



IRFU

Research and Discovery



Irish Rugby: Building success, together

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STRATEGY

STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

Research, defined as “a careful study of a subject, especially in order to discover new facts or information about it”, has considerable potential to enhance our enjoyment, wellbeing, participation, and performance. The IRFU Strategic Plan 2018-2023 promotes the vision for Irish Rugby as ‘*Building success, together*’. Through our collective efforts, we aim to develop and grow the game through excellence in performance, quality experiences, effective engagement, dynamic relationships, and strong leadership. The Research and Discovery Unit will play an important part in delivering on this vision.

RATIONALE

The IRFU Research and Discovery Unit will drive a “research-in-real-life” approach, where the research projects and related activities are embedded into every-day practice, aiming to support and develop research and innovation across all levels of the game in Ireland.

Adopting a proactive approach where projects are initiated to: 1) address specific issues (e.g. player injury, environment, technology); 2) enhance current practice (e.g. training prescription, leadership), or 3) identify opportunities for discovery will ensure that research is anchored to performance, safety; enjoyment, and the health of our players and staff. Ultimately, the IRFU will seek to develop a vital and questioning culture where research and evidence-based practice become an integral part of our daily activities, leading to insights that delivers excellence across all levels of the game. The IRFU Research and Discovery Unit will integrate player welfare with performance goals.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

To discover innovations and insights that positively impact the performance and health of our players and the rugby community.

VISION

A focused research programme that is clinically relevant, performance and welfare driven, and contributes to sustained success.

MISSION

Creating a community that proactively delivers innovative and impactful research focused on player wellbeing, safety and performance.

KEY DEPENDENCIES

We have identified three key dependencies, upon which to build an effective Research and Discovery Unit: INTEGRATION, INSIGHT, and IMPACT (Figure 1).

