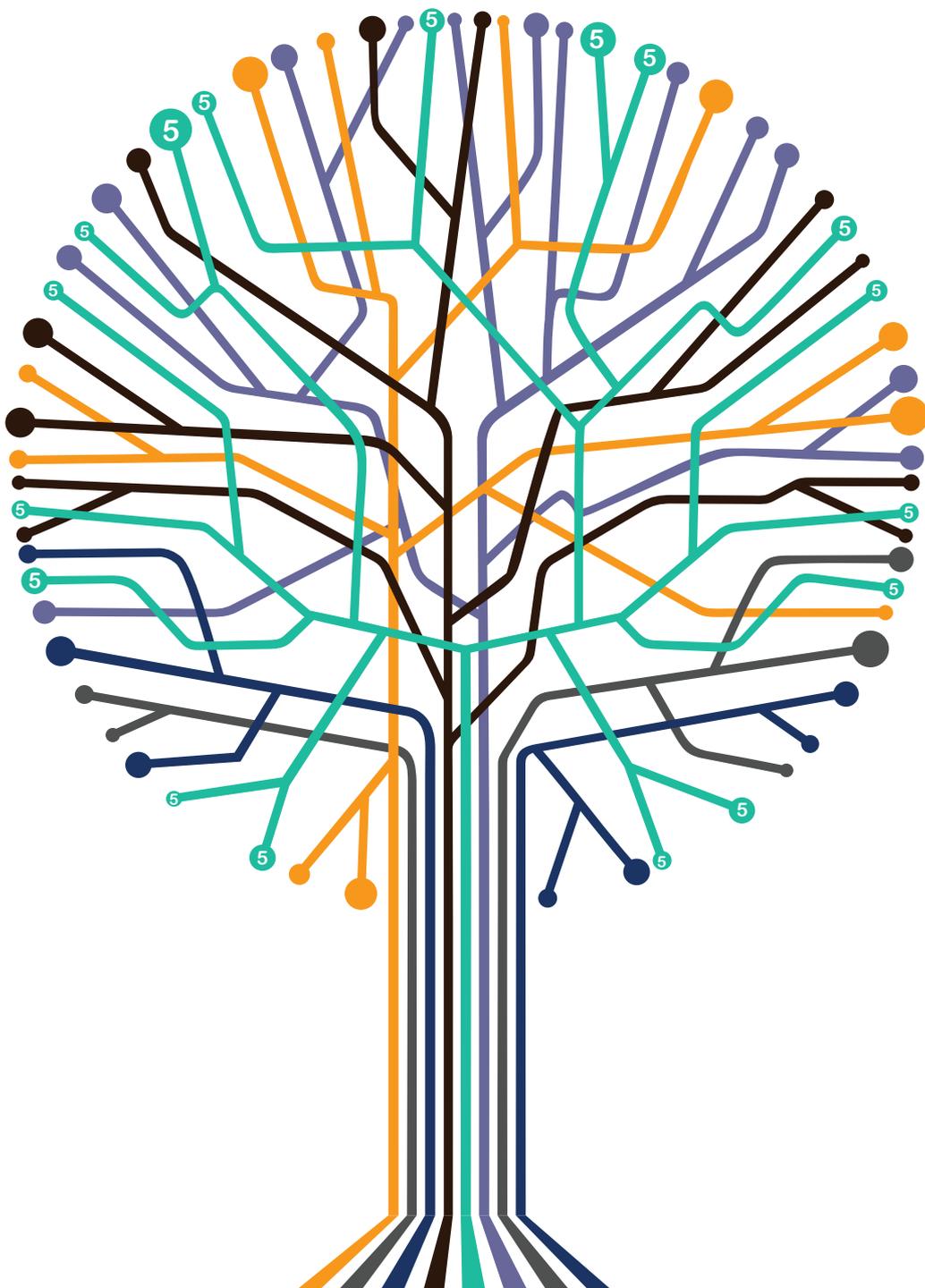


# CENTRAL APPLICATIONS OFFICE

## 5 YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

2013 – 2017



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## ACRONYMS

Below is a list of acronyms used throughout this document.

CAO	Central Applications Office
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IoT	Institute of Technology
IoTI	Institutes of Technology of Ireland
IUA	Irish Universities Association
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MIE	Marino Institute of Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NUI	National University of Ireland
NUIM	National University of Ireland, Maynooth
PAC	Postgraduate Applications Centre
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognised Prior Learning
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UK)
UK	United Kingdom
VFM	Value for Money

## FOREWORD

This CAO *Strategic Plan* covers a five year period from 2013 to 2017. Its timing is opportune as both the sector and the country are likely to continue to experience considerable change over the life of this *Plan*. The educational landscape will undoubtedly alter, with increasing demand and the changing nature and expectations of the student, under the backdrop of significant challenges in relation to funding and an expectation of significant reform of the higher education system itself under the National Strategy to 2030.

The preparation of the *Plan* thus required a significant level of reflection and consultation, both on the challenges to the sector and the focus and priorities of the CAO. The *Plan* sets out an ambitious vision for the CAO, representing the needs of not just CAO member organisations, but also those of the wider stakeholder community. Achieving this vision will involve a significant level of change and flexibility to proactively respond to moving priorities and will therefore be challenging to the CAO whilst at the same time offering opportunities to embrace further the use of enhanced technology and for broadening of the CAO portfolio of activities.

This *Plan* is the first formal strategy developed and approved by the CAO Board and represents a significant milestone in the context of the 35-year history of the CAO. The CAO represents an excellent example of shared service provision within higher education and has gained a high level of credibility nationally and internationally for its effectiveness and efficiency and for the objectivity and transparency it provides to the admissions processes. In addition to ensuring the provision of a dependable, robust and secure application processing service, this *Plan* looks beyond the current remit of the CAO, and toward active engagement with stakeholders to identify new or changing application processing service requirements.

I would like to thank all stakeholders for their contribution to the development of this *Plan*. We believe it has struck the right balance in maintaining what we do well and responding to future requirements and opportunities. I commend all the staff of the CAO for their continued efforts, dedication, and commitment to maintaining and advancing the CAO as the premier national system for processing online applications to education. The publication of the *Plan* signals only the first step in a long journey through implementation. The staff of the CAO will have the full backing of the Board in the implementation of this strategy.

