Statement of Strategy

2017 – 2021

SEPTEMBER 2017

Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission
Introduction

This Statement of Strategy sets out what the State Examinations Commission (SEC) intend to achieve over the next five years in delivering our mission to provide a high-quality candidate-centred state examination service and our vision of a progressive, fair and responsive examination service and organisation with a positive impact on learners and society. This is consistent with the broader ambition of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to provide the best education and training system in Europe, as set out in the Action Plan for Education 2016 – 2019.

It builds upon the success and achievements of our previous strategies whilst reflecting that we must continually evolve if we are to continue to deliver a high-quality service, address the current and future challenges we face and meet societal expectations of us.

The Statement of Strategy sets out:

- What we do and how we do it;
- An overview of the state examination sector in Ireland;
- The key challenges and opportunities in our operating environment;
- Our strategic approach, mission, vision and values; and
- Our goals.

The implementation of this Statement of Strategy will be underpinned by the SEC’s work planning and budget cycle. Specifically the five strategic goals and the supporting objectives guide the specific work and projects set out in the associated high-level SEC rolling Annual Business Work Plan (2017 – 2021) and the annual work plans for each year of the Statement of Strategy.

A formal evaluation of actual performance against the Statement of Strategy and the associated annual work plans will be reported in our Annual Report.

The development of this Statement of Strategy has benefitted enormously from the excellent engagement of our staff and the input of many stakeholders. We now look forward to working with staff, staff representative bodies and our stakeholders to deliver it.
What We Do and How We Do It

The SEC is a statutory body, staffed by civil servants, which was established by the then Minister for Education and Science in March 2003 under Section 54 of the Education Act 1998. The functions of the SEC are set out in State Examinations Commission (Establishment) Order 2003 and can be broadly summarised as the holding, assessment and certification of the second-level state examinations1 and of certain trade and professional examinations. The SEC is led by five non-executive Commissioners appointed by Government and a full-time CEO.

Running the state examinations each year is an immensely challenging logistical operation, bound by the immutable deadlines of the examinations themselves and the issuing of results2. Meeting these deadlines requires large numbers of examiners to set and mark examinations, superintendents to supervise examination centres and permanent staff, supplemented by temporary staff, to organise and administer the service. The smooth delivery of examinations each year is also dependent on the continued co-operation of candidates, school principals, teachers and their representative associations, school authorities and management bodies, parents and parents’ representative bodies.

Reflecting the critical role of the state examination service within the education system in Ireland, we work in close co-operation with the DES and with other national agencies including the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Teaching Council, and the Central Applications Office (CAO).

In addition, there are a wide variety and number of stakeholders who have significant interest in what we do and whom we engage with as we deliver the state examinations. These include, amongst others, the school management bodies (the Joint Management Bodies (JMB), the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)), an Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), the teacher unions (Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), the National Parents Council – Post Primary, the Irish Second Level Students Union (ISSU), the Education Research Centre (ERC), the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), the National Council for Special Education (NSCE), and various advocacy groups and associations with a particular interest in candidates with special educational needs.

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2 See Appendix I for an overview of the annual examination cycle.
## 2016 State Examinations Key Statistics

- **118,713**: Providing examinations to 118,713 candidates across all examination programmes.
- **1 million**: Generating just over 1 million individual grades leading to the award of 118,713 sets of examination results.
- **13,399**: Processing some 13,399 appeals at Leaving and Junior Certificate.
- **1.9 million**: Examining some 1.9 million individual test items.
- **2,029**: Providing just under 20,209 reasonable accommodations to facilitate 16,764 candidates with individual needs to access the certificate examinations through 10,685 special examination centres.
- **5123**: Engaging 5,123 superintendents to superintend at main examination centres.
- **383,108**: Returning 383,108 marked scripts to schools for viewing.
- **4 million**: Producing approx 4 million examination papers made up of approx 47.7 million A4 pages.
- **578**: Engaging 578 drafters, setters and translators to develop 506 different test instruments – including oral tests, aural recordings, practical briefs, project briefs, portfolio and coursework items as well as the written examination papers.
- **6,848**: Engaging 6,848 examiners to mark the oral, practical and written examinations.