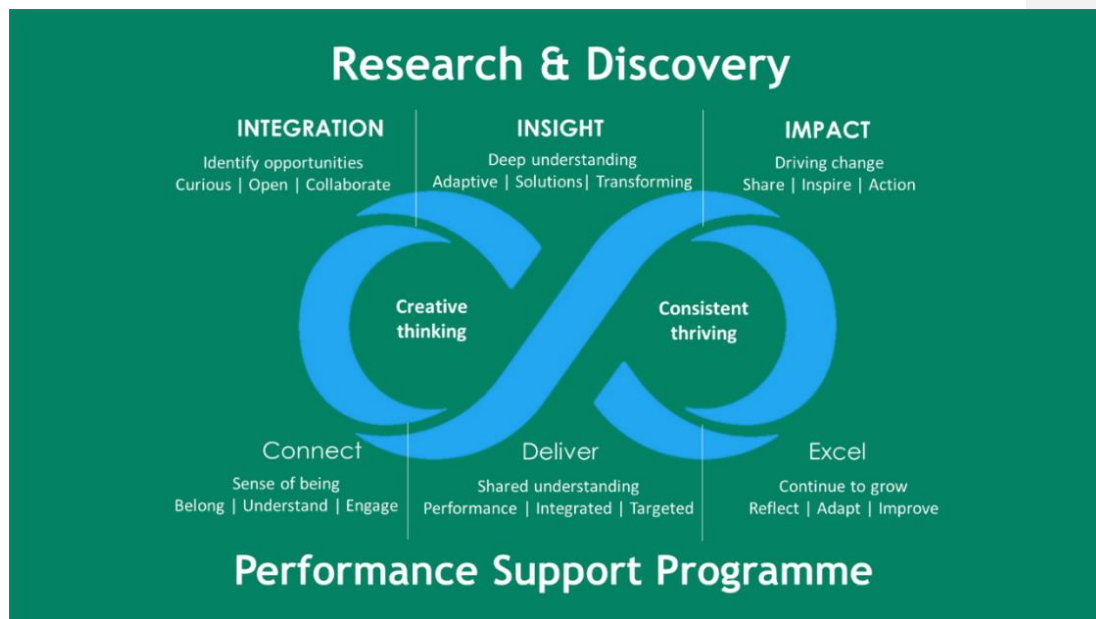


Figure 1. Research and Discovery: Key Dependencies for Delivery

INTEGRATION

Connecting with each other with purpose will facilitate insights that make a difference to the players and our staff. Integration is an important part of any successful team. Feeling a sense of belonging and part of a collective identity allows openness, transparency, and focus. Research and Discovery starts with an integrated approach to identify key questions around the performance and health of our players, and discover opportunities to improve our practice, service delivery, and interactions within the system. Developing projects that are inclusive of different individuals, departments, and disciplines creates opportunities for healthy ideation and robust discussion. Purposeful connections will facilitate insights that positively impact players, staff and volunteers.

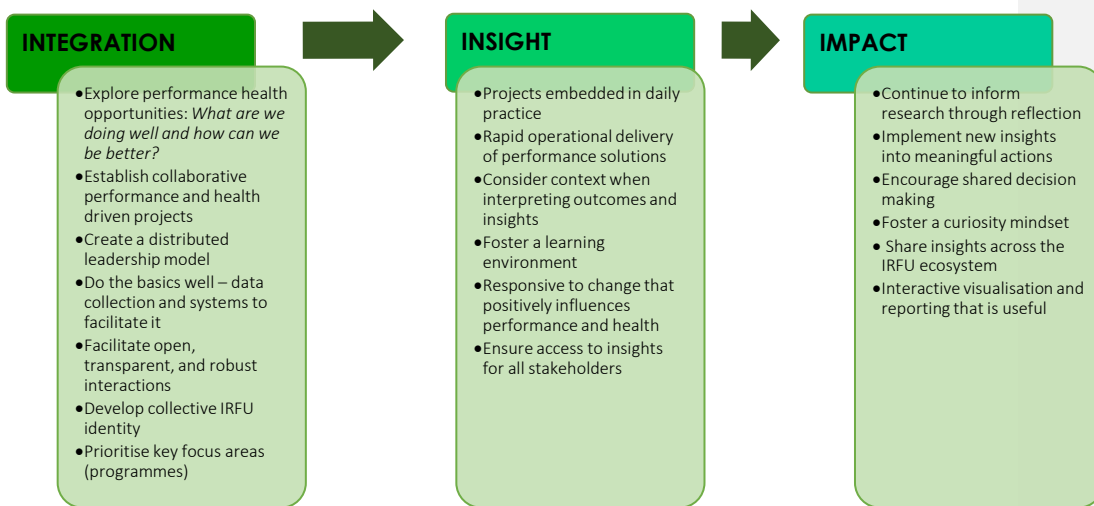
INSIGHT

Insights are accurate and deep understanding of solutions to identified problems and opportunities to enhance performance and health innovation. IRFU Research and Discovery is evidenced-based and data informed, responsive to change, and always consider context when interpreting results. We seek solutions to identified problems, but equally take advantage of opportunities that allow staff and players to thrive. Our research translates data into knowledge and these insights will facilitate shared decision making, and awareness of how we can be better.

IMPACT

Our insights lead to actions that impact performance and health in meaningful ways. Greater understanding or novel approaches are implemented, and we share these insights widely within our IRFU ecosystem. These novel insights are made accessible, and we approach change with openness and positivity. Our integration-to-impact vision creates clear and obvious benefits to our system, our staff, and our players.

Research and Discovery Dependencies: Summary of Key Tactics



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IMPLEMENTATION

Project Development,
Planning, and Design

IMPLEMENTATION

MAIN OBJECTIVES

- Establish the IRFU Research and Discovery Unit
- Create a project-based research framework
- Develop rapid and agile operational delivery of insights and solutions
- Implement strategic long-term projects that impact performance and health
- Build relationships at individual (expert) and institutional (expertise) level
- Establish knowledge translation mechanisms to support evidence-based practice and share research within the IRFU, and the wider sporting community.