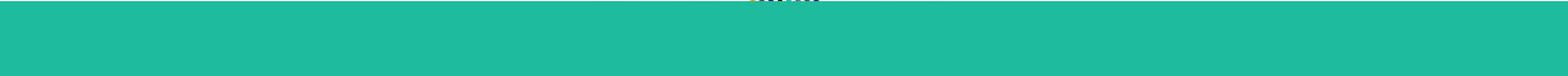
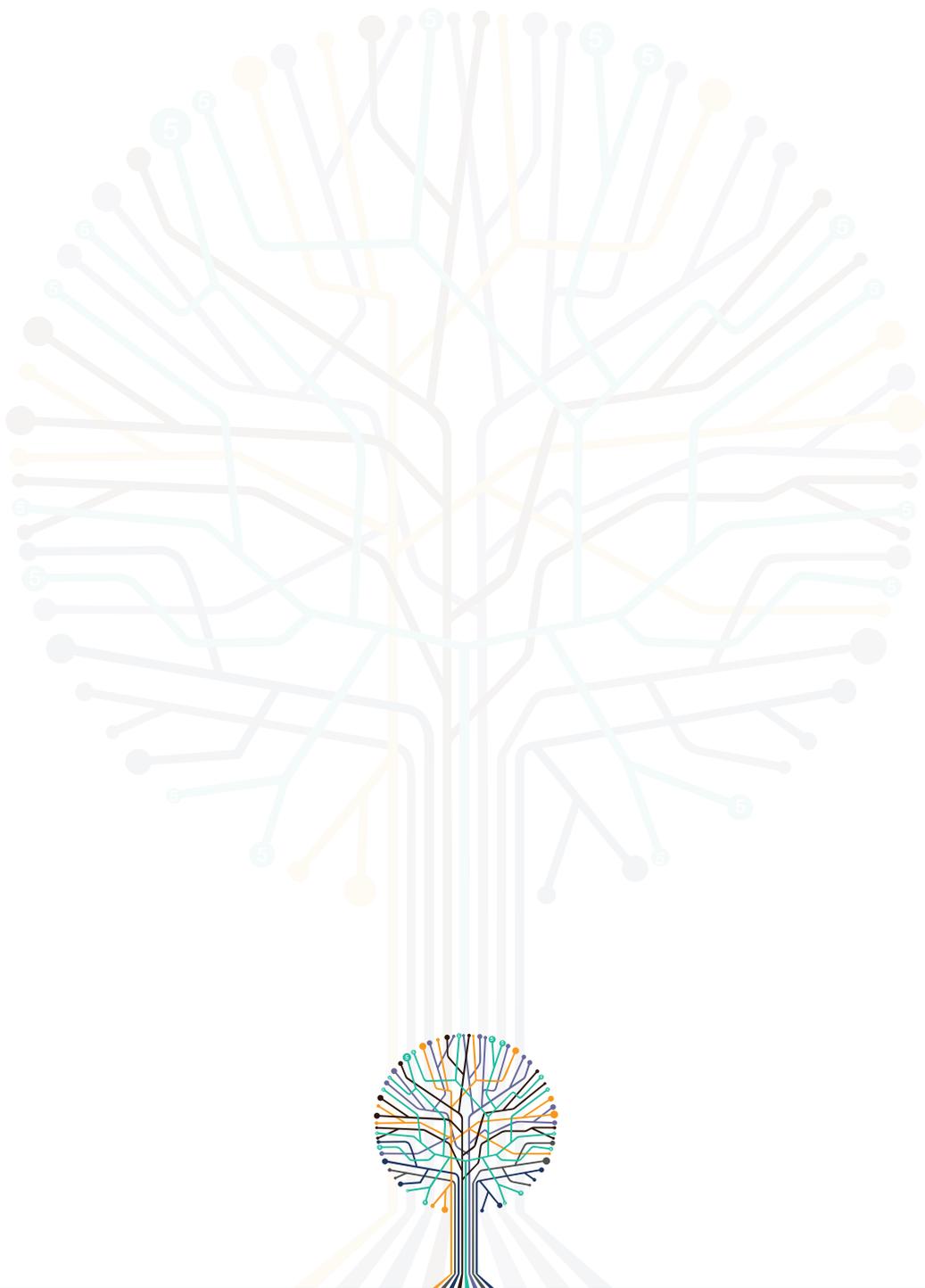
On behalf of the CAO, I look forward to engaging with those at the heart of the CAO service offering, namely applicants and higher education institutions, in realising the ambition of the *Plan* to 2017.



---

Professor Paul Giller  
Chairman, Central Applications Office  
January 2013

# INTRODUCTION



## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. CEO Opening Statement

The organisation, CAO, was founded in 1976 by the higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Republic of Ireland. The current purpose of the CAO is to process applications for entry to first year undergraduate courses centrally and to deal with them fairly and efficiently. The HEIs retain the function of making policy decisions on admissions.

From the early 1990s, the CAO has undergone significant change. In 1990, the CAO system consisted of a central application system for just ten institutions, namely the seven Universities, Dublin Institute of Technology, Thomond College in Limerick and the National College of Art and Design. In 1991, the CAO system expanded to include eleven Institutes of Technology through the CAS system. This resulted in two systems: the CAO and the CAS system, operating side by side until 1998, when all applications reverted back to the CAO system. From 1991 to 2001 the number of education providers supported by the CAO system increased when the following institutions joined: Mater Dei, the seven Colleges of Education, the Colleges of Theology, the Royal College of Surgeons, and a number of private institutions.

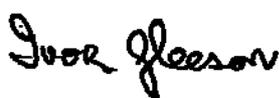
At present, there are 45 institutions within the CAO system catering for some 77,000 applicants, offering 1,380 courses at National Framework of Qualifications Levels 6, 7 and 8.

This *Strategic Plan* plots a course for the CAO for the period 2013 – 2017, enabling us to set clear, achievable goals for the next five years. We are operating in difficult economic times and, therefore, we will always strive to offer value for money to all participants in the CAO system.

We are committed to further developing our highly professional and cost effective service. Our aim is to engage proactively with our existing HEIs, offering them a range of additional services to meet their current needs, while maintaining the reliable and efficient service traditionally associated with the CAO.

Over the life of this *Plan*, we will engage with additional post-secondary education providers and professional bodies with a view to exploring opportunities to secure their participation in the application system, and to ensure that we offer the premier national system for processing online applications to post-secondary education. Applicants will benefit greatly from having a one-stop-shop where they can choose from a multitude of courses, offered at various levels, both on a full-time and part-time basis.

I would like to thank the CAO Strategic Planning Committee, Dr. Michael Mulvey (DIT – Chair), Dr. Anne O’Gara (MIE) and Dr. David Redmond (NUI Maynooth) for their time and contribution, which was invaluable in the preparation of this *Strategic Plan*.



---

Ivor Gleeson  
CEO, Central Applications Office  
January 2013

## 1.2. Strategic Planning Context

The CAO was founded in the mid-1970s and is guided by its original *Memorandum and Articles of Association* as set out in 1976. The principal role of the CAO has traditionally been the processing of applications for first-year admission to a range of undergraduate higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland. The organisation's prominence and reputation are recognised as significant in upholding the integrity of the admissions and enrolment policies of its institutional stakeholders. The CAO is widely regarded as the only working example of shared services within the higher education sector in Ireland.

In late 2011, the CAO Board and Executive recognised a need to engage in a strategic planning process to ensure that the CAO objectives and activities were aligned with the changes in the broader higher education sector in the Republic of Ireland and beyond, and that the organisation was in a position to serve its member organisations to meet their current and future needs. The CAO Board recognised that the higher education sector had experienced, and continues to experience, very substantial change and that the application processing requirements of the sector had extended beyond what was covered in the original *Memorandum and Articles of Association* for the CAO. A comprehensive strategic planning process was considered timely, and a strategic planning committee, comprising members of the CAO Board, was established with the process facilitated by an external firm of consultants. This document is the output from that process.

The strategy development process involved the following elements:

- **Environmental Analysis:** Analysis of the external environment in which the CAO operates, including the organisation's position in the higher education sector in Ireland. It also examined any threats external to the CAO that may impact on its ability to deliver on its mandate on an on-going basis
- **Benchmark Analysis:** Review of the scope of activities of other international application processing bodies in higher education sectors outside of Ireland
- **Stakeholder Needs Analysis:** Consultation sessions with approximately thirty stakeholder groups through facilitated workshops, face-to-face meetings, and online surveys to better understand the evolving needs of stakeholders. The results of these sessions were analysed, in turn, to determine the extent to which it is appropriate and feasible for the CAO to respond to these needs
- **Strategic Options Assessment:** Development, analysis, prioritisation and selection of the strategic options available to the CAO in the context of its mandate; the needs of its stakeholders; the environment in which it is operating; and the opportunities and threats which the organisation is facing both now and over the life of this strategy
- **Planning:** Preparation of a detailed *Strategic Plan*.

