national programmes, initiatives and projects that contribute to these aspects of learning. The meeting also considered some of the content of the Council Conclusions on the role of education and training in strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship, which the Spanish Presidency had proposed.

1.2. Meeting of the EYCS (Education) Council - 23 November 2023

Ambassador Barbara Cullinane led the Irish delegation. The meeting was chaired by the Spanish Minister for Education, Vocational Education and Employment Training, Ms Pilar Algeria, and the European Commission was represented by newly-appointed Commissioner Iliana Ivanova.

The Council adopted the following policy texts:

- A recommendation on key enabling factors for successful digital education and training
- A recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training
- Conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship

The main policy debate focused on the theme of attracting female talent to science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) disciplines. In their interventions on the challenges in reducing the gender gap in STEAM disciplines, Ministers highlighted existing national initiatives and good practices and explored what further initiative could be launched at European level.

Common themes included the importance of visibility of women in STEAM careers, the need for a range of diverse pathways into STEAM careers, the critical role played by educators in all sectors in breaking down gender biases, as well as the opportunities to reform curricula. Suggestions were made for EU initiatives including dedicated Erasmus+ projects; the use of the European Universities' initiative; and EU-wide communication and promotion campaigns.

2. Research and Innovation

Under the EU Treaties, research and innovation policy is a shared competence between the Union and Member States while education is a national competence. The European Research Area (ERA), which was launched in 2000 and has been enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty since 2009, aims to achieve a single European research area in which researchers, scientific knowledge and technology circulate freely.

A new framework for European research and innovation policy was adopted by the Competitiveness Council (Research and Innovation) in November 2021. It comprises:

- the Pact for Research and Innovation – which is the overarching, long-term strategy and includes common values and principles, jointly agreed priority areas and the tools required to drive implementation at EU and national level;
- ERA Policy Agenda – which sets out the specific actions to be progressed during the period 2022-2024; and
- New governance structures – to ensure the effective implementation of the ERA priorities.

In May 2022, Member States were asked to identify which of the agreed ERA priority actions they planned to implement at national level. Ireland agreed to participate in the ERA actions that are most closely aligned with national research and innovation priorities – particularly the priorities agreed in the national research and innovation strategy, *Impact 2030*, which was launched in May 2022. These include actions to facilitate knowledge sharing, promote attractive researcher careers, reform how research is assessed, promote gender equality, support international cooperation and maximise the impact of research and innovation in addressing wider economic and societal challenges.

Work is underway on the development of the next ERA Policy Agenda for the period 2025-2027. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (D/FHERIS) is engaging with national research and innovation stakeholders as the new ERA Policy Agenda evolves. It is due to be adopted by the Competitiveness Council in early 2025.

Meetings of the Competitiveness Council (Research and Innovation)

Ministers met on two occasions during the period July to December 2023:

- Informal Meeting of Research and Innovation Ministers – 28 July in Santander; and
- Competitiveness Council (Research and Innovation) – 8 December in Brussels.

2.1 Informal Meeting of Research Ministers – Santander – 28 July 2023

Ireland was represented by Mr Joseph Moore, Principal Officer, D/FHERIS. The meeting was chaired by the Spanish Minister for Science and Innovation, Ms Diana Morant. The Commission was represented by Mr Marc Lemaître, Director General, DG Research and Innovation. There were two policy debates.

The first policy debate focused on science diplomacy. There was broad consensus on the need for greater coordination to strengthen Europe's approach to science diplomacy to maximise the benefits. Finding the appropriate balance between openness and safeguarding European interests is vital. Member States agreed on the importance of capacity building, training and sharing best practices. They also highlighted the role science diplomacy can play in promoting EU values and principles – such as academic freedom, research ethics and integrity, research excellence, transparency and openness.

The second policy debate focused on the Strategic Plan (2025-2027) for the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon Europe. The Strategic Plan is one of the new features introduced in Horizon Europe – it is a welcome and positive development. There was broad consensus that new initiatives should only be introduced where justified and that Member States must be consulted at the earliest opportunity on proposals for new instruments. Member States recognise the need for flexibility to respond to emerging issues while ensuring that agreed research and innovation goals are achieved. There were also calls for structured dialogue with the diverse range of research and innovation stakeholders to ensure more effective and inclusive decision making – the public and private sectors and citizens.

2.2 Competitiveness Council (Research and Innovation) – Brussels – 8 December 2023

Ireland was represented by the Deputy Permanent Representative, Ms Barbara Cullinane. The meeting was chaired by the Spanish Minister for Science, Innovation and Universities, Ms Diana Morant. The Commission was represented by the new Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Ms Iliana Ivanova.