Strategic focus areas

- Player, Team, and Union performance
- Leadership and environment
- Player and staff health and wellbeing
- Robustness/Resilience

Operational focus areas

- Data integration (flow)
- Analysis and Interpretation
- Visualisation and dashboards
- Accessibility

STRUCTURE

The IRFU centralised system allows for unique opportunities to contribute towards the success and performance of our teams. While our High Performance environment sees an expanding array of services delivered to players, the domestic game continues to receive support in terms of governance and oversight from the IRFU.

One of the key advantages within the IRFU structure to deliver performance insights are established injury surveillance systems. Within the High Performance game, a central monitoring system, The Sports Office/Kitman Labs, allows data to be entered regularly into a central database and provide medical and athletic performance services to all the players. Similarly, the Irish Rugby Injury Surveillance (IRIS) project has established a monitoring and surveillance system in the domestic game and continues to develop further projects based off these insights.

Ensuring that we use our resources optimally, we propose a framework that is inclusive, clear, and follows a distributed leadership approach. By creating more awareness of IRFU governance over research practices, we aim to develop a network of research coordinators across the game and assist teams to determine whether there is value in proposed projects. In addition this allows us to protect players against exploitive research and ensure they get value from projects that protect their health, enhance their performance, and/or contribute to their enjoyment of the game.

Performance Support Programme

The Performance Support Programme was established in 2021 to find and deliver performance-driven solutions that enable players and staff to thrive on and off the field. A key pillar of the Performance Support Programme is 'Research and Discovery', therefore the Research and Discovery Unit will continue to drive and support projects developed within the scope of the Performance Support Programme.

Domestic Game Strategy

Currently, the Medical and Rugby departments will continue to set the strategic agenda for the Domestic game.

Strategy and Technology

Many projects will be dependent on quality data, including data collection, privacy, access, architecture, analysis, and security. The Research and Discovery Unit will work closely with the Strategy and Technology department to ensure we meet all relevant requirements, and take advantage of technologies at our disposal. In addition, the Medical Research Lead is actively involved with the Director of Strategy and Technology in a collaboration with Enterprise Ireland, the state funding body, around access of new start up technologies in Ireland.

Research Advisory Committee

The IRFU Research Advisory Committee (RAC), formerly known as the Research and Education Committee, was established in 2018 to provide oversight and governance to research activities involving our players and staff across all levels of the game. Since then, we have continued to ensure the RAC, with independent chair and higher education institution representatives from health, sport, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and life sciences, provide an advisory and governance role to the IRFU, particularly the IRFU Research and Discovery Unit.

The purpose of the RAC is to create a synergistic strategic partnership with the IRFU where researchers can deliver research quickly using high quality IRFU data to improve the health, welfare, safety, and performance of rugby players in Ireland. In addition, the Research and Discovery Unit can improve its delivery of performance insights whilst demonstrating trustworthiness and accountability to the IRFU, its stakeholders, and the public. The interactions with the RAC are described in the Application Process (available online) and the RAC Constitution and Terms of Reference is included in Appendix C.

Future developments

Interest Groups

Where appropriate, Interest Groups will be appointed to provide oversight to projects and ensure they are aligned with organisational strategy, assist with resolving strategic level issues and risks, and provide advice and guidance on issues facing the project(s).

Research Coordinators

Each province in partnership with the IRFU will appoint a research coordinator. Alongside operational duties relating to local research, the research coordinators will be appointed to provide research governance and facilitate research activity within the auspices of the IRFU.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT, PLANNING AND DESIGN

Commented [G1]: See previous comments.

Performance and health discussions will be nurtured and fostered across different groups and in different environments. From these discussions, performance questions or opportunities will be identified. Once a question/opportunity is identified, a project will be established to address or explore the opportunity. When framing research activity across the union, we will implement a project-based approach (Figure 2). Although some projects will inevitably make up larger themes (i.e. workload and injury), we will continue to use this framework to drive connection, help us deliver on and off the field, and excel in the future.