### 1.3. CAO Board and Strategic Planning Committee Members

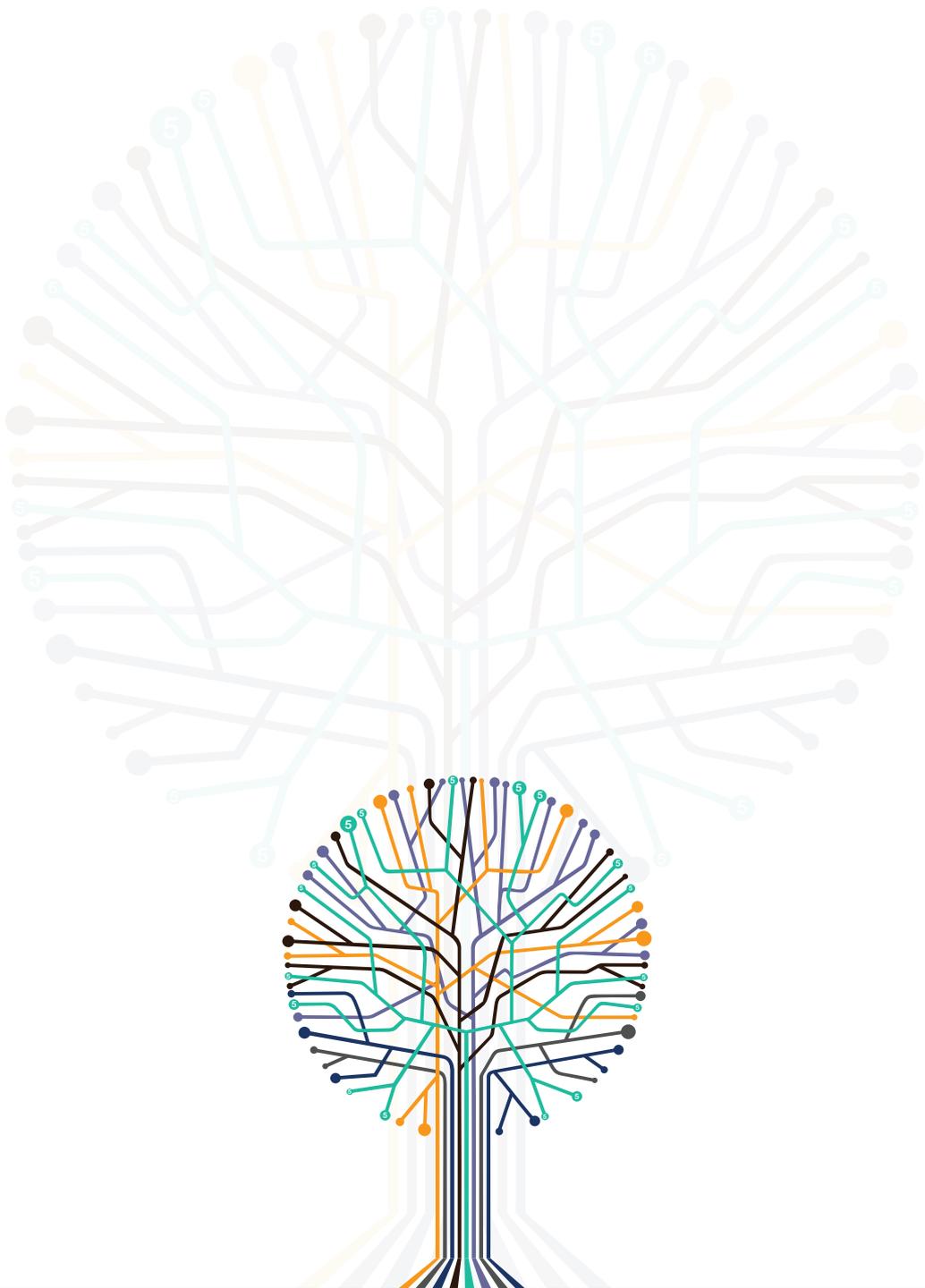
#### Members of the CAO Board as at January 2013

- Professor Paul Giller (Chair)
- Professor Eithne Guilfoyle
- Professor Linda Hogan
- Professor Nollaig Mac Congail
- Professor Paul McCutcheon
- Professor Mark Rogers
- Dr. Mary Meaney
- Dr. Aidan Mulkeen
- Dr. Michael Mulvey
- Dr. Anne O’Gara
- Mr. Paul Hannigan
- Mr. Tom Boland

#### Members of the CAO Strategic Planning Committee

- Dr. Michael Mulvey (Chair)
- Dr. Anne O’Gara
- Dr. David Redmond
- Mr. Ivor Gleeson

# ENVIRONMENT ANALYSIS



## 2. ENVIRONMENT ANALYSIS

A summary of the environmental context, which supported the development of the strategic objectives set out in this *Plan*, is presented below.

### 2.1. National Education Context

The economic climate within which the CAO is operating is extremely challenging. This is characterised by sharp increases in national debt, high and rising unemployment figures, significant declines in GDP and changes in the higher education landscape. The following specific factors are pertinent to the strategy and role of the CAO in Irish higher education:

- The challenging macro-economic environment, which has constrained the funding historically available for higher education providers. There is increasing pressure from Central Government and the HEA for education providers to collaborate, engage in shared service initiatives, and to demonstrate value for money in all activities
- The economic downturn, which has increased the importance of providing accessible and high quality education programmes to students, in order to enhance their knowledge, skill levels, and marketability both in Ireland and abroad
- The HEA focus on the importance of further education as a key component of post-secondary education, and the prioritisation of the creation of more effective links between further and higher education, in order to meet the broader needs of learners and the economy.

A number of national initiatives have been undertaken to respond to these challenges, including the following publications:

- The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. This provides a roadmap for the medium to long term development of the higher education sector. The HEA has cited that the collapse of Irish public finances has negatively impacted the “perception of the quality of Irish higher education internationally”, and the national strategy “presents an opportunity to bring a nationally coherent and co-ordinated approach to the development of the sector while respecting institutional autonomy”<sup>1</sup>
- The HEA document, *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape*. This indicates that the future of higher education requires consolidation and rationalisation, as dictated by the requirements of sustainability and quality
- The *Pathways to Work*<sup>2</sup> Policy Statement outlining education and training initiatives. In 2012, the Department of Social Protection committed to supporting over 85,000 beneficiaries of job placement, work experience, and back to education schemes, representing a significant investment in the context of the current budgetary constraints
- The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Bill 2011*<sup>3</sup>. With constraints on available funding in the Irish market, the importance of effectively targeting international students has increased. It is intended that the Bill will support effective targeting of international students by ensuring that only quality assured HEIs will be issued with an International Education mark.

<sup>1</sup> HEA – Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape, February 2012

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Protection and Department of Education & Skills – Pathways to Work, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education & Skills – Qualifications & Quality Assurance (Education & Training) Bill 2011

## 2.2. Overview of Current Application Processing Market

In 2011, almost 200,000 students were enrolled at varying levels of progression in full-time and part-time programmes across all HEA funded HEIs in Ireland. Of the total, approximately 20 per cent were new entrants to full-time undergraduate programmes. In the same period, in the region of 140,000<sup>4</sup> student applications were processed for a limited number of places per programme across HEIs. This includes undergraduate, postgraduate, and flexible learning programmes and can be summarised as follows:

Application Processing Organisation	Approximate %
Central Applications Office (CAO)	~55%
Postgraduate Applications Centre (PAC) <sup>5</sup>	~15%
Springboard <sup>6</sup>	~5%
Direct <sup>7</sup>	~25%

At present, entry to Irish higher education can be direct or indirect; with student applications processed through numerous different admissions systems throughout Ireland, including the following:

- 29 state funded systems (7 Universities, DIT, 13 Institutes of Technology, 6 Colleges of Education, the IOTI, and Springboard/Bluebrick)
- 2 self-funded systems – the CAO and PAC.

The total size of the post-secondary education market in Ireland is much larger than that outlined above. As well as higher education provision, there are multiple further education and training providers operating to deliver in the region of 300,000<sup>8</sup> places across the further education sector. The majority of these providers process applications directly.

In addition, there are more than thirty private / independent colleges operating within the sector, with the majority processing applications directly.

There is a continued increase in the number of application processing systems servicing Irish education providers. This has resulted in significant duplication of effort, resources, and ultimately cost to the sector. The absence of a coordinated sectoral response to the processing of applications also renders the process of engaging with students or prospective students more complex to navigate. Consequently, the cost and processing effort is being replicated many times, through the numerous technology solutions used by Irish education providers. The overall cost of processing applications is significantly higher than would be the case if one or a smaller number of application processing models were used.

