

2010 –
2013

The Postgraduate Applications Centre Ltd

Strategic Plan 2010 – 2013



Foreword

The Postgraduate Applications Centre Ltd (PAC) was established in 1998 to centrally process applications for the Postgraduate Diploma in Education – PGDE (formerly Higher Diploma in Education), for the constituent universities of the NUI (UCC, UCD, NUI Galway & NUIM). We continue to carry out the above functions, but in 2005 PAC diversified to process other non-PGDE postgraduate courses. In that year we piloted an online postgraduate application system in conjunction with Dublin City University. The following year, UCC and NUI Galway joined the system and others followed in subsequent years. We now have six of the seven universities in the Republic of Ireland participating in the PAC postgraduate online application system.

PAC's operation has grown from handling an initial 2,456 PGDE applications in 1999 to handling over 20,000 applications in 2009. PAC intends to target other institutions and professional bodies with a view to their participating in the system.

We are currently engaging with our existing colleges to offer additional services, such as a centralised deposits system that applicants can avail of when accepting PAC offers. Our aim is to offer a range of additional services to our membership without impacting in a negative way on the current services that we provide.

This Strategic Plan will plot a course for PAC for the period 2010 – 2013. It will enable us to set clear, achievable goals. We are conscious of the fact that we are all operating in difficult economic times and therefore we will always strive to offer value for money to all participants in the PAC system.

We are committed to expanding our highly professional and cost-effective service to colleges, to ensure that we offer a premier system for processing online applications. The more colleges and bodies that we incorporate in the PAC system, the better for applicants, who will benefit greatly from having a one-stop-shop where they can choose from a multitude of courses.

I would like to thank the PAC Strategic Planning Committee for their work in preparing this document, and in particular Professor Jim Ward (NUI Galway) for chairing our meetings.

Dr Séamus Mac an Rí,

CEO, PAC



Contents

- Foreword** **i**

- 1 Introduction** **2**

- 2 Mission, Vision and Values** **3**

- 3 Strategic Priorities** **4**
 - 3.1 Improve and Expand Services to Existing Core Customers of PAC 4
 - 3.2 Improve Communications 5
 - 3.3 Grow Existing/New Business in Postgraduate Applications 7
 - 3.4 Develop New Brand for Non-Postgraduate Applications 7
 - 3.5 Grow Existing/New Business in Non-Postgraduate Applications 8
 - 3.6 Provide Common Point of Application for the University Sector 10
 - 3.7 Develop Business in Non-Core Areas 10
 - 3.8 Revise Pricing Model 10

- Composition of PAC Board of Directors, and Members of the PAC Strategic Planning Committee** **13**

- List of Acronyms** **14**

1 Introduction

History and Brief Overview of PAC

The Postgraduate Applications Centre Ltd (PAC) is a limited company set up in 1998 by the NUI universities to process applications for their Higher Diploma in Education (now Postgraduate Diploma in Education – PGDE) programmes. Since then, PAC has extended its operations to include additional programmes and institutions. From an initial base of 2,456 applicants for a single programme, PAC now processes over 20,000 applications over a wide range of postgraduate programmes.

There are now seven HEIs availing of PAC services – UCD, UCC, DCU, TCD, NUIM, NUI Galway, and WIT. PAC also offers services to the Public Health Nursing system for the Health Service Executive.

The Board of Directors of PAC is currently made up of the Registrar of the NUI (Chair), Registrars of UCC, UCD, NUI Galway, NUIM and DCU, and the Dean of Postgraduate Studies of TCD.

Development of the Strategic Plan

The development of this first strategic plan for PAC is timely. PAC celebrated its first 10 years in existence in 2008. Moreover, we are now in a period of rapid change, when it behoves every organisation connected with the third level sector to review its operations, and assess the impact of the economic downturn.

In 2008, PAC commissioned a review of its first 10 years of operation. Following from this review, and the research carried out on foot of its recommendations, PAC developed this Strategic Plan which will be the blueprint for development of the organisation over the years 2010 – 2013.

Our Strategic Plan is based on a review of our existing business, a SWOT analysis, surveys and interviews with existing clients, and research undertaken to identify potential new clients. We greatly appreciate the time and effort of all involved in the review process, the preliminary research, and the development of the plan.