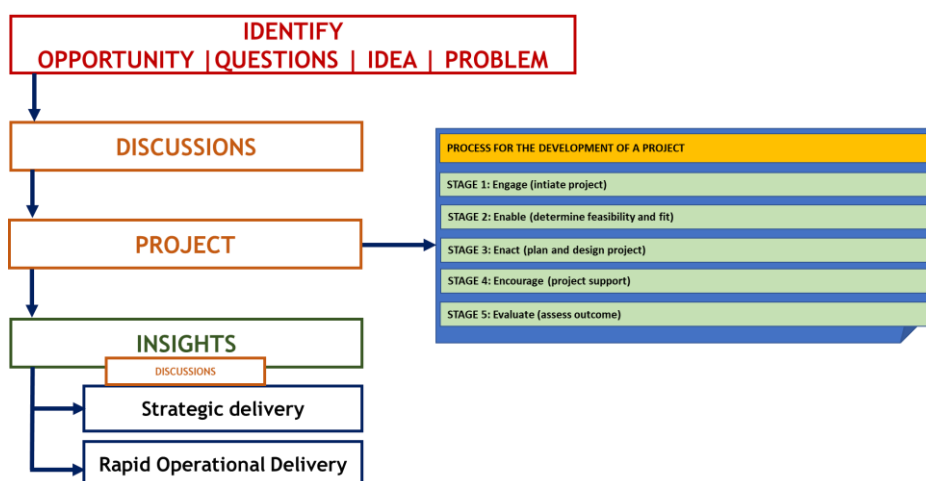


Figure 2. Framework for the identification and development of a performance question and establishing a project around that question to provide performance insights.

We have a curiosity mindset. Our projects are iterative. As part of continuous improvement, we plan, act, observe, and reflect to ensure we learn from each project. This will help continue to improve our processes and procedures, as well as foster an environment where the success of each project is enjoyable and informative. Projects will be established to allow for volatility, embrace uncertainty, appreciate complexity, and welcome ambiguity. When a project is initiated, we initiated the IRFU Research and Discovery Project Process which comprises of five stages.

1. Engage (initiate project)
2. Enable (determine feasibility and fit)
3. Enact (plan and design project)
4. Encourage (project support)
5. Evaluate (assess outcome)

A complete project planning and design together with checklist can be found in Appendix A.

STAGE 1: ENGAGE (INITIATE PROJECT) - Initial process of discussions with relevant leaders, area leads, groups and individuals. Formal leaders as well as informal leaders will be engaged to determine the nature and scope of the project. Expertise within the IRFU will be sought. If required for specific areas or needs, outside experts will be consulted. Appropriate groups and/or stakeholders within the union will also be included in the initial discussions. After the question have been identified, with the appropriate discussions hosted by the research and discovery unit, all appropriate approvals will be obtained, or identified to be obtained.

STAGE 2: ENABLE (DETERMINE FEASIBILITY AND FIT) - Through thoughtful collaborations internally and externally, considering a community of trust and openness, and acceptance of potential change, we will enable the project to be successful. A Research and Discovery Unit representative will facilitate the project framework, and determine its fit within the IRFU (i.e. purpose (strategy or operational delivery) and which area(s) of the IRFU it involves)

STAGE 3: ENACT (PLAN AND DESIGN PROJECT) - The project will be initiated using a clear and concise approach. A defined performance and/or health question/opportunity will be established to create a clear purpose and appropriate design.

The project members are identified through consideration of:

- Scope and nature of the project
- Expertise needed to deliver the research
- Interest in a particular area of research
- The potential output/value of the project
- Workload & agreed work programme of those involved

The project parameters and processes will be outlined so the appropriate support and systems needed for the project is put in place.

Each project plan must include the following components:

- Clear purpose
- Population that will be targeted (and scalability or transfer to other areas of the IRFU)
- Impact on IRFU staff (workload)
- Academic programme requirements (if appropriate)
- Data considerations, including (as appropriate); General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines, Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIA), data sharing agreements, research agreements and Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU).
- Appropriate ethics approval or consideration
- Budget and/or funding requirements
- Intellectual property ownership
- Technology needed to execute project
- Expected timeline including regular communication/updates (Gannt chart or similar)

At this stage, an Application Form is completed and submitted (, and reviewed by the Research and Discovery Unit with referral to the RAC (see Application Process document).

