Research plan

Creating a culture of rigorous inquiry

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Introduction

Like many public agencies within Australia and internationally, the Department of Education (the Department) is operating in an evidence-based environment where policy making and practice needs to be underpinned by quality, accurate and timely information. In a globally connected, information rich society, access to rigorous research is essential for continuous improvement.

Research provides the foundation for Government to deliver effective, evidence-based services in early childhood education and care, school education, and further education. The Department has a long history of supporting and engaging in high quality, contemporary research as a reviewer, a participant, a partner, a funder, a lead investigator, and an end product user. Evidence is used by the Department every day to deepen knowledge about the impact of our services and improve our policies, decisions and performance. Investment and participation in high-quality research, and the use of research findings, ensures our initiatives are based on the best available evidence.

Along with evaluation, analysis and innovation, research is a key component of the Department's Evidence Framework. This framework supports the generation of better evidence and the rigour with which we build and examine that evidence. Building a local evidence-base in relation to what works for whom, under what circumstances and why, is essential for delivering an effective and focussed education system, now and into the future. It also enables the Department to respond to our learners and learning communities by supporting research that provides insights into the opinions and aspirations of children, young people and families.

This Research Plan aims to strongly align our research activities and investments with the Department's strategic priorities. The plan has six elements:

- Research principles;
- Standards for ethical research practice;
- Research application assessment;
- Research priorities;
- Research engagement and translation; and
- Investment in research.

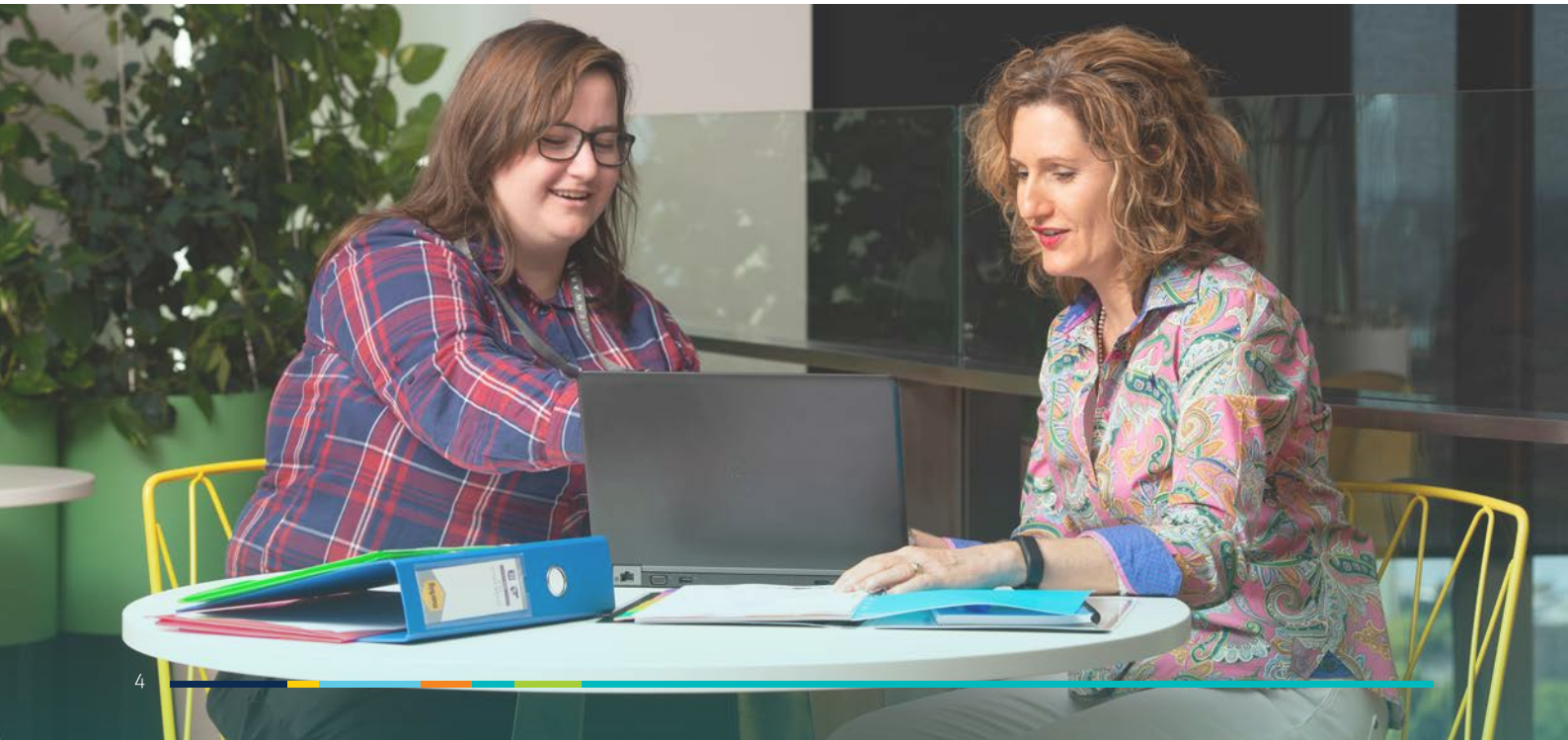
Through these elements, the plan will support a culture of rigorous inquiry across the organisation, encourage universities and other research organisations to focus their research efforts in areas relevant to the Department's needs, support transparency and accountability for research decisions, and ensure research outcomes are communicated in a way that is accessible and relevant.