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### 2017 – 2021

**Statement of Strategy**
Growth in the State Examinations Sector 2014 – 2016

Candidates

- Total Number of Candidates
  - 2014: 117,317
  - 2015: 117,452
  - 2016: 118,713

Reasonable Accommodations

- Growth in Reasonable Accommodations since 2014
  - +7.6% Reasonable Accommodation Candidates
  - +7.4% Special Centres

Contract Staff

- Total Number of Contract Staff
  - 2014: 11,682
  - 2015: 11,764
  - 2016: 11,971

Legend:
- [Green] 2014
- [Blue] 2015
- [Gray] 2016
## The Key Challenges and Opportunities in our Operating Environment during 2017 – 2021

### Increasing Demographic Pressures:
The number of candidates for state examinations is increasing (estimated to increase by over 21% by 2025 from 2015) as is the number with special educational needs and the nature and scale of accommodations sought by these candidates.

### Wider Curricular and Educational Reform Agenda:
Changes are happening at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate level which must be reflected in the examinations service.

### Changing Societal Expectations and the Digital Agenda:
Society expects more from public bodies, particularly in terms of the clarity and modes of communication, responsiveness, the quality of service and greater engagement online and digitally. The greater use of technology in the delivery of services is expected.

### Economic Environment:
Whilst recognising the impact the constrained economic environment has had on the SEC in the period of the previous Statement of Strategy, continued economic growth in the coming years may provide opportunities for targeted improvements in the examination service.

### Action Plan for Education 2016 – 2019:

### Public Sector Reform Programme and the Civil Service Renewal Plan:
As a civil service body we are part of the ongoing programme of change under the Public Sector Reform Programme and the Civil Service Renewal Plan and are alive to the opportunities available through the implementation of shared services and new ways of working.

### Contract Staff Supply:
It is increasingly difficult to attract and retain the number of suitably qualified contract staff (such as Examiners and Superintendents) required to deliver the state examinations each year.

### Organisational Capacity:
Investment in and development of our internal capacity (in terms of our staff, technological infrastructure, facilities, and processes) will be required to enable us to meet these challenges and exploit opportunities.
## Projections of State Examinations Sector in 2021

The following increases are projected by 2021:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Candidates:</strong></td>
<td>Increase by 7% (an additional 8,100 candidates)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Contract Staff:</strong></td>
<td>Examiners and Superintendents to increase by 6% (an additional 420 Examiners and 310 Superintendents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RACE³ Scheme:</strong></td>
<td>25% increase in candidates accommodated under the scheme and special centres established (an additional 4,200 candidates and 2,700 special centres)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curricular Reform:</strong></td>
<td>Three additional curricular subjects at Leaving Certificate (Politics &amp; Society, Computer Science and Physical Education); Junior Cycle Reform will lead to the introduction of new assessment modalities across all subjects over the period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual items Examined:</strong></td>
<td>1,982,038 increasing to 2,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leaving Certificate Scripts Returned for Viewing:</strong></td>
<td>Increase by 6% (22,560 additional scripts returned for viewing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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³ Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations Scheme
Strategic Approach

We recognise that to meet the challenges in our operating environment over the coming years, in particular the curricular reforms and demographic increases, will involve a programme of transformational change within the SEC. This transformational change will involve a move from a predominantly paper-based system to a technology enabled one, allowing us to meet changing societal and digital expectations and underpin wider curricular and educational reforms over the coming years. The transformational change will be managed in a careful and considered way without impacting on our core operational responsibility to provide a high-quality, fair and inclusive state examination service each year.

