Educational Research Centre
Strategic Plan 2022-2024

Foras Taighde ar **Oideachas**
Educational Research Centre

Contents

Acknowledgements

This strategic plan represents a collaborative effort among staff of the Educational Research Centre (ERC), working with the Department of Education's (DoE's) Central Policy Unit (CPU). It is the second of the ERC's strategic plans covering the period 2022-2024 and follows the submission of an Interim Strategic Plan submitted to DoE in December 2021.

Our thanks to the members of our Board, Denise Burns (Acting Chair), Éamonn Murtagh, Michael Martin and Sharon Feeney for their input into the drafting and finalising of the strategic plan. Sincere thanks to all of our staff for their extensive engagement with the Chief Executive and Head of Governance and Corporate Affairs during the development phase of the plan.

We sought responses from 25 partner/stakeholder groups through a consultation survey conducted in January 2022, and acknowledge and thank the agencies and organisations that provided valuable responses and commentary. The agencies consulted on the plan are listed in the Appendix.

Foreword by the Chair

The Governing Board of the Educational Research Centre has pleasure in presenting the Strategic Plan for 2022 – 2024. This is the second Strategic Plan of the ERC since it gained its statutory basis under the Education Act (1998) in September 2015. Much has been achieved since the ERC gained its statutory basis.

The work of the ERC is significant in the educational landscape of Ireland. Large-scale assessments provide comparable data between students and schools in Ireland and those in other countries. Tests developed by the ERC and used by schools provide data on the performance and academic needs of individual and class groups of students, which helps to inform teaching and learning practices.

This strategic plan articulates a vision for the work of the ERC in optimising its programme of work and the valuable data that is generated. The vision includes establishing a coherent research and assessment strategy that overarches large-scale assessments, evaluations and test development. The vision outlines the hope of a multi-year resourcing arrangement with the Department of Education in order to plan effectively and implement the life cycles of projects. To this end, the Strategic Plan recommends structures that would enhance the relationship, communication and mutual understanding between the ERC and the Department. Such structures would ensure that the outputs of the ERC fit well with national strategies and local priorities and needs. Reciprocally, data generated by the ERC could be optimised for the setting of national priorities in policy and the allocation of educational resources.

The Board wishes to commend the ERC staff for commitment and professionalism which makes possible the quality and quantity of work produced. In particular, the Board wishes to acknowledge and thank Dr Jude Cosgrove, the CEO, for her expertise, dedication and integrity as her leadership has so effectively guided the ERC in recent years and established a clear direction for the future.

The Board looks forward to working with staff, the Department of Education and collaborators in the implementation of this strategic plan.

Denise Burns

Dr Denise Burns

Acting Chair

Foreword by the Chief Executive

While the Educational Research Centre (ERC) has been in existence since 1966, it was not established as an independent statutory body until September 2015, under Section 54 of the Education Act, 1998. Its first strategic plan covered the period 2019-2021, which coincided with a period of transition and change, not only in terms of the ERC's governance and structures, but also within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This second strategic plan is organised along the three themes of **stabilise, enhance** and **innovate** to reflect the current context and strategic priorities of the ERC, which are to stabilise our programme of work and ways of working; to further enhance capacity, resources and governance; and, in certain areas of our work, to implement innovations so that we can better deliver excellence and efficiency in an uncertain time of digital, environmental and societal change.

I am very grateful to have had the privilege of guiding the ERC through the implementation of its first strategic plan, and have witnessed the exceptional work of our staff over this period. I have also been inspired and moved by the care and adaptability of our staff and our colleagues, parents/guardians and students in the schools that we work with in dealing with the difficult and myriad challenges arising from the pandemic.

The ERC provides important contributions to our national educational landscape and, to continue to do so, it must contribute to, and learn from, international educational contexts. The current challenges facing our educational system can and should be supported by well-designed and implemented research, assessment and evaluation that serve the needs of our system. The themes that are woven through the 2022-2024 plan reflect the priorities that the ERC should focus on over the coming period, as identified by our Board, our staff, the Department of Education, and various stakeholders.

I congratulate and thank the Board and the staff at the ERC on the overall success of its first plan and wish all of the staff every success with the implementation of this second plan.

Jude Cosgrove

Dr Jude Cosgrove

Chief Executive Officer

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CPU	Central Policy Unit (of the Department of Education)
DCU	Dublin City University
DEIS	Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools (DoE's initiative to support educational disadvantage)
DoE	Department of Education
EAL	English as Additional Language
ERC	Educational Research Centre
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HR	Human Resources
IRC	Irish Research Council
IT	Information Technology
LSA	Large-Scale Assessment (ERC oversees the following LSAs: NAMER, PIRLS, PISA, TIMSS)
NAMER	National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PPADE	Post-Primary Assessment and Diagnosis – English (a standardised test developed jointly by NEPS and the ERC)
RPO	Research-Performing Organisation
SEN	Special Educational Needs
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

Highlights from the Educational Research Centre's (ERC's) Strategic Plan

Strategic vision

The strategic vision of the ERC is *excellence in conducting and supporting educational research, evaluation and assessment*.

Mission

Our mission, based on the ERC's Establishment Order, has three parts:

- To conduct and disseminate commissioned and independently-initiated national and international research, assessment and evaluation studies that are timely, accessible and relevant, on all aspects of education, and at all levels of the education system;
- To develop high-quality assessments and provide strong assessment support services to schools and centres of education; and
- To collaborate with national and international bodies to share learning and to develop capacity and expertise in all of the aforementioned areas.

Values

Our work is informed by six core values: valuing the quality, relevance, accessibility and impact of our work; valuing the public trust and confidence placed in us; valuing and respecting learners, parents/guardians, educators and stakeholders, and each other; the importance of investment in staff expertise and wellbeing; the importance of teamwork, relationships and working collaboratively; and our commitment to public service values.