NOTE:

Internal reviews or audits of normal service delivery practices, including clinical workflow, specific processes or management as part of normal service delivery within a specific area, is not expected to go through a formal application process. However, we would encourage all data audits (medical, science or performance based), novel interventions or new technologies being tested/evaluated to be flagged with the Research and Discovery Unit by emailing the appointed Medical Research Lead (nicol.vandyk@irfu.ie). This is to ensure there is appropriate documentation of all practices, prevent unnecessary replication and where applicable share insights.

STAGE 4: ENCOURAGE (PROJECT SUPPORT) – The IRFU aims to build success, together and therefore personal development is at the core of the Research and Discovery Unit. Identifying research leads to facilitate project development, implementation and completion will encourage:

- Personal Development	- Recognition and Reward
- Facilitation	- Networking
- Mentoring	- Collective Decision Making

To ensure the project is successful, we aim to address these aspects of personal development. We would look to include mentors, build relationships, identify challenges and barriers, consider time allocation, ensure good communication, and create awareness (connectedness) appropriately throughout the system. We will include progress reports and evaluations with regular check-ins, and networking opportunities internally and externally for those involved.

STAGE 5: EVALUATE (ASSESS OUTCOME) – When a project is completed, the most appropriate method of reporting is determined. The relevant participants and stakeholders are provided a summary of the main outcomes and engaged in further performance discussions (also see section on Dissemination).

DISSEMINATION

It is important that results from research projects influence practice. Specifically understanding how clinical validity (provided through the research outcomes) are integrated in our daily practice to provide clinical utility is vital to ensure continued success.

A project summary will be made available for each completed project, including main take aways, dissemination strategy, and access to any published or reported outcomes.

Internally – providing IRFU staff, players and volunteers with the performance and/or clinical advantage resulting from projects.

Expected output:

Meaningful engagement with our players, staff, and coaches

- Access to data platforms and reporting systems
- Involvement and information exchange of the players and coaching staff

Support interaction and drive connection

- Improving data quality and interpretation
- Feedback (e.g. injury and illness reports)
- Workshops and group meetings
- IRFU oversight to support the development of individual clinicians

World leading programmes

- Develop a vital and questioning culture where research becomes an important part of practice and innovation, driving excellence at every level
- Drive a shift in behaviour towards research supported decision making
- Implementation of integrated clinical and scientific support programmes that provide clear links to the provinces and support their development

Externally – Sharing what we have done with the broader scientific and Sports and Exercise Medicine community. This may include publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals and/or presentation at both national and international conferences and meetings.

Performance Summit (Research Symposium)

We aim to create an annual symposium to showcase the various Research and Discovery Unit projects across the IRFU. This event will also be an opportunity to deliver on the Performance Support Programme objectives, as well as the Learning and Development programme. The event will be conducted over two days, where the first day is for IRFU staff and stakeholders only, with a second day aimed at a broader (inter)national audience.

Public – Sharing findings across public platforms and general media outlets. Where relevant, we will engage with the IRFU Commercial and Marketing Department to create meaningful output from our projects to the wider Irish Rugby audience. This will demonstrate how we are contributing to the health and performance of our players and the rugby community, protecting them from injury, or leading ground breaking programmes that provide new ways to manage and support players.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – IRFU Research and Discovery Unit Project Planning and Design (with Checklist)

Application Title:

Project lead:

Members:

Date:

1. ...

2. ...

3. ...

