



**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Research Strategy 2023 - 2026

July 2023

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## Introduction

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The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Research Strategy arises from the organisation's Strategic Plan 2022-2025. The NCCA's mission is to advise the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools. One of the ways in which this is achieved is by 'generating, using and sharing research as a basis for advice, discussion and debate on teaching, learning and assessment' (NCCA, 2022, 14). The Strategic Goal associated with this aspect of the organisation's mission resonates with the principles of this Research Strategy and states that the NCCA will:

*...generate, use and disseminate rigorous and robust research evidence to support the development of curriculum and assessment advice and practice in all educational settings. Through research design, we will engage with the diversity of stakeholders in the education system, including children<sup>1</sup>, students, parents, teachers/practitioners and school leaders, in authentic, collaborative and meaningful ways. We will share and use NCCA-generated research and the work of other researchers to stimulate and inform the discourse on matters related to our curriculum and assessment advice. We will contribute to capacity-building in research across the education system (NCCA, 2022, 18).*

In addition to the Strategic Goal on Knowledge and Research, the Research Strategy will contribute to achieving the Strategic Goal on Engagement and Collaboration, specifically in relation to the NCCA's advocacy for evidence-informed learning, teaching and assessment practices (NCCA, 2022, 17).

This Research Strategy articulates the Vision and Principles that guide the NCCA's research activity and outlines the contexts for and scope of that activity. In whatever form its research activity is shaped, the NCCA takes its research responsibilities very seriously and is committed to implementing the highest standards of ethical behaviour. This Research Strategy, 2023–2026, includes a new Ethical Statement, which acknowledges the ethical implications and considerations arising from the NCCA's research activity and is designed to provide clarity and guidance for both the staff of the NCCA and those who engage in research activity on its behalf.

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<sup>1</sup> This strategy uses the word 'children' when referring to early childhood settings and primary schools, and 'students' when referring to post-primary schools. The term 'young people' is used to include all young learners across the education continuum from early childhood to the end of senior cycle, including vulnerable young adults.

## Vision

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An evidence-informed culture for curriculum and assessment innovation and development across the continuum of Irish education encompassing early childhood, primary and post-primary.

## Principles

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This Research Strategy is grounded in principles of:

### Integrity

The NCCA grounds its curriculum and assessment development in rigorous and robust research evidence.

### Inclusivity

The NCCA's research actively engages with the diversity of stakeholders in the education system, including young people, parents, teachers and educators in authentic, collaborative and meaningful ways.

### Influence

The NCCA's research stimulates and informs national and international debate on critical issues in education through reciprocal conversations.

### Impact

The NCCA's research is mediated through partnership with stakeholders into learning and teaching contexts.

### Accessibility

The NCCA makes research openly available and accessible and communicates research evidence through multiple channels.

## Organisation research profile

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Consistent with the NCCA Mission Statement (NCCA, 2022, 14), curriculum development and advice are grounded in research. The NCCA's research activity is broadly based so as to effectively inform '... advice, discussion and debate on teaching, learning and assessment' (NCCA, 2022, 14). This includes, but is not limited to, research carried out by the NCCA in relation to specific aspects or areas of curriculum development across early childhood, primary and post-primary education. It also includes longitudinal studies that inform system-wide developments. In general, the NCCA's research output can be categorised as internally and externally generated. Internal research is carried out by the NCCA Executive, whereas external research output is

conducted on the NCCA's behalf by academic institutions and personnel, by independent education consultants or by research organisations. The NCCA uses the research outputs to inform and support its processes of curriculum review, policy development and advice. Whether internally or externally generated, this strategy's principle on Inclusivity is evident in the NCCA's concern to reach out to and hear all voices.

## Internal research

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Research is carried out by the NCCA Executive for a number of reasons and in a variety of contexts. For example, background papers may include literature reviews which support the development of key messages or the design of a brief for further development, or may mediate research literature into key messages for internal structures. Staff in the NCCA also engage in data collection through fieldwork in relation to, for example, consultation with stakeholders and reviews of specific areas of curriculum provision. Such consultations and reviews, often carried out in collaboration with education partners, reflect the NCCA's focus on inclusivity by using a broad range of methods in a variety of contexts and by engaging widely with stakeholders across the education system. Because of the relationships that exist between the NCCA and its stakeholders, the NCCA pays close attention to issues of research bias, particularly in relation to data analysis, and research design and methodologies include measures to mitigate against such bias.