Guiding principles

Our work is underpinned by five guiding principles: quality, relevance and impact; balance between sustainability and development; alignment with national priorities while informed by international developments; collaborative spirit in both leadership and teamwork; and inclusiveness and respect.

Cross-cutting themes and phases of the strategy

Arising from current internal and external contexts, several themes cut across the strategy. These are equality, diversity and inclusion; Irish language communities; training and professional development; staff wellbeing, engagement and retention; and technology.

Objectives, goals and outcomes 2022-2024

Objectives

1. To **stabilise** and bring flexibility to the working environment; physical environment and infrastructure; and conduct of research, evaluation and assessment studies and services, in response to resource challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic
2. To **enhance**, strengthen and improve corporate governance and compliance; test development and delivery; and analysis and reporting
3. To bring **innovation** to products and services; technology, tools and instruments; and knowledge and methods.

Goals

1. Working with the Department, establish a sustainable, multi-year structure and resourcing plan for the programme of work
2. Working with the Department, strengthen the ERC's test development and standardisation programme of work in order to implement test development studies that are mutually identified as being of high priority
3. Establish a sustainable and stable response to COVID-19 that incorporates ongoing monitoring and risk management and a long-term blended working policy
4. Establish an IT strategy that is closely linked to governance and compliance as well as ERC's strategic priorities
5. Establish a comprehensive research and assessment strategy that cuts across large-scale assessments, evaluations, and test development and test services to schools activities; and which includes a strand covering analytic methodologies with links to the CPD strategy
6. Establish a CPD strategy that covers CPD along a continuum, promotes collaboration, and incorporates engagement, retention and wellbeing
7. Establish a communications strategy that prioritises audience awareness, reach, Irish language, SEN and EAL groups
8. Achieve enhanced efficiencies in the administration of research and evaluation studies
9. Build on the Agreement with DCU and progress made on the regularisation of the Test Department building ownership in order to make urgent enhancements to ERC's physical infrastructure
10. Further strengthen governance structures, prioritising finance, risk and audit, data governance, and HR.

Outcomes

1. A clear operationalisation and resourcing of ERC's statutory functions captured within a coherent structure to enable efficient multi-year strategic and resource planning between the ERC and DoE, agility in responding to requests from the DoE, and strategic enhancements to further enable independent work and collaboration

2. The commencement of an efficient, modular test development and standardisation programme that provides high quality outputs and a good fit with national and local needs and strategic priorities

3. A confident, stable and agile organisation that effectively incorporates flexibility and technology into its working environment without loss of its core values or culture

4. IT tools, resources, policies and processes that equip staff to work effectively and with a broader awareness of governance, compliance and national contexts

5. A research and assessment strategy that fits with broader national and international contexts, brings increased strategic coherence across the organisation, and permits efficiencies and innovations to be identified

6. A professional and personal development strategy that brings about improvements in engagement, retention, professional learning and wellbeing

7. A communication strategy that is successful in enhancing audience awareness and reach, with specific focus on Irish language, SEN and EAL groups

8. Research and evaluation studies that are administered more efficiently to permit more time for analytic and innovative work

9. A physical infrastructure that is supported by a 10-year building plan, with work begun to address capacity, accessibility and environmental sustainability concerns

10. An organisation that is achieving or approaching excellence in all areas of governance.

Section 1: Introduction

Overview

This section provides a brief overview of recent and current context of the ERC, and summarises the key achievements under its previous 2019-2021 plan. The review of previous achievements and challenges informs the development of the goals and actions under the current 2022-2024 plan.

Summary evaluation of 2019-2021

Box 1 lists some of ERC's achievements over the lifetime of the 2019-2021 plan, while Box 2 summarises key challenges and obstacles encountered during this period[1].

BOX 1. HIGHLIGHTS OF ERC'S ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS, 2019-2021

- A 25% increase in staff
- Four large new projects successfully commenced and on track
- Publication/completion of 26 reports and infographics, 18 peer-reviewed articles, 23 conference or seminar presentations, 20 tests/test manuals/test software, and in 2019, the organising and hosting of an international conference
- Nomination for a Civil Service Excellence Award in 2021 for collaborative work with NEPS
- Successful implementation of remote working environments for staff in response to COVID-19
- Successful adjustments and administrations of large-scale assessments (including NAMER, PIRLS and PISA) in response to COVID-19
- A 60% increase in followers of ERC's Twitter account (from 1450 to 2300) with over 300 tweets issued
- Long-term Agreement with DCU established
- Significant developments and improvements made with respect to governance, in particular audit/internal controls, finance, risk and HR
- Substantial improvements made to ERC's IT infrastructure, policies and processes, including joining the HEANet National Educational and Research Network
- Achieved compliance with the Official Languages Act
- Significant amount of professional development undertaken in a range of specialised topics to support research, administrative and technical work
- All-staff training covering topics including Health and Safety, GDPR and cyber security
- Successful procurement, redevelopment and deployment of ERC's online assessment system for schools
- Successful procurements of multi-year psychometric/technical services, print, data entry, large-scale assessment technical support, laptop hire and legal and audit services
- Significant improvements to test sales services to schools with new website and updated catalogues.

---

1   These arise from an internal evaluation of the ERC's implementation of its 2019-2021 strategic plan, which consisted of internal audit and reflective review and discussion.

