

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection

Hearing on the Establishment of the Education Research Centre (ERC) as a body corporate under Section 54 of the Education Act 1998

8th July 2015

FORMAL STATEMENT BY MINISTER JAN O’SULLIVAN, TD, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS

SUMMARY

The Educational Research Centre (ERC) at Drumcondra was founded on the initiative of the Department of Education and St Patrick’s College in the 1960s. Since its foundation, the ERC has been an internationally recognised centre of excellence in research, assessment and evaluation in education. Its work makes a key contribution to the development and evaluation of educational policy in Ireland.

However, despite the national importance of the Centre it lacks any effective governance structure. The Centre is physically sited on the campus of St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, and Department funding for the Centre is channelled through the College. However, no governance structure was ever put in place for the Centre, even though its work is completely distinct from that of the College. St Patrick’s College is one of a number of colleges amalgamating to form a new Institute of Education under the auspices of Dublin City University. This makes the lack of governance of the Centre an even more pressing issue.

In view of the key national strategic role of the Centre, the Government decided in July 2014 to establish the Educational Research Centre as a new agency under section 54 of the Education Act, 1998. The required draft establishment order was laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas on 11 June 2015. It is intended to establish the Educational Research Centre as a body corporate under Section 54 of the Education Act 1998...

The establishment of the Centre in this way will secure the future of the Centre:

- Establishing the Centre as a body corporate with its own board will underpin its academic independence and secure its contribution to national policy making.
- Establishing the Centre formally guarantees the continuance of the vital support that the Centre makes to several other bodies in the education system. The Centre carries out research and provides advice and support to several bodies including the Department and Inspectorate, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the State Examinations Commission and the National Council for Special Education.
- While the Centre has no legal standing at present, it is a *de facto* body. Its main funding comes from the Department of Education and Skills, and its staff are public employees.

Providing a legal basis for the Centre will regularise the employment of the staff and the continuance of the Centre's excellent research and evaluation work.

- The ERC is a key piece of our national educational infrastructure. It holds invaluable historical data on the Irish education system including longitudinal data on the performance of Irish students. Its staff have the skills and expertise to enable Ireland to participate in major international studies such as TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA. There is a growing awareness of the importance of assessment and research in education systems. The formal, legal establishment of the Centre will ensure that Ireland continues to have a strong capacity to carry out such work into the future.

...

In the ERC, Ireland has an international recognised centre of excellence in educational research and assessment. Establishing the Centre as a legal body simply regularises a currently unsatisfactory situation by enabling formal governance structures to be put in place. This will secure the future of the ERC and ensure that its work and development can be put on a satisfactory footing.

Establishment of the Education Research Centre (ERC) as a body corporate under Section 54 of the Education Act 1998

The Education Research Centre, Drumcondra

The Department of Education and Skills is the main funder of the Educational Research Centre in Drumcondra. Since its foundation in the 1960s, the Centre has been an internationally recognised centre of excellence in research, assessment and evaluation in education. It has a world-class reputation in the development of assessment and test instruments and in the conducting of major national surveys and international comparative studies, such as PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS and others. In addition the Centre is now key to the development of Irish educational policy and practice and will be into the future. For example, in recent years, its research played a fundamental role in shaping the DEIS strategy that addresses educational disadvantage. Given the centrality of the expertise and resources of the ERC to ongoing education policy formation and monitoring, it is essential that the centre's long term future is secure.

Despite its importance, the Centre lacks a governance structure

Despite the national importance of the Centre, the ERC currently lacks any effective governance structure. The Centre was founded on the initiative of the Department of Education and St Patrick's College in the 1960s and is physically sited on the grounds of St Patrick's College, but a formal governance arrangement was never put in place for the Centre. Department funding for the Centre is channelled through St Patrick's College, but the funds are ring-fenced for the purposes of the Centre. Technically, the staff of the Centre are currently employees of St Patrick's College but senior staff are appointed on the instructions of the Department.

A major programme of consolidation in all teacher education institutions is underway following the publication of the Sahlberg Report on the Future of Teacher Education in Ireland. As part of this reduction in the numbers of institutions, St Patrick's College is, with Mater Dei College, the education department in Dublin City University and the Church of Ireland College of Education forming a new Institute of Education which will be a college of Dublin City University. Given the consolidation of St Patrick's College and the other institutions into the new Institute, the lack of a proper legal standing and independent governance structure for the Centre need to be addressed urgently.

Establishment of ERC as a body corporate under Section 54 of the Education Act, 1998

In view of the key national strategic role of the Centre, the Minister for Education and Skills initiated consultations with the authorities of St Patrick's College and the Educational Research Centre. Legal advice was also sought from the Legal Affairs Section of the Department and the Office of the Attorney General regarding the governance of the Centre.

