



CENTRAL
APPLICATIONS
OFFICE

STRATEGIC PLAN

2018-2023

CAO
www.cao.ie

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS	4
FOREWORD/RÉAMHFHOCAL	5
INTRODUCTION	7
Members of the CAO Strategic Planning Subcommittee	9
VISION, MISSION AND VALUES	11
THE CURRENT STAGE OF STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT	14
Review of the Strategic Plan 2013 To 2017.....	14
Delivering on the Strategic Plan 2013 - 2017	15
CONTEXT FOR THE STRATEGIC PLAN	21
Higher Education at a Sectoral Level.....	21
Projections	22
International Trends in Higher Education Application Processing Systems	24
PREPARING A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN 2018-2023	27
Phase 1: Data Collection.....	27
(i) Consultation with Management and Staff.....	28
(ii) Consultation with Admissions Officers	32
Review of and Consultation on the Plan	34
Recommendations from the Registrars Groups	35
Recommendations from Key Stakeholders	36
STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2018-2023.....	38
Phase 2: Strategic Plans and Priorities	38
IMPLEMENTATION AND ALIGNMENT	42

A SUMMARY OF STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2018 – 2023



ACRONYMS

Below is a list of acronyms used throughout this document.

ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
CAO	Central Applications Office
CCEA	Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
EU	European Union
ETBI	Education and Training Board Ireland
GAMSAT	Graduate Medical School Admissions Test
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HPAT	Health Professional Admission Test
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
IoT	Institute of Technology
THEA	Technological Higher Education Ireland
IUA	Irish Universities Association
MSAP	Mature Students Admissions Pathway
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NISCA	Northern Ireland Schools and Careers Association
NMBI	Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland
NPCPP	The National Parents Council Post-primary
NUI	National University of Ireland
PAS	Public Appointments Service
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SOLAS	Further Education and Training Authority
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UK)
USI	Union of Students in Ireland

FOREWORD/ RÉAMHFHOCAL

Leis seo cuirim i láthair *Plean Straitéiseach an CAO, 2018 – 2023*. Agus na heilimh atá ar an Ard-Oideachas agus mar gheall air sin ar an CAO ag athrú, déanann an *Plean* seo forbairt ar na haidhmeanna straitéiseacha a bhí i b*Plean* 2013-17.

I am pleased to introduce *The Central Applications Office Strategic Plan 2018 – 2023*. This *Plan* builds on the strategic objectives of its predecessor, preparing the Central Applications Office (CAO) for the demands of a changing higher education landscape.

The mission of the CAO is to be the leading provider of centralised application processing services for Irish post-secondary education providers; this *Plan* explores how the CAO can continue to realise this vision. Stakeholder needs, and the ways that various stakeholders interact with CAO, are changing. This *Plan* identifies both the challenges and the opportunities, and presents a set of strategic priorities designed to reaffirm CAO's position as a leading provider of shared services for the Irish higher education sector.

I would like to thank the Strategic Planning Subcommittee for their work on this project, and to all who played a part in bringing this document to fruition. To the contributors - including the CAO management and staff, admissions officers, and stakeholder groups - your involvement has helped to provide a valuable insight into the service offerings of CAO, and the ways that these offerings can be enhanced to meet the needs of existing and potential service users.

With over forty years of experience, the CAO is an unrivalled shared-service provider for Irish Higher Education Institutions. It is, however, important to ensure that with experience does not come complacency, and that is why the CAO board and management agreed to embark on this journey of strategic analysis. We must ensure that we remain in tune with our stakeholders in order to continue to provide a premium service offering.

The strength of any organisation depends largely on its people, and I would like to commend the CAO staff for their hard work and dedicated service. With a small core team of 13 - supported by seasonal staff during peak season - almost 80,000 applications are processed, and over 90,000 offers are issued each year.

Mar Chathaoirleach ar an Bhord Stiúrthóirí, táim ag tnúth le tacaíocht a thabhairt do bhainistíocht agus d'fhoireann CAO agus an *Plean* seo a chur i bhfeidhm.

Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh, MRIA
Chairman, Central Applications Office

August 2018

Chapter 1

Introduction



INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Strategic Plan is to guide the Central Applications Office (CAO) through the major developments in the changing higher education landscape to 2023.

This plan explores the challenges and opportunities facing the company. It also sets out the organisation's key priorities to ensure continued success as a shared service provider for the Irish higher education sector.

Founded in the mid-1970s, the CAO is widely regarded as the principal working example of shared services within the higher education sector in Ireland. With just under 15,000 applicants, five participating institutions and 69 courses on offer in 1977, the organisation experienced significant growth over a 40 year period, with over 81,000 applicants, 39 institutions and 1,323 courses on offer in 2017. The primary role of the CAO has traditionally been the processing of applications for first-year admission to a range of undergraduate courses in the Republic of Ireland; there is potential for delivering further services employing this model.

While CAO is well known for operating the shared application system, CAO also operates, on behalf of HEIs, the central evaluation systems for Leaving Certificate, QQI FE, and Northern Ireland and British GCE/GCSE. The CAO software checks that course minimum entry requirements have been met, and calculates scores using the central evaluation systems. CAO automatically receives examination data for such applicants from the SEC (Irish Leaving Certificate examination data), QQI (QQI FE examination data), UCAS and CCEA (GCE/GCSE examination data).

CAO works with other examining authorities, for example PAS (on behalf of NMBI) and ACER (HPAT, GAMSAT and MSAP examination results), receiving examination data for applicants and applying this data to their CAO account for scoring. Other examination and assessment details are received directly from applicants, scanned by CAO, and assigned to the applicant's electronic file for assessment by HEIs, for example, EU school leaving qualifications.

The following third parties also receive data from CAO (on the basis of consent from applicants): the grant authority SUSI for the purpose of provision of identification, contact and offer/acceptance details; and the NUI for exemption purposes. The NUI also communicates exemption information directly to CAO.

In recent years the CAO has become central to the applications processing, data management, and coordination of the DARE and HEAR schemes for widening access to higher education. The CAO's involvement in these schemes may help to grow the number of HEIs participating, and contribute to ensuring that they are operated efficiently and to the high standards that customers have come to expect from CAO.