The value for money achieved in the processing of applications, based on the unit cost of processing, varies significantly from one system to another.

<sup>4</sup> Figures based on assumptions made in conjunction with publicly available information

<sup>5</sup> Figures based on assumptions made in conjunction with publicly available information

<sup>6</sup> HEA, Springboard 2011 First-Stage Evaluation confirmed 7,348 applications processed, February 2012

<sup>7</sup> Figures based on assumptions made in conjunction with publicly available information

<sup>8</sup> Pathways to Work, 2012 – Includes all enrolments and not just annual new entrants

Additionally, it would appear that the trend towards bespoke admissions systems and processes is set to continue, with the planned introduction of additional application processing by a number of higher education providers in the next three years.

This trend, and the cost associated with maintaining multiple processing systems in a higher education market the size of Ireland, suggests the need for a consolidated sectoral approach to application processing.

### 2.3. Application Processing Context

The following application processing market trends related to higher education and post-secondary education providers are relevant to the determination of the strategic direction of the CAO:

- The standard applicant type is changing in Ireland because of the increased participation in education beyond standard leaving certificate entrants and the widening diversity of backgrounds due to higher education access programmes, unemployment and internationalisation<sup>9</sup>. In 2012 the Government set out to transform Ireland's labour market activation policies and support the unemployed in returning to the workforce. In 2011 the further education and training sectors provided almost 300,000 places to students, with the Institute of Technology sector providing over 10,000 further education places
- In 2011, 17.5 per cent of full-time new entrants to higher education came from the Live Register. Additionally, of the 7,348 applications received, there were 5,900 places offered through the Springboard initiative, with 60 per cent of participants having been unemployed for more than twelve months and one third of those for more than 24 months<sup>10</sup>
- The cost of application processing varies significantly among the application processing providers, with the CAO providing the most cost effective average processing cost per application<sup>11</sup>
- Irish HEIs are increasingly focused on attracting international students (non-EU international students in particular), due to the potential fee income arising from this student type
- A number of HEIs are investing in new in-house student registration systems, which include admissions and application processing functionality, providing them with the option to process applications directly
- An increase in the number of students applying from Britain and Northern Ireland is apparent in recent years, with any further increase expected to be largely driven by the introduction of fees in the UK.

<sup>9</sup> HEA National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008 – 2013

<sup>10</sup> Pathways to Work, 2012

<sup>11</sup> Based on publicly available information relating to operational costs relative to number of applications processed

Higher Education at a sectoral level:

- At present, the sector facilitates multiple entry routes to higher education. There is increased focus on exploring new gateways to education<sup>12</sup> and examining further the alternatives to the current points system to cater for the anticipated increase in education participation and changes emerging in the applicant type
- Participation in higher education is expected to increase significantly. The ESRI predicts 25 per cent growth in undergraduate entrants over a 20 year period to 2030<sup>13</sup>. It is imperative that education providers are supported by efficient and effective application processing systems to deal with this projected increase
- Irish education strategy is continuing to focus on changing models of teaching and learning. This has implications for entry procedures and, in turn, on applicant type. Areas of change include flexible learning models, non-traditional types of students, proposed standardisation of first year courses, variable course start dates, more generic skills-based first year courses, joint programme delivery across HEIs, and external transfer models
- The HEA, Department of Education and Skills and individual higher education representative bodies are all grappling with limited resources with which to fund the sector. The outsourcing of non-core services and the use of shared service models are increasingly being examined as ways to save money, reduce duplication, and enhance service delivery and reliability. Application processing, and, in particular, the CAO, is acknowledged as the one strong example of higher education shared services currently in operation in Ireland, and a model on which further services could be delivered.

#### 2.4. CAO Operational Context

The CAO has been in operation for nearly forty years and in that period has expanded its range of services, technology, and data processing capability.

The CAO is a company limited by guarantee, owned by its members, with a clear and limited mandate, upon which it has consistently delivered. The CAO is almost entirely self-funded through application fees. The CAO charges a nominal fee to education providers to partially cover the costs associated with the initial implementation of certain additional services provided at the request of each higher educational institution.

All additional income derived from CAO activities is applied solely to the delivery of the mandate of the CAO. No proportion of income generated is transferred directly or indirectly to member organisations, nor can any such transfer or distribution take place, since the CAO is governed by the provisions of the CAO *Memorandum and Articles of Association*.

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<sup>12</sup> NCCA & HEA – From Transaction to Transition, 2011

<sup>13</sup> ESRI – A Study of Future Demand for Higher Education in Ireland, November 2012

The context within which the CAO is now operating is changing. This *Plan* is a response to address the changing needs of post-secondary education providers and the sector as a whole, and to address a number of threats to the continued success of the CAO, including the following:

- Historically the CAO was the first and only provider of non-direct application processing services to HEIs: however, the emergence of other admissions bodies and systems for processing other applicant types, not previously undertaken by the CAO, has resulted in these bodies now providing what was once provided directly by HEIs. The CAO is not currently providing postgraduate or further education application processing services such as those provided by PAC or Springboard/ Bluebrick
- Many HEIs are introducing their own application systems to support the processing of applications, typically for specific categories of student (e.g. international), which, in turn, may provide them with the option to process all applications directly. This will dilute the student base being processed by the CAO, increase the cost of application for students, complicate admissions processes by increasing the number of application interactions, and increase the overall cost of student admissions / application processing to the funding authorities
- This challenge is further underlined by the continued State funding of Bluebrick and other application processing systems in parallel to the existence of the CAO
- The CAO is a well-recognised and trusted brand in Irish society. It has its own identity as an organisation, yet it is owned by its member organisations, funded by applicants, and lacks the structures or capabilities required to operate as a corporate entity in its own right. It is rightly considered as transparent and independent and, therefore, trusted and reliable
- There is a perception among some organisations within Irish education that the CAO is not necessarily proactive enough in consulting with member organisations to determine their new or changing needs and in planning how the services of the CAO might actively support these needs
- The CAO has not formally set its own strategic direction in the past. Additionally it has developed its range of services and capabilities in line with those formally requested by member organisations
- The Board of the CAO may benefit from expansion of skill set to enhance the skill-mix, and allow for increased focus on the strategic development of the CAO as an organisation.

## 2.5. International Context

A detailed benchmarking exercise was conducted as part of this strategic planning process, examining the application processing systems in operation in eight countries:

- Australia
- UK
- Canada
- Finland
- Netherlands
- New Zealand
- Croatia
- Sweden.

The Irish model is most similar to the systems in place in Croatia, Sweden and Australia. Croatia, South Africa and Oman have all examined the CAO system and adopted major elements of the CAO model when designing their own central application processing systems.

In general, internationally, higher education providers are experiencing growth in the number of applications. A review of eleven countries conducted by UCAS<sup>14</sup>, in conjunction with the International Association of Admissions Organisations, of which the CAO is a member, found that this growth could be attributed to a number of factors including rising birth rates (Australia, Canada), and economic downturns (Ireland, British Columbia).

A number of trends in the development of application processing systems have been identified including the following:

- A move to more flexible modes of study and thus admissions
- More than half of the admission systems in operation internationally only operate as part-time application services
- Material variations in application fees with no fees charged in Sweden or Croatia and the HEIs recharged in Germany
- Significant differences in the number of choices presented to students with some Canadian students offered unlimited choices: elsewhere, in the majority of cases, between six and 20 options are provided
- The facilitation of several entry cycles each year in certain countries with the majority facilitating two such cycles
- In some countries a HEI is provided with information related to the students who applied to their college, in addition to information on other choices made by the student, relating to other HEIs, on an information basis only.

