



RIN Advisory Board

NOTE OF THE TWELTH MEETING – 1 APRIL 2008

Action points in red italics

Present:

Robert Burgess (University of Leicester) (Chair)
John Coggins (University of Glasgow)
John Feather (University of Loughborough)
Stéphane Goldstein (RIN)
David Ingram (University College London)
Michael Jubb (RIN Director)
Roger Kain (University of Exeter)
Malcolm Read (JISC)
Tom Rodden (University of Nottingham)
Jennifer Rogers (HEFCE)
Jean Sykes (London School of Economics)
David Walton (British Antarctic Survey)
Nigel Weatherill (Swansea University – University of Birmingham from 1 May)
Jan Wilkinson (University of Manchester)
Jo Wood (University of Leicester)

Apologies

Michael Anderson (University of Edinburgh)
Mike Cruise (University of Birmingham)
Paul Hubbard (HEFCE)
Elaine Martin (University of Newcastle)
Ed Pentz (CrossRef UK)
Lyn Pykett (University of Aberystwyth)
Kevin Schürer (University of Essex)
Philip Steer (Imperial College)
Terry Threadgold (Cardiff University)
Anne Trefethen (University of Oxford)

On behalf of the Board, the Chair welcomed two new members of the Board, Tom Rodden and Nigel Weatherill; a welcome was also extended to Jan Wilkinson, who had joined the Board as a full member, having previously been the British Library's observer. Two additional new members, Philip Steer and Terry Threadgold, had sent their apologies.

1. Minutes of the meeting of 19 December 2007 (paper RIN/AB/08/01)

These were agreed.	
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2. Matters arising

From item 3

Interviews for the four RIN vacancies would be taking place on 9, 10, 15 and 30 April; Board members would be sitting on the interview panels for two of these posts. Shortlists of six had now been established for the first three interviews. The view of the Executive Team was that, on the basis of CVs and written applications, the quality of shortlisted candidates appeared to be high.	
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From item 5

The Board noted that RIN had produced a response to the REF consultation. This has been posted on the RIN website¹.

3. Report from awayday, 5-6 February 2007 (paper RIN/AB/08/02)

The awayday was deemed a useful and constructive event, which had given the RIN Executive Team a good basis for developing some of its strategy – in particular once new staff members are appointed.

Members commended the report from the meeting, but felt that it required editing prior to being publicised through the RIN website. Key points could also be usefully drawn out and prioritised.

It was agreed that these points should be revisited at a future Board meeting, probably in October, to check on progress in the intervening months.

Members asked to what extent international benchmarking might be valuable. The Board noted that the RIN maintained international relationships, but – owing to resource limitations – there were clear limits to this type of activity. However, there would be scope for increasing international interaction once new staff members were appointed.

■ *Stéphane Goldstein to refine the report from the awayday, upload it on the RIN website and circulate the relevant URL to members.*

■ *Executive Team to ensure that the agenda of a forthcoming Board meeting, probably October, should include an update on key awayday points.*

4. Advisory Board membership (paper RIN/AB/08/03)

The increase in the Board's membership was noted; four new members had agreed to join, and steps were currently being taken to recruit a further two. Members were reminded that their suggestions for new members would be most welcome, particularly covering areas outside the traditional realms of academia and the Research Councils.

Members noted that the Executive Team would henceforth be complying with HEFCE good practice by maintaining a register of Board members' interests and making this publicly available on the RIN website. It was intended that relevant interests should be declared by June, and that the register should be updated each June thereafter.

■ *Stéphane Goldstein to circulate a breakdown of current Board membership and to seek suggestions for possible new members.*

■ *Stéphane Goldstein to circulate reminder and deadline for registration of interests*

5. RIN Operating Plan and financial statement (paper RIN/AB/08/04)

Members' attention focused on the constraints felt by the RIN in taking forward its programme of activities, particularly owing to the performance of consultants and research groups commissioned to undertake research projects. Two major problems were highlighted:

- Poor project planning by consultants and research groups, which had led to significant over-runs on the production of reports.
- Disappointing quality of the drafting of these reports, often characterised by an insufficient ability to produce a coherent narrative (i.e. more than just an undifferentiated enumeration of facts and findings). This tended to require significant remedial efforts on the part of the Executive Team to turn the drafts into well-written and persuasive documents; this too had contributed to the over-runs. The Executive Team has regretfully concluded that such investment of time and effort had become almost inevitable, but in future would be

¹ See <http://www.rin.ac.uk/ref-consultation>

looking for more rigorous adherence to timetables and milestones.