The Minister and the Department considered a number of options for the future governance of the Centre. Amalgamation into the new Institute of Education was considered but this ran the risk that the ERC would lose its separate identity and role within a larger institution. It was judged that the nationally important focus of the Centre on assessment, research and policy evaluation could be put at risk in an institution focussed on the professional development of teachers. Absorbing the ERC into the Department of Education and Skills was also considered

and rejected as this could threaten – either in practice or perception – the research independence of the Centre. The Minister took the view that the best available option was to establish the Centre as a body under Section 54 of the Education Act, 1998.

Section 54 provides that the Minister, with the concurrence of Government, may establish a body to perform functions in, or in relation to, the provision of assessment materials for schools, the oversight of student testing, both national and international, and the reporting of the outcome to the Department, and that such a body must act within the policy determined by the Minister.

The Government agreed in July 2014 to establish the Educational Research Centre as a new agency under section 54 of the Education Act, 1998. The required draft establishment order was laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas on 11 June 2015.

Why is the formal establishment of the Centre important?

The establishment of the Education Research Centre as a body corporate will ensure that the Centre will have a properly constituted board and a formal legal identity. This will achieve a number of important objectives:

- Establishing the Centre as a body corporate with its own board will underpin its academic independence and secure its contribution to national policy making. Successive Ministers for Education and the Department have always respected the independence of thinking and research that the Centre has carried out and the Government is very conscious of the professional role that researchers, evaluators and statisticians must play if they are to be really valuable to the policy making process. By putting in place proper structures to underpin the work of the Centre, the Government is ensuring that high quality and internationally respected research, rigorously conducted in the Irish education system, will be available to inform Government decision making.
- Secondly, establishing the Centre formally ensures that it can continue to provide important research, advice and support to other bodies in the education system. The Centre carries out research on behalf of a range of bodies and provides advice and support to several key actors in the education system, including the Department and Inspectorate, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the State Examinations Commission and the National Council for Special Education. For example, work at the ERC was instrumental in developing the Department's DEIS policy for disadvantaged schools; the NCCA has commissioned work from the ERC to help to inform its development of the curriculum; and the ERC monitors literacy and numeracy standards on behalf of the Department through its periodic National Assessment of English Reading and Mathematics. The Establishment Order also makes clear that the ERC will have a role to play in developing and providing materials and systems to schools to enable them to monitor and report to parents and others on the progress of their students. Establishing the Centre formally guarantees the continuance of this vital support to the education system.

- Thirdly, the Establishment Order regularises a very unsatisfactory situation for the staff of the ERC, its Director, St Patrick’s College and the Department. Although the Centre has no legal standing at present, it is a *de facto* body. Its main funding comes from the Department of Education and Skills, and its staff are public employees. Since the decision of Government in July 2014 to formally establish the ERC as a statutory body, officials from the Department of Education and Skills have worked with the authorities in St Patrick’s College and senior staff members at the ERC to ensure that necessary practical arrangements regarding the formal establishment of the ERC have been addressed. DES officials have also consulted with the staff of the Centre while these proposals for governance were worked out. Providing a legal basis for the Centre will regularise the employment of the staff and the continuance of the Centre’s excellent research and evaluation work.
- Establishing the ERC formally will achieve one further important objective by enabling the Irish education system to maximise the potential to use assessment and research data to improve educational provision. There is a growing awareness in education systems of the importance of using high quality assessment and evaluation information, and of tracking trends in such data over time. Indeed, a recent OECD report, *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment* (OECD, 2013) highlights the importance of having in place appropriate legal frameworks to ensure that student assessment information may be generated, collated and used to best effect.

The ERC has a proven track record and capability to design test instruments, and to develop further systems to analyse and publish performance data on the Irish school system. Its staff have the skills and expertise to enable Ireland to participate in major international studies such as TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA. In addition, the ERC holds valuable historical data on the Irish education system including longitudinal data on the performance of Irish students over several decades.

By establishing the ERC formally, the Government will be ensuring that this information resource, and the pool of skills and experience amassed in the ERC, will be maintained and enhanced, and the proper legal basis provided to underpin this important work.

...

Transition period

A two year transition period has been agreed between St Patricks College, DCU, the Department of Education and Skills and the staff of the ERC and an appropriate transition agreement is nearing finalisation. During the transition period issues such as the future, long-term location of the Centre will be finalised. In the meantime, the ERC will continue to be supported by and located within St. Patricks College Drumcondra.