

**Educational Research Centre
MEETING OF THE BOARD
2 December 2020**

A meeting of the Board of the Educational Research Centre (ERC) was held online on 2 December 2020.

Board Members Present:

Pauric Travers (PT), Chairperson; Denise Burns (DB), Deputy Chairperson; Michael Martin (MM); Edward Murtagh (EM)

In Attendance:

Jude Cosgrove (JC), Anne Comey (AC) who took the minutes

Absent: N/A

Counsel Present: N/A

Call to Order

The Chair called the meeting to order at 2 pm (due to a delay with the ARC meeting). The Agenda was adopted (Appendix I).

1. Minutes (Bmin-1020)

The minutes were approved.

2. Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interests were raised.

3. Matters arising from previous minutes

In view of the impeding expiry of all Board member appointments, consideration will need to be given to the staggered appointment of members going forward to avoid a repeat of the current situation. The Board will review the Terms of Reference at its next meeting but this may be dependent upon the Department of Education (DoE).

The Board conveyed its thanks to AC for preparing Board and ARC documents whilst on sick leave.

4. Report on developments since previous meeting

JC provided an update on various developments and activities (See Appendix II).

5. Covid 19

No further updates were made to the Covid protocol and the ERC continues to adhere to government guidelines.

Some remote tools are being considered for rolling out as soon as the IT manager is in post (E.g. softphones) which should facilitate greater communication between staff members.

Following from the current remote working situation a Remote Working group has been set up to look at remote working after the pandemic. A staff survey will issue before Christmas and the findings will guide the development of a remote working policy, preferably by Spring 2021.

6. Governance matters

- The ARC draft report will be issued to the Board at their first meeting of 2021.
- As per the recommendation from internal auditors, the internal controls audit for 2020 will take place in Q1 2021.
- An external evaluation of the Board will need to be considered in 2021.
- The Board agreed that the current self-assessment forms didn't require changes for 2020. They may be reviewed in 2021.
- The Board reviewed the draft annual report (**B-6-20-1**) and members will issue comments by email within one week.
- The ERC contacted Central Policy Unit (CPU) to raise awareness that the ERC's critical review is due in 2021. This is Department lead and information will be issued to the Board as it is shared by the Department of Education (DoE).
- Some progress was made on the pensions issue and the AG confirmed that the ERC was liable for its pensions although funding for same remains an issue. Further clarifications on the AG decision has yet to be shared by the DoE. Central Policy Unit (CPU) will need to contact DPER to discuss the funding issue (from either the DoE or the Higher Education Authority (HEA)). No transfer of service has yet been confirmed for an impending retirement and there is still no confirmation as to who will calculate entitlements. Discussions continue between the DES, DCU and the ERC. DCU no longer receive funding from the HEA for ERC retirees and has been funding ERC retirement payments since January 2020.
- JC updated the Board on ongoing legal issues relating to the provision of online tests.
- The Board reviewed the report issued by An Coimisinéir Teanga (CT) as issued by email by JC. The Board's contribution to the matter was very helpful. The report states that, by excluding all-Irish schools from its primary school test standardisation process in 2018 the ERC has:
 - i. failed to comply with the statutory language obligations of subsections 6 (i), (j) and (k) of the Education Act, 1998.
 - ii. not failed to comply with the statutory language obligation of subsection 7 (2) (d) of the Education Act, 1998.

The ERC will need to explore the implication of these findings with the CT in early 2021. It will need to inform the CT's office, within 6 months, of its intention to ensure that all provisions of the act will be applied going forward as well as inform the DoE of these findings (and confirm CT that same has be done) within 3 months.

The Board confirmed that:

- it will not appeal the decision.
- a short statement should be prepared for public reporting.
- the practical impact of the findings will need to be assessed including the resource implications.

7. Finance

In light of the delays in finalising the 2019 Financial Statement (FS) audit (as a result of remote working and issues accessing documentation), the C&AG's presentation of its finding is postponed until Q1 2021.

Sign off of the 2019 FS is expected before year end, and the Management Report by mid-January 2021. The report will be reviewed by the ARC and Board at their first meeting of 2021.

The Board was provided with an update on the following items:

- Profit & Loss year to date (B-6-20-2).
- Correspondence with CPU relating to end of year finance estimates (B-6-20-3).