The organisation contributes to the national understanding, through the provision of national and sectoral level statistical information, and participation in education initiatives, for example the Transitions Reform process.

Strong stakeholder relationships have been essential in helping CAO to continually deliver on its mission and values for over 40 years. Figure 1.1 provides a summary of these different stakeholders.

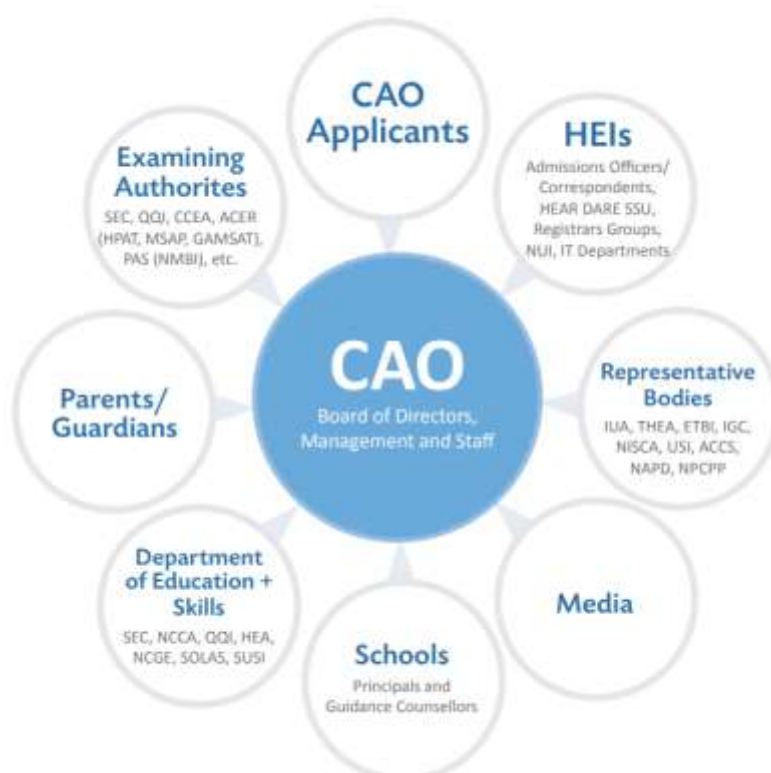


Fig. 1.1. Summary of CAO Stakeholders

The CAO has a permanent staff of 13 and up to 35 seasonal staff are engaged each year to deal with peaks in clerical work.

The organisation is governed by a board of directors drawn from the membership, which is representative of the higher education sector.

MEMBERS OF THE CAO STRATEGIC PLANNING SUBCOMMITTEE

Prof. E. Guilfoyle

Dr. M. Mulvey

Dr. D. O'Byrne (Subcommittee Chairman)

Chapter 2

Vision, Mission and Values



VISION, MISSION AND VALUES

This section articulates the guiding vision and values that shape decision making and strategic priorities within the CAO. The organisation plans and evaluates its actions based on a set of well-defined values. Combined, these values establish the foundations for the expectations of staff, the users of the services, the education system and the public more generally. The CAO is renowned for its open, transparent and efficient provision of a national shared service to HEIs, for the benefit of applicants to third level.

Mission

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

To enable that mission the following seven values will be proactively fostered across all of our activities.

Core Values

- 1. 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
- 2. 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 remain independent of post-secondary education providers while maintaining a good working relationship with these important stakeholders
- 3. 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
- 4. 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

5. 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

6. Accessible – CAO will provide a user-friendly and inclusive application processing service that meets its diverse stakeholder needs

7. Leading – CAO will ensure its position as the primary organisation responsible for processing applications for entry into post-secondary education in Ireland.

These core values lead us to a particular unique service model that defines services in terms of the user experience, user and public confidence, and a focus on ethical and fair behaviour.

These values also enable CAO to have a Strategic Plan that will emphasise ease of access, transparency, capacity to report and analyse trends, staff and services.

Chapter 3

The Current Stage of Strategic Development



THE CURRENT STAGE OF STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

REVIEW OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN 2013 TO 2017

In 2016, the CAO board of directors carried out a review of the progress of the 2013-2017 Strategic Plan.

This first plan originated in late 2011, when a comprehensive strategic planning process was considered timely. A strategic planning committee, comprising members of the CAO board, was established. The process was facilitated by an external firm of consultants.

The purpose of the plan was to ensure that the CAO's 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 participating organisations to meet their current and future needs.

The Strategic Plan successfully guided the CAO through a period of rapid change that saw CAO respond to changes in the operating environment. Principle among these was the Transitions Reform process which involved changing the CAO's central evaluation software as a result of the introduction of the new Leaving Certificate Grading Scheme, the new Common Points Scale, and the revised entry requirements for higher education courses. This also saw the CAO develop new communications strategies and online tools in order to ensure a smooth transition for applicants.

Over the period of the plan there has been a significant change in the way applicants engage with the application process, and the CAO has had to develop new ways of communicating, and new tools to meet the needs of applicants.

At a global level, the strength of the Strategic Plan 2013-17 was to provide a framework for the capacity of the CAO to grow and develop. This has resulted in a strengthening of the core capabilities of the CAO to respond to changing market demands evidenced through the growth in the diversity of type and ranges of applications processed, and the transfer of new activities such as HEAR and DARE into the core functions of the CAO.

Similarly, the period has seen the CAO ensure sustainability in the resource base, and a clear capacity to meet the challenging demands of emerging IT infrastructure trends and requests. The CAO has risen to the challenges of providing more reporting and data led analysis for service users.

DELIVERING ON THE STRATEGIC PLAN 2013 - 2017

The 2013 – 2017 Strategic Plan established a number of goals. The CAO made significant progress on each one of those and the outcomes are as follows:

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

CAO launched a new website with a number of new and improved features to help enhance user experience. The website reflects the changing preferences of CAO stakeholders and has a strong focus on the applicant perspective.

In early 2014, the web-based CAO Interface was launched for HEI admissions officers along with a *Service User Manual*. This provides HEIs with a much-improved, intuitive user interface providing the tools to assist admissions managers to make decisions and interact with CAO data.