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<sup>14</sup> UCAS & International Association of Admissions Organisations – APR International Comparisons, 2011

Application processing systems may be separated into three main types:

1. Offers based on interim results – based on the UCAS system in place in the UK and also in Ontario, Canada
2. Application portal only – in place in Germany, the Netherlands and British Columbia, Canada
3. Choices ranked and applicants ranked – reflective of the CAO system, with the Irish model similar to that adopted in Croatia, Sweden, and Australia.

The following are the common issues which these bodies are considering in the formulation of their future plans:

- Concerns relating to the security of data and the confidentiality of applicant information
- Outsourcing of infrastructure development and certain support services
- Use of social media to attract students (Facebook, ucas.tv/YouTube)
- Development of student/ HEI call centres in certain countries
- Increasing requirement for data warehousing models that provide a single data repository, and hold historic and current application details
- Business intelligence tools available to education providers to allow them to interrogate information stored on a data model
- Maintenance of charitable legal status in the context of changing external environment and funding pressures
- Requirement to expand service offering to meet the changing needs of education providers and applicants to education.

Based on this analysis of international peers it was evident that some international applications bodies provide additional services to education providers, not all of which are currently offered by the CAO. These ancillary services include the following:

- Facilitating other tests and admissions related to more than one exam
- Requesting transcripts / facilitating electronic transcripts
- Lottery service for oversubscribed courses (in particular Canada)
- Informational newsletters / services to advisors / parents / HEIs
- Data warehouse services
- Self-service business intelligence tools for HEIs (HEI market share / first preference etc.)
- Web services to enter criteria/ interests/ search and compare programmes
- Conduct of surveys on behalf of HEIs on preferences/ interest levels etc. for students
- Suggesting service for oversubscribed courses – e.g. alternative options
- Provision of marketing service on behalf of participant colleges to students.

Some of the services and models outlined above are currently offered by the CAO. This process examined each specific issue noted, the models in operation in other countries and the services provided by other application processing organisations in the context of the needs of Irish higher education providers and the extent to which any changes proposed would impact on the objectivity and independence of the CAO.

## 2.6. Stakeholder Needs

The development of the CAO *Strategic Plan* involved significant stakeholder consultation<sup>15</sup>. There was a clear interest among sectoral stakeholders in consolidating the application processing systems as education funding bodies continue to search for value for money and cost efficiencies under a shared service agenda.

Some of the stakeholder needs identified as part of this process have been grouped as follows:

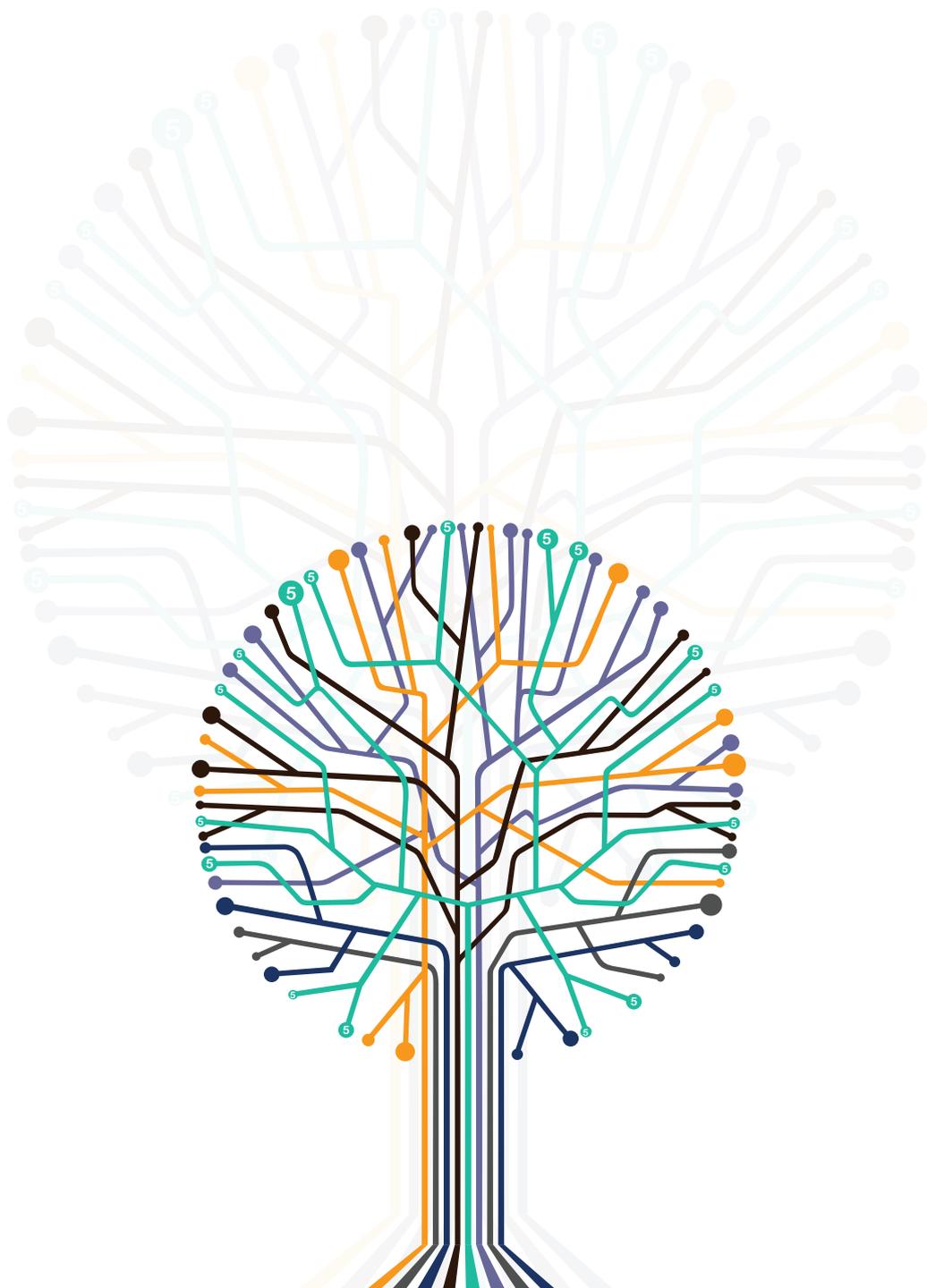
Application Processing	Applicant Types
A single body for all applicant types	A system that caters for varying applicant types
A shared service approach to application processing across the sector	Co-ordinated promotion of Ireland abroad
A single source of sectoral application information	Removal of application timeline restrictions associated with HEIs
Integration between higher education, further education and training	Continued awareness of the sensitivities associated with certain applicant types including HEAR/DARE <sup>16</sup>
ICT, Communication & Reporting	Governance & Structure
A more intuitive user interface and user friendly application data reporting	Strategic engagement at sectoral level
Greater student accessibility and interactive methods of accessing information	Consideration of CAO Board representation and mix
Real-time information and reporting	Greater value for money across the sector

All of the needs expressed were considered and analysed by the CAO Strategic Planning Committee: those deemed to be of greatest significance to the greatest number of stakeholders, the strategic development of the CAO, and that were consistent with the CAO vision and core values have been included within this *Plan*.

<sup>15</sup> List of stakeholders consulted as part of the Strategic Planning process is included in Appendix I

<sup>16</sup> Higher Education Access Route and Disability Access Route to Education Schemes

# CAO MISSION, VALUES, VISION



### 3. CAO MISSION, VALUES, VISION

#### 3.1. Mission

The mission of the CAO is to be the leading provider of centralised application processing services for Irish post-secondary education providers

This mission is underpinned by the requirement for education providers to retain the function of setting admissions criteria for their respective institutions.

