

RIN Advisory Board

REPORT OF DISCUSSIONS AT AWAYDAY MEETING, 5-6 FEBRUARY 2008

Present:

Robert Burgess (University of Leicester) (Chair)
Michael Anderson (University of Edinburgh)
John Coggins (University of Glasgow)
Sally Curry (RIN)
John Feather (University of Loughborough)
Stéphane Goldstein (RIN)
David Ingram (University College London)
Michael Jubb (RIN Director)
Malcolm Read (JISC)
Kevin Schürer (University of Essex)
Jean Sykes (London School of Economics)
Jackie van Bueren (RIN)
David Walton (British Antarctic Survey)

Apologies

Mike Cruise (University of Birmingham)
Paul Hubbard (HEFCE)
Roger Kain (University of Exeter)
Elaine Martin (University of Newcastle)
Ed Pentz (CrossRef UK)
Lyn Pykett (University of Aberystwyth)
Anne Trefethen (University of Oxford)

Welcome and introduction

The previous awayday had taken place in the context of the preparation for the RIN review, in 2007. This has now taken place, with a broadly positive outcome. Given RIN's additional resource, the challenge now is to set the course for the next three years and to help identify priorities and set the focus on what RIN can uniquely achieve.

Session 1 – the research information landscape, overcoming barriers and promoting change

Promoting change in the information landscape may be achieved by elaborating a **long-term vision about information provision**, with strong leadership built in to achieve this. The vision might be articulated around the **free movement of knowledge** (as opposed to its protection), founded on open innovation / open research, implying the necessity of paradigm shift in the way that information is distributed – which poses fundamental questions about the current nature of the scholarly communications process, and not least the role of the publishing industry.

Developing a vision may be important, but it is subject to challenges:

- **The vision needs to be sold** – but bear in mind that a visionary approach may be futile if derived and prioritised courses of action are not identified
- Moreover, **there may be several visions**: researchers do not share the outlook of, say, funders; and researchers themselves are not a homogeneous constituency.

To what extent should the implementation of a vision follow essentially from the identification of researcher needs? These may be important, but arguably less so than those of funders, since it is they who

either provide the resources, or provide a lead in research policy. However, **even funders may need to be persuaded of the centrality of information as a significant research resource.**

RIN has started playing this role by developing an evidence base. It could usefully build on this by setting out a **prioritised research agenda**, and promoting a better understanding of the possibilities and advantages, for the UK research base, offered by a visionary, open-information agenda.

Session 2 – The impact of changes in information policies and services on research practice, productivity and performance

The practical question is what RIN can usefully influence in a 3-year lifespan – bearing in mind that it needs conclusively to demonstrate achievements in its next review. Areas such as this might be worthy of investigation:

- **Time taken to track down information and the impact that this has on researcher behaviour**
- **Discovery outside one's own discipline**
- **Accessibility** is a key issue especially for researchers working in professional environments other than the HEI sector
- **Improving researchers' information/data performance**, which is an important education / training issue
- **Networking**, inasmuch as researchers want to know not only about information, but also (and maybe even more) about what their peers are doing, in order to tap into possible sources of advice.
- **Information retrieval specialists to support research**
- **Research assessment and researcher behaviour**
- **'Infomediary' services** – there are new commercial opportunities arising because of the changing information landscape.

Session 3 – RIN audiences and interlocutors: who are we seeking to influence and involve in our work, and how do we do it?

The RIN has limited resources, but with great expectations... The potential range of audiences (and their interests) is wide; RIN cannot possibly address them all.

How does RIN reach policy-makers? How can RIN lobby effectively for a higher profile? Which policy-makers, and at what level? In principle, this type of interaction is important, but the underlying question – again – is the nature and scope of the agenda. The choice of policy makers is dependent on the nature of the agenda, and of the priorities that RIN determines.

Generally, **RIN lobbying can only be effective if there is clarity of purpose** about RIN objectives. Stakeholders are more likely to be interested if RIN can demonstrate that it can help them solve problems and address challenges – for instance, relating to maintaining UK competitive position internationally.