The impact of this transformational change will be evident to candidates, parents, schools and contract staff through better service delivery through the greater use of technology and higher levels of satisfaction in the level and quality of engagement with us (including digital communication channels).
Our Mission

To provide a high-quality candidate-centred state examinations service

Our Vision

A progressive, fair and responsive examination service and organisation with a positive impact on learners and society

Our Values

- The candidate is at the centre of everything we do
- We value the public trust and confidence placed in us and are committed to living up to that trust
- We are committed to the highest standards of integrity
- We value teamwork, relationships and working collaboratively
- We value quality, and are committed to doing things right and in the right way
- We value fairness and are committed to providing an impartial and inclusive service
- We value respect for candidates, for stakeholders and for each other
- We are committed to civil service values

As reflected in the Civil Service Renewal Plan 2014. See Appendix II for excerpt from the Civil Service Renewal Plan regarding the vision for the Civil Service.
Statement of Strategy

2017 – 2021

Our Goals

1. To provide a high-quality, fair and inclusive state examination service

2. To develop the examinations service in line with curricular reforms and in pursuit of service quality improvements

3. To exploit technology to deliver better services and meet current and future challenges

4. To be responsive and accountable to our stakeholders

5. To be organisationally excellent; with staff, infrastructure and systems aligned to deliver our mission
## Goal 1: To provide a high-quality, fair and inclusive state examination service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Prepare and produce test instruments of a high quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provide fair access to the examinations through inclusive design and the provision of appropriate accommodations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Arrange for the proper conduct of examinations in schools and centres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conduct marking, resulting and appeals to ensure candidates receive the grades that fairly reflect the quality of their work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Provide that the examinations rules and regulations are appropriate and fairly applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Ensure the integrity, security and confidentiality of the examinations service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Communicate clearly with candidates and schools on examinations matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Minimise risks inherent in the examinations system</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied and Junior Cycle/Certificate examinations delivered and conducted in accordance with the examinations rules and procedures and resulted securely and on time each year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The provision of a scheme of examinations access arrangements delivered in line with the published RACE Scheme and which is fair to all candidates undertaking examinations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The maintenance of examination standards year-on-year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Maintain level of satisfaction of candidates and stakeholders regarding their engagement with the state examination service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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See Appendix I for an overview of the annual examination cycle.
### Objectives

| 1.  | Support the phased implementation of Junior Cycle Reform through expert advice, the provision of appropriate assessment and the implementation of the new grading system |
| 2.  | Support the Transitions Reform Agenda through developing the new Leaving Certificate Grading System and contribute to the next phase of reform |
| 3.  | Support the implementation of any new or revised Leaving Certificate specifications through expert advice and the provision of appropriate assessment |
| 4.  | Trial the practical assessment in senior cycle sciences |
| 5.  | Carry out necessary research to underpin the successful development and implementation of assessments that support curricular reform and service improvements |

### Outcomes

| 1.  | Revised Junior Cycle grading system in place and operational in 2017 |
| 2.  | Revised Leaving Certificate grading system in place and operational in 2017 |
| 3.  | Appropriate assessments for new Junior Cycle specifications implemented up to 2021 in place |
| 4.  | Appropriate assessments for new Leaving Certificate specifications implemented up to 2021 in place |
| 5.  | Trial on practical assessment in senior cycle science commenced by end of 2017 |
| 6.  | Annual research and development plan in place and operational |
**Goal 3:  To exploit technology to deliver better services and meet current and future challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Progress the transition to the online marking of examinations</td>
<td>1. User friendly SEC website in place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Redevelop our website to be a user friendly information portal for our stakeholders that supports the delivery of digital services</td>
<td>2. Electronic communication with schools and contract staff the default where possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Enable digital engagement between the SEC and schools through harnessing existing IT infrastructure and systems to reduce administrative burden</td>
<td>3. The process of entry of candidates for examinations is streamlined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Move all manual application/fee payment processes of candidates to an online system</td>
<td>4. The following services to candidates are provided online:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Move all manual application, recruitment and payment processes for SEC contract staff to an online system</td>
<td>a. Payment of examination fees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Pilot the electronic completion of coursework by candidates</td>
<td>b. Examination appeals application process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Set electronic communication as the default communication channel with contract staff</td>
<td>c. Refund of examination appeals fees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Facilitate greater use of Assistive Technology to enhance accessibility of examination services</td>
<td>d. Request for examination statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Reasonable accommodation applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. The following services to SEC contract staff are provided online:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Recruitment and Appointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Claims for payment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Greater use of Assistive Technology by candidates with special educational needs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Progress made towards the transition to the online marking of examinations</td>
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## Goal 4: Be responsive and accountable to stakeholders

