REAPING THE BENEFITS OF FORESIGHT

A conversation with PROFESSOR MARK FERGUSON, Director-General of Science Foundation Ireland and Chief Scientific Adviser to the Irish government

Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) is a state body that funds research in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in Ireland. It is a competitive funding agency modelled on the National Science Foundation in the United States. Its head, Prof Mark Ferguson, took over in 2012, and was reappointed for another five years in January. Here, Prof Ferguson, who discovered temperature-dependent sex determination in alligators and crocodiles, discusses SFI’s developments and plans.

Since the recession, how has SFI’s budget and scope changed?
During the recession there were significant cuts to the public sector as part of the austerity measures, but the government left the science budget almost untouched. Sure, there were some small cuts, perhaps 5-10%, but nothing like on the scale — 35% or so — that went through much of the public service. Strong arguments were put forward about the importance of science for innovation, especially for a small, advanced export-oriented economy like Ireland’s. I give the Irish government a lot of credit for maintaining faith in science. Equally, the scientific community responded to the challenges. We developed new programmes and upped our game.

How has SFI’s strategy developed?
Ireland achieved a world ranking of 10 for the overall quality of its scientific research; an increase of 26 places in only 13 years. My predecessors improved capacity, now we’re focusing that capacity in strategically important areas. One of the biggest things we’ve done well in the past five years is to create 16 SFI Research Centres, which are mandated to collaborate with universities and with industry.

Science Foundation Ireland also participates in international research funding programmes to provide researchers in Ireland with additional opportunities. For example, we have a partnership to enable Irish based researchers to participate in the Royal Society’s University Research Fellowships. It means that our researchers go through the Royal Society’s rigorous procedures and we pick up the cost if the person is working in Ireland. Equally, we fund jointly with the Wellcome Trust so all their programmes are open to researchers in Ireland. The same goes for research councils in the UK (BBSRC and EPSRC) — and we have programmes with the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health in the US, as well as the National Natural Science Foundation of China.

How are the SFI Research Centres organised?
They each have cutting-edge science at their core, as well as an administrative hub located at one university. Then they have various partner projects, as spokes around the core. We ask that all the excellent people within a subject area in Ireland collaborate because that expertise is very distributed here.
Insight, for example, our largest SFI Research Centre — and Europe’s largest data analytics centre — has researchers in four locations.

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We are now in a position to attract people back into Ireland. SFI Research Centres with their collaborative, environment together with programmes such as our SFI Research Professorship and Future Research Leaders are making Ireland more attractive.

So, if the UK’s Brexit plan makes it harder for UK researchers to access European money, might Ireland receive a migration dividend?
We are strengthening our bilateral relationships with the UK — and for those people who are thinking of leaving, we want them to think of Ireland. We are open for business. We are committed members of the EU. I see more opportunity than threat.

At one extreme, if the UK retains access to European research programmes, strengthening bilateral relationships is important because groups in both countries will be able to collaborate and win European funding together. At the other extreme, if the UK is out of those programmes, then bilateral relationships will matter even more — hence we have so many joint funding programmes with UK research councils and charities.
Ireland Funds Great Research...

Maybe it’s your turn to join us!

Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) employs various mechanisms for both international collaboration and the recruitment of excellent researchers to Ireland.

- SFI Research Professorship Programme aims to attract outstanding senior research talent to Ireland, with awards of up to €5 million (direct costs).
- President of Ireland Future Research Leaders Award aims to recruit to Ireland outstanding emerging research leaders in both scientific and engineering domains, with awards of up to €1 million (direct costs).
- ERC Development Programme supports ERC applicants to resubmit to the ERC through an Irish Higher Education Institution.

Science Foundation Ireland funds across the career spectrum from early-stage to mid-stage career researchers to emerging research stars and up to established highly-esteemed research leaders, through individual and collaborative awards.

We also have a number of exciting opportunities for international partnerships, fellowships and conferences.

To find out more visit www.sfi.ie or follow us on Twitter @ScienceIrel