



UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy *Research, Analysis, Evidence*

Empowering Policy Excellence (EPEX)

This paper sets out a plan for an initiative called Empowering Policy Excellence (EPEX), which is intended to enable policy makers in Ireland, other European countries and international organisations to achieve excellence in policymaking, implementation and evaluation. This will be achieved by an innovative combination of initiatives to strengthen relationships, build research impact capacity and provide educational programmes from micro-credential to doctoral level. These initiatives are designed to:

- build stronger links between policy makers and UCD researchers to strengthen the evidence base for policy
- enable UCD researchers to maximise the policy impact of their research
- strengthen policy makers' capacity to commission, conduct, interpret and use research effectively to inform their work and
- promote innovation and excellence in policy making, implementation, and evaluation.

EPEX builds on several initiatives already underway in UCD, particularly in the Geary Institute for Public Policy and the College of Social Sciences and Law, but also in other parts of the university. However, EPEX will significantly expand and integrate these initiatives to construct an innovative, multifaceted, coherent, and comprehensive programme to empower policy excellence.

EPEX Knowledge Dissemination and Impact Maximisation

The Geary Institute's research for policy dissemination platform - PublicPolicy.ie - has been at the forefront of efforts to disseminate research findings in an accessible way to policy makers.

Established originally in 2012 and integrated into the Geary Institute in 2019. PublicPolicy.ie has published 24 policy papers in 2024 to date (2-3 papers are published monthly). These papers outline the policy implications of academic research on an enormous variety of topics. Most papers are contributed by UCD researchers, but an increasing number are written by academics at other Irish third-level institutions. Disseminating knowledge on PublicPolicy.ie is now the 'go to' strategy for meeting the impact maximisation requirements of research grant applications.

The Geary Institute also provides an extensive suite of support to enable members to maximise their policy impact. For instance, editorial services are provided as part of PublicPolicy.ie which advise researchers on presenting their findings in an accessible way for a non-specialist audience. The Geary Institute has produced a policy impact guide for members and provides regular training and information events on maximising policy impact.

EPEX would significantly expand the suite of impact supports currently available to Geary Institute members to include more training and information events. In addition, the pre- and post-award research project management support services currently provided to members would be expanded to include advice on designing impact maximisation strategies for research grant applications and support for implementing these post-award.

EPEX Public Policy Expert Residency and Mobility Programmes

As part of the EPEX programme, the Geary Institute for Public Policy will expand its suite of policy relevant publications by establishing a *Policy and Practice Reflections* series linked to a new expert in residency programme. This programme would provide experts from the Irish civil and public service and relevant non-governmental and commercial organisations with the opportunity to spend a three-month period at the Geary Institute, when they would write a 5,000-10,000 word reflection on a particularly critical and knotty policy and/or practice challenge they have faced in their career or a current/ ongoing challenge. This residency would provide these policy makers and practitioners with an opportunity to take a break from 'thinking fast' about responses to the most pressing political priorities and provide them with an opportunity to 'think slow' about how to address 'wicked problems'. The EPEX policy maker and practitioner residency programme would also enable these experts to gain new skills and knowledge by attending the Geary Institute's seminar and training programme, using the library, research software and online resources and networking with faculty and researchers.

The latter would, in turn, gain opportunities to strengthen their links with policy makers and practitioners, which would help to maximise the impact of their research.

The Geary Institute currently runs a successful Building International Collaborations Supports (BICS) seed funding scheme which provides office space and funding to enable members to bring international collaborators to Ireland. EPEX will expand this programme to enable experts from policy institutes in highly ranked universities abroad to spend a period at the Geary Institute. During their time at UCD, they would be expected to contribute to the EPEX Webinar Series or summer/ winter school programme (see below). The Geary Institute already has strong links with several policy institutes abroad, including King's College London, University College London and Queen's University Belfast, and this international programme would enable it to expand and deepen these links and thereby support further collaboration on research grant applications and other activities.

In the medium term it is envisaged that the national and international links with researchers, policy makers and practitioners forged through two EPEX residency programmes will support an application for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action (MSCA) Staff Exchange grant. This would support exchanges between policy makers and researchers in policy institutes across the EU and in other Horizon Europe participating and third countries.

EPEX Webinars, Masterclasses and Micro-credentials

In the 2023/24 academic year, the Geary Institute for Public Policy ran a very well received online training programme for the civil servants attached to the Irish Government Economic Evaluation Service (IGESS), with contributions from leading international public policy experts. This programme examined the latest thinking and research on achieving excellence in policy making, implementation and evaluation.

The Institute plans to partner with the Irish Civil Service Research Network to develop this programme into a monthly EPEX webinar series in which an international researcher or policy maker will present research on policy making, implementation and evaluation innovations internationally, and a member of the Civil Service Research Network will respond with a short reflection on the relevance of these reforms for Ireland. These webinars are intended to feed new ideas into the Irish policy making infrastructure, inspire innovation, and strengthen the Geary Institute's links with Irish policy makers and public policy institutes and researchers internationally.

There is potential to develop this initiative into masterclasses and summer/ winter schools and ultimately into a programme of micro-credentials in policy making, implementation and evaluation. These micro-credentials would draw on existing expertise in UCD, particularly among colleagues who teach the Master of Public Policy (MPP) and PhD in Public Policy programmes, but also on the many policy relevant programmes that the university offers in environmental, economic and public health policy and other areas. A public policy micro-credentials programme would also expand the pool of applicants to these degrees.

EPEX Graduate Education and Doctoral Programme

UCD established a successful PhD in Public Policy programme in 2007 and a Master of Public Policy (MPP) in 2010. Recruitment into the former programme is currently just 1-2 students per year, but the latter recruits 30-40 students per year, including some part-time students from the civil service and government agencies. Programmes of this type are provided in many other leading universities internationally and are commonly linked to public policy institutes. Examples include: the Policy Institute at King's College London, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and the policy institutes linked to the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago and the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley.

UCD's MPP and PhD in Public Policy programmes have significant potential for further expansion, in particular by attracting more serving civil and public servants for part-time study. In addition to the PhD in Public Policy, there is potential to create a linked taught doctoral programme that would be very attractive to this cohort. EPEX would contribute significantly to this objective by helping to build links with and thereby attract this cohort of potential students. In addition, EPEX would increase the resources and expertise available to students who could attend the webinar series and summer/ winter school programmes and enjoy guest lectures from participants in the two residency programmes detailed above.

In the medium term, the EPEX residency programmes and associated doctoral programmes will support an application for an MSCA doctoral network. This would support exchanges between public policy PhD students in policy institutes across the EU and in other Horizon Europe participating and third-country countries.