## External research

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The NCCA commissions a considerable range of research, both nationally and internationally. In many cases, these commissions are for literature reviews which encapsulate current theory, research findings and conceptualisations of good practice. The NCCA also commissions audits of international provision in specific areas and comparative studies locating Ireland in the international context. In addition, the NCCA commissions academics and independent education consultants to support the NCCA Executive in carrying out both fieldwork (e.g. focus groups) and data analysis as part of consultations. All of the NCCA's consultations include consultation with young people in the relevant age groups, including babies and young children. Ensuring that the views and perspectives of young people are included in consultation brings particular requirements in terms of ethics and appropriate methodologies, and the inclusion of the Ethical Statement in this Research Strategy reflects this concern. The NCCA's consultation with children is almost entirely carried out on its behalf by academic researchers who are required to obtain ethical approval for their work with children from their academic institution. In the case of external work carried out on the NCCA's behalf with students, the same requirements about obtaining ethical approval are applied. The implication for staff in the NCCA is to ensure that this requirement in working with young people is explicit in Requests for Tenders and subsequent contracts.

The NCCA has also commissioned, through Request for Tender processes, major longitudinal research projects which have contributed to the development of capacity in the research community in Ireland. Currently, the *Children's School Lives* longitudinal study – funded by the NCCA – is being undertaken by University College Dublin. This study is investigating children's primary school experiences and is scheduled for completion in 2025. A second longitudinal study,

*Exploring the Introduction and Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle* is investigating schools' experiences of the curriculum and assessment changes introduced through the framework. Funded by the NCCA, the study is being carried out by a research team from the School of Education at the University of Limerick and runs from 2020 to 2024.

## **Additional research engagement**

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The NCCA contributes to research activity in the broader educational context through involvement and partnership with other organisations, nationally and internationally. Examples of national engagement include the NCCA's support for the Teachers Research Exchange (T-REX), an online platform developed by a consortium of third level institutions led by Mary Immaculate College; the NCCA's membership of SCoTENS (the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South); membership of committees on TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment); and corporate membership of the Education Studies Association of Ireland. The NCCA engages with international organisations such as the International Educational Assessment Network (IEAN); with the Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe (CIDREE); and with the Association for Educational Assessment, Europe (AEA). The NCCA ensures that staff have opportunities to attend national and international research conferences to support them in developing and maintaining their professional knowledge base, thereby enhancing their capacity to engage in and with research activity. Staff engagement in research enhances the organisation's capacity to develop curriculum and assessment advice that is informed by research evidence. Additionally, staff of the NCCA engage in dissemination of the organisation's research outputs through presentations at national and international conferences and seminars, professional publications and other media.

## **Conclusion**

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Research engagement is integral to the work of the NCCA. This Research Strategy provides the framework within which that engagement – national and international, internal and external – takes place. It will be used to identify actions through which the Vision and Principles are enacted and achieved, and it will be reviewed in tandem with the renewal of the NCCA's Strategic Plan.

## Reference

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National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2022) *Strategic Plan 2022 – 2025*. Available at: <https://ncca.ie/media/5515/strategic-plan-2022-2025.pdf>

# Appendix 1: Ethical Statement to support and underpin the Research Strategy

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## Context and rationale for the Ethical Statement

- The NCCA's core research practices relate to the development of new or revised curriculum and assessment models and the review of existing models led by the organisation's full-time Executive. Its practices entail both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data gathering. The NCCA Research Strategy sets out the nature of the research approaches undertaken to support curriculum and assessment development. These approaches include but are not limited to:
  - Desk-based research
  - Engagement of outside expertise in particular areas through commissioned research
  - Design, implementation and evaluation of research and consultation with stakeholders, including young people
  - Research collaboration with external agencies and individuals.
- It is acknowledged that the methodologies used in the NCCA's research activities and collaborations, and the associated ethical implications, are varied. It is equally noted that partners engaged to work with the NCCA are required to get and abide by ethical approval from their own organisation or institution, such as a university or research agency.
- Research undertaken by the NCCA Executive, as described in the section on Internal Research, is generally with stakeholders in the context of consultation on curriculum, and differs in purpose to research undertaken by, for example, academic researchers. (There are a very small number of exceptions to this in the case of specific collaborative research projects, such as Erasmus Plus or CIDREE projects).
- The categories identified in the statement that follows are not intended to be a definitive list of the NCCA's research activities. They are noted here as particular ethical considerations that may apply on a regular basis in the course of the NCCA's work. It is envisaged that the general ethical imperatives identified here, informed by the Research Strategy principles, should be applied in any research context that arises for the NCCA.

## Ethical Statement

Ethical Theme	Statement
<b>General research practices and culture</b>	An awareness and respect for the principles of our Research Strategy is promoted and fostered.
<b>Research safeguards</b>	Research adheres to relevant legal requirements.
<b>Respect and care for research participants</b>	Researchers and research participants are informed about and aware of their rights and responsibilities and are treated with respect, care and dignity.
<b>Research practices and procedures</b>	A commitment to applying quality contemporary thinking and practices is evident throughout the research process.
<b>Research administration and data management</b>	Administration and management of research data conforms with appropriate protocols and practices.
<b>Researching with young people</b>	Researching with young people accords with statutory guidance and invokes appropriate safeguards.
<b>Collaborating on research</b>	Collaborative practices are conducted with integrity and through a transparent process.
<b>Public communication and societal considerations</b>	Communication of research aligns with the NCCA's commitment to accessibility.



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