BOX 2. CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED IN 2019-2021

- Retirement of Chair in July 2021 (Deputy Chair currently in Acting Chair role)
- Long-standing Ordinary Member vacancy (since September 2018, filled at end of 2021)
- Significant capacity and resource gaps indicated by 2021-2024 Workforce Plan remaining unaddressed, leading to delay or postponement of some research projects/outputs, notably test development studies, where Irish language test development is a priority
- Less progress than desired on multi-annual strategic and resource planning with parent Department, resulting in resource/capacity shortages to progress some of the programme of work
- Necessary diversion of resources to manage ERC's primary (e.g. remote working) and secondary (e.g. complex adjustments to existing programme of work) responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Internal and External Contexts

Looking more generally at the internal and external contexts of the ERC, the following five are important factors to consider in establishing a strategic response and way of working for the ERC during 2022-2024. The wide-ranging and cross-cutting implications of these factors mean that they affect both internal and external contexts.

1. The significant developments relating to **digital technologies** (e.g. ERC's move to cloud-based test services for schools; data analytics; AI and machine learning; remote/blended working and meeting tools) that have implications for the IT infrastructural requirements of the ERC; the manner in which ERC staff work; the manner in which the ERC can best address the needs of schools in the provision of its test services; and the strategic role that ERC can play in scanning the horizon to guide research and policy.

2. The medium- and longer-term consequences arising from the **pandemic-related disruptions to schooling and to the State Examinations** and the wide-ranging implications that these have for Senior Cycle Reform, teaching, learning and assessment more generally.

3. 1 and 2 have significant implications for national strategies which will be active in the lifetime of this current (2022-2024) strategy – two major ones being the **Digital Strategy for Schools** (whose timeline coincides with the EU Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027) and the new 10-year **National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.**

4. Within highly complex and uncertain internal and external contexts, there is an ongoing need to identify and embed **cross-linkages and coherence** between and among the various strands of ERC's statutory functions, strands of work, national priorities and international trends. This can be supported and enabled through enhanced cross-linkages and coherence in the relationships between the ERC, its parent Department and its stakeholders. Cross-cutting areas for which greater internal and external coherence is sought include **research and assessment strategy** (including both large-scale assessments and tests

provided to schools)**; medium- to long-term resource planning;** and **use of data to inform policy and monitor implementation.** Further internal work is required to achieve greater structure, coherence and efficiency in **professional and personal development** and **communications and outputs**. All of these in turn can be supported by strong governance, for example by **filling the current Chair vacancy of ERC's Governing Board.**

5. The resilience and wellbeing of ERC's staff, along with the population more generally and including school leaders, teachers, parents/guardians and students has perhaps never been more important. Wellbeing has been challenged with the myriad of negative health, social, family and economic impacts of the pandemic. Widespread concerns about our environment and at times harmful effects of digital technologies should be acknowledged and acted upon, and this in turn creates a need to place **resilience, sustainability and wellbeing at the centre of strategy**.

Section 2: Development of the Strategic Plan

The development of the Strategic Plan 2022-2024 takes both a phased and consultative approach.

- **Phase 1 – Initial review and development** – September-November 2021
  - Internal review of existing strategic plan
  - Consultation with ERC's Senior Management Team
  - Consultation with Governing Board and Department of Education
  - Agreement on high-level aspects of the plan
  - Identification of high-level priorities and phases.

- **Phase 2 – Internal consultation** – November 2021-January 2022
  - Consultation with staff via survey
  - Key themes identified in the survey responses explored further through group discussions to establish priorities, actions, goals and challenges
  - Interim plan submitted to Central Policy Unit (CPU) December 2021.

- **Phase 3 – External consultation** – January 2022
  - 25 partners and stakeholders consulted via survey (list shown in Appendix 1) with follow-up communications and exchanges where required
  - CPU co-ordinated a response to the ERC's consultation across the various sections and units with which the ERC works.

- **Phase 4 – Drafting and submission of Plan** – February-March 2022
  - Review by Senior Management Team
  - Review by Governing Board
  - Review by DoE
  - Submission of final plan to DoE at end March.

Section 3: ERC's strategic plan 2022-2024

Strategic vision

Consistent with 2019-2021:

Excellence in conducting and supporting educational research, evaluation and assessment.

The ERC will maintain and enhance its work in the areas of national and international educational research and evaluation, development of assessments, and supporting schools and other centres of education in the use of these assessments.

For 2022-2024, we have added:

It will enable, particularly through its independent research function, implementation of strategic innovations in research, evaluation and assessment, and will support national efforts towards strategic coherence and alignment in these areas.

Mission

Our mission has three parts (and is unchanged since 2019-2021). The first two are drawn from the Establishment Order while the third is included as an essential means by which our functions are enhanced and informed by collaboration with national and international bodies.

1. To conduct and disseminate commissioned and independently-initiated national and international research, assessment and evaluation studies that are timely, accessible and relevant, on all aspects of education, and at all levels of the education system
2. To develop high quality assessments and provide strong assessment support services to schools and centres of education
3. To collaborate with national and international bodies to share learning and to develop capacity and expertise in all of the aforementioned areas.

Values

Values also remain unchanged from 2019-2021:

1. We place a high value on the quality, relevance, accessibility and impact of our work
2. We value the public trust and confidence placed in us and are committed to living up to that trust

3. We value and respect learners, parents/guardians, educators and stakeholders, as well as each other
4. We value investment in staff expertise, support and wellbeing
5. We view teamwork, relationships and working collaboratively as essential
6. We are committed to public service values.

Guiding principles

The ethos and staff of the Centre are as important as the work and outputs of the Centre, if not more so. Our work in all areas and at all levels is guided by the following principles. Some of the guiding principles are updated since 2019-2021 – each is labelled according to whether it has been updated or not.

1. ***Quality, relevance and impact***
   (Updated for 2022-2024)
   Whether our work is commissioned by the DoE or other agencies, or initiated by the ERC itself, we place a high value on the technical quality of the work we undertake.