#### 3.2. Core Values

In order to achieve this mission, the values that will underpin and drive all of the activities of the CAO include the following:

- **Reliable** – CAO service is built on tried, trusted, robust technology and processes: the system will continue to do what it is intended to do and provide a dependable and secure application processing service
- **Impartial, Honest and Transparent** – as a company limited by guarantee, the CAO will continue to deliver a fair and transparent service to applicants based on objective criteria, and maintain an arm's length relationship with post-secondary education providers
- **Efficient** – CAO will continue to process applications in a manner that demonstrates efficient and effective use of resources, while maintaining a consistently high level of service quality and delivering value for money
- **Self-funding and Not for Profit** – CAO will continue to be self-funded through fees charged per applicant and will use any surplus generated to further the purpose of the CAO and its activities
- **Proactive** – CAO will actively engage with education providers to identify new or changing application processing service requirements and will adopt a proactive approach to responding to emerging application-related service needs in real time or near real time basis, in particular, HEI data services
- **Accessible** – CAO will provide an inclusive and user-friendly application processing service that meets all of its diverse stakeholder needs
- **Leading** – CAO will ensure its position as the primary organisation responsible for processing applications for entry into post-secondary education in Ireland.

### 3.3. Vision to 2017

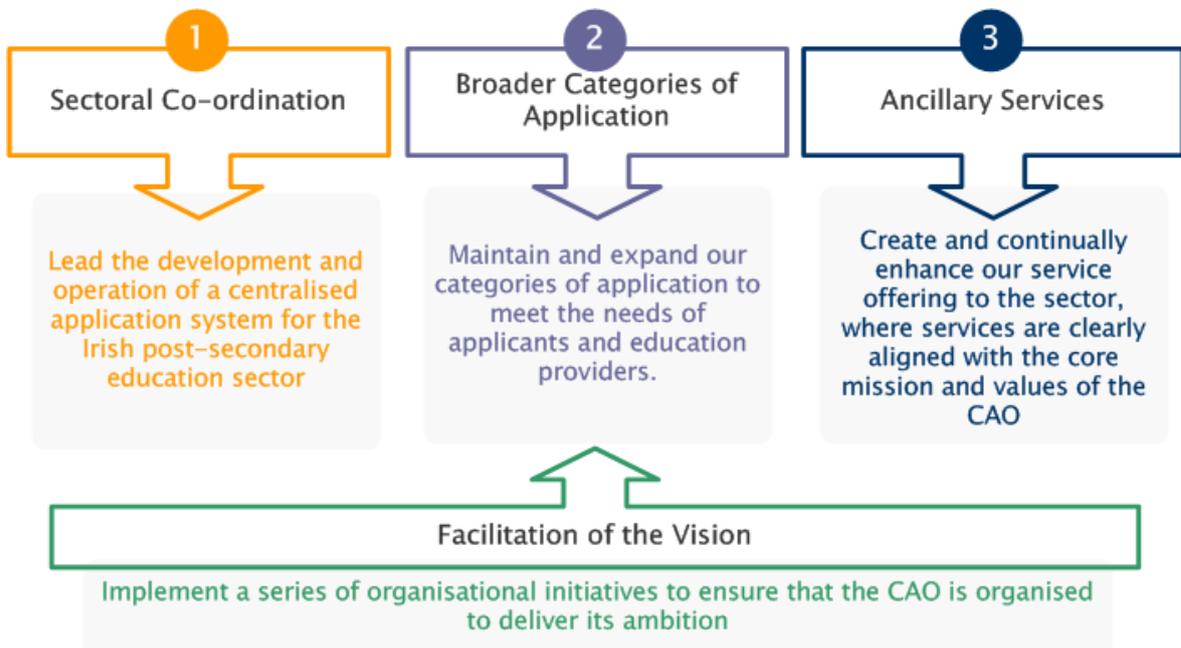
The CAO intends to lead the development of a centralised application system for the Irish post-secondary education sector over the period covered by this *Strategic Plan*.

The CAO intends to become a sectoral provider for post-secondary education application processes.

The CAO will be open to considering appropriate requests for processing of applications to education courses from post-secondary education providers as they arise. However, each request will be assessed in accordance with specific quality criteria, i.e. the courses and providers must be subject to accreditation by a nationally recognised quality body and the provision of application processing services by the CAO should not impact negatively on the reputation, credibility and standing of the CAO or its existing members. To date, all courses in the CAO system have been offered by HEIs backed by the State, or with a bonding arrangement in place to ensure a safety net for those admitted.

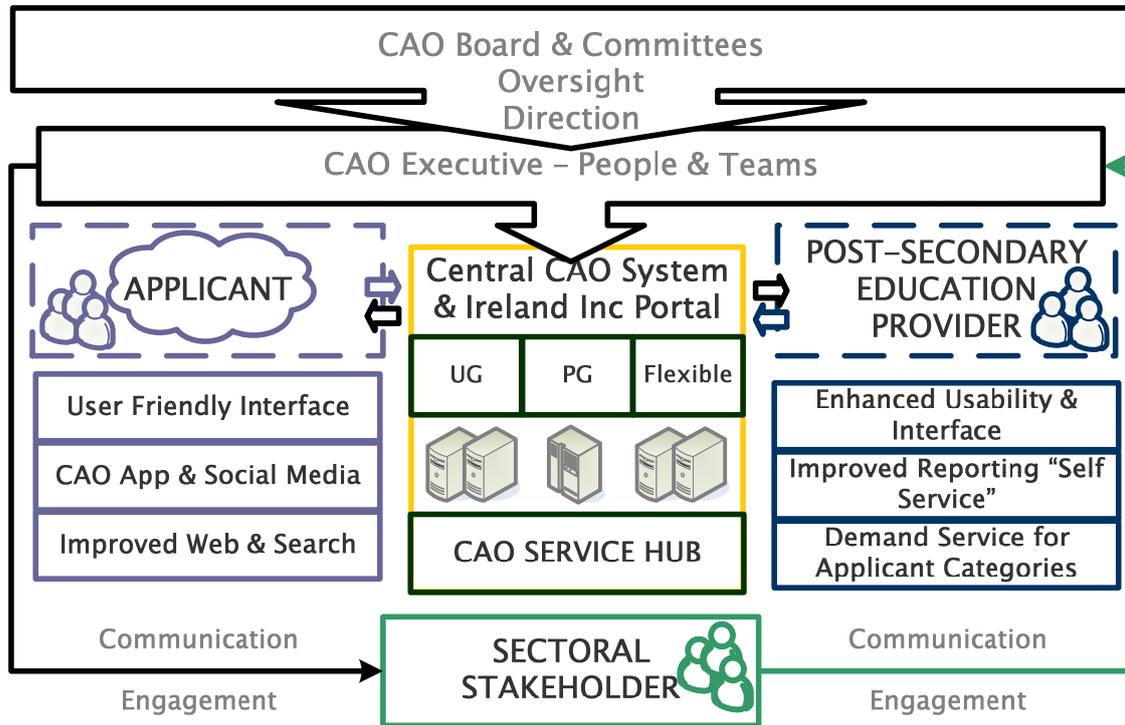
The CAO does not intend to extend its service offering in the period covered by this *Plan* to application assessment service provision.

The CAO will deliver on its mission over the next five years through three key strategic pillars:



This vision is ambitious, and will involve a significant level of change as outlined further below.

Figure 1 below presents the future or target model for the operation of the CAO as set out in this *Plan* and the nature of the organisation that this strategy seeks to implement.



**Fig 1: 2017**

To achieve the CAO vision to 2017, a series of organisational initiatives will be implemented as outlined in the following section.

# CAO STRATEGY 2013 – 2017



## 4. CAO STRATEGY 2013 – 2017

The CAO strategy to 2017 is built on three key pillars, which reflect the future direction of the Organisation:

**Sectoral Co-ordination** – The CAO will lead the development and operation of a centralised application system for the Irish post-secondary education sector.

**Broader Categories of Application** – The CAO will maintain and expand its categories of application to meet the needs of applicants and education providers.

**Ancillary Services Development** – The CAO will create and continually enhance its service offering to the sector, where services are clearly aligned to the core mission and values of the CAO.