Research in the Department

Research is the 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society'[1]. In the context of education, well-planned, high-quality research can identify:

- conditions and practices that support effective learning across the lifespan;
- skills and knowledge necessary for today's society and future employment;
- evidence-based strategies for promoting wellbeing of all learners and staff;
- inclusion and engagement strategies for disadvantaged, special needs or marginalised populations;
- characteristics and strategies to enable successful transitions through early childhood, school and further education;
- physical environments, resources and infrastructure that support optimal learning, teaching and community engagement;
- expertise and leadership skills of staff that can be developed and shared;
- effective data sources and measures for learning, teaching and service delivery; and
- responsibilities and relationships between government, community and industry that enable efficient service delivery and support positive outcomes.

1. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2002). Frascati Manual: Proposed Standard Practice for Surveys on Research and Experimental Development, OECD, Paris, p.30



Every day, the Department engages in and utilises research at many levels of the organisation, including at the:

- service delivery level — through evidence gathering, action research, data use, and the participation in studies occurring in early education and school sites;
- regional level — through larger-scale studies involving the participation of a number of sites; and
- system level — through major studies, often involving external research partners and other organisations, including Australian Research Council linkage projects, commissioned research and analysis of central data.

The vast majority of this research engagement, including commissioned research, partnered projects and in-kind support, involves our state schools. The Department undertakes a rigorous assessment of applications to conduct research in Queensland state schools and other departmental sites, or to use departmental data, to ensure all research activity aligns with our research principles, standards for ethical research, and research priorities.

The Department also supports research partnerships and has mechanisms to provide funding and in-kind support toward projects that match its priorities and demonstrate significant value for investment.

The outcomes of such research engagement are used to build the Department's evidence-base through the identification, replication and expansion of what works in the Queensland context. This in turn:

- informs policy and program development;
- identifies teaching, training and learning approaches that meet Queensland's diverse needs;
- support focussed and effective service delivery;
- transforms practices; and
- improve the links between education, industry, the non-government sector, and the broader community.

1. Research Principles

The following principles inform the Department's research activity and investment and ensure that anticipated benefits of research are achieved and communicated.

Accessible	Research outcomes and findings are available and disseminated widely. New knowledge is embedded in policy and replicated on a larger scale.
Ethical	Research is highly ethical and appropriate, and presents minimal risk and intrusiveness to participants or the Department.
Integrated and aligned	Research addresses gaps in knowledge, aligns with priorities, and is of clear benefit to participants, schools, the Department or broader Queensland population.
Open and collaborative	Research is collaborative and involves an open, respectful relationship between all participants, researchers, and partners.
Quality	Research is well designed, purposeful, and capable of producing sound results that are relevant to the research goals.

2. Standards for ethical research practice

The Standards for ethical research practice outline the core requirements of ethical practice in the design, delivery and reporting of research involving departmental data, sites, staff or students. They align all research activity with the National Statement of Ethical Conduct of Human Research, the Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and Communities, the Queensland Public Service Code of Conduct and information privacy requirements.