   Quality should also be paired with relevance and accessibility to users and stakeholders in the education system and our research, evaluation and assessment should provide tangible value to the intended target groups.

   We recognise that impact can be bi-directional and that we should look to adjust both our processes and our outputs in response to feedback from partners and stakeholders.

2. ***Balance between sustainability and development***
   (Updated for 2022-2024)
   We must manage our activities in a manner that prioritises both environmental and work- or capacity-related sustainability whilst promoting development in research, assessment and evaluation.

   We recognise that development activities cannot reasonably occur unless there is a minimum level of stability in staffing and a structured, planned approach to our work that takes a multi-year view.

   We note the importance of the independent function of the ERC, that is, to initiate and conduct research for and with other bodies as well as for the furtherance of ERC's own strategic objectives.

   We also recognise the importance of achieving our goals under the 2030 Climate Target Plan, such that all development, including infrastructural improvement, must be environmentally sustainable in the longer term.

3. ***Aligned with national priorities, informed by national and international developments***
   (Updated for 2022-2024)
   As an independent statutory agency of the Department of Education and in line with our mandate as prescribed in the ERC Establishment Order, we

will continue to carry out activities on behalf of the Department, while at the same time, prioritising strategic planning that supports independent research activities.

This Plan is thus informed by the Department's Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 and by some of the strategies and policies which in turn inform it, notably:

- Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life
- Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice
- DEIS Plan
- 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language
- Policy on Gaeltacht Education
- Digital Strategy for Schools
- STEM Education Policy Statement.

We will continue to develop and progress our independent function by maintaining close engagement with partners and stakeholders at both national and international levels so that we can enhance our ability to lead on and support research, evaluation and assessment practices in Ireland and internationally.

The support and enhancement of ERC's independent function occurs in a range of respects:

- participation in organising international conferences, including the conferences of the Association for Educational Assessment – Europe (2022) and the European Association for Research in Adolescence (2022)
- through the publication of ERC's *Irish Journal of Education*
- in the learning gained in our participation in international large-scale assessments
- through participation in/contributions to international conferences and workshops and international journals
- through the conduct of research studies/activities on behalf of bodies other than the Department of Education
- from collaboration with colleagues in other organisations, nationally and internationally.

Examples of international developments of note during the lifetime of this Strategic Plan are:

- The first digital administration of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in Ireland in 2023
- The transition from spring to autumn testing in Ireland for the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2022

- Continued participation in FLIP+, an international online e-assessment organisation

- The implementation at EU level of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027.

Some of the key developments that the ERC is well-positioned to examine in a forward-looking manner are:

- Computer-based assessment design and data analysis, to provide a better fit to both school and system level needs

- Analytic and conceptual advances that permit further use of existing national and international datasets, to provide new insights and more efficient use of existing data

- The nature of links between educational and other outcomes (e.g. wellbeing), to enable greater coherence in research, policy and practice.

4. *Collaborative spirit in leadership and teamwork*
   (Unchanged from 2019-2021)

   We view collaboration as fundamental to all aspects of our work. We learn from each other as well as from external agencies and stakeholders, and view shared learning as a driver to improvement. We encourage and facilitate senior staff to guide, mentor and support junior staff and show leadership as well as good management. We value working in teams due to the complexity of the issues facing education and the complexity of the methods used in educational research.

5. *Inclusiveness and respect*
   (Updated for 2022-2024)
   Inclusivity and respect underpin all aspects of our work and are related to the principle of collaborative spirit. In addition, we place a high value on being aware of and sensitive to the range of needs and interests of the diverse groups within and connected to the education system. We aim to improve the accessibility and relevance of our reports and other outputs (e.g. website, standardised tests and supporting documentation) in order to be more fully inclusive and respectful of our various audiences, including those in Irish language communities and in various socio-economic and other linguistic contexts.

Phases of the strategy

As with our Strategic Plan 2019-2021, we have designed our 2022-2024 plan along three phases. Phases overlap and cut across organisational functions.

Achieving **Stability** is a precursor to **Enhance**, which is a precursor to **Innovate**. There are relationships between phases. For example, stability is required in order to innovate, but innovation is necessary to ensure the long-term stability of the ERC.

Different phases may be in operation at a given time, depending on the organisation function being considered. The phases are driven by a combination of:

- **Consultation** – across all phases but particularly in the stabilise phase, consulting extensively with staff; and across all phases, placing a priority on reaching out to our key stakeholders, in particular school leaders, teachers, parents/guardians and students – to improve our outputs and services
- **Efficiency** – across all phases, we strive towards efficiency, through coherent business planning, collaboration, reduction in/streamlining of workflow steps and/or processes, and appropriate and effective uses of technology
- **Excellence** – across the *stabilise* and *enhance* phases, and then using the learning from these to inform the innovate phase, building on what we have learned, actively seeking approaches and solutions to improve our ways of working.

2022-2024: Stabilise

In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, ways of working have changed dramatically, and these have implications for a range of staffing, infrastructural and working environment issues, as well as for the implementation of ERC's statutory functions. The stable conduct of research and evaluation studies, as well as the delivery of ERC's assessment services to schools and other centres, will need to take into account the profound changes that have occurred as a result of the pandemic, and the technological and other responses that are occurring to meet these challenges. Central to this phase is the establishment of an appropriate, long-term blended working policy.

We have also experienced some challenges and delays in our 2019-2021 programme of work which may be directly linked to a lack of staffing capacity, and in particular (as evidenced in our 2021-2014 Workforce Plan), a shortage of management, administrative and technical staff, and a shortage of researchers with Irish language skills to implement a range of test development and standardisation studies as agreed with our parent Department. To achieve stability on test development, a long-term plan including cyclical/modular redevelopment is required, as well as specific staff for core and urgent projects.