A revised *CAO System User Guide* is under ongoing development based on consultation with admissions officers and CAO staff. The guide provides an overview of the annual CAO processing schedule; the required and common tasks; and advice for users in the form of 'how to' guides. The aim of the completed project is to provide a clear, concise and user-friendly

guide to the CAO system for admissions officers and other HEI staff members with responsibility for CAO processes.

CAO also provides on-site training for admissions staff in HEIs to ensure users extract maximum benefit from the tools CAO makes available.

2. Proactive communication and engagement

CAO appointed a communications officer to facilitate proactive engagement with a variety of stakeholders, including: applicants, parents, admissions and other HEI staff, media, state agencies and representative bodies. The communications officer has also made a major contribution to the *CAO System User Guide* mentioned above.

One of the CAO's most important public documents, the annual *CAO Handbook*, underwent a review in 2015. A significantly revised and improved handbook was launched for 2016. This applicant-focused document simplifies the application process for the applicant.

The process of refreshing CAO's corporate identity began in late 2017. The introduction of a standardised document and in-house style, and enhanced applicant-focused material, will bring a fresh new approach to CAO's communications resources.

The implementation of these changes have helped to further improve relationships with key stakeholders.

3. Effective governance and accountability structures

The introduction of Audit and Investment; Pension; and Strategy Subcommittees at board level has helped CAO to ensure continued accountability and organisational advancement.

A GAP Analysis and review resulted in a revised *CAO Code of Practice for Corporate Governance*.

The 2014 Companies Act required companies to undertake a conversion process. The CAO executive arranged for the conversion of the Memoranda and Articles of Association of the company to a new 'Constitution' to conform to the new requirements. The Company engaged a qualified professional provider to fulfil the role of company secretary and arranged for Continuing Professional Development training in Corporate Governance for the executive.

Significant changes to data protection law in Europe came into effect on 25 May 2018; in order to prepare for these changes CAO management established an internal GDPR Committee. The internal committee has engaged the professional services of a firm of consultants to assist CAO in meeting its obligations and responsibilities around the collection, use and protection of data.

CAO is also in ongoing consultation with the HEI User Group's designated GDPR Subcommittee. CAO staff will receive training in GDPR compliance, and management will report to the board of directors on data protection matters.

4. Cohesion and Alignment of Management and Teams

CAO adopted the Prince 2 Project Management method. Key staff received training to ensure project delivery to a high quality professional standard.

The CAO Executive created teams to implement specific projects based on the skill-set and experience required for each project. This approach had the added benefit of contributing to enhanced knowledge sharing and cohesion among the team as a whole.

5. Lead the development of a centralised applications system

CAO launched an 'Advanced Entry' application system. Advanced Entry (AE) is an application made through CAO for a place on an undergraduate course entering the second, third or fourth year of study at a participating third-level institution. Seven HEIs are currently participating, with the potential to build on both the number of participating HEIs and to expand to other applicant and course types, for instance international applicants and part-time/flexible study courses.

In line with CAO's commitment to enabling applicants, and the national commitment to broadening access to higher education, CAO deepened the level of involvement with the DARE and HEAR schemes. In 2013, the data management function for the schemes transferred from UL to CAO. CAO also agreed to provide helpdesk support to DARE/HEAR applicants and their advisors/representatives.

In 2016, CAO appointed a CAO DARE/HEAR Co-ordinator to organise the following tasks (previously organised by the DARE/HEAR Shared Services Unit in the Irish Universities Association):

- Production of scheme literature
- DARE/HEAR helpdesk
- Changes/updates to the application forms
- Recruitment and training of screeners
- Screening process, outcomes, quality control, recheck process, and appeal process.

The DARE/HEAR Coordinator is also the main point of contact between HEIs and CAO.

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

Enhancements to the statistical offering of CAO have been made since the appointment of a Statistician at the end of 2013. These enhancements include:

- The migration of statistics from a variety of older systems to a standardised software system.
- Enhanced analysis of DARE and HEAR access routes and the provision of anonymised data to researchers and institutions (e.g. ESRI, individual HEIs, etc.).
- Geographical representation of applications and acceptances.
- The facilitation of data requests from representative bodies, Higher Education Institutions, researchers and media.
- International Standard Classification of Education for fields of education (ISCED-f) will be used exclusively from 2018 onward for the compilation of course statistics. The classification will facilitate more detailed analysis of CAO statistics and international comparison. This new classification will replace the existing 17 statistical categories used to present course choices data by subject category.

The provision of statistical data and the *CAO Interface for HEIs* facility has helped institutions in the development of policy and decision making. CAO has laid the groundwork for self-service reporting tools and aims to build on these facilities and offerings based on feedback received from Higher Education Institutions.

Chapter 4

Context for the Strategic Plan



CONTEXT FOR THE STRATEGIC PLAN

The following sectoral analysis and projections for the Irish higher education landscape, including international comparison, help to shape the strategic priorities of this plan.

HIGHER EDUCATION AT A SECTORAL LEVEL

At present, the higher education sector facilitates multiple entry routes to higher education. There is increased focus on exploring new gateways to education. Therefore, it is imperative that education providers are supported by an efficient and effective application processing system 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
- external transfer models

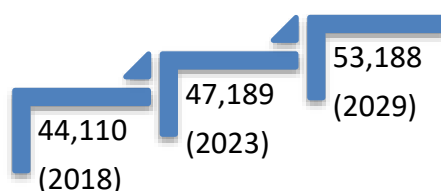
The HEA, Department of Education and Skills, and individual higher education representative bodies are all grappling with limited resources with which to fund the sector. The outsourcing of non-core services, and the use of shared service models, are increasingly being examined as ways to save money, reduce duplication, and enhance service delivery and reliability.

PROJECTIONS

The Department of Education and Skills reports:

“Demand for third level full time education is projected to continue to increase substantially until 2029. This is a direct result of increases in births in recent years, and of the relevant underlying populations at first and second level”¹.

Based on the calculations presented in the report, projected new entrants are expected to grow as follows:



These figures are a baseline, assuming maintenance of current transfer rates. However, even in a reduced rate scenario projections are that demand will continue to increase substantially.