### Objectives

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Fully implement and comply with our corporate governance responsibilities⁶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Clearly set out the governance and accountability framework for the SEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Maintain and strengthen engagement with all stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Underpin public confidence in the service and the organisation through clear and open communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Understand and appropriately respond to stakeholder expectations</td>
</tr>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Meet our customer service commitments under the Customer Charter</td>
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### Outcomes

<p>| | |</p>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Full compliance with our corporate governance responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>All Customer Charter commitments and targets met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Level of public confidence in the examination service maintained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Stakeholder satisfaction in level and quality of engagement with the SEC increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Stakeholder satisfaction in the clarity of our communications increased</td>
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⁶ See Appendix III for a brief summary of some of the corporate governance responsibilities of the SEC.
Goal 5: To be organisationally excellent; with staff, infrastructure and systems aligned to deliver our mission

### Objectives

1. Recognising our part within a unified Civil Service, embrace the implementation of the Civil Service Renewal Plan and the Public Service Reform Plan (including Shared Services)
2. Review the sustainability and suitability of the SEC’s current operating model to meet current and future needs
3. Recruit, retain and develop a highly skilled, motivated and ‘reflective’ workforce supported by a strategic HR approach
4. Progress the development of an enhanced physical environment to enable the SEC to provide a high quality examination service
5. Develop the project management capability and capacity to plan, manage and implement change within the SEC
6. Re-engineer our financial administration processes to align with (and maximise the benefits of) the new Financial Management Shared Services Centre and the development of a strategic ‘retained finance’ function
7. Review our core processes to identify opportunities for continual improvement of internal performance and service delivery
8. Develop internal communication mechanisms to support a culture of collaboration in the SEC with staff having the right information at the right level to fulfil their roles and responsibilities effectively and a strong sense of being involved and consulted with in decision making
9. Improve contract staff recruitment and retention by increasing the pool of suitable applicants and implementing measures to encourage retention

### Outcomes

1. Well motivated, well trained and well informed workforce (measured through civil service employee engagement survey)
2. An operating model conducive to a high-quality candidate-centred state examinations service and the health and well-being of staff
3. Enhanced physical environment in place to support the delivery of a high quality examination service
4. Sufficient level of suitable contract staff to conduct examinations and assessment
5. Core processes within the SEC reviewed and revised
6. Increased level of awareness of and performance in our corporate environmental and energy efficiency responsibilities
7. Clear and consistent staff communication channels and forums in place
8. Continued good industrial relations in place
## Appendix I: Annual Examination Cycle

### Overview of Examination Service Operation

The SEC is responsible for the operation, delivery and development of the Irish State Examinations (principally the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations). Working closely with school authorities, teachers, parents and students the SEC delivers this national service across the post-primary school network and many atypical settings (such as Youthreach centres, hospitals, and prisons). The examinations are delivered across multiple modes of assessment, from written examinations in June each year to oral and practical examinations during term-time and practical coursework over the course of the school year.

The examinations must be delivered to immutable deadlines each year and to the highest possible standards of quality in order to ensure continuing public confidence in the system. With some 23,000 personnel involved in the annual delivery and operation of the system, significant levels of quality assurance, security and confidentiality underpin each stage of the examination preparation, production, delivery and marking processes. Contingency planning and preparation, based on a robust management of the risks inherent in providing such a large scale national service, are central to the operation and delivery of the system.