8. Risk Management (Recurring item)

Work on the internal audit on risk has started. Since the ERC is in the process of reviewing its risk process, it is hoping to use the findings of the audit to further develop instruments to formalise its risk strategy. Following clarification from the C&AG, the Board, following recommendation from the ARC, confirmed that the risk audit should be an actual audit rather than a guidance exercise, in order to fulfil the requirements on internal controls for 2020.

The Board was provided with an update on the following items:

- Strategic Risk Register (B-6-20-4).
- Draft Risk Policy (B-6-20-5).

The Board noted the recommendation of the ARC that divisional risk register feed into the main strategic register.

However the Board also noted that the current development of Risk processes were mostly aspirational given the current capacity issue. The Risk policy developed cannot be finalised until capacity has been identified to carry the work and regular review required to allow for efficient risk processes.

Similarly the current risk register and strategic risk register will need further work to allow for better identification process.

Staffing contingency, the requirements of the Irish language Act and Legal matters are new high risk items for the strategic Risk Register.

9. Policy Update

The Board was informed of changes to:

- Cookies Policy (B-6-20-6).
- Privacy Policy (B-6-20-7).

10. Staffing (B-5-20-3A/B/C/D)

The Board was provided with:

- A recruitment update for the new posts of IT Manager, HR Executive Officer and Clerical Officer.
- An update on the Research Fellow Recruitment following confirmation of one retirement.

A discussion followed on the current workload of the CEO and the clear lack of contingency for the role leaving the ERC at risk. JC shared a note issued to the ARC highlighting the difficulties and risk raised by the lack of Senior Management staff within the ERC. The Board noted that, given the pressure of work, it might be necessary to prioritise projects and decline some requests from the DoE. It also noted that the DoE has already delayed addressing the need for a Principal Officer/Deputy CEO post. PT as Chair will contact the Secretary General as a matter of urgency to raise the issue again and the ARC with the CEO will work on an updated document to CPU.

11. AOB

Invitations to the online retirement event for Gerry Shiel will be issued to the members.

There being no further business AC and JC left the meeting. The members continued their discussions without members of the ERC executive.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pauline Shiel".

Appendix 1

**EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH CENTRE
Board Meeting
2 December 2020
Agenda**

1. Minutes of meeting of 20 October 2020 (**Bmin-5-1020**)
2. Conflict of Interest
3. Matters arising from the minutes
4. Report on developments since previous meeting
5. Covid 19
6. Governance matters
 - *Draft Annual report (B-6-20-1 – for review and discussion)*
7. Finance
 - *Profit & Loss year to date (B-6-20-2 – For information)*
 - *Correspondence to CPU re end of year estimates (B-6-20-3 – For information)*
8. Risk Management (Recurring item)
 - Strategic Risk Register (**B-6-20-4** – For information)
 - Draft Risk Policy (**B-6-20-5** – For approval)
9. Policy updates
 - Cookies Policy (**B-6-20-6** - For information)
 - Privacy Policy (**B-6-20-7** - For information)
10. Staffing
 - Urgent need for Senior Management Staff (**B-6-20-8** – for discussion)
11. AOB

Appendix 2

ERC Governing Board Meeting

Project updates

December 2, 2020

DEIS

- The DEIS-PISA achievement report and infographic was published on Nov 26. Lorraine Gilleece was interviewed for Newstalk and there was some media coverage. The finalising of the press release and infographic has been difficult.
- The DEIS-PISA context report is on track.
- The P-Tech study continues with development of a student questionnaire for Q1 2021 commencing.
- Further work on the DEIS technical index will re-commence early 2021.

TPL

- The press release and multi-strand literature review (phase 1) report are completed and approved by the Department.
- Publication is scheduled for Dec 1.
- The errors in the phase 2 survey datasets that were detected by the project lead are now being addressed by an experienced researcher (all are 'fixable'), and additional support from an experienced researcher is being provided.
- A sample of 12 schools is confirmed for Phase 3 and an advanced draft of the baseline phase 3 survey is in progress.
- Next Steering Group meeting is in December.

PISA 2022

- Analysis on the nationally developed questionnaires is on-going; draft versions of the main study national questionnaires will be presented to the PISA National Advisory Committee at its next meeting in January.
- The Department has agreed that testing in PISA 2022 will take place in the autumn.
- Details are being discussed with OECD secretariat and consortium and following this, revised timeline will be established.

TIMSS 2019

- All planning for the TIMSS 2019 launch on Dec 8 is completed and press release approved by Department.

- ERC staff and minister recorded the presentation which will be used during the online launch.
- Preparation of the national report is on-going. A first draft is almost complete and ready for internal review, before being sent to the DES.