It is therefore a high priority for the ERC to establish a medium-term agreement with its parent Department so that solutions can be reached in order to resource and implement the agreed priorities of the ERC's work. This agreement, which would entail operationalising elements of the ERC's Strategic Instrument (SI No. 392 of 2015) will also need to define ERC's independent functions and governance, for example to enable the ERC to efficiently respond to requests to work for agencies and Departments other than its parent Department; to respond effectively to invitations for collaboration with other national and international agencies; and to itself initiate collaborative and independent work which supports its strategic priorities.

Also important for this phase is the establishment of a longer-term Building

Strategy which will incorporate digital technology and sustainability/environmental considerations, as well as the long-term needs of the ERC.

The stabilise phase deliberately cuts across all three years of the strategic plan to reflect the considerable and sustained efforts that will be required to achieve the ERC's strategic priorities under this phase.

2023-2024: Enhance

Despite governance and resourcing challenges, the ERC envisages moving from stabilisation to enhancement in three key areas during the lifetime of the current plan: use of data to enhance its monitoring and evaluation functions; services to schools (by developing new tests and providing enhanced supports for existing and new tests); and engagement with other stakeholders and the general public (with reporting and other outputs).

2024: Innovate

Conditional on sufficient stability and enhancement, the ERC intends to move into a phase of innovation in certain strands of its work (i.e. those flagged under the Enhance phase). We use the OECD's (2014)[2] definitions and framework for innovation to identify and implement innovation in our products and services (e.g. tests and testing services to schools); technology, tools or instruments (e.g. the integration of test sales and services into the online assessment platform integration and enhancement); and knowledge and methods (e.g. effective deployment and analysis of a proposed ERC test data archive).

Interdependencies

Good strategic planning and management includes the identification of roles and responsibilities for actions. The 2022-2024 plan specifies roles and interdependencies at the action level to facilitate monitoring of the implementation of the plan. The annual business planning underpinning the plan identifies external interdependencies, owners of, and levels of effort associated with each action.

Cross-cutting themes of the strategy

Arising from ERC's external and internal context, five themes which cut across various functions of the organisation have been identified through the consultation process. While some themes cut across most or all functions, others will apply to just a few. In consultations with staff, these themes were all viewed as important to various strands of our work; some of our stakeholders also mentioned these themes in their responses.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: This theme is of relevance to all of our work but in particular to four areas – accessibility of our building; accessibility and diversity of representation in our tests and other outputs (e.g. reports); in our working with

---

2   https://www.oecd.org/education/ceri/Measuring_Innovation_16x23_ebook.pdf

one another as members of ERC staff; and in our work to consult with the range of stakeholders that interact with the ERC.

Irish language communities: Since the ERC came under the remit of the Official Languages Act in 2020, we have implemented a bilingual phone system, corporate email signature, and enhanced capacity in its staff to respond to queries in Irish. We publish our annual reports and strategic plan in Irish, and have published some of our research outputs (e.g. infographics) in both Irish and English. We also, as standard practice, issue letters, surveys and other materials to schools in both Irish and English as part of our research studies fieldwork and communications. However we now need to build on this work to enhance our functions under the 1998 Education Act by developing an assessment programme that prioritises Irish language tests of high quality.

Training and professional development: Given the rapidly evolving nature of our research and assessment work, as well as a need to remain informed about legislative, data, governance and technological developments, training and professional development underpin one of our 10 goals in its own right. We understand training and professional development as a suite of activities that covers a spectrum ranging from informal and formal mentoring and supervision; informational/procedural training; collaborative learning across individuals and teams; collaborative exchanges with our sister agencies and other bodies and stakeholders; consultative practices; attendance at conferences, seminars and workshops; generic and tailored courses; and the pursuit of more formally accredited learning activities (e.g. post-graduate degree or diploma). In line with the overall strategy, values and guiding principles, we understand these various activities as needing to be woven into the fabric of all strands of our work.

Staff wellbeing, engagement and retention: In consultation with staff, the dual theme of retention and wellbeing arose, linked together, perhaps, by engagement. Engagement is a concern due to the highly specialised and technical nature of our work; a 25% turnover rate in staff 2019-2021 (due to retirements and resignations); four career break requests among research staff (2019-2021); and the erosion of wellbeing that has occurred since the onset of the pandemic. We also recognise the need to build coherence across a range of our activities to maximise the extent to which staff enjoy engagement and challenge, while at the same time feeling heard and well-supported. The theme of wellbeing is linked with that of equality, diversity and inclusion, in the sense that the ERC recognises that the factors contributing to wellbeing (and retention) will vary for different staff members.

Technology: the ERC has undergone significant development and improvement in its IT infrastructure during the course of 2021, and the period of the current plan (2022-2024) will see this continuing. A strategic approach to technology is advanced in the current plan – one which not only provides ERC staff with up-to-date technology tools and resources, but also with the understanding to permit informed choices in their safe, efficient and ethical usage, as well as, for researchers and Test Department staff,

a keen understanding of the technology environments and challenges in the various school contexts in which the ERC's tests and research studies are implemented.

Objectives, goals and outcomes 2022-2024

Objectives

1. To **stabilise** and bring flexibility to the working environment, physical environment and infrastructure, and conduct of research, evaluation and assessment studies and services, in response to resource challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic
2. To **enhance**, strengthen and improve corporate governance and compliance; test development and delivery; and analysis and reporting
3. To bring **innovation** to products and services; technology, tools and instruments; and knowledge and methods.

