

Letter to Wellcome Trust

Re: Discovery Research Funding eligibility criteria

13 July 2026

Irish Humanities Alliance



FAO: Professor Rachel McKendry (Executive Director, Discovery, Wellcome Trust) and Doctor Alyson Fox (Director of Research Funding, Wellcome Trust)

13th July 2026

Dear Professor McKendry and Dr Fox,

We write as medical humanities scholars on the island of Ireland, to note with concern your letters of June 17th to Irish HEIs, to the effect that, from October 2026, applicants from the Republic of Ireland will no longer be eligible to act as lead investigator for the Trust's Discovery Research schemes. As your letter notes, this brings a longstanding relationship to an abrupt end – not only in the life sciences and public health, as noted in your letter, but also in the medical humanities. Here, scholars have a long history with the Wellcome Trust, as recipients of grants, as collaborators with international colleagues, as contributors to significant strategic initiatives – and as members of a transnational community that have given significant amounts of time to serving on Wellcome Trust review and interview panels, just as the Trust has made a major contribution to advancing the field in Ireland. We note with understanding and sympathy the geopolitical and other pressures underpinning the tightening of the Trust's geographical focus. Nonetheless, this letter raises two objections, one processual and one substantive, and urges you to reconsider.

First, we have been dismayed by the suddenness of the decision, and the absence of any consultation, or even any informal discussion, with the affected research community. Many of us have given over significant amounts of time to building strong relationships with Wellcome - indeed, have been encouraged by Trust staff, on their visits to Ireland, to continue to invest in this relationship. Most egregiously, perhaps, until several weeks ago, we have encouraged students and early career colleagues to arc their research trajectories towards the fund's schemes, and to plan accordingly. It is surprising and disappointing that this does not seem to have played any part in the suddenness with which that relationship is now ended. It is equally surprising and disappointing that the Trust has not seen the necessity of any kind of consultation, or even collegial forewarning. In the case of our early career colleagues, who will of course have started the process of planning a competitive bid more than 12 months from the next putative deadline, to be told that the final deadline is in fact barely over one month away, is especially unfortunate. Whatever about the substance of the decision, we want to stress to you that, as a process, in terms of its speed, and its absence of consultation, this has not been handled well – and indeed seems hard to square with the Trust's own much publicized interest in positive research culture.

Second, however, is the substance of the decision. As medical humanities scholars in Ireland, we work on an all-Island basis – i.e. we organise ourselves as a research community across the border. Efforts to slowly and patiently build such cross-border scholarly communities have had a highly positive development on this island over recent decades, generating important externalities in post-conflict social and communal developments, in addition to addressing cross-border health challenges. Non-state funding bodies operating across the border, such as Wellcome, have been critical to it. It seems odd, with this in mind, that the Trust now finds itself creating a foreseeable negative impact with its new funding arrangements that would be detrimental to the health, as well as the social and political wellbeing, of both communities north and south of the border, thereby working against decades of positive progress in this area. Both research and communal lived

experiences have shown that a whole-of-island approach to health and wellbeing in Ireland, is critical for both jurisdictions on the island, including the jurisdiction that remains in the UK. Indeed, if the north of Ireland remains among the Trust's priority geographies, it is counterintuitive to disqualify researchers on the other side of the border, given how important cross-border healthcare has been in recent decades. Supporting the north of Ireland's (and indeed the UK's) health and wellbeing challenges means supporting researchers on both sides of the UK/Ireland border – building on longstanding partnerships between academics, institutions and community partners across the whole island of Ireland, in the context of the borderless population flows across the two jurisdictions.

With these two points in mind, we urge you to revisit this decision. We do sincerely recognise the strategic reasons for this development; but there is a clear anomaly in Wellcome's relationship with Ireland, and very good reasons for this anomalous relationship, that justifies a rethink.

**Signed by members of the IHA Health and Medical Humanities Working Group
and supported by 50+ leading scholars across Ireland**

Further information

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