### 4.1. Strategic Objectives to 2017

The strategic objectives aligned to each key pillar can be described as follows:

One strategic objective was identified under the pillar – **Sectoral Coordination**

#### 1.1 Lead the Development of a Centralised Applications System

The CAO will lead proactively the development of a centralised application processing system that will be applicant focused and will meet the needs of Irish post-secondary education providers. The centralised system will build on the strengths of the CAO in delivering successful shared services to the sector to date, and will support the marketing of education in Ireland and overseas.

Three strategic objectives were identified under the pillar – **Broader Categories of Application**

#### 2.1 Maintain and Enhance Current Undergraduate Offering

The CAO will continue to expand the application processing offering to cover all part-time undergraduate programmes with existing education providers.

#### 2.2 Process Non-EU International Applications

The CAO will expand its service offering and process applications for non-EU international students to Irish post-secondary education providers on an opt-in basis. In doing so, the CAO will offer alternate application timelines based on rules agreed with the education providers.

#### 2.3 Widen Applicant Categories

The CAO will seek proactively to provide application processing services for categories of application that are currently un-serviced and / or under-serviced.

One strategic objective was identified under the pillar – **Ancillary Services Development**

### 3.1 Establish a Single Repository for Applications Data

The CAO will establish a single repository for applications data that will provide for flexible self-service reporting by education providers to support policy and decision making.

The pillars are underpinned by a series of initiatives under the umbrella, “Facilitating the Vision”, which sets out a series of operational actions that will be implemented to ensure that the CAO is structured and organised in a manner that supports the achievement of its strategic objectives.

The initiatives identified under **Facilitating the Vision** can be outlined as follows:

### 4.1 Advance ICT and System Usability

The CAO will develop its ICT and system usability to enhance interaction both between the CAO and applicants, and the CAO and admissions officers.

### 4.2 Proactive Communication and Engagement

The CAO will secure and engage the necessary resources to support adequately organisational responsibilities and activities.

### 4.3 Effective Governance & Accountability Structures

The CAO will ensure that effective governance and oversight mechanisms are in place to support organisational advancement. This will include ensuring that accountability for specific functions is effectively and appropriately allocated at Board and Executive level.

### 4.4 Maintenance of Self-Funding Model

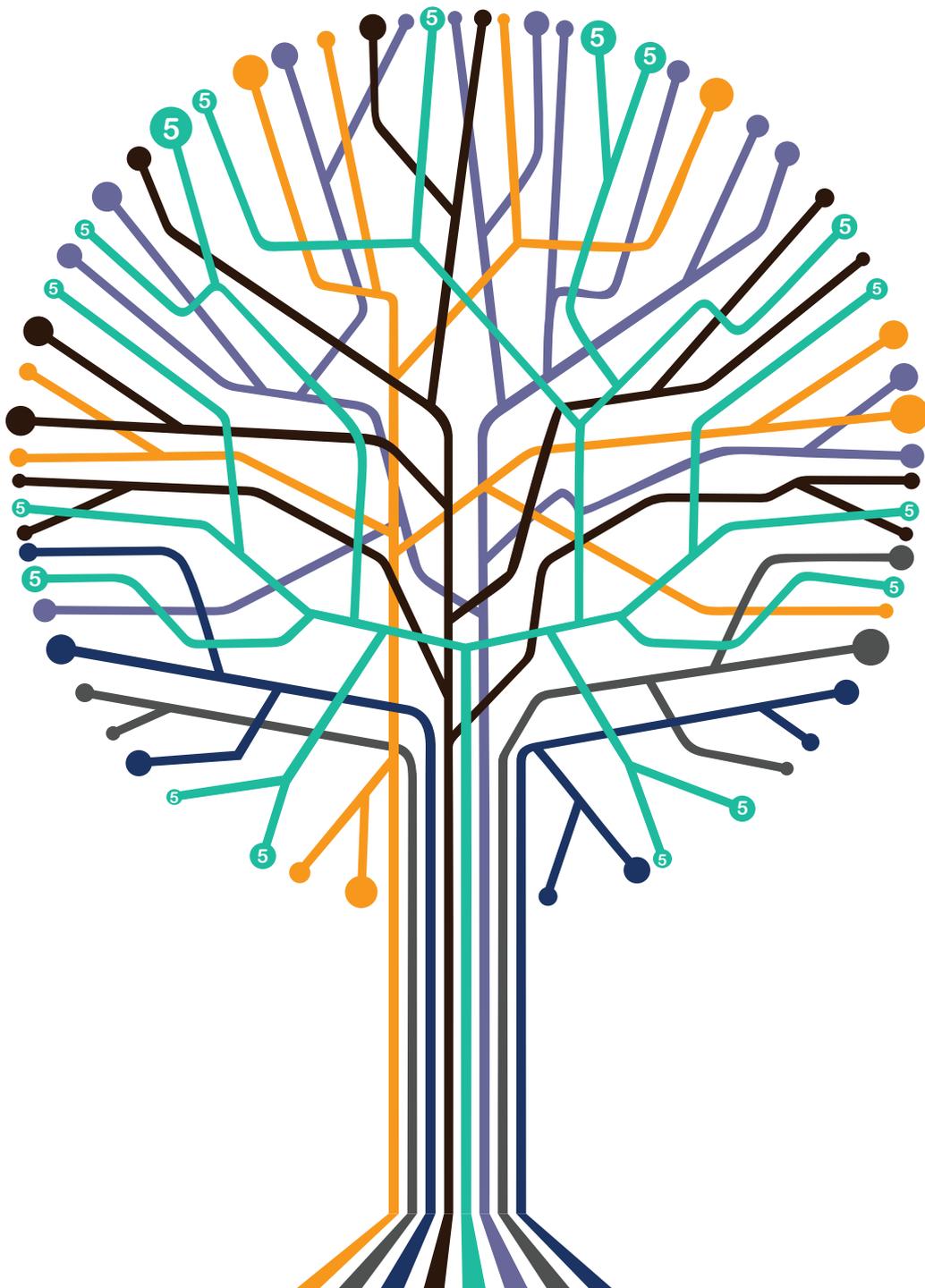
The CAO will continue to maintain a self-funded model and will ensure that all monies are expended with consideration of value for money, regularity and propriety. The CAO will perform a cost benefit analysis and financial impact assessment prior to engaging in any new activity.

### 4.5 Cohesion and Alignment of Management and Teams

The CAO will engage the necessary resources, training and development required to adequately support the advancement of organisational responsibilities and activities in line with the new strategic direction to 2017.

An action plan, budget and timeline will support the achievement of each strategic objective.