We have identified the following strategic priorities to guide our operation over the next three years:

1. Improve and expand existing services to current core customers of PAC
2. Improve communication in general across the system
3. Grow existing/new business in postgraduate applications
4. Develop a new brand to accommodate proposed new non-postgraduate client groups
5. Grow existing/new business in non-postgraduate applications
6. Develop PAC as a common point of application for the University sector

7. Develop business in non-core areas
8. Revise current pricing model.

Section 2 of the plan presents our mission statement, vision statement and corporate values.

Section 3 presents our detailed plans for each of the strategic priorities. Each priority area includes specific timelines for completion of actions.

2 Mission, Vision and Values

PAC's Mission

The mission of PAC is to undertake the central processing of applications for admission to postgraduate and other approved programmes, on behalf of Irish universities and other higher education providers. By providing an efficient, convenient and cost-effective online service, PAC supports the objectives of the member institutions in relation to postgraduate recruitment, nationally and internationally.

PAC's Vision for the Future of Our Organisation

PAC will become the national system for centrally processing applications to higher education programmes such as:

- 4th Level Postgraduate Applications
- Professional Education Programmes
- Part-time Programmes. A new brand will be developed to process applications in the case of part-time programmes
- Undergraduate Programmes not handled by the Central Applications Office (These are areas that are not part of the strategic plan or vision of the Central Applications Office)
- Other programmes not handled by the Central Applications Office (These are areas that are not part of the strategic plan or vision of the Central Applications Office).

PAC will be a vehicle for expanded sharing of services between Irish universities and other higher education institutions.

Our Corporate Values

The company values its clients, both HEI staff using the system to assess applicants and its online applicants. PAC aims to provide a first-class service to all its clients and makes every effort to ensure that all applicants and HEI contacts are dealt with on a professional basis. We shall always strive to avoid problematic situations, but if such do arise, to resolve them in a timely and professional manner.

Confidentiality is a core value of PAC. The existence of firewalls and password-protected systems ensures that data are safe and secure.

Each HEI has access only to data pertaining to their applicants.

3 Strategic Priorities

3.1 Improve and Expand Services to Existing Core Customers of PAC

The quality of service for member HEIs and applicants can be improved through the following:

- PAC System Improvement
- Deposits Management.

3.1.1 PAC system improvement

The main initiatives here are: Improving the PAC online application system and developing a Common Application System.

Planned Improvements to the PAC Online Application System

Actions	Timeline
Allow applicants to upload their documentation directly to the site	October 2010
Develop a system where questions can be specified on a programme-by-programme basis	October 2010
Allow applicants to copy application information from one application to another	2011
Complete W3C accessibility standardisation of the system	2011

Development of Common Application System

Actions	Timeline
Implementation of common application system	Subject to demand from HEIs.

Note: For more details on the Common Application System see Section 3.6.

3.1.2 Deposits management

PAC will develop a system in conjunction with universities to handle deposits from students when they are accepting offers. The real advantage is that the deposits will be paid online, ensuring that not only will it be more convenient for the HEI and the student, but also, by using this method, the payment can be directly tracked back to the applicant.

Actions	Timeline
PGDE Online Deposits System implemented (previously a manual deposits system handled by PAC)	Implemented April 2010
Deposit Handling System fully implemented for UCD	On hold
Deposit Handling System fully implemented for all participating institutions	2011

3.2 Improve Communications

Our core value, expressed clearly in our strategy, is a commitment to providing a first-class service to all our clients. Feedback from the institutions using our service indicates that the PAC system is an extremely useful and attractive channel for institutions to communicate with mobile students across the sector. Good communication plays a key role in improving our service.

3.2.1 Develop a comprehensive communication strategy

At the heart of this strategic plan is a drive to expand the organisation and extend its range of clients. The rebranding of PAC to accommodate non-postgraduate courses is a key part of this initiative. We will draw up a communication strategy which will include launching the new brand and publicising the organisation’s expanded range of operations.

3.2.2 Targeted communication with prospective clients

To bring PAC to the notice of prospective new clients, PAC needs to develop a concentrated communication campaign, targeting in particular those sectors which include possible new clients. This targeted campaign will establish the usefulness of PAC services and their cost benefit to the client organisation.

3.2.3 Regular communication with client organisations

At present, PAC has a structured method of communication with participating HEIs which includes the following:

- PAC User Group
- PGDE Steering Group.