The Board was extremely concerned about these difficulties, bearing in mind the RIN's generous funding of its projects. Members suggested that many consultants were not equipped to produce the sort of outputs that RIN had a right to expect, and were lacking in project management skills; members agreed that it would be instructive to see an instance of the sort of draft report presented to the RIN.

The RIN may have been optimistic in its expectations; members asked whether consultants were being managed sufficiently, and – in spite of fairly precise project specifications – whether there was a need for greater clarity about RIN expectations. A number of suggestions were made to help address these problems:

- The RIN should secure an even more proactive level of engagement with consultants and research groups, who might need to accept that their role would be more tightly defined within the context of given projects.
- Consultants and research groups might be asked to demonstrate more formal project management skills, for instance familiarity with PRINCE 2 methodology.
- Experts could be given a greater role in vetting the progress of projects.
- The Executive Team might consider using the services of freelance writers to improve the readability and presentation of reports – although it was acknowledged that this could be an expensive option.
- Researchers could be seconded to the RIN for periods of say three to six months, so as to allow them to become 'embedded' into given projects.

These ideas would be considered, but the Executive Team also felt that its ability to oversee projects, draft reports and present findings to varied audiences would be improved thanks to the RIN's additional staffing resources.

Members used the opportunity to ask about the extent to which the needs of audiences were being addressed as part of the commissioning of projects. It was noted that this issue was specifically addressed in paper RIN/AB/08/05 below.

With regard to the four reports that are currently nearing completion, the Board agreed that care would be needed with the scheduling of their release and dissemination.

- *Stéphane Goldstein to circulate a sample first draft of a commissioned report, along with the corresponding project specification and consultant's response.*

6. RIN research projects and their implementation (paper RIN/AB/08/05)

The Board noted the broadened nature and scope of RIN projects as defined in the proposed approach. The emphasis on considering the needs of RIN audiences and consequently the possible impact of the work was well received. Members added that evaluation of outputs could usefully be built into the design of projects. The Board agreed that the proposal should serve as the basis for future projects – even if the increased timescales implied a reduction in their number.

It was understood that the proposal posed some noteworthy challenges to the RIN:

- The definition of policy objectives at the outset; this would inevitably involve much dialogue with relevant stakeholders.
- The very careful specification and commissioning of projects, and the use of highly skilled individuals (perhaps with social science backgrounds) to undertake them.

- The production of easily digestible recommendations for key audiences, not least the RIN's own funders.

In the short term, it was agreed that the dissemination strategies suggested in the proposal should be applied to the current sequence of four nearly-completed projects. This would be a real test of the RIN's ability to disseminate its outputs, and early lessons could thereby be learnt about the commissioning of future projects.

7. Future of RIN Consultative Groups (*paper RIN/AB/08/06*)

The proposed model for the *modus operandi* of the Consultative Groups reflected the discussion at the Board awayday, and there was general agreement about this as the way forward. However, Board members felt that the success of the proposal depended largely on the identification of suitable additional individuals to serve on the Groups. These were the RIN's ambassadors, and it was therefore important that they should include a critical number of committed members. A number of questions were raised:

- Would it be useful to set the groups some challenges relating to RIN projects?
- What might be the role of champions? If this were properly defined, the RIN could derive much benefit – although incentivisation was an important issue which required some reflection. It would be worth experimenting in the first instance with one of the Groups
- Is there a role with regard to the Groups for recently retired individuals?

There was some concern about the practicality of bringing together the Groups into a single forum. This could be very valuable, but its usefulness would be undermined if a motivating agenda were not set out to engage the interest of participants. The Board concluded that an initial joint meeting of the Groups should be organised on an experimental basis, reflecting Group members' interests on the agenda.

8. Update on UK Research Data Service feasibility study

Jean Sykes updated the Board on progress with this initiative. John Milner had now been appointed as project manager and SERCO as consultants to undertake the study. A project initiation meeting had taken place on 10 March, at which the project plan was approved. The study website had been set up. The steering committee (including no fewer than four Advisory Board members) held its first meeting on 18 March.

It was emphasised that any national data management framework that emerged from the study would build on rather than replace existing good practice.

- *Jean Sykes to circulate information about progress to date.*

9. Other business

There was none.

Next meeting: Wednesday 25 June 2008