The standards apply to studies undertaken by departmental staff or external researchers on departmental sites, and articulate clear expectations regarding:

Privacy and confidentiality	Researchers respect and protect the privacy, confidentiality and cultural sensitivities of the participants and of their communities.
Voluntary participation	A person's decision to participate in research is voluntary, no one is subjected to pressure in deciding whether to participate, and participants are entitled to withdraw from the research at any stage.
Informed consent	The full, informed consent of participants and the assent of children and their parent/guardian is obtained before research begins.
Justice and beneficence	The benefits of research are achieved through just means and outweigh potential risks, and there are mechanisms to deal adequately with any harm or discomfort that may occur as a result of research participation.
Right to Review	Participants have the right to review their contributions or attributable data prior to its publication, and can access findings of the research in an appropriate way.

Undertaking research in this Department is a privilege that comes with great responsibility. Through the application of the standards, researchers demonstrate that they recognise their ethical responsibilities to respect and protect all participants from harm, particularly children and young people, and ensure participants and the Department benefit from their involvement in research.

3. Research application assessment

Research occurring in Queensland state schools and education sites, or involving access to departmental data, requires the permission of the Department through submission of a research application via Queensland Education Research Inventory (QERI).

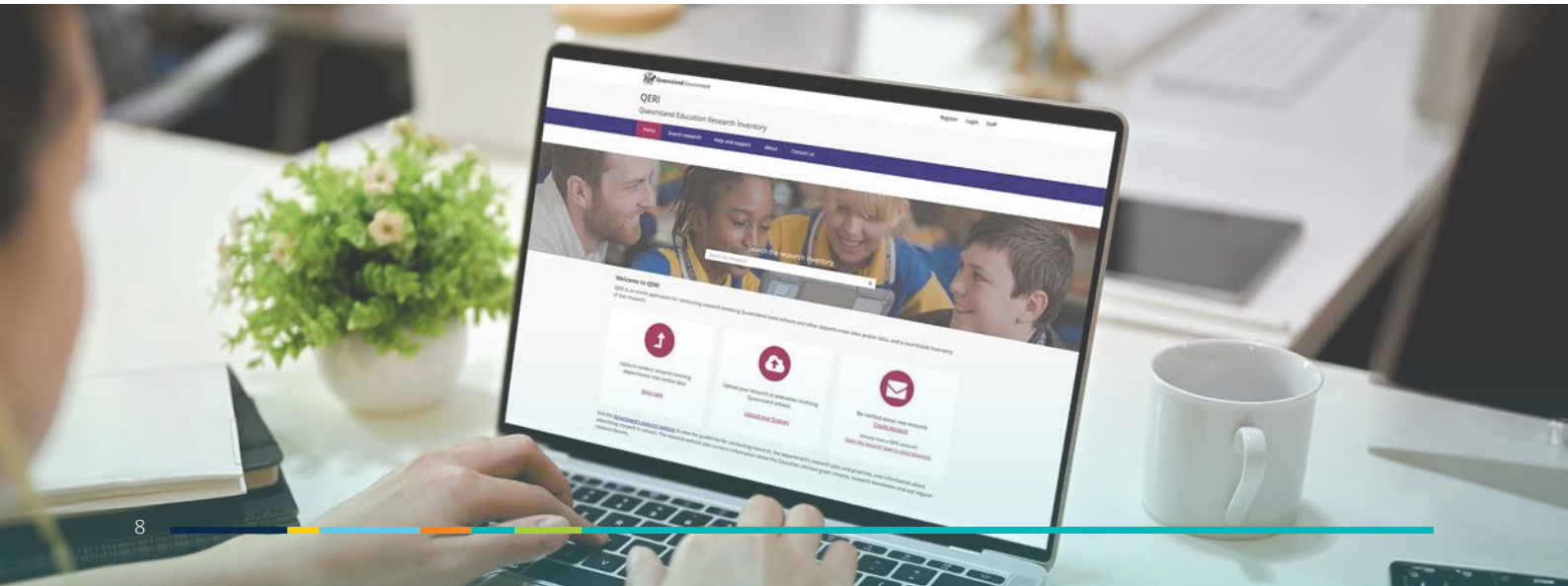
QERI is an online research portal developed and managed by the Department. The portal contains an online application form for researchers applying to conduct research. The application and approval process ensures that all research conducted in schools and other departmental sites adheres to policy and legislative requirements, so that the wellbeing of students and departmental staff is protected, the integrity of learning is maintained at school sites, and research provides benefits for participants, school communities and education in Queensland.