TIMSS 2015

- The TIMSS 2015 report on home environment was published on Nov 12.
- The TIMSS 2015 report on learning characteristics was published on Nov 17.

GRS

- ERC is about to finalise the contract with NUI Maynooth so that the TEG tests can be administered in 7 post-primary schools (via Zoom) in December, 2020.
- Some modifications to the workplan for 2021-2022 are agreed with the Department. Extra care is being taken in communicating with schools, particularly in instances of paper-based survey/test materials dispatch.
- ERC is likely to need to request the extension of one research assistant's specified purpose contract for this study.
- Plans are being made to ensure continuity on the project into 2021 due to pending retirement of one staff member.

PIRLS and NAMER (both 2021)

- The NAMER team has begun packing the large volume of surveys for dispatch to schools in late Jan 2021 (sample size: 14,000 pupils in 200 schools, along with parents, teachers, principals). The planned course on scaling for the NAMER team due in October 2020 has been postponed until Q3 2021.
- An additional assistant has been assigned to PIRLS 2021 from November up until next August.
- Casual and clerical staff contingencies and casual staff continuity strategies have been built into the fieldwork dispatch and return phases.
- A structured communication plan using early warning and escalation during the course of fieldwork has been agreed with the Department.
- ERC is seeking clarify the role of the Inspectorate in encouraging school participation.
- As with GRS, extra care is being taken in the communications to schools in the context of Covid 19 and national guidelines.

PISA 2018

- The report on reading literacy is progressing well and a final draft is expected later this month.
- The reports on digital technologies and wellbeing are delayed due to staff illness/leave but will be a priority early next year.
- The PISA 2018 autumn feasibility study report has been approved for publication by the Department.

DOTS

- The contract of the DOTS research assistant has been extended until end Q1 2021 and will need to be further extended until end Q2 2021.
- Overall the project is on track, despite the 8 week delay in starting, with piloting of the new systems planned for Jan 2021.
- The DOTS teams has identified schools to participate in the pilot and a graduated approach to technical support has been developed.
- The first annual governance meeting with Prodigy took place on Nov 3. ERC and Prodigy both reported high levels of satisfaction with progress and working together. The governance meeting included a discussion of strategic development work to commence in Q3 2021. These three strands of work have the common objective of streamlining the paper based and online tests into a single system, from end to end (test development through to ordering and invoicing).
- There is a legal situation ongoing with the previous online assessment supplier.

NEPS PPAD-E

- 400 schools have now registered their interest in using the PPAD-E test.
- All training and support materials are now finalised (three manuals and four instructional videos).
- A DPA has been finalised and send for e-signing to these schools and so far about 320 schools have signed the DPA. The DPA is needed to access the PPAD-E scoring and reporting tool.
- The scoring and reporting tool development, testing and server deployment has been extremely complex and challenging for a variety of reasons, but the ERC and NEPS are very pleased with the final product.
- ERC and NEPS had a meeting with the TUI in early November to allay any concerns and addressed all concerns through the communications plan with schools.

- **DLF**
- The wave 1 survey report is progressing but delayed slightly; publication unlikely prior to Q1 2021.

SET allocation model

- Further work on the SET allocation model will re-commence in Q1 2021.

LC2020

- The ERC has provided a second sworn affidavit to the Department relating to an ongoing legal challenge based on a test case.
- The ERC LC2020 data verification report was published on the Department's website on November 23.

OLA

- There has been no capacity to advance the planned work on the official languages act since the previous meeting.
- The ERC received and responded to a further complaint from an Coimisinéar Teanga on November 11. The ARC and Board has already seen a copy of this correspondence in both English and Irish, as have the Department. The correspondence invites engagement with the CEO of the ERC. So far, no response has been received.

Test Development

- Various budget scenarios along with a set of principles and constraints were discussed with the Department on November 4.
- It was acknowledged by the Department that test development cannot commence until Q4 2021 and that additional staff are required to do this work. A case for these additional staff will be made in the proposal going to the Department in December. A case will be made for additional permanent staff since tests for schools is one of ERC's two statutory functions and therefore should not be overseen by specified purpose contract staff.
- Three priorities have been identified for test development – primary tests in Irish reading, re-standardisation of screening/diagnostic reading and mathematics tests for senior infants/first class, and an Irish language version of PPAD-E. However with respect to the third option, this would need to receive support from NEPS as well and it is possible that preference would be given to standardising PPAD-E at other grade levels.

PT