The group members are identified through consideration of:

Scope and nature of the project, Expertise needed to deliver the research, Interest in particular area of research, Potential output/value of the project, Workload and agreed work programme of those involved

APPLICATION FORM SUBMITTED AND APPROVED		
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>		
No <input type="checkbox"/>		
APPROVAL (tick all that is applicable):		
Line manager <input type="checkbox"/>	Head of Department <input type="checkbox"/>	Area Lead <input type="checkbox"/>
Director <input type="checkbox"/>	Executive <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>
IS THIS PART OF AN ACADEMIC PROGRAMME (If Yes name programme and institution with supervisors)		
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>		
No <input type="checkbox"/>		
COMMENTS:		

PROJECT PURPOSE (Problem Question Opportunity)		
<i>Clear and concise statement of purpose</i>		
AREA IT APPLIES TO:		
STRATEGY <input type="checkbox"/>	OPERATIONAL DELIVERY <input type="checkbox"/>	WHICH AREA DOES IT INVOLVE? (Choose all that apply)
<i>Name pillars or goals with which the project is aligned (i.e. Body, Mind, People, Place)</i>	Data (analysis/interpretation) <input type="checkbox"/> Visualisation and reporting <input type="checkbox"/> Analysis <input type="checkbox"/> Accessibility <input type="checkbox"/>	Performance Support <input type="checkbox"/> High Performance Unit <input type="checkbox"/> Domestic Game <input type="checkbox"/> Business/Commercial <input type="checkbox"/>
ENVIRONMENT AND POPULATION (TEAM/GROUPS) IT WILL INVOLVE		
<i>Provincial/HPC Entire team, groups of players, etc. Have these teams/groups/players/individuals been consulted?</i>		

WORKLOAD CONSIDERATIONS FOR THOSE INVOLVED
<i>Name all those involved and how it might effect their workload and daily interactions, whether additional time needs to be allocated for the project, whether it fits within daily service delivery or duties, etc.</i>

ETHICS INFORMED CONSENT GDPR CONSIDERATIONS DATA PROTECTION
<i>Consider and name all appropriate processes and approvals that will need to be sought in order to deliver the project, including if they are not applicable and why.</i>

METHODOLOGY – HOW WILL THE PROJECT BE PERFORMED

Include and describe the specific procedures or techniques used to identify, select, process, and analyse the project, including data collection, statistical analysis, and interpretation. If needed, include any relevant evidence from either literature or clinical practice to inform the project purpose, and in this section, explain how the project will be conducted.

DATA AND TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS

Consider and name all necessary data access and collection procedures. Consider whether IT/Technology is required to provide access to platform or secure environment.

If the proposal includes a novel/untested technology, consider whether a review is needed, and how best to proceed with a review.

COST | BUDGET | FUNDING

Name and explore costing solutions if required for the project. If appropriate, it is expected that a budget be proposed for relevant approval for the project.

If the project is being funded, name funding agency and requirements/expectancies of the funding body.

If it is proposed to apply for funding, name agency/institution/body, process, deadlines, requirements, etc.

TIMELINE AND DELIVERABLES

A Timeline for the project, including planning, data collection (if appropriate), data organization and structuring, analysis, interpretation, and outcomes.

A Gantt chart or similar can be included, with expected time points for deliverables and check-ins (including progress reports)

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

What is the expected outcome(s) of the project, and demonstrate how it will be synthesized, delivered, communicated.

We would expect the group to be able to name how this might impact IRFU, rugby community, or relevant stakeholders, and what impact it might have on daily service delivery and/or understanding of the relevant topic(s) or area(s).

IMPLEMENTATION AND SUPPORT

To ensure the project is successful, we aim to address these aspects of personal development, mentor relationships, challenges and barriers, time allocation, communication, awareness (connectedness) appropriately throughout the system, progress reports and evaluations, and networking opportunities internally and externally

PROJECT CHECKLIST

ITEM	Yes/No/NA	Date
Application form submitted and approved		
Group members assigned		
Project lead assigned		
Approval from relevant stakeholders		
Clear purpose stated		
Area it applies to identified		
Academic programme requirements met		
Environment and population (team/groups) it will involve identified		
Workload considerations for those involved discussed		
Ethical approval (if applicable)		
Informed consent completed (if applicable)		
GDPR requirements satisfied		
DPIA completed (if applicable)		
Data sharing agreement completed (if applicable)		
Non-disclosure agreement signed (if applicable)		
Methodology completed		
Data and technology requirements identified		
Cost, budget, and/or funding established		
Timeline and deliverables determined		
Expected outcomes named		
Implementation and support initiated		
Other		