

Educational Research Centre
MINUTES OF INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE BOARD
28 September 2016

A meeting of the Board of the Educational Research Centre (“ERC”), was held on September 28th 2016 at the offices of the Organisation.

Board Members Present:

Professor Pauric Travers, Chairperson; Dr Denise Burns, Deputy Chairperson; Dr Jude Cosgrove; Prof Michael Martin; Mr Edward Murtagh.

In Attendance:

Peter Archer, CEO; Anne Comey, Senior Administrator

Absent: N/A

Counsel Present: N/A

Call to Order

Dr Travers called the meeting to order at 10.30 am and it was agreed that Anne Comey would take the minutes. It was agreed that the minutes of the Board meetings would be available under Freedom of Information regulations after editing where required (e.g., for the purpose of data protection).

Members introduced themselves. It was noted that Prof Michael Martin would use Skype for future meetings to save travelling from Boston. The Agenda was then adopted (Appendix I).

1. Objects and functions of ERC: Establishment Order

There was a discussion of the statutory instrument (Establishment Order) under which the new ERC was established. During this discussion, it was noted that the objects and functions outlined for the ERC accurately reflect the work that the Centre does and has done for most of its existence. However, some challenges were identified.

The first arises from Item 8 (iii) which refers to the ERC assisting schools to identify the special educational needs of individual students. It was noted that the ERC is not well equipped to provide this assistance, save for diagnostic tests currently available for use with junior classes in primary schools.

The second challenge relates to capacity building for staff and others [Item 9 (f)]. Capacity building is done mostly through the professional development of existing staff. There are no postgraduate programmes currently in Ireland which cover the type of work carried out by the ERC which means staff joins the ERC at entry level and develop “on the job”. This is particularly true for statistical and psychometric skills. It was pointed out that changes in Teacher Education programmes whereby students no longer have the opportunity to study maths as a subject compounds the difficulties. There are also less people going abroad for training. It was noted that the difficulty to find trained staff exists in the US also. The Board agreed to look at provisions for capacity building, including staff development and sending staff for

training abroad. There is currently a draft policy on Professional Development which needs to be reviewed by the Board and adopted.

The Board welcomed the recognition in the Order that the ERC can and should initiate research but it was recognised that this can be difficult given the pressure to meet overlapping deadlines in commissioned projects especially large-scale international projects. It was also recognised that the distinction between commissioned and internally generated projects is not always clear.

The Board noted the weakness of the current staff profile with only one staff member with a teaching background. The secondment of teachers to the ERC in the past proved to be very expensive. The question was also raised as to the need to attract staff with IT based skills for the development of ICT based tests.

It was noted that when the chair appeared at the Oireachtas Committee, there were questions on the research carried out on the Irish Language. The ERC did a National Assessment on Irish in 2002 with the Linguistics Institute. In 2010 the previous year's National Assessment were replicated in schools where Irish is the medium of instruction. The ERC also has tests in Irish for schools.

2. Current Programme of Work

A document outlining the Centre's work was presented and summarised by Peter Archer who noted that the document dealt mainly with current projects and did not, for example, describe the work done by staff who sit on various committees and provide consultancy to other institutions.

The programme of work is based on a calendar year. The programme of work for 2018 will have to be agreed in Spring 2017. Before its establishment the ERC would meet with different sections of the DES to discuss specific projects. From now on the ERC will have to submit a programme of work to be agreed with DES through its Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) section.

3. Financial matters

In relation to the funding of the Centre, it was explained that before its establishment in 2015, funding for the centre came from four main sources, a grant which came from the HEA via St Patrick's College, supplementary funding from the DES, revenue from the Test Centre and other occasional research income. However the Grant from the HEA had been frozen for many years and CAP and other DES sections made up the shortfall for specific projects. Since its establishment the majority of the ERC funds come from CAP with some funds also coming from the Special Education and Social Inclusion Sections, and some from ad-hoc work for other agencies.

Summary of accounts had been prepared and were presented by Anne Comey. The Board was then briefed in relation to buildings and related matters. It was noted that the current ERC premises was built with funds generated by the ERC (mainly from money raised through the Test Department). It was noted that because, prior to

establishment, the ERC had no legal identity separate from the College legal (but not necessarily beneficial) ownership of the building resided with the College and DCU after incorporation. Board members were informed that, under the terms of a Transition Agreement between the ERC, the College and the DES, there will be no question of the ERC being asked to vacate the building while that agreement is in place.

Difficulties were noted in relation to forward planning for structural investments (e.g., a new phone system) and strategic direction, as there was no certainty about what will happen after the transition agreement expires in September 2017. Members were also informed that the Test Department building is the subject of a deed of trust and that the possibility of dissolving that trust and transferring ownership to the ERC which is no longer legally prohibited from owning property had been discussed with the College but the matter had not progressed. It was agreed that the Chairperson and the CEO would try to resolve these matters in discussion with DCU and the DES.

It was noted that accountant needs to be approved by the Board. Further information is to be provided to the Board for the next meeting.

4. Staffing levels and structures

The CEO reported that it had been possible to maintain staffing levels during the worst years of the financial crisis. Some opportunities for promotion had also arisen. However, the staffing structure of the ERC has remained the same for over 20 years with very little room for progression. Concern was expressed that this would impact on recruitment at all levels, including appointment of CEO.

IFUT, the Union which represents many staff members, had made a submission to DES in the context of the discussions about the transition arrangements. The response was that the submissions should be directed to management. The submission sought a change in the entry grade and to align the other grades with those in comparable institutions. Uncertainty about its status and the employment control framework have constrained the Centre's capacity to address such issues. However, it was acknowledged that there were staffing issues and anomalies vis a vis similar institutions which needed to be addressed.

5. Immediate priority tasks for the board

The immediate priority tasks for the Board were discussed and agreed as follows:

- Planning and reporting arrangements/adoption of work programme.

The Board will have to determine a process for reporting.

- Appointment of next CEO

The incumbent CEO was due to retire in August 2016 and he has agreed to stay on until his successor is appointed. The extension has been approved by the Minister for up to 12 months. The Board agreed to start the process for appointment of a

successor as soon as possible. It is hoped that an advertisement might be placed in January, with interviews in the late Spring and the appointee taking up duties in August/September. It was agreed by the Board that the appointment's process should be done through the Public Appointment's Commission and that advertisement abroad would be appropriate. A Job Specification will be drafted for consideration at the next meeting of the Board. The chair will speak to the Public Appointment's Commission before the next Board meeting and report. It was noted that clarifications will be required as to whether the appointment should be for a fixed term and, if so, the duration of that term.

6. Organisational Matters

- Code of Practice for State Bodies

The new code was discussed briefly. It was agreed that members should review the Code and consider whether they might need to have a seminar organised to clarify its implications. It was noted that clarification is required on whether a Board of 5 requires a Finance and Audit Committee or how similar Boards meet the requirements in this area.

- Service Level Agreement with DES

The Department of Education and Skills is to issue a draft document which will then be reviewed by the Board.

- Transition arrangements

A number of outstanding issues have yet to be resolved. The difficulties during the transition have not affected collaboration and other contacts with SPD staff.

7. Schedule of future meetings

It was agreed that future meetings should include presentations from staff. The following dates were decided:

- December 14th 2016 @ 2pm
- January 25th 2017 @ 2pm
- March 22nd 2017 @ 2pm
- May 24th 2017 @ 2pm
- July 5th 2017 @ 2pm

8. Any other business

All meetings should be numbered yearly and all documents prepared for or resulting from meetings should be numbered accordingly.