We intend to review the operation of these groups to improve if possible their communication function.

3.2.4 Annual consultative forum

In order to enhance communication in general across the system, PAC intends to convene an Annual Consultative Forum, where HEIs can come together to discuss general issues and to resolve problems collectively. Each HEI will be permitted a set number of representatives.

3.2.5 Online database of application statistics

With the permission of participating institutions, PAC proposes to make available online statistics for both PAC online courses and PGDE applications. The data will include analysis of applications, offers and acceptances.

3.2.6 Communication of system improvements to academic users

From our survey of this group, it is clear that we need to improve our interaction with them. Numbers of academic staff respondents to the survey were low. We need to communicate more effectively with this group, investigate further any issues they have, and possibly tutor them if necessary on how best to use the system. We will progress this through the on-campus PAC user groups. PAC currently offers group training sessions on how best to use the system.

3.2.7 Communication improvement with applicants

We will research the reaction of applicants to the system improvements, and constantly seek to streamline and simplify the application process. To this end, we will conduct a survey of 1,000 applicants on an annual basis.

Actions	Timeline
Develop comprehensive communication strategy	2010 and ongoing
Plan publicity campaign targeting potential new users	2010 and ongoing
Ensure regular communication with existing client organisations	Ongoing, via Steering Group, PGDE, PAC User Group
Set up Annual Consultative Forum	2011
Initiate discussion with client organisations re online database of application statistics	As requested
Provide PAC Training Courses for academic staff	Ongoing
Survey applicants re possible improvements to the service	2010 and ongoing

3.3 Grow Existing/New Business in Postgraduate Applications

Growth in the number of applicants using PAC is most likely to occur in the general online system, where the numbers applying to the HEIs which currently participate in the system will probably increase, and the number of HEIs participating may also expand. Major expansion of numbers applying for the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) or Postgraduate Diploma in Public Health Nursing (PHN) is unlikely.

Trinity College Dublin has recently included its research applications (approximately 800 applications) in the PAC online application system, and used the PAC online application system to process its PGDE applications (approximately 800 applications) in 2011.

As the PAC market in graduate student admissions expands, the PAC online system has the opportunity to become the single admission system used by all HEIs in the country (comparable to CAO at undergraduate level).

Possible initiatives for this section are set out below.

3.3.1 Encourage non-users to join PAC

We will actively encourage non-users in the University sector to join PAC.

3.3.2 Add IOTs to the PAC system

Postgraduate numbers are expanding in the Institute of Technology (IOT) sector. There was a total of 2,572 postgraduate students in the IOT sector in 2008/2009, with 1,080 (42%) from DIT.

PAC will encourage IOTs to consider using its services provided that the numbers of applications are sufficient in this sector to make it financially worthwhile, and to generate significant benefits for the IOTs.

3.4 Develop New Brand for Non-Postgraduate Applications

This plan proposes that PAC expand its operations into the area of non-CAO undergraduate programmes and other programmes deemed appropriate by the Board. The Postgraduate Applications Centre brand should be retained, but to accommodate this new development, a separate interface/webpage for undergraduate applications will be essential. A separate brand identity will be developed for undergraduate applications. The proposed new brand will need to be developed very carefully, with clear and unambiguous distinctions made between the two different functions of the company. The existing company website will be considerably redeveloped and reviewed to ensure clarity and usability for the different categories of applicants.

3.5 Grow Existing/New Business in Postgraduate and Non-Postgraduate Applications

PAC has identified two main areas for developing new business related to undergraduate applications:

- Undergraduate programmes not handled by the CAO
- Inter-institutional modules for registering students.

3.5.1 Undergraduate programmes not handled by the CAO

The opportunity for PAC to expand and grow through targeting private institutions and professional bodies in Ireland is very apparent, as research by PAC shows that there is the potential for this to happen. The impact of expanding beyond postgraduate applications poses a problem, such as how to define the business anew if this were to happen. To expand beyond postgraduate applications would also require development costs, which are unquantifiable at present.

Undergraduate and other programmes that are not, at present, handled by the CAO and are available to PAC should it wish to diversify are:

- Non-CAO Undergraduate Programmes (through Admissions)
- International Student Admissions
- Adult and Continuing Education Programmes
- Government Initiatives Related to Economic Downturn.