Goals

1. Working with the Department, establish a sustainable, multi-year structure and resourcing plan for the programme of work
2. Working with the Department, strengthen the ERC's test development and standardisation programme of work in order to implement test development studies that are mutually identified as being of high priority
3. Establish a sustainable and stable response to COVID-19 that incorporates ongoing monitoring and risk management and a long-term blended working policy
4. Establish an IT strategy that is closely linked to governance and compliance as well as ERC's strategic priorities
5. Establish a comprehensive research and assessment strategy that cuts across large-scale assessments, evaluations, and test development and test services to schools activities; and which includes a strand covering analytic methodologies with links to the CPD strategy
6. Establish a CPD strategy that covers CPD along a continuum, promotes collaboration, and incorporates engagement, retention and wellbeing
7. Establish a communications strategy that prioritises audience awareness, reach, Irish language, SEN and EAL groups
8. Achieve enhanced efficiencies in the administration of research and evaluation studies
9. Build on the Agreement with DCU and progress made on the regularisation of the Test Department building ownership in order to make urgent enhancements to ERC's physical infrastructure
10. Further strengthen governance structures, prioritising finance, risk and audit, data governance, and HR.

Outcomes

1. A clear operationalisation and resourcing of ERC's statutory functions captured within a coherent structure to enable efficient multi-year strategic and resource planning between the ERC and DoE, agility in responding to requests from the DoE, and strategic enhancements to further enable independent work and collaboration

2. The commencement of an efficient, modular test development and standardisation programme that provides high quality outputs and a good fit with national and local needs and strategic priorities

3. A confident, stable and agile organisation that effectively incorporates flexibility and technology into its working environment without loss of its core values or culture

4. IT tools, resources, policies and processes that equip staff to work effectively and with a broader awareness of governance, compliance and national contexts

5. A research and assessment strategy that fits with broader national and international contexts, brings increased strategic coherence across the organisation, and permits efficiencies and innovations to be identified

6. A professional and personal development strategy that brings about improvements in engagement, retention, professional learning and wellbeing

7. A communication strategy that is successful in enhancing audience awareness and reach, with specific focus on Irish language, SEN and EAL groups

8. Research and evaluation studies that are administered more efficiently to permit more time for analytic and innovative work

9. A physical infrastructure that is supported by a 10-year building plan, with work begun to address capacity, accessibility and environmental sustainability concerns

10. An organisation that is achieving or approaching excellence in all areas of governance.

Actions

Table 1 on the next pages breaks each of the 10 goals into 50 actions, noting the timeline for each action, the phase(s) of the strategy it is linked to, and, where relevant, interdependencies.

Importantly, goals/actions with external dependencies will not be possible to achieve by ERC alone. It should be noted that 26 of the 50 actions have dependencies with the DoE for resourcing and/or approval. The 50 actions are broken across phase and year as shown below.

Phase		Year	
Stabilise	26 (52%)	*2022*	21 (42%)
Enhance	17 (34%)	*2023*	19 (38%)
Innovate	7 (14%)	*2024*	10 (20%)

Table 1. Goals, phases, actions, timelines and dependencies for ERC's 2022-2024 strategic plan

Goal	Phase	Actions	Timeline	Dependencies
1: Working with the Department, establish a sustainable, multi-year structure and resourcing plan for the programme of work	Stabilise (1.1-1.4); Enhance (1.5-1.6)	1.1. Working with the Department, establish key elements of multi-year structure and resourcing plan for the programme of work	Q2 2022	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		1.2. Review and update workforce plan	Q3 2022	
		1.3. Working with the Department, finalise multi-year resourcing plan	Q4 2022	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		1.4 Monitor/update multi-year resourcing plan and workforce plan as required	Q4 2023, Q4 2024, more often as required	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		1.5. Apply for RPO status to the IRC	Q2 2023	
		1.6. Implement tracking system to enable strategic responses to research requests and opportunities	Q1 2023	
2: Working with the Department, strengthen the ERC's test development and standardisation programme of work in order to implement test development studies that are mutually identified as being of high priority	Stabilise (all)	2.1. Revisit and agree test development/standardisation programme of work and resourcing with DoE	Q3 2022	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		2.2. With staff in place, commence first phase of test development/standardisation programme of work	Q4 2022	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		2.3. Working with online assessment supplier, identify and implement test development workflow efficiencies	Q4 2022	External supplier dependencies (relationship/contract management)

Table 1. Continued.

Goal	Phase	Actions	Timeline	Dependencies
3: Establish a sustainable and stable response to COVID-19 that incorporates ongoing monitoring and risk management and a long-term blended working policy	Stabilise (all)	3.1. Monitor impacts of COVID-19 on timelines, budgets, procedures, outputs, suppliers	Q1 2022, Ongoing	External supplier dependencies (relationship/contract management)
		3.2. Complete staff consultation on blended working policy	Q2 2022	
		3.3. Finalise first version of blended working policy	Q2 2022	Dependencies with national and parent Department guidelines (compliance)
4: Establish an IT strategy that is closely linked to governance and compliance as well as ERC's strategic priorities	Stabilise (all)	4.1. Complete urgent IT infrastructural projects	Q4 2022	External supplier dependencies (relationship and contract management)
		4.2. Complete suite of IT policies and associated training supports	Q4 2022	
		4.3. Complete IT strategy document	Q2 2023	

Table 1. Continued.

