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To All it Concerns:

I am writing to draw attention to an issue of great concern to me and to many other academics in Ireland regarding the way Research Ireland is being run and the decisions it is taking. I am far from alone in believing that these represent a major threat to the excellence of higher education in this country. I write as someone with extensive experience of not only teaching abroad but also reviewing grant applications for a number of regional, national, and international funding bodies in Europe and the United States. I am thus familiar with international best practice across a wide variety of academic systems. RI is an outlier in a number of extremely concerning ways.

First and foremost is its clear ancestry in Science Foundation Ireland and the Department of Enterprise rather than in an higher education ecosystem. This orientation towards industry is unusual and distorts its understanding of the purpose of research, which includes serving civil society in a wide variety of ways that should not be dominated by the goal of creating the maximum number of jobs in privately owned foreign companies. While the board of comparable bodies is usually composed entirely of distinguished academics, supplemented in some cases by senior civil servants who typically also have impressive academic qualifications and who often serve ex officio, there is substantial industry representation on RI's board.

Second and nearly equally serious is its approach to "consultation." While many Irish government bodies routinely solicit the opinions of both experts and the general public through open meetings and invitations for written feedback, RI hosts briefings where lavish food cannot disguise the complete lack of opportunity for invitees to provide input regarding its strategies or the policies through which they are implemented. The inclusion

of the humanities and social sciences is largely limited to topics that do not acknowledge that scholars based in Ireland may come from or be expert in other parts of the world, but worse yet is the clear anti-intellectualism of some of the business-oriented speakers. Indeed, the whole organisation appears to be in thrall to AI, with little concern about the implications for democracy or the environment, much less that much of what it is currently generating is anti-factual hallucinations. AI companies are perfectly capable of investing their billions in their own research without compromising the ability of Ireland to develop more effective medicines, more sustainable agricultural practices, better housing policies, more efficient ways of delivering healthcare, and all the other benefits to society its academics need funding to realise.

It is also a matter of enormous concern that many of RI's top staff appear to have little or any idea of how broad swathes of academia work or how excellence is generated. Empower, the new process for awarding RI-funded doctoral and postdoctoral positions, is structured to reduce independent thinking at doctoral level. One of the key reasons why for most of the last three-quarters of a century the best place in the world to do a doctorate in many fields has been the United States is the degree to which most students in many fields, and the best students in all fields, have been responsible for choosing or at the least largely shaping their own doctoral topics. In my own area, it is often unthinkable that any student who simply wanted to study at a particular department or under a particular faculty member, would be admitted without proposing a credible doctoral project in advance of being admitted. In the sciences, many people have won Nobel Prizes for research to which they made original contributions as doctoral students that demonstrated their ability to go far beyond the direction their supervisors gave them.

RI's extraordinarily mis-guided plan to devolve decisions about funding doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows to universities that will select them on the basis of their research strategies will significantly undermine our international standing across multiple fields. Indeed the decision to name the scheme Empower ensures that it will disempower recipients because few universities or other employers are likely to take seriously a qualification with such a corporate-sounding name. Moreover, no excellent scholar or scientist begins by working to the research strategy of their university; excellent universities have them only in so far as they govern in what areas to hire and invest in the purchase of expensive equipment. Indeed, even having such themes is viewed by many, myself included, as an infringement of academic freedom. Furthermore, the new selection process deprives candidates of the international peer review that every applicant always merits and that bestows credibility on the fellowship, ensures early recognition of their work, and opens up opportunities that often extend even to those candidates who have not been successful. RI's approach instead promotes cronyism, which is exactly why the vice

presidents for research like it, as it will enable them to make or break careers as promotion is often dependent on supervising the winners. It also encourages an intellectual insularity that endangers the quality of even undergraduate teaching, not least as I have yet to encounter a campus where the faculty whose work garnered the most international respect were the ones who were most widely celebrated on their own campuses.

The other consequences are also serious. The salaries are set for the terms of the fellowship, rather than being raised in line with public service agreements in the sector. Many of the best Irish students who pursue doctorates already leave either for the United States, where their fellowships cover tuition and provide stipends that are often nearly double what they can get in Ireland, or for the rest of the EU, where the cost of living is almost always lower and they receive social benefits, such as health insurance and pension payments. Irish doctoral programmes attract extremely talented students from the Global South, but even eating properly can be a major challenge after they pay rent, if they can indeed find a habitable place to live. Nor does it help that RI is so hostile to those it should be there to serve that many recipients of its last round of doctoral funding struggled to confirm that they would indeed be able to continue their studies, because letters that should have taken a congratulatory tone imposed irrelevant conditions that incorrectly suggested that they were ineligible.

In conclusion there is much room for improvement, which can be realised above all by consulting with academics, very much including the increasing number of precarious staff as well as senior figures and the Royal Irish Academy, and also through a better understanding of how Ireland can align with the best of what other EU countries offer.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Kathleen James-Chakraborty', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Kathleen James-Chakraborty
Professor of Art History