- **Non-CAO undergraduate programmes (through admissions)**

In 2009, NUIM asked PAC if it could bring some undergraduate diploma programmes online. There is also interest from NUI Galway, DCU and UCC in allowing students to apply online for its non-CAO programmes (such as the Diploma in Dental Hygiene in UCC). If PAC decides to add undergraduate programmes to its portfolio, we will need to use two separate web interfaces for the undergraduate and postgraduate groups.

- **International student admissions**

Not all HEIs use the CAO to process non-EU applications, and PAC would be an obvious alternative here, rather than HEIs working with paper-based forms or their own proprietary systems. Some HEIs already use PAC for International Student Admissions and it has been successful for them, as the online system speeds up the application process. There is obvious potential for it to be successful for all other HEIs. We do not have comprehensive figures for the numbers of international applications across all HEIs. PAC needs to research this market more fully in order to develop a strategy for this area.

- **Adult and continuing education programmes**

At present, universities and IOTs run evening programmes for adults. Some of these short programmes do not have an application fee, but the larger Certificate and Diploma programmes do have fees. There is another large untapped market here for PAC, as the application procedures would be similar to those for postgraduate programmes. A reduced application fee for such programmes merits further consideration. Our research to date suggests that there are around 5,000 such applications per annum.

- **Government initiatives related to economic downturn**

With the downturn in the economy, students graduating from primary degree programmes may feel that they are better off remaining in education, as there are fewer job options currently available. This should have a positive impact on the number of applications which will come through the system. In August 2009, the Government announced an initiative to encourage unemployed people to return to education. PAC facilitated the processing of applications related to this initiative through its online system, and the majority of HEIs participating in the PAC system availed of this service.

Actions	Timeline
Pilot systems implemented	2011
All other HEIs' courses will be implemented subject to an agreed schedule	

3.5.2 Inter-institutional modules

All universities are currently trying to develop a method of registering their students for modules offered in universities other than their own, and are having difficulty due to the different student administration systems and business processes. PAC must look at this opportunity and work with HEIs to develop a standardised system of recording all modules for applicants.

There may also be an opportunity here for PAC to develop a system that would allow students to register for a list of pre-approved modules. PAC would be more than happy to work with the HEIs on a method of recording these modules on student transcripts.

There is no system, at present, to facilitate the above, so, by working with the HEIs, a solution may become apparent to make the process easier, and therefore meet a need in the current market. If PAC could come up with a clear solution for the HEIs, it could cost a great deal less than each institution attempting to develop its own independent system.

It seems advisable that PAC should begin this process by concentrating on structured PhDs, to enable it to develop a system to cater for this market.

Action	Timeline
Further discussion required with HEIs on timeline	—

3.6 Provide Common Point of Application for the University Sector

PAC is currently considering the possibility of creating a common application system with multiple choices for all taught Masters. This would allow applicants to fill out their standard information once on a common application form and then select their courses from across all participating HEIs.

Each HEI would receive details of the application to their own programmes only, and each HEI would assess the applications independently. This system would not be preference based, but rather all applications would be assessed on their merits.

Each HEI would then receive information relating to its own modules/programmes.

While it would be desirable to introduce a sliding scale of charges for applicants making multiple applications, regrettably introduction of a new pricing model (see 3.8 below) at this juncture would have serious implications for PAC’s future income. Any change to fee levels will be deferred pending the introduction of the new pricing model. Further discussion and detailed costings will be necessary.

Actions	Timeline
Further discussion required with individual HEIs on this proposal	—

3.7 Develop Business in Non-Core Areas

PAC will explore other possible areas for expansion, as opportunities arise.

3.8 Revise Pricing Model

PAC derives its income from application fees and also the charge to the HSE for administering the PHN system.

Currently the income from fees is just about enough to meet the running costs of PAC, but insufficient to allow for necessary expansion as the organisation grows.

In addition, PAC needs to review its current pricing model to provide better value for money for the applicant. Possible new models include:

- Multiple applications for one fee
- Stepped charges depending on the number of programmes applied for
- Charges for registering students for modules offered in different HEIs.

3.8.1 Current PAC income streams

The present fee structure can require applicants to pay more than a single application fee, if applying for postgraduate programmes in more than one HEI. However, applicants can apply for all PGDE programmes on one common online form for one fee.