The Council adopted Conclusions on strengthening the impact of research and innovation on the policymaking process in the EU. The Conclusions recognise the importance of evidence based policymaking to enhance the quality and coherence of policy initiatives in different sectors.

Political agreement was reached on a Council Recommendation to create a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talents in Europe. The main aim of the Council Recommendation is to ensure that Europe remains an attractive location for the best researchers globally. The European Framework, which recognises the diversity of national research and innovation systems and approaches, includes a definition to ensure a clear and common understanding of a 'researcher' and recommendations covering a wide range of issues such as recruitment and working conditions, promoting intersectoral mobility and interdisciplinary careers and how researchers are assessed and rewarded. It also includes the European Charter for Researchers, which is a set of principles underpinning the development of attractive researcher careers to support excellence in research and innovation.

Member States also exchanged views on how knowledge valorisation can support economic and industrial recovery and resilience. Knowledge valorisation is about how best to maximise the impact of investment in research and innovation and transform research results and knowledge into sustainable products, services and solutions that benefit society. There was broad agreement on the importance of knowledge valorisation and the challenge of addressing the so-called 'valley of death', whereby start-up

and scale-up companies struggle to bring their research to market and convert that research into products and solutions. The complexity of knowledge value chains was highlighted as was the need to support awareness raising, mobility between sectors and skills development.

3. Other developments under the remit of the Department

The European Year of Skills

The European Year of Skills commenced on May 9 2023 and will run to May 8 2024. The Year has been designed to give a fresh impetus to lifelong learning, to empower people and companies to contribute to the green and digital transitions, supporting innovation and competitiveness. D/FHERIS is leading Ireland's engagement with the European Year and is using the communications opportunity to promote skill development, life-long learning and up and re-skilling for citizens and workers in Ireland. A range of national and regional events took place during 2023.

European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

The aim of the ESF+ is to achieve high employment levels, fair social protection and a skilled and resilient workforce for the future world of work, in line with the principles set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights. Ireland's ESF+ total allocation for 2021-27 is over €1 billion (National €532m, EU €509m).

The ESF+ Managing Authority in the D/FHERIS lead on the Ireland's ESF+ Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training (EIST) Programme for 2021-27. The EIST programme is comprised of 21 Actions. These are delivered by the following eight Departments and agencies

- Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth
- Department of Justice
- Department of Rural and Community Development
- Department of Social Protection
- Higher Education Authority
- Skillnet
- SOLAS
- Sport Ireland

EIST was launched on 21 March 2023. Of the 21 EIST actions, 15 had commenced by December 2023. Programme management for EIST progresses; the second Monitoring Committee meeting for EIST was held on 30 November 2023. This was attended by representatives engaged in delivery of each of the 21 EIST actions, social partners, representatives from other European Cohesion Policy funds and a representative of the European Commission. The EIST Managing Authority engaged with European Commission's managing and monitoring processes via:

- Submission of the Management and Control template to the Commission on the 30th June 2023
- Attendance at the annual review meeting with the Commission on 7th November 2023. This meeting was organised by the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform (D/PENDPDR), in coordination with the European Commission, to jointly review the European Regional Development Fund, the Just Transition Fund and ESF+. A review report was submitted to the Commission in advance of the meeting. This outlined our progress on the establishment and commencement of the EIST programme, including ICT development, communications and finances.

A schedule of communication and visibility activities for EIST has been designed and implemented, and include:

- Design and launch of the EU Funds Website and Social Media
- Special Europe Day supplement in the Irish Independent to mark Europe Day 2023
- Contribution to European Commission's marquee at the National Ploughing Championships
- Contribution to the National Communications Committee of the EU Funds to produce an animated video to mark 50 years of Ireland's membership of the EU
- Production of a video to disseminate information on the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), EIST's operation of strategic importance.

ICT development is a major sub-project within the management of EIST, which involves the collection and reporting of a significant amount of financial and non-financial indicator data. This must be submitted to the European Commission via electronic system. The implementation of an ICT solution, entitled the Irish European Funds Administration System (IEFAS), for reporting, monitoring, auditing, and accounting expenditure under Ireland's ESF+ programme for 2021-2027 reached Phase 2.

The ESF+ Managing Authority will submit non-financial indicator data in January 2024 to the European Commission to report recorded achievements up to end of 2023 of the actions that have launched in that time period.

European Globalisation Adjustment Fund for Displaced Workers (EGF)

The EGF continues to assist Member States to provide active labour market supports to workers made redundant in major restructuring events.

Currently, there are no EGF programmes in operation in Ireland. D/FHERIS continues to monitor collective redundancy notifications to determine whether sustainable cases can be made for EGF support, having regard to the relevant EGF regulatory requirements.

