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**Commercial research 'like herding cats';  
State's chief scientific adviser says researchers must be directed towards  
industry, writes Maria Delaney**

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THE state's chief scientific adviser says scientists must be encouraged to research areas of "strategic importance" to Ireland but that directing them towards areas with commercial impact is like **herding cats**.

Mark Ferguson told a conference in NUI Galway in May: "It's very difficult to herd cats, but I can certainly change the position of their feeding bowl."

Ferguson, who is also director general of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), Ireland's largest science funding agency, told The Sunday Times the remark related to thematic funding schemes within the SFI.

"There are areas of strategic importance for Ireland currently where there is not a huge focus of research but there are people capable of doing it," said Ferguson.

Links with industry feature prominently in the new SFI strategy but a study by Times Higher Education magazine last week found that Irish researchers attracted the lowest amount of industry funding.

Ferguson said this did not reflect current activity in Ireland.

"There's a lot happening now and it will take time for those things to show through," he said.

Professor Eugene Kennedy, science secretary of the Royal Irish Academy, welcomed the growing relationship between science and industry but said "curiosity-driven research" should not be "squeezed out".

A panel of civil servants, scientists and company representatives have drawn up a list of 14 "priority" areas on which scientists should focus, including diagnostics, marine renewable energy and medical devices.

"You must fund the very bright, even though their research may not fall within the prioritisation," Kennedy said. He added there is concern within the scientific community about individuals not being funded because their research is in a low priority area.

Professor Peter Gallagher of Trinity College Dublin said he would like to see more balance in the system. Astronomy, for example, is not a priority area, which is preventing him and researchers from other Irish universities from building a radio telescope in Birr Castle, Co Offaly.

"Commercial gain is important but [SFI] should support excellent scientists to do excellent science," said Gallagher. Ferguson, who controls SFI's funding, said he believes that excellence must be coupled with impact. "[Funders] will think: 'What am I getting for my money?' The scientific community needs to articulate their relevance."

Data obtained by The Sunday Times shows that there was nearly a threefold increase in the number of funding applications rejected on grounds of eligibility in 2013.

About half of these applicants were rejected before being evaluated by a scientific panel because they did not fit into the SFI's prioritisation areas. Ferguson said that though this rate has increased, Ireland is still below the global average.

Despite being appointed chief scientific adviser in October 2012, Ferguson said he had yet to be asked for advice by the government. After his appointment some scientists suggested that Ferguson's dual roles could create a conflict of interest. "I've never been asked for any advice so there is no conflict of interest," said Ferguson. He added that if asked, it is unlikely he would provide advice himself but would instead assemble an expert panel.

Despite this, Ferguson said his advisory role was not redundant.

His job involves being an ambassador for Irish science as well as benchmarking with other chief scientific advisers, he said, but it does not involve advising the government on science policy.

Ferguson said that the terms and conditions of the position changed when he was appointed. The office of the chief scientific adviser was abolished upon the departure of the previous chief adviser, Paddy Cunningham, and its two staff were redeployed. "There are no resources now, so anything that had resource attached to it was removed and that included anything to do with science policy," said Ferguson.

He also defended his scientific record following criticism in the Dail by Clare Daly, an independent TD, who accused him of "academic malpractice".

As a young researcher, Ferguson published papers in two scientific journals using the same data. This was revealed in a New York Times article in 1982 which said that "editors of leading scientific journals are cracking down on what they consider deceptive or improper practices by researchers who submit the same paper simultaneously to two or more journals".

Ferguson, who issued an apology at the time, said the incident occurred more than 30 years ago and was not scientific malpractice. "I'm not sure of the motives of people who want to bring up something from 30 years ago when I was a PhD student," he said.

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