- Arguably, the main targets should be **RIN's own funders**. There is much scope for improved and deepened engagement with e.g. RCs and RC-funded programmes that have a significant focus on information/data.
- There is a need to think about **the Government's priorities**, and to engage with public bodies on that basis.
- Importance of **personal contact in trying to influence individuals and organisations**. Advisory Board members have a degree of engagement with heads of such organisations; they are in a good position to influence in these circumstances – but only if they are clear about RIN objectives in given areas. Mechanisms need to be put in place in order to ensure that RIN can best make use of Board members. Practical examples of how this might be done:
 - production of crib sheets;

- mapping of Board interactions (e.g. meetings at which Board members participate) with relevant bodies.

Consultative Group members could play a similar role.

- At the same time, **the RIN should not be concerned that individual researchers do not know about it.** Trying to reach out to large segments of the research community may be an impossible task even with increased resources.
- Nonetheless, some form of engagement within the research community could be secured through the allocation of a proportion of RIN funds to **open, responsive-mode competitions in broad areas of endeavour**, to allow researchers leeway in defining possible solutions to given information/data challenges.
- There is scope for fora such as Royal Society of Arts and Royal Society of Edinburgh for reaching **interdisciplinary audiences**, perhaps through discussions and focus groups tied into these organisations' events.

There is **scepticism about the value of regional university associations** as useful interlocutors – except perhaps in the context of encouraging regional collaborations in relation to specific issues such as training.

Session 4 – Improving RIN performance and taking advantage of RIN's expanded staffing structure

For the next phase of RIN's existence, **it is critically important to demonstrate delivery and impact.**

There is a need to show:

- how RIN audiences have been influenced;
- how RIN has made a difference;
- how value has been added (although it is understood that measure this is extremely difficult)
- how stakeholders can be catalysed.

This could be achieved largely by **obtaining commitment and building communities** that can be relied upon to disseminate RIN messages. RIN is competing for the attention of busy stakeholders – so there is a real challenge in **carefully identifying/targeting audiences**. The approach should be founded on helping individuals from these audiences to resolve problems and issues of concern to them, i.e. offering solutions.

What might this community-building involve in practice?

- **Need for clarity about how RIN will influence and promote change;** methodologies may be needed for this purpose, and choices need to be made about how and what to promote. In a sense, what is required is a sort of **marketing plan for each RIN initiative** with identifiable output measures
- **Importance of targeted and concise messages**, using where appropriate punchy and attractive material.
- **Importance of follow-through from RIN events**, developing relationships with individuals and organisations that take part.
- To assist with dissemination, **RIN might piggy-back its workshops and other events** onto conferences organised by others.

Whatever activity it undertakes, the **RIN needs to ensure that, in future, it adheres to its investment plans.** The perpetuation of the sort of underspends that have characterised the first three years of its activity would seriously undermine its credibility.

Performance management also becomes critical (and hugely challenging) in this context.

Session 5 – Developing the role of the Consultative Groups

How might the performance of the Consultative Groups be improved? A number of ideas were canvassed:

- devising ways of developing interaction between the four Groups;
- envisaging the Groups as a single pool of experts;
- providing incentives/rewards to Group members, perhaps through a greater formalisation of their status as contributors to an organisation with a national remit;
- tailoring the shape and scope of each group to the disciplinary cultures that they represent.

In practice, this might mean:

- Getting the Groups to meet in the context of a **single forum**, maybe once a year, on the basis of a residential meeting to encourage informal interaction and networking across disciplinary boundaries.
- At the same time, warding against the danger of creating too diffuse a structure, with insufficiently clear objectives, by **maintaining disciplinary settings** at least for some meetings.
- **Increasing the overall membership of the Groups.**
- Using the Groups as a **multidisciplinary pool** from which to recruit for RIN working groups, expert panels for projects, etc.; care would need to be taken not to over-stretch members.
- **Re-visiting the types of individuals** (to date, relatively younger researchers) recruited to the Groups.
- **Extending membership** to individuals with an industry background and to those drawn from organisations such as the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.
- **Using the Groups as a means of helping other organisations**, e.g. JISC, obtain input from segments of the research community.

If new structures are set up, care should be taken care not to lose what has worked so far with the Groups, including ownership of activities. Any new structure needs to be well thought-out, effective in delivering RIN objectives, and helpful in raising RIN's profile.