



RIN Consultative Group for Life Sciences and Medicine NOTE FROM THE FIFTH MEETING – 11 DECEMBER 2007

Action points in italics

Present:

John Coggins (Chair) (University of Glasgow)
Stéphane Goldstein (RIN)
Kevin Hiom (MRC Lab of Molecular Biology)
Michael Jubb (RIN)
Howard Meltzer (University of Leicester)
Oliver de Peyer (MRC National Institute for Medical Research)
David Shotton (University of Oxford)
Vince Smith (Natural History Museum)

Apologies:

George Banting (University of Bristol)
Emily Quinton (University of Birmingham)
Nicola Seare (Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Rutland Strategic Health Authority)
Patricia Spoor (University of Leeds)

1. Minutes of the meeting of 19 September 2007 and welcome (*paper RIN/LSM/07/14*)

The minutes were approved.

2. Matters arising

There were none.

3. Taking forward issues raised at the RIN workshop with life sciences and medicine learned societies, 11 December (*oral*)

The Group considered the discussion at the [RIN workshop](#) held earlier on the same day with representatives from a dozen learned societies or learned society publishers in the life/biomedical sciences. This had also been attended by four members of the Consultative Group.

The Group highlighted four broad areas from the workshop.

Publication

There was much discussion about the **author-side payment model** of open access. Conversely, the ‘green’ open access model (i.e. deposit in a freely-accessible repository) did not receive much attention, in spite of the momentum within HEIs at the moment towards the development of repositories. Group members were concerned that developments are being driven largely by financial considerations, not least the RAE, rather than scientific imperatives.

Given the centrality of **peer review** in the publication process, members reflected on the nature and pertinence of such review in a Web 2.0 world characterised by open

commentary, online social networking and powerful search engines; are these approaches not novel forms of peer review, some of them (e.g. Nature Preprints) developed by publishers themselves? However, it was well understood that the conventional publisher view, reflecting the status quo, is that value is added through processes of selection, validation and recording managed by journals.

It was agreed that there is much tension between proponents of this status quo (including those who nevertheless recognise that it needs to be improved) and those who feel that the web offers opportunities, in the longer term, for a radical departure in the way that research is evaluated and accessed. It was recognised that, in the short term, the major players, including most learned societies, are not ready to make such departures. Members agreed that, realistically, there is little prospect in the next ten years of moving away fundamentally from a conventionally accepted peer review methodology. At present, institutional and funding constraints, research assessment models, as well as inertia, act as obstacles to significant change. The challenge is to recognise these constraints, whilst at the same time preparing the ground, persuasively for a more open environment.

Members reflected on the role of services such as Google acting as a front end for helping to identify and access research results.

Research data

Much of the Group's discussion focused on the **legal and ethical constraints** associated with clinical research data – although it was understood that clinical data represents only one part of the biomedical data landscape. There is a possible role for RIN to investigate these constraints, to shed light on a confusing environment and highlight the problems that these constraints can cause to researchers – for instance, those undertaking longitudinal studies that rely on obtaining personal data that might require retrospective consent. Another type of challenge applies to the setting up large-scale clinical data infrastructures geared to practitioners, but where the possible needs of researchers have not been properly considered.

Could there be an RIN scoping project to evaluate the nature and scale of such problems? Is there scope for RIN to use the services of high-level players such as John Bell and Les Borysiewicz to bring the issues to the fore? At a more basic level, does RIN have a role with regard to building bridges between relevant stakeholders? Members considered whether the challenge represented by such questions might justify the setting up of a separate Consultative Group covering clinical research.

Members highlighted other relevant concerns:

- the semantic linkage between journal articles and underlying data;

- *RIN Executive Team to consider including in its works programme a scoping study on evaluating the constraints faced by researchers requiring access to clinical data.*

- metadata standards: even within the clinical area, data is heterogeneous, and communities have very different needs and approaches; the structure of metadata reflects this. There is a challenge in moving from informal tagging to more formal taxonomic systems.

Access

There is scope for seeking to understand what access learned societies can or cannot provide to their members. The Group felt that, in all likelihood, there is a large unmet need, especially for those working outside the HE sector – RIN might usefully undertake a study in this area. Moreover, provision and procurement of access is extremely fragmented, and therefore inefficient. Universal national licences, as in Iceland, might be an ideal to aspire to, but how realistic is this in a country the size of the UK?

Training

Members felt that training and access are sometimes linked, inasmuch as teaching requires access to resources which may not always be available.

Members suggested that information tools (e.g. Google) should be so intuitive that little or no training is required. However, there is a distinction between training for specific tools, and training about principles and good practice relating to information and data management. The research environment is also a factor: some researchers have more access to support (including peer support and advice) than others, who may for instance be more isolated.

- ***RIN Executive Team to consider including in its works programme a study on unmet access needs for researchers working outside the context of HE, for instance in the NHS, or at the interface between HE and the NHS.***

4. Research Excellence Framework (*paper RIN/LSM/07/15*)

The Group noted RIN's scepticism about an assessment approach that is based largely on bibliometrics of a specific kind, and pays little heed to newer approaches to research outputs. Thus the underlying assumption of the REF appears to be that scholarly communication would stay essentially as it is now.

As an example, members raised concerns about instances, in areas characterised by papers with a long half-life, where citations may not be forthcoming until a while after publication. The Group's general view that the REF takes a short-term approach and that this could be unhelpful. Moreover, the proposed system, as with the RAE, is also based on a 'sudden death' selection of those staff whose output would be appraised.

- ***All to consult colleagues and comment further on the REF proposals.***

5. Researchers and libraries (*paper RIN/LSM/07/16*)

Members noted that the RIN is taking forward the conclusions of its report on researchers' use of library services through its new working group.

Members wondered whether subject librarians have the

expertise to keep up with complex developments within their field in a way that is useful for researchers. Is this really a role suited to them? Generic