Inter-candidate equity is a core principle underpinning the state examinations so that all candidates are treated fairly and equitably. The SEC responds to the requirements for adaptive services to the greatest extent possible on behalf of candidates with special educational needs in the examinations. The SEC has robust and transparent appeal processes in place for candidates who are unhappy with decisions of the SEC.

### Key Statistics

Each year the SEC:

- Provides examinations in 90 curricular and 16 non-curricular subjects;
- Engages 5,000 superintendents at ordinary examination centres and almost 7,000 examiners to correct the examinations;
- Produces some 4 million examination papers made up of almost 50 million A4 pages;
- Prepares 506 test items and examiners approximately 1.9 million individual items of candidates work;
- Provides almost 20,000 reasonable accommodations to facilitate just over 15,000 candidates with individual special needs to access the certificate examinations and establishing 10,000 special examination centres as a result;
- Generates just under 1 million individual grades leading to the award of 118,000 results; and
- Returns approximately 360,000 marked Leaving Certificate scripts to schools for viewing by candidates and processes some 13,500 appeals.
**Appendix II: Excerpt from the Civil Service Renewal Plan on the Vision for the Civil Service**

**Overview of Examination Service Operation**

**Our Vision**
To provide a world-class service to the State and to the people of Ireland.

**Our Mission**
- To offer objective and evidence-informed advice to Government, respond to developments, and deliver Government objectives while striving to achieve optimal outcomes in the long-term national interest.
- To serve citizens and stakeholders efficiently, equally and with respect, in a system that is open, transparent and accountable.

**Our Values**
- A deep-rooted public service ethos of independence, integrity, impartiality, equality, fairness and respect.
- A culture of accountability, efficiency and value for money.
- The highest standards of professionalism, leadership and rigour.

**Our Commitments**
- We will encourage creative and innovative thinking, constructive problem-solving, openness to change and flexible working methods.
- We will ensure through appropriate merit based recruitment, training, and life-long learning and development, that the Civil Service has the necessary expertise to advise on and implement public policy in a complex and changing world.
- We will maximise the contribution of all staff, by nurturing and rewarding talent and by encouraging civil servants to develop their potential in a workplace committed to equality, diversity, and mutual respect.
Appendix III: Corporate Governance Responsibilities of the SEC

As a statutory body, staffed by civil servants, established under section 54 of the *Education Act 1998*, the SEC is subject to the following corporate governance and statutory obligations including:

- The Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies 2016;
- Ethics in Public Office Legislation;
- Protected Disclosures Act 2014;
- Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015;
- Data Protection Legislation;
- Freedom of Information Legislation;
- Compliance with Official Languages legislation;
- Compliance with Employment Law and Civil Service HR Legislative provisions;
- Compliance with Disability Legislation;
- Compliance with Public Financial Procedures;
- Compliance with Procurement Directives;
- Compliance with Health & Safety obligations; and
- Compliance with Energy Efficiency obligations as a public body.

The SEC is also obligated to comply with various administrative and policy initiatives applicable to the civil and public service such as adherence to Civil Service HR Guidelines/Circulars and the Civil Service Renewal Programme.

In terms of annual reporting, the SEC is obligated to present an annual report to the Minister for Education and Skills on its activities during the preceding year. A copy of the annual accounts of income and expenditure are required to be submitted within six-months of the end of the accounting period to which they relate to the Comptroller and Auditor General for audit.

Finally, the Chief Executive Officer is the Accounting Officer for the appropriation accounts of the service for the purposes of the *Exchequer and Audit Departments Act, 1866* and *1921*, and the *Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act, 1993*. The Accounting Officer may be asked to appear before the Committee of Public Accounts to deal with issues raised by the Comptroller and Auditor General.