In the report of the Strategy Group for higher education it was noted that: *"If Ireland is to achieve its ambitions for recovery and development within an innovation-driven economy, it is essential to create and enhance human capital by expanding participation in higher education. The scale of the projected widening and growth in participation over the period of this strategy demands that Ireland's higher education system become much more flexible in provision in both time and place, and that it facilitates transfer and progression through all levels of the system²."*

¹ Department of Education and Skills: Projections of Demand for Full Time Third Level Education, 2015 – 2029 (Dublin, 2015), 7

² Department of Education and Skills: National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Dublin, 2011), 10

"Internationalisation provides important new opportunities for Irish higher education, but equally, and as other countries also compete for talent and resources, Ireland cannot afford to be left behind³."

Whilst CAO is frequently associated in the public mind with the Leaving Certificate examination and 'points', the service is diverse, with a broad range of applicant types submitting applications to CAO.

In 2018, there were 72,643 applications made to CAO by the normal application closing date of 1 February. The table below provides some details:

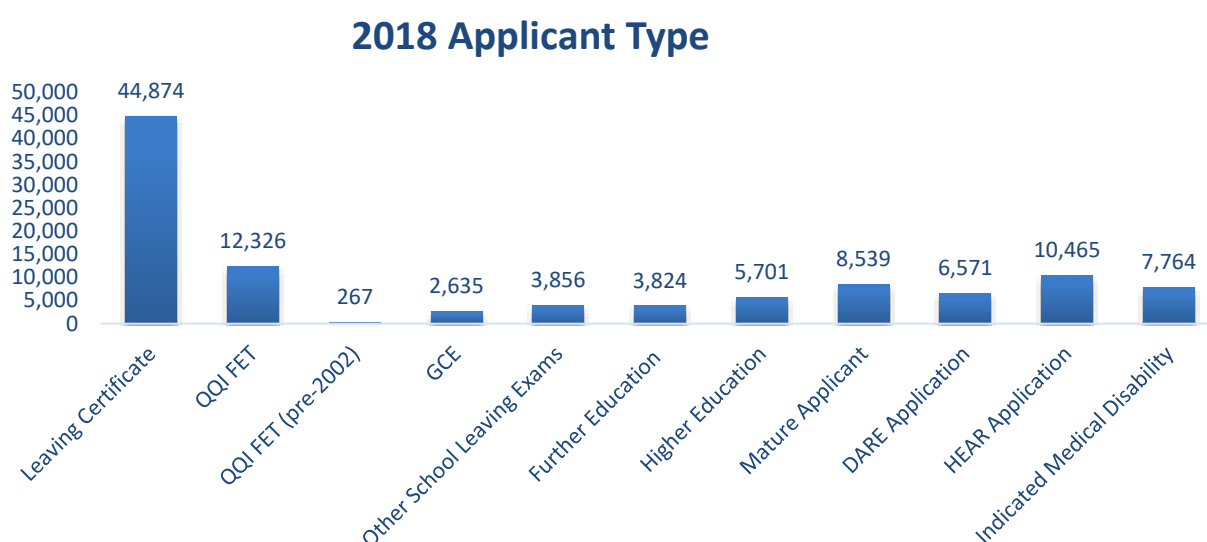


Table 1.1. CAO applicant type at 1 February 2018

Please note, applicants may present with a combination of the above.

Processing of Leaving Certificate and QQI Further Education applications – and administering the central evaluation suite of software - places CAO in a key position in the higher education admissions infrastructure. These core elements of the business are to remain high priorities.

A Higher Education Report states that the percentage of new entrants to higher education - whose basis for admission is a further education qualification - is currently at 6.6%. The target

³ Department of Education and Skills: National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Dublin, 2011), 13

for progression from further to higher education was set in the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019 at 10%.⁴

“Collaboration between QQI, SOLAS and the HEA, and work by regional Clusters on the development of pathways between further and higher education will support the achievement of this target”⁵

International applications, including EU and non-EU applications, are not as well represented as they might be. With buy-in from HEIs, CAO can play a role in accommodating growth in these categories for the sector as a whole.

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION APPLICATION PROCESSING SYSTEMS

In recent years there has been a shift towards more flexible offerings in terms of modes of study, and this has implications for admissions services. As would be expected, there are differences in the number of choices available to applicants, the number of entry cycles, the data services provided to participating HEIs, and the funding models.

Funding models are widely varied, ranging from no application fee (HEIs recharged) to substantial fees. CAO remains competitive in this regard with a modest base-line fee and no support from the state, or HEIs, or commercial activities.

⁴ Higher Education Authority: National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 – 2019 (Dublin, 2015), 36

⁵ Higher Education Authority: National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 – 2019 (Dublin, 2015), 36

The focus of Admissions Services internationally is shifting from⁶:

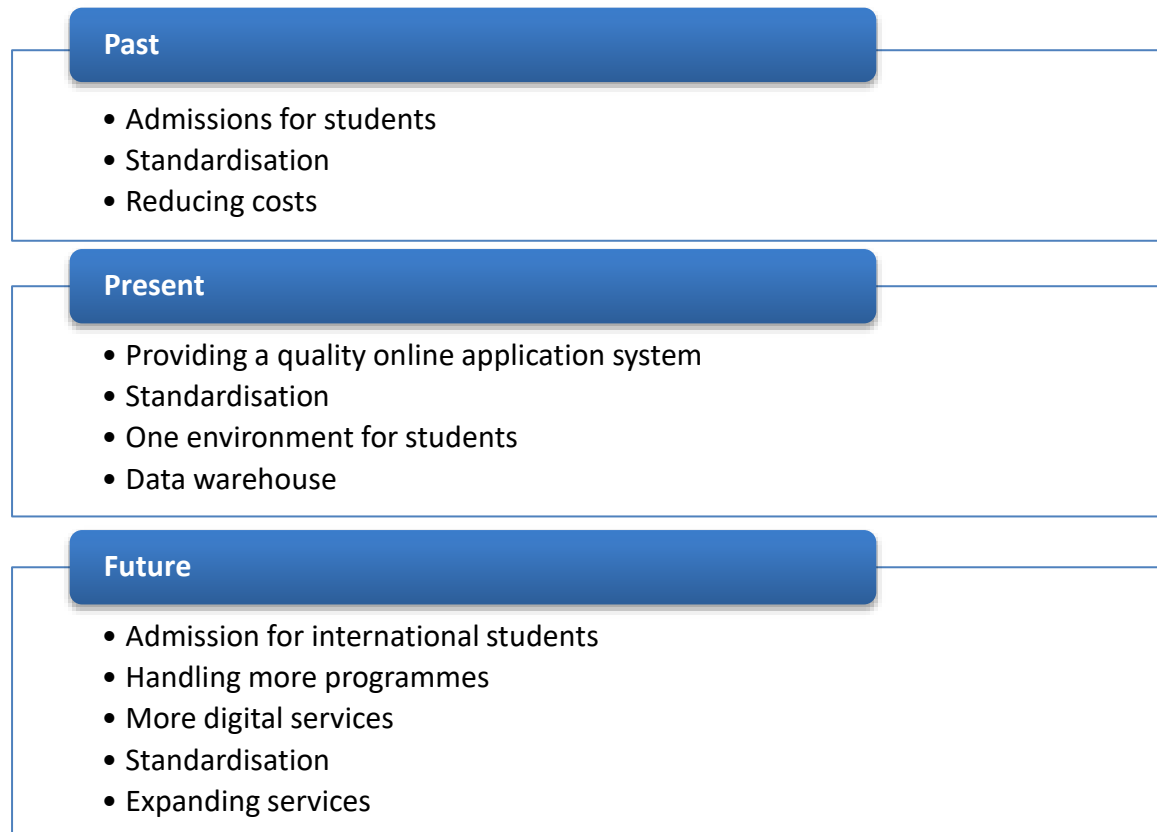


Fig. 1.2 The focus of Admissions Services Internationally

If CAO is to remain on track to meet future admissions needs, the organisation needs to explore the introduction of entry routes for different types of applicants. This will have implications for the current application model and for the organisation's resources, communications strategies and technology.

⁶ Studielink: IAAO Survey - Admission of international students (Berlin, 2014), 4

Chapter 5

Preparing a New Strategic Plan



PREPARING A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN 2018-2023

In March 2017, the CAO board of directors appointed a Strategic Planning Subcommittee to be tasked with drafting a new *Strategic Plan for 2018-2023*.

The subcommittee set about this task in three phases:



PHASE 1: DATA COLLECTION

The CAO has successfully completed a strategic cycle 2013 to 2017 and has accordingly created internal capabilities to take greater control and ownership of the next strategic plan. The company decided to draw upon the knowledge base within the CAO staff, and feedback from admissions officers, in the next iteration of the strategy.

The objectives of the data gathering phase were to:

1. Build a picture of the relative strengths of the CAO and the challenges it faces through engagement with its staff and key user groups.
2. Engage with the people who will have real ownership in delivering on the future of the CAO, in order to harness their deep understanding, knowledge and foresight.
3. Produce a document that critically positions the CAO and the potential avenues for strategic development.

The collection of the necessary data to support this phase included consultation with management, staff and admissions officers.

(I) CONSULTATION WITH MANAGEMENT AND STAFF

A facilitated strategic session was conducted with the staff of the CAO to explore their views and insights into the strengths and challenges facing the business, and the possible avenues for improvements in operations, finance and business growth.

The session also explored how to build on the achievements and challenges of the past strategic plan, and how that positions the CAO for future activity.

The following themes emerged from a consultation session with CAO management and staff.

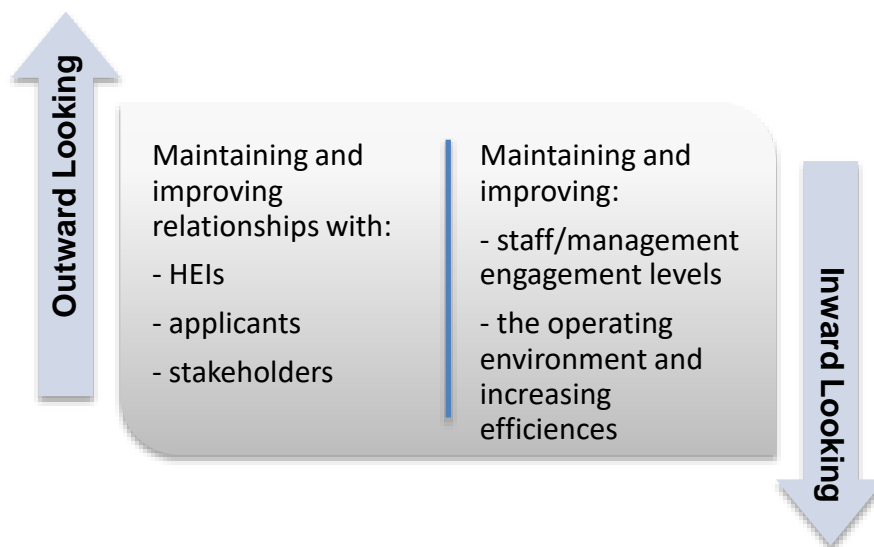


Fig. 1.3 Themes emerging from consultation with CAO management and staff

Relationship with HEIs

There was a strong focus on the relationship of the Company with the participating Higher Education Institutions, specifically Admissions Offices. The team was interested in developing and deepening this important relationship.

The objective would be to add value for HEIs, particularly with a view to leveraging the central position of the Company to yield greater efficiencies for HEIs.

Concrete examples discussed included:

- providing tools for HEIs to use when evaluating applications, such as School Leaving Qualifications other than Irish Leaving Certificate and mature applications
- facilitating cooperation and shared services between HEIs, for example when using the evaluation tools mentioned above
- visiting each participating HEI to learn and understand how the HEI interacts with CAO, and to attempt to then pull together this learning and further add to the value that participating in the central application service brings to HEIs
- further development and additions to the tools on the CAO Interface for HEIs that have been rolled out in recent years, for example, the manner in which HEIs access both statistics and data has been greatly enhanced by use of this interface. Working with HEI representatives, these services have been expanded and improved

HEIs would benefit from a more user-friendly interface and ease of access to data and statistics - tools that can be used by HEIs in pursuing their strategic objectives. Applicants would also benefit from improvements and efficiencies in operations, and the improved flow of information from HEIs to applicants.