Goal	Phase	Actions	Timeline	Dependencies
5: Establish a comprehensive research and assessment strategy that cuts across large-scale assessments, evaluations, and test development and test services to schools activities; and which includes a strand covering analytic methodologies with links to the CPD strategy	Stabilise (5.1-5.3); Enhance (5.4-5.7); Innovate (5.8-5.10)	5.1. Finalise/complete strands of existing test development work: primary	Q4 2022	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		5.2. Finalise/complete strands of existing test development work: post-primary	Q4 2023	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		5.3. Hire Head of Research and Operations (PO)	Q4 2022	DoE dependency (resourcing and approvals)
		5.4. Establish large-scale assessment and test development programme of work/priorities	Q2 2023	DoE and external stakeholder dependencies (consultations)
		5.5. Establish ERC test data archive and comprehensive analysis plan associated with it	Q2 2023	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		5.6. Identify analytic priorities and link these with CPD strategy	Q3 2023	DoE and external stakeholder dependencies (consultations)
		5.7. Complete research and assessment strategy document	Q2 2024	DoE dependency (resourcing and approvals, see 5.3)
		5.8. Examine potential online administration of the next round of NAMER (including over-sampling options, benefits and challenges associated with a transition to online administration)	Q4 2023	DoE and external stakeholder dependencies (consultations)
		5.9. Working with the Department, develop innovative annual monitoring programme based on standardised test results	Q3 2023	DoE dependency (resourcing and consultation)
		5.10. Apply novel methodological and analytic approaches to existing datasets, e.g. exploratory work in cluster analysis, data mining, item level analyses of test items of LSAs	Q2 2024, Ongoing	

Table 1. Continued.

Goal	Phase	Actions	Timeline	Dependencies
6: Establish a CPD strategy that covers CPD along a continuum, promotes collaboration, and incorporates engagement, retention and wellbeing	Enhance (6.1-6.4); Innovate (6.5)	6.1. Complete updated skills matrix	Q1 2023	
		6.2. Complete staff consultation on professional and personal development, engagement, and wellbeing	Q1 2023	
		6.3. Complete CPD strategy document	Q3 2023	
		6.4. Establish ERC wellbeing committee	Q3 2023	
		6.5. Establish one or more working groups to promote shared learning on specific topics with appropriate collaborative links with other organisations, where relevant	Q2 2024, ongoing	
7: Establish a communications strategy that prioritises audience awareness, reach, Irish language, SEN and EAL groups	Enhance (7.1-7.2); Innovate (7.3)	7.1. Complete stakeholder consultation on communications strategy	Q1 2024	DoE and external stakeholder dependencies (consultations)
		7.2. Complete communications strategy document which incorporates both internal and external communication and includes enhancing (i) dissemination via infographics or other non-technical means to reach wider audiences, (ii) reach to teachers, parents/guardians and students through the use of videos or other dynamic means, (iii) Irish language outputs, (iv) dissemination in technical, research and academic fora, and (v) outputs including tests and surveys for SEN and EAL groups	Q3 2024	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		7.3. Give consideration to innovative and collaborative approaches to outreach and dissemination activities, e.g. engagement with young people; an annual or biennial ERC-organised forum on assessment	Q3 2024, ongoing	DoE dependency (resourcing)

Table 1. Continued.

Goal	Phase	Actions	Timeline	Dependencies
8: Achieve enhanced efficiencies in the administration of research and evaluation studies	Enhance (all)	8.1. Identify and implement streamlined research-related administrative processes through teamwork	Q2 2023	DoE dependency (resourcing and approvals, see 5.2)
		8.2. Identify and implement streamlined research-related administrative processes through digital technologies	Q3 2023	DoE dependency (resourcing and approvals, see 5.3)
		8.3. Identify and implement streamlined research-related administrative processes through data governance pathways	Q3 2023	DoE dependency (resourcing and approvals, see 5.3)
9: Build on Agreement with DCU and progress made on the regularisation of the Test Department building in order to make urgent enhancements to ERC's physical infrastructure	Stabilise (9.1-9.4); Enhance (9.5-9.6); Innovate (9.7)	9.1. Establish licence for works with DCU	Q4 2022	DCU dependency (agreements)
		9.2. Working with architect team, establish specifications for building projects	Q4 2022	
		9.3. Working with DCU and other relevant parties, establish full regular ownership of Test Department	Q4 2022	DCU dependency (agreements)
		9.4. Review fitness for purpose of Test Department in order to decide on next steps	Q3 2023	
		9.5. Establish 10-year building strategy	Q1 2024	
		9.6. Commence urgent building works (e.g. lift installation, library reconfiguration, kitchen refit)	Q3 2023, Ongoing	DoE dependency (resourcing)
		9.7. Commence and monitor a range of improvements and innovations required for 2030 sustainability goals	Q1 2024, Ongoing	DoE dependency (resourcing)

Table 1. Continued.

Goal	Phase	Actions	Timeline	Dependencies
10: Further strengthen governance structures, prioritising finance, risk and audit, data governance, and HR	Stabilise (10.1-10.5, 10.7); Enhance (10.6)	10.1. Establish up to date strategic risk register and dynamic monitoring system	Q4 2022	DoE and DPER dependencies (agreements)
		10.2. Achieve further streamlining of financial management systems and reporting	Q4 2022	
		10.3. Maintain sustained engagement on pensions	Q1 2022, Ongoing	
		10.4. Establish HR handbook with complete set of HR policies and procedures, supported by staff intranet	Q4 2022	
		10.5. Establish list of research data governance priorities	Q2 2023	DoE dependency (resourcing and approvals, see 5.3)
		10.6. Achieve required enhancements to data governance policies and processes	Q2 2024	DoE dependency (resourcing and approvals, see 5.3)
		10.7. Commence work on establishing long-term online library solution for research staff	Q4 2022	DoE dependency (resourcing)

Section 4: Review and monitoring

An ongoing review and monitoring of the goals and actions of the strategy will be conducted at three levels:

- Internal ERC Senior Management Team meetings every eight weeks or so.
- Quarterly review of progress on the strategy at ERC Governing Board meetings.
- Review of progress on the strategy at ERC-Department governance meetings supported by the annual Performance Delivery Agreement.