There were 2 EGF applications received by the European Commission during the period July to December 2023, Vallourec - EGF/2023/003 and Danish Crown - EGF/2023/004. The proposals have yet to be published.

A proposal was published for the following application from Belgium.

<i>EGF application reference</i>	<i>COM (2022) xxx final</i>	<i>EGF Case</i>	<i>EGF co-funding proposed</i>	<i>Reducing balance</i>	<i>Council Decision Ref No</i>	<i>Council Decision Date</i>
Balance at 01/07/2023				€204,425,245.00		
EGF/2022/002	COM(2023) 470 final	Makro	€2,828,223.00	€201,597,022.00	2023/2748	22/11/2023

Other engagements in education and training

In addition to engagement at Council level, officials from the D/FHERIS participated in a range of education and training related events during the Spanish Presidency. These included:

- Meetings of the High-Level Group on education and training
- A meeting of the Directors' General for vocational education and training
- A meeting of the Directors' General for higher education
- A meeting of the Bologna Follow-up Group
- Meetings of the national co-ordinators for the European Year of Skills
- Conferences on values and democracy in education and training and promoting women and girls careers in STEAM disciplines.

The working groups for co-operation under the framework for co-operation for the European Education Area, continued their work during this period. Officials from D/FHERIS participated in the following groups:

- A working group on Higher Education
- A working group on Adult Learning
- A cross-sectoral working group on Digital Education: Learning, Training and Assessment (DELTA)
- A cross-sectoral working group on Equality and Values in education and training

Officials from D/FHERIS continued to engage with the European Institutions, as well as Ministries and Departments from other Member States to support policy development in Ireland and in response to bilateral requests.

Part 2 – A look ahead to the Belgian Presidency (January to June 2024)

Belgium assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 1 January 2024.

1. Schedule of Council Meetings during the Belgian Presidency

Meetings of EYCS (Education) Council

- EYCS (Education) Informal Ministerial – 29 February and 1 March 2024 – Brussels
- EYCS (Education) Council – 13 May 2024 - Brussels

Meetings of COMPET (Research and Innovation) Council

- Informal Meeting of Research and Innovation Ministers – 15 February – La Hulpe
- Competitiveness Council (Research and Innovation) – 23 May – Brussels

Meetings of EPSCO (Social) Council

- EPSCO (Social) Informal Ministerial – 11 and 12 January – Namur
- EPSCO (Social) Council – 11 and 12 March – Brussels
- EPSCO (Social) Council – 07 May – Brussels

2. Overview of key issues likely to arise during the Belgian Presidency

Education and Skills priorities

- Mobility
 - The Presidency will negotiate a Council Recommendation called ‘Europe on the Move: Mobility in education and training for all’
 - The informal meeting of Ministers will be dedicated to the topic of mobility
- Evidence for policy in education and training
 - The Presidency will develop and negotiate Council conclusions on the topic, and it will host an international conference on this topic in February
- Skills and Digitalisation
 - The Presidency will continue the work on the European Year of Skills (which concludes in May 2024)
 - It will also host conferences on digital skills and life-long learning
 - The OECD Skills Summit will also be hosted by Belgium in February
- Response to Ukraine
 - The Presidency will retain a focus on the efforts to support Ukrainian refugees and will continue the work in co-ordination and sharing of information.
- Higher Education

The Commission is due to publish a package of proposals relevant to co-operation in higher Education, including the European Universities Initiative. The package is likely to include the following measures:

- A proposal for a Council recommendation on careers in higher education
- A proposal for a Council recommendation on quality assurance
- A communication on a joint European degree

The Commission have indicated that the package will be published by early April. The Belgian Presidency will facilitate initial discussions on the package, although it is likely that most aspects will pass to the Hungarian Presidency which will take up office on July 1 2024.

Research and Innovation priorities

The main research and innovation priorities of the Belgian Presidency include:

- Council Conclusions on the role of knowledge valorisation in supporting Europe's industrial resilience and strategic autonomy;
- A Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on research security, which forms part of the EU Economic Security package. Research and innovation are becoming increasingly geopolitical. As a result, there is a lot of focus at European level on how to manage the risks of international cooperation while remaining open to collaboration where it is in our mutual interests to do so; and
- Council Conclusions on the ex ante evaluation of the previous EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon 2020.

Skills and Training priorities – EPSCO Council

- The European Year of Skills will remain a priority for the Belgian Presidency.
- Belgium is also likely to commence discussions on a Council recommendation on a quality assurance framework for traineeships
- A discussion on a directive pertaining to traineeships may also commence during this semester.