Relationship with applicants

The provision of additional and enhanced services for applicants was another important element of the discussions. Such measures would have the dual objectives of improving applicant experience and the efficiency of the operation by reducing errors and waste.

CAO refreshed and improved the CAO website and online application form in 2014 to great effect. The team has identified further improvements to ensure correct completion of applications based on data supplied, such as:

- highlighting the need to register for relevant tests or submit portfolios based on course choices
- based on age, applicants may be prompted to complete the mature section of the application form and directed to the mature section of the CAO website, or even to the specific HEIs instructions pages.

Relationship with stakeholders

CAO wants to build on its reputation as being willing to engage with its many stakeholders (see Fig. 1.1. on page 8 for a list of stakeholders).

CAO communicates its key messages to applicants via the *CAO Handbook*; the many resources available on the website; at student-focused events; and through media, schools and representative bodies.

Regular two-way communication takes place between CAO staff and applicants, parents, and guidance counsellors - mainly via email and telephone - to deal with specific application-based queries. Response rates are prompt, and the organisation is always looking at ways to improve applicants' experiences by providing clear instructions and useful resources.

The public perception is one of a fair, impartial and independent system which is not subject to influence. CAO brings key stakeholders together by organising a series of annual conferences and participating in meetings with representative bodies and state agencies.

Staff and management are engaged and enthusiastic

The team takes pride in the reputation of the Company as an efficient, cost effective and fair organisation; is keen to be involved and engaged with the aims of the company; and to give input in order to ensure that activities/projects are aligned to the aims of the Strategic Plan.

It was suggested that any proposed objectives should be examined for feasibility and, if found feasible, a business case then made. The team will work to achieve objectives set out in the Strategic Plan. Management will link staff activities with these objectives; engage staff with regular updates; as well as reporting on progress to the CAO board.

Improve operating environment and increase efficiencies

The team is very interested in ensuring continued improvements in the way the office operates. This inward looking theme is a function of a culture of a small and close-knit unit where all voices are heard and constant improvement has been the result.

The team is keen to be involved and informed with suggestions for regular meetings, project teams, reporting, knowledge sharing, staff development, learning and training.

Training and Continuing Professional Development is encouraged informally, but it was suggested that a formal structure be developed with respect to staff training.

The team also discussed improvement opportunities that come with adopting formal practices such as LEAN office principles, further developing in-house technology and tools to manage projects and processes, or engaging tools such as MS Project.

(II) CONSULTATION WITH ADMISSIONS OFFICERS

A short open-ended questionnaire was distributed to the CAO Operations Group (admissions officers), with a follow-up facilitated discussion chaired by the chair of the Strategic Planning Subcommittee.

Admissions officers were satisfied with services and identified some of the strengths and opportunities facing CAO.

CAO Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficient processing of applications. • Delivering on a clear message and process for applicants. • Implementing rules and deadlines necessary to deal with 80,000 applicants in a pressured time schedule. • Key resource in the data that the organisation holds. • Recent CAO System developments e.g. CAO Interface for HEIs, Advanced Entry, DARE/HEAR data processing etc.
CAO Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAO as the portal of choice for all entrants to higher education. • CAO provision of the tools necessary to process non-standard applicant groups in a common routine fashion. • Improving access to data in a more user-friendly manner (enhancing each individual HEIs capacity to make admission decisions). • Enhancements to CAO systems to allow for more user-friendly access to data to support admissions activities

Significant challenges identified included the changing nature of applicant types, and potential challenges with CAO staff resourcing.

Admissions officers were enthusiastic about the system development that has taken place in recent years and encouraged CAO to build on this progress.

CAO has a key resource in the data that it holds and admissions officers were keen that it should focus on enhancing access to that data in a more user friendly manner and in a way that enhances each individual HEIs capacity to make admission decisions. The CAO Interface for HEIs is seen as a strong basis for development in this regard. The tools developed should enable more HEI-directed analysis capacity with less reliance on asking CAO for data. They should be wider ranging, more easily accessible and timely to support admissions activities of HEIs.

CAO has been undertaking a shift from legacy technology to more appropriate interfaces and technology, and this has been welcomed. In achieving this, CAO has been consulting with admissions users and this was appreciated and encouraged.

Admissions officers were keen to ensure that developments will be appropriate and usable. To this end consultation in the design stage will be invaluable. In addition, it was noted that training, documentation and user support all contribute to the success of a software/technology project.

REVIEW OF AND CONSULTATION ON THE PLAN

At the request of the CAO board of directors, the Strategic Planning Committee embarked on a consultation phase with a number of key stakeholders. The executive prepared a document setting out the emerging strategic priorities (see below), and this formed the basis of discussions with the THEA Registrars Group and the IUA Registrars Group.

THEA is the advocacy and representative body for the IoT sector in Ireland. The IUA are the representative body for Ireland's seven universities.