The review and monitoring of strategic actions is built into the ERC's annual business plan, which assigns owners and level of effort assigned to each of the 50 actions under the 10 goals of the strategy.

The business planning is designed to enable alignment between the various planning and strategic functions and documentation processes, i.e.
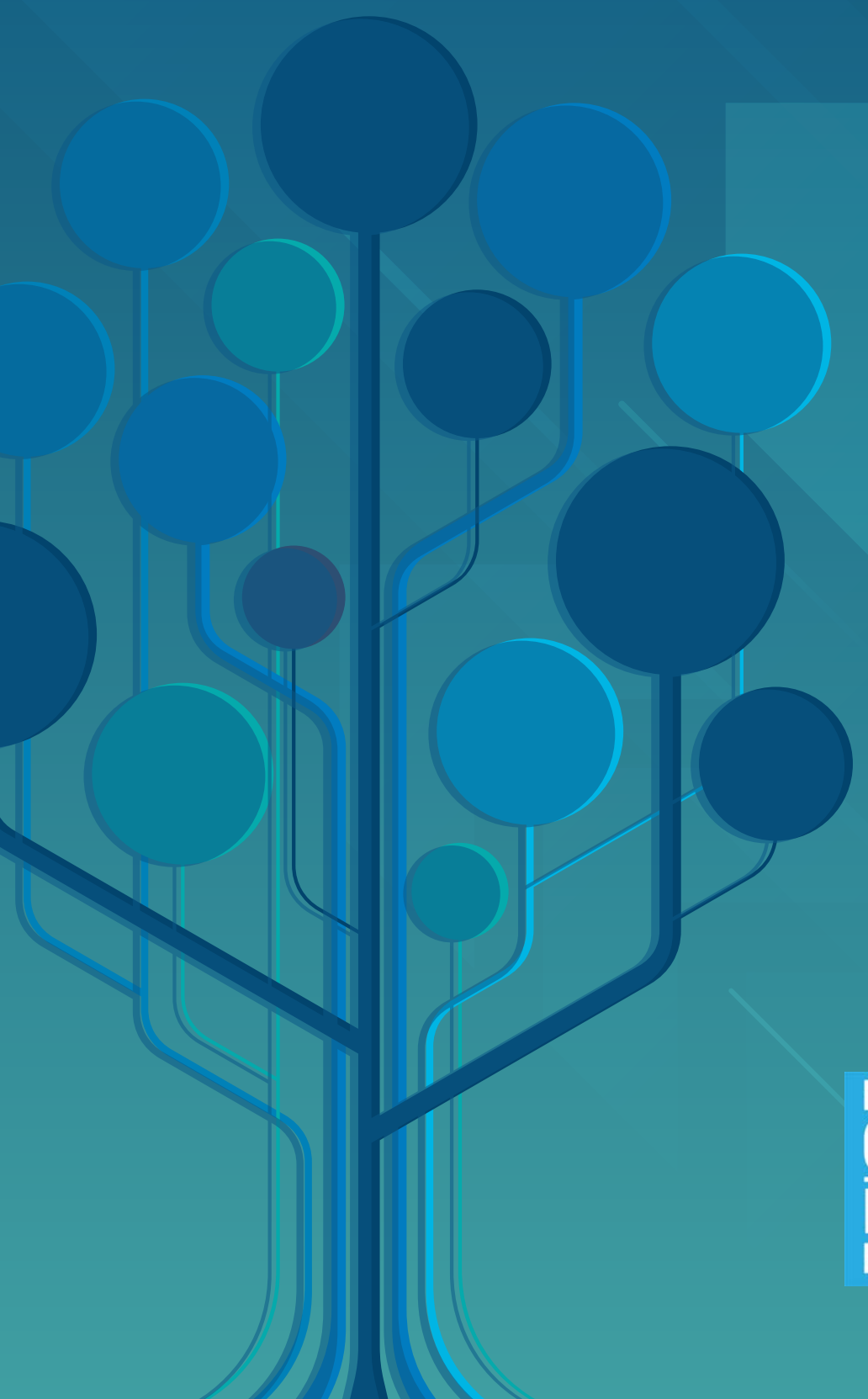
- Research and assessment strategy
- Workforce planning
- Financial and budget management and planning
- Risk strategy and risk monitoring
- IT strategy
- HR and professional development planning and strategy
- Internal audit planning
- ERC building strategy.

While much has been achieved in the lifetime of the first strategic plan (2019-2021), significant efforts will be required over the course of the next three years. Despite a high level of uncertainty, the ERC is hopeful that, through its own efforts, ongoing engagement with and support from the Department, and the strategic oversight from the Board, many of its functions will become more stable and, with targeted work to enhance these, we will be able to realise our vision to implement innovations both within the organisation and for the broader benefit of the education system.

Appendix: List of bodies and agencies consulted on the plan

Bodies and agencies submitting a response to the ERC's consultation are marked in **bold**.

- **Department of Education (DoE)** (Response co-ordinated by Central Policy Unit, CPU)
- **Higher Education Authority (HEA)**
- Irish Research Council (IRC)
- **An Chomhairle um Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)**
- National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE)
- **National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)**
- **State Examinations Commission (SEC)**
- **Teaching Council**
- **National Council for Special Education (NCSE)**
- Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN)
- National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
- Gaeloideachas
- An Foras Patrúntachta
- Educate Together
- Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)
- Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI)
- **Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)**
- National Parents Council (primary)
- National Parents Council (post primary)
- Comhairle na nÓg
- Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU)
- Irish Universities Association (IUA)
- **Department for Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)**
- Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
- **Economic, Social and Research Institute (ESRI)**
- **Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).**