As outlined in the Department's Guidelines for Conducting Research, research applications may be appraised by a school, regional office, or central office, depending on the nature and scope of the research. Consistent appraisal criteria are applied in the assessment of all research applications, with priority given to applications that align with the Department's research principles, standards for ethical research practice and research priorities.

Careful consideration is given to research which creates a disruption to school activities. While poorly-designed research projects are rejected by the Department as a rule, the Department may also decline well-designed research due to, for example, no demonstrated alignment with the Department's research priorities, the potential impost on schools, the ability to source research participants outside school sites, or where such research is similar to existing studies.

An applicant granted 'Permission to Approach' is authorised to approach Queensland state schools or other departmental sites to invite participation in the research. It does not guarantee engagement by schools or imply official departmental endorsement of the research or any research products. All research participation remains voluntary and final authority rests with the school principal or appropriate departmental officer.

To maximise the benefits of the Department's research participation, researchers are required to provide the Department with a report of the findings of the study when completed, for dissemination and publication if appropriate.



4. Research priorities

Priority research themes are identified regularly through internal consultation and represent a forward research agenda for the Department. The priorities are used to inform research activity and investment, so the Department can:

- apply learnings from research to maximise benefits at a system level;
- target resources toward research that is relevant and future-focussed;
- maximise research capacity and outcomes from financial and in-kind investments;
- leverage additional research investment from other funding sources;
- collaborate with other agencies, universities, research centres and non-government organisations on topics of mutual interest; and
- encourage postgraduate students, departmental staff, and other researchers to investigate critical areas of relevance to the Department.

The priority research themes are aligned to the Department's Equity & Excellence strategy, the Department's Strategic Plan and Queensland Government objectives for the community.

Educational leadership and teaching expertise

Digital innovation in teaching and learning

Educational performance and support

Educational precincts and revitalised educational infrastructure

The learning journey

5. Research engagement and translation

Research conducted through the Department provides an opportunity to 'translate' research findings into policies, practices and tangible resources for implementation in schools, central and regional office. Making research easy to find, understand and apply for end-users, practitioners and policy makers aids in maximising the intended impact of the research.

To assist with research translation, the Department has identified four key components of best-practice research engagement and translation:

1. **engage with end-users:** identify end-users early in the research process and consider their interests and the type of engagement required to support uptake;

2. **build capacity:** address gaps in engagement and translation skills of both researchers and departmental staff;

3. **tailor communication strategies:** identify the end-users and tailor findings, key messages, implications and expected benefits of the research in line with end-user preferences; and

4. **monitor and evaluate uptake:** gather data that assesses the uptake of research findings and the extent to which the expected benefits are realised by end-users.

The Department prioritises its research funding and participation to projects which can demonstrate alignment with these components of best practice. Exemplars of research with high end-user engagement can be found on our research translation webpage, including an example end-user engagement plan.

In addition, the Evidence Hub (for departmental employees only) provides practitioners and policy makers access to examples of effective practice and research about school improvement. The Evidence Hub supports educators to engage in robust conversations and cycles of inquiry about students' progress.

6. Investment in research

The Department administers a dedicated research investment fund and actively builds partnerships with the broader research community so that leverage of research effort is maximised and a critical body of evidence is built and shared.

In 2016, the Department introduced the Education Horizon research grants to incentivise research, build knowledge in areas of priority interest and provide seed funding for potentially larger projects. Grants are available for Queensland-based research and offer a number of streams to support evidence generation across the Department's portfolio priority areas and align with the research priorities.

The department also supports engagement in Australian Research Council (ARC) linkage projects via an annual partnership round. This grant scheme, administered by the Australian Government, is highly competitive and promotes innovation and research translation by partnering university researchers with industry stakeholders from Government and other sectors.

Standard application templates and explicit investment criteria are used in the allocation of Department funding and support for both ARC Linkage projects and research grants, facilitating a consistent, transparent, and equitable approach to funding decisions.

The Department also supports other types of research grant schemes, partnerships and co-design opportunities with researchers, research institutions and organisations and may consider other research partnerships on a case-by-case basis. A standing offer arrangement for academic advice is available to support streamlined procurement of academic advice from organisations listed on this supply arrangement.

Monitoring our performance

The Department will periodically review progress in implementing the Research Plan.

More information

Further information on applying to conduct research on departmental sites, any partnership or funding opportunities, and reports from completed research are available on the Department's website at www.qld.gov.au/DoEresearch.

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