# CAO STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2013 – 2017



## 5. CAO STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2013 – 2017

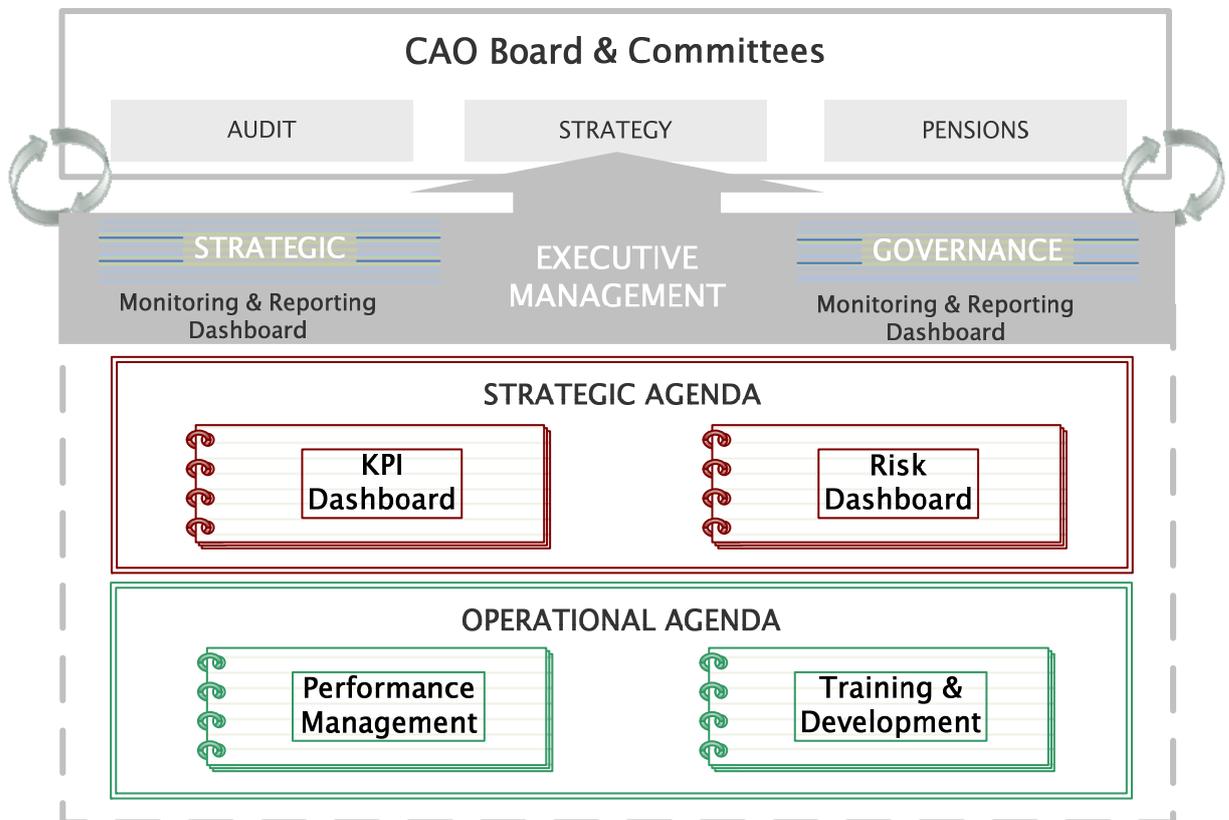
Key to the success of the overall CAO strategy will be commitment to and ownership of its implementation. The CAO Board has developed an implementation plan in line with the three strategic pillars underpinning this strategy: the strategic objectives are set out under each pillar outlined in Section 4, to support and facilitate the delivery of this *Plan*.

### 5.1. Monitoring and Reporting

A number of indicators have been identified to support the CAO in tracking and monitoring progress against its strategic objectives using a number of key dashboards, including the following:

- Strategic
- Governance
- KPI
- Risk.

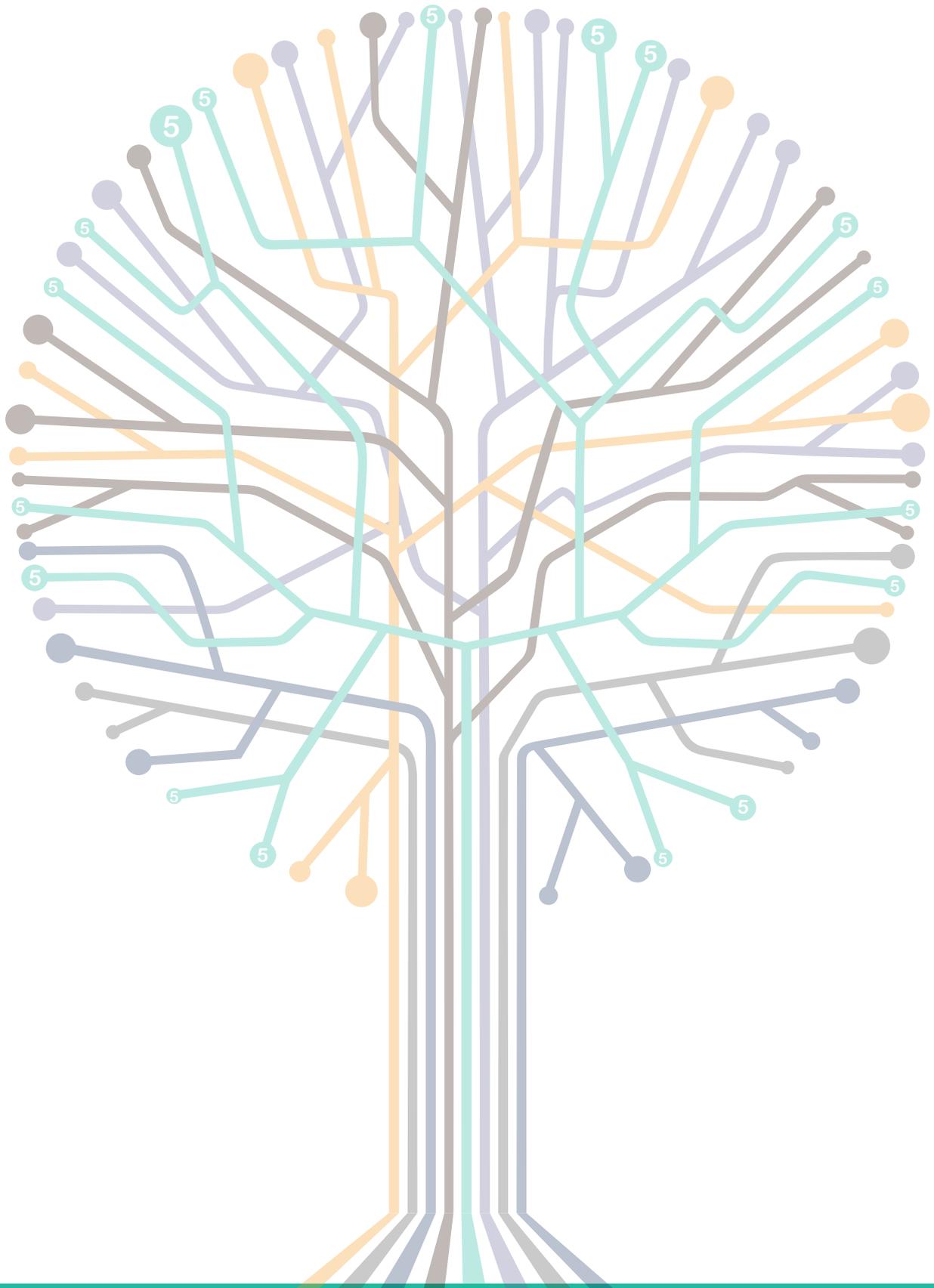
Each dashboard will support the CAO in monitoring and reporting progress against agreed deliverables to CAO staff, the CAO Board and wider stakeholder groups.



Key milestones will be set against actions, which will be phased over the lifetime of the *Plan* and will support interim reviews to ensure everything is progressing as appropriate. This is particularly important in light of the significant level of change within the wider education sector at the time of writing this *Plan*.

The CAO will assess its strategy and objectives on an on-going basis to ensure that it remains appropriately aligned with the needs of its member organisations and wider stakeholder groups.

# APPENDICES



## APPENDIX I – LIST OF ORGANISATIONS CONSULTED

Department of Education & Skills

Department of Education & Skills – International Policy Section

Higher Education Authority (HEA)

HEA – HEA Shared Services (SS) Working Group

Irish Universities Association (IUA)

IUA – Registrars of Universities

IUA – IUA Shared Services Working Group

IUA – International Officers Group

Institutes of Technology of Ireland (IoTI)

IoTI – Registrars of IoTs

IoTI – IoT Shared Services Representative

Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA)

Operations Group of Admissions Officers

National Council for Curriculum & Assessment (NCCA)

State Exams Commission (SEC)

Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI)

Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE)

Irish Second–Level Students' Union

Institute of Guidance Councillors

Teacher Unions – INTO, TUI, and ASTI

National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)

Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)

An Comhairle um Gaelscoileanna agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)

Joint Managerial Body (JMB)

National Parents Council – Post–Primary

Education Ireland

Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA)

Many other stakeholders were consulted throughout the process and assisted in the preparation of the CAO Strategic Plan.



[www.cao.ie](http://www.cao.ie)