Fees Charged by PAC for Individual Applications

Year	PAC Online Application Fee	PGDE Fee	Note
2007	€32	€80 (€120 late fee)	Not proposed to change the PGDE fee nor is the number of applications likely to change significantly
2008/2009	€37	€80 (€120 late fee)	
2009/2010	€45 (credit card payment) €50 (bank giro payment)	€80 (€120 late fee)	No further increase in the PAC application fee envisaged

A critical question for PAC is sustainability of the business, especially in light of a number of potential threats identified in the SWOT analysis, including: competitors, loss of current participants and a decrease in postgraduate applications. PAC must react to this by responding through Strategic Initiatives outlined in this plan, including:

- growing through expanding existing business in postgraduate and undergraduate applications
- developing new business with new and existing clients
- enhancing the quality of service.

Despite an increase in application numbers and revenue, PAC incurred losses in recent years, mainly due to increased rental costs, and development costs. The company generated a profit in 2010.

PAC needs to grow and diversify in order to ensure the viability of the company in the future, and accumulate surplus funds to ensure sustainability and development, and deal with possible loss of business in coming years. If more HEIs were to use PAC, this would create a significant number of additional applications. Should PAC in the future accumulate substantial surpluses, the decision will rest with the Board to implement a reduction in the application fee.

3.8.2 Financial projections for PAC's future

As part of this strategic planning exercise, PAC developed financial projections for the years 2010 – 2013. All of the projections relate to the core business of servicing HEIs.

For these projections, total income includes total income from postgraduate applications, and income from the PGDE. The application fee of €45 for PAC online courses, and the income from the PGDE applications remain constant for these projections. Expenditure includes all costs incurred in augmenting the number of applications, and the resources needed to cope with this increase. Based on these financial projections, PAC will be financially viable into the future, and plans to set aside an agreed percentage of any net profits generated to enable organisational development.

An important aspect of ensuring financial viability are cost-control measures. These have been implemented within PAC with the development of an autonomous finance function within PAC itself. Cost-control measures include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Financial responsibilities have been assigned, with corresponding accountability
- Transactions authorised and properly recorded
- Appropriate budgeting system, with an annual budget which is approved by the Board, and which is reviewed against actual results.

3.8.3 Sharing the fee

Sharing of the fee with all participating HEIs will be considered if the numbers of applications increase significantly to a level capable of sustaining fee sharing. Obviously, PAC must ensure that it continues to have a good cash-flow and a strong contingency base.

Composition of PAC Board of Directors, and Members of the PAC Strategic Planning Committee

PAC Board of Directors

Date: 21 June 2010.

The members (shareholders) of the company are the NUI and the four NUI constituent universities. The Board of Directors comprises a representative (currently the Registrar) of each member university except TCD, which is represented by the Dean of Postgraduate Studies. The Registrar of the NUI, Dr. Attracta Halpin, chairs the Board of PAC. The Secretary/CEO of PAC attends Board meetings and acts as Secretary to the Board. The Heads of Education, the original directors, were replaced by the NUI Registrars in 2006, when the operation expanded to incorporate the non-PGDE postgraduate programmes. DCU and TCD directors were appointed to the PAC Board in February 2009.

The members of PAC Strategic Planning Committee are as follows:

PAC Strategic Planning Committee

University	Member Name
NUI Galway	Prof. Jim Ward (Chair)
UCC	Michelle Nelson
UCD	Kevin Griffin
NUI Galway	Michael Kavanagh
NUIM	Marie Murphy
TCD	Jennifer Hill
DCU	Jennifer Bruton
PAC	Dr Séamus Mac an Rí (CEO) Kieran Guiry Sharon Newell Mary Delaney

List of Acronyms

CAO	Central Applications Office
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DCU	Dublin City University
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
EU	European Union
H. Dip. in Ed	Higher Diploma in Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institute
HSE	Health Service Executive
IOT	Institute of Technology
NUI	National University of Ireland
NUI Galway	National University of Ireland, Galway
NUIM	National University of Ireland, Maynooth
PAC	Postgraduate Applications Centre Ltd
PGDE	Postgraduate Diploma in Education
PHN	Postgraduate Diploma in Public Health Nursing
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
UL	University of Limerick
WIT	Waterford Institute of Technology
W3C	The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C): international community that develops standards to ensure the long-term growth of the Web.