

Researchers and freedom of information – a workshop

9 September 2008, London



SUMMARY REPORT

1. FoI legislation clearly offers opportunities to some research communities, such as historians, to engage in new kinds of research in novel ways. However, this implies adapting research methodologies and learning about how to make best use of FoI. This has become an important resource, but requires some skill to take advantage of it – and a degree of persistence where requests for information are initially declined. At the same time, expectations also have to be managed, and there is a need for pragmatism about what information can and can't be realistically obtained.
2. There was a general view on the day about the lack of awareness regarding the potential of FoI as a research tool, and there remains a degree of lethargy about researchers' approach to the legislation; many of them do not see its relevance and some are also put off by the length of time and bureaucracy involved, and the limited returns. But is this because requests are not framed properly in the first instance? This question reinforces the view about the need for training in order to get the most out of FoI, and to manage expectations. Lessons could be learnt from journalists, who have acquired confidence about using FoI in recent years. Participants reflected on whether research institutions might employ experts who could provide advice/training to researchers. The meeting was reminded that there are FoI officers in post in universities, but by and large they are probably not used for this advisory purpose.
3. At the same time, it was recognised that FoI should not necessarily be the default approach to obtaining information. It may be more helpful to envisage it as a means of complementing information already obtained from elsewhere, to plug gaps through the use of focused and well thought-out enquiries.
4. One interesting issue raised at the meeting was the potential impact of blogging on the scale of FoI requests. At the moment, in the UK, there are 100,000 FoI requests a year. Might this not increase hugely if bloggers start to become aware of the potential represented by FoI?
5. At the end of the day, workshop participants indicated that they were now better informed and had a broader understanding of the usefulness but also the limitations of FoI. Some indicated that they would make more use of FoI, or help to raise awareness of it. There was a realisation that the legislation is more than just for journalists.
6. The RIN is interested in taking forward the ideas raised at the workshop. This could be done by talking to organisations involved in researcher training (funders, universities, etc) so as to encourage them to better equip researchers to make good use of FoI. Further workshops such as this, conceivably in other parts of the country, could form part of a learning programme. The keynote speaker at the event, Professor Duncan Tanner (Welsh Institute for Social and Cultural Affairs, Bangor University) is in the early stages of drafting a handbook on how to make best use of FoI. Although this will be largely geared to historians, it could have applicability in other scholarly areas; it is not due for release until the beginning of the 2009-10 academic year, but when it comes out, RIN could envisage promoting its dissemination.

Further information about this event and a short podcast with interviews from the key speakers available at: www.rin.ac.uk/foi-workshop