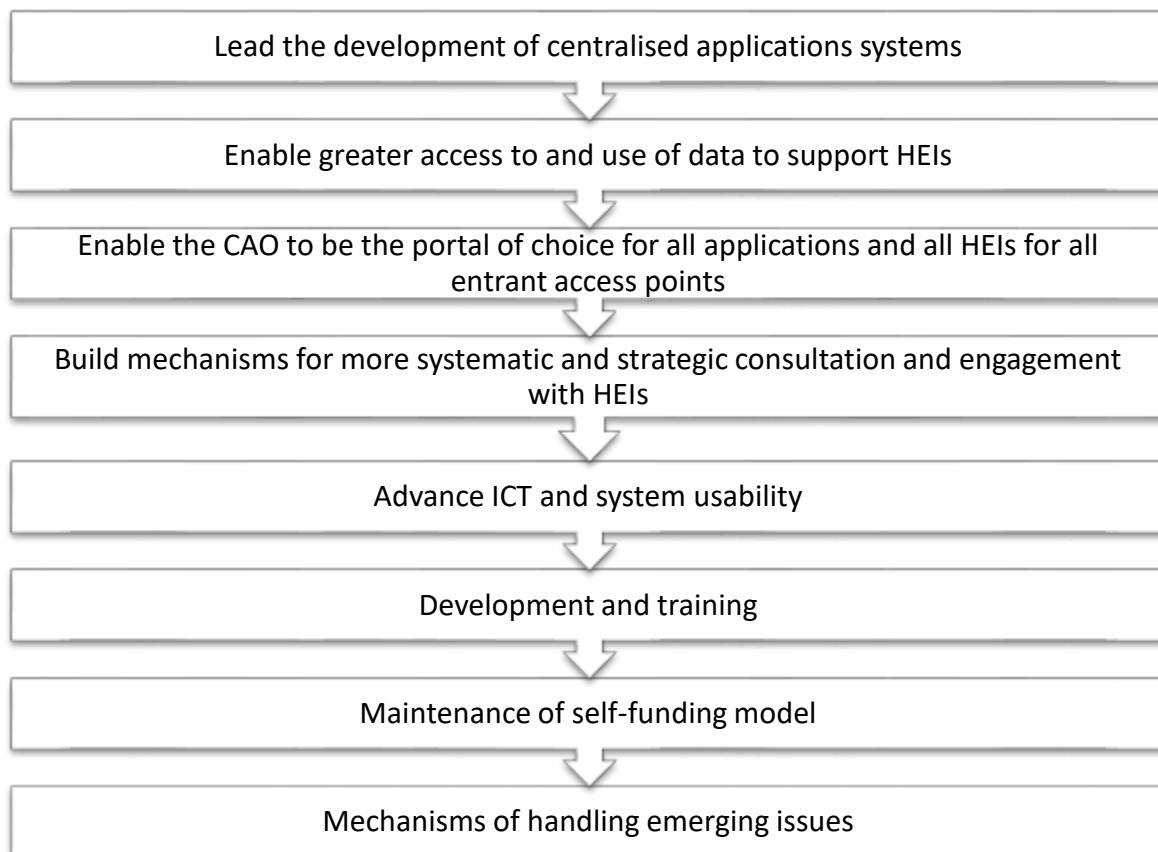


Fig 1.4 Emerging strategic priorities

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE REGISTRARS GROUPS

The Registrars Groups gave a very positive response to the emerging strategic priorities. Both groups demonstrated particular interest in the theme "Enabling greater access to data to support HEIs". This theme focuses on making self-service reporting tools available to HEIs to allow for the extraction and analysis of strategically important national and sectoral level statistics.

THEA registrars suggested that other bodies should also be considered in relation to opportunities to interrogate national level data, for example, THEA, IUA and QQI.

The theme "Enable the CAO to be the portal of choice for all applicants and all HEIs for all entrant points" was also discussed, with particular interest in processing applications from EU and Non-EU applicants. Postgraduate applications also featured in the discussion.

The IUA Registrars Group discussed Further Education (FE), both in relation to making information more readily accessible for FE students considering application to higher education, and in relation to highlighting FE opportunities for those who do not obtain a HE place.

The Executive subsequently circulated the emerging strategic priorities to the following key stakeholders.

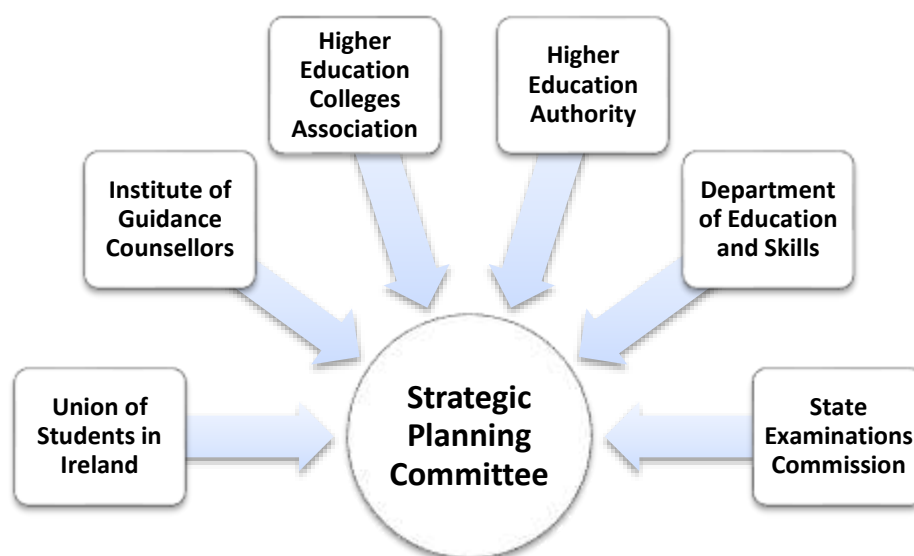


Fig 1.5 Stakeholders chosen for further consultation on the emerging strategic priorities

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The following stakeholders provided feedback on the emerging strategic priorities of the plan:

- Institute of Guidance Counsellors
- Union of Students in Ireland
- Department of Education and Skills
- State Examinations Commission

A number of the stakeholders identified the importance of continuing to nurture the important working relationships that exist between CAO and its stakeholders.

It was noted that the plan should highlight the opportunities and challenges presented by the Transitions Reform programme.

Continuing consultation around developments involving the further education sector was also recommended, taking into account the ETBI and SOLAS.

The CAO was asked to look at ways to ensure more diversity in our education system, and to encourage HEIs to provide additional resources to assist with access to education.

Chapter 6

Strategic Priorities 2018 - 2023



STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2018-2023

PHASE 2: STRATEGIC PLANS AND PRIORITIES

The company recognises that CAO will operate more effectively if there is strong alignment between the board, the staff, and the design and implementation of a strategic plan. The plan has been developed through a process that builds from the current plan, engages key groups, and is completed in a timely manner.

Lead the development of Centralised Applications Systems

The CAO will proactively lead the development of centralised application processing systems 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 HEIs in promoting education in Ireland and overseas. In pursuing this objective, CAO will seek proactively to provide application processing services for categories of application that are currently un-serviced and / or under-serviced.

Enable greater access to, and use of, data to support HEIs

CAO has rich datasets, appropriate use of which can support HEIs in managing strategic and operational activities. The CAO will continue to build on the accessibility of data through enhancements to the CAO Interface for HEIs. In addition, CAO will make available to HEIs self-service reporting tools which will allow data interrogation in a user-friendly manner while ensuring compliance with regulations. Valuable data at a national and sectoral level can be made more easily accessible to policy makers and bodies whose role includes planning and analysis.

Enable the CAO to be the portal of choice for all applicants and all HEIs for all entrant access points

CAO will explore with HEI partners how best to develop tools and processes to enable HEIs to channel diverse applicant types through the CAO application system – reducing the need for local application processing and providing efficiencies for both HEIs and applicants. In pursuing this objective, the experience with the Advanced Entry application service, and the DARE/HEAR screening process, can be leveraged.

Accommodate mechanisms for more systematic and strategic consultation and engagement with HEIs

The CAO has a very positive professional relationship with HEIs, mainly through Admissions Offices. CAO is keen to build on this relationship and to harness the deep knowledge of the overall process of entry to higher education that exists in HEIs. This will enable CAO to build tools which will empower HEIs in their missions and to mine the efficiencies for which there is so much potential with shared services. Specifically, there is potential to streamline processes and reduce duplication of effort through a combination of knowledge sharing and cooperation. CAO proposes to pursue this strategic objective through a combination of structured site visits with individual Admissions Offices, and group sessions to define common goals.

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. The CAO Interface for HEIs is a development which has been welcomed by HEI users; the users have encouraged CAO to expand on the capabilities of this valuable service. CAO has recently upgraded the website and the application process and will build on this, exploiting technology to enhance the service for applicants.

Development and training

CAO will enhance opportunities for staff development and training. Through formal training and understudy arrangements, the office will build on the existing cohesion of the staff and management team, and create opportunities for staff to grow their involvement in achieving the strategic objectives of CAO.

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. CAO will perform a cost benefit analysis and financial impact assessment prior to engaging in any new activity, and ensure that it delivers appropriate resources through its operations to ensure it is developing a sustainable future.

Mechanisms for handling emerging issues

CAO will monitor the environment it operates in and prepare for changes that might impact on the activities of the Company, for example, the changes to data protection law coming into effect from 25 May 2018.

Chapter 7

Implementation and Alignment



IMPLEMENTATION AND ALIGNMENT

A detailed Implementation Plan will be prepared by CAO management in consultation with the Strategic Planning Committee. The implementation and internal monitoring of this plan will be the responsibility of CAO management.

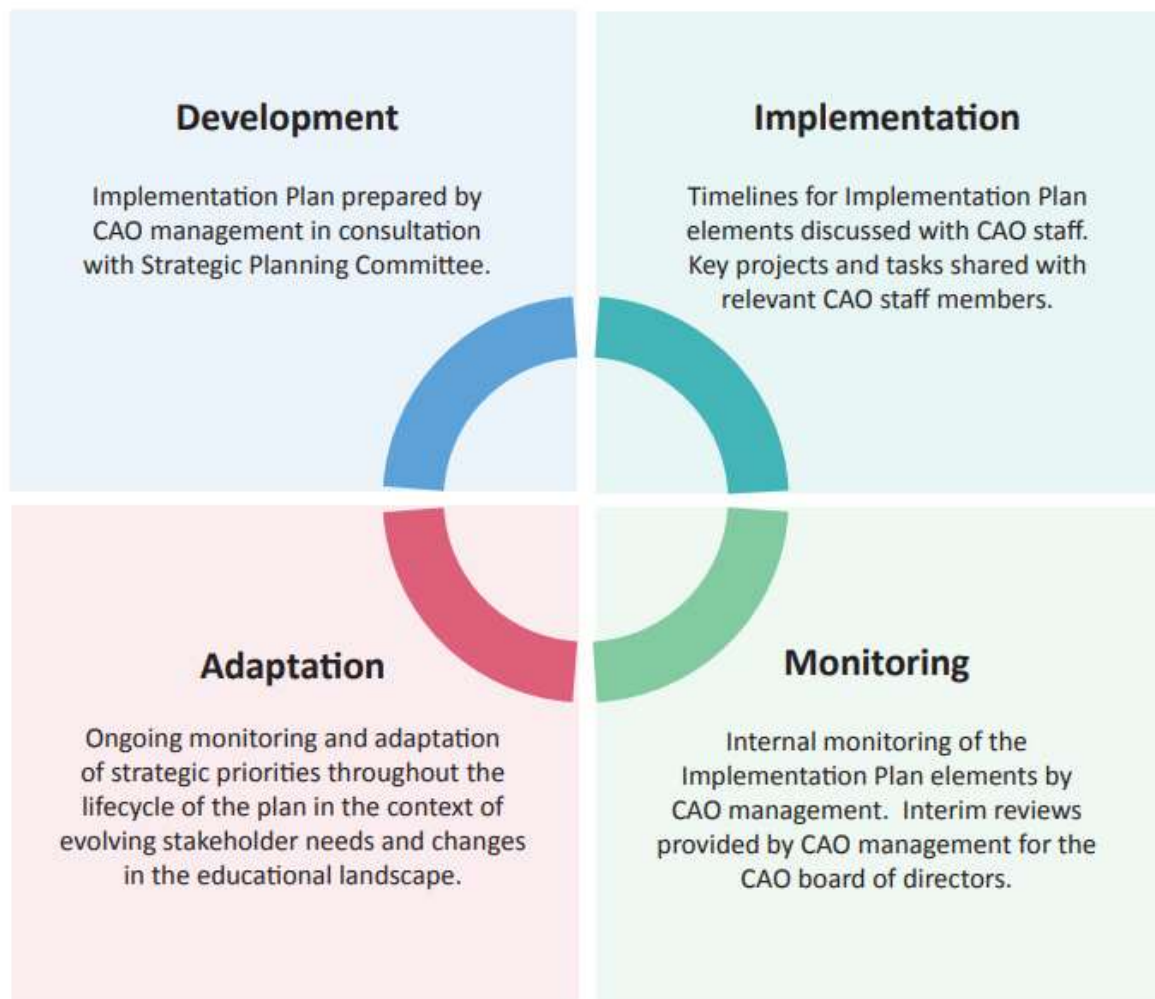


Fig. 1.6. The Implementation Process

Progress reports will be provided, by management, to the CAO board of directors.

During the lifecycle of this plan it is expected that the Implementation Plan will evolve in line with changes to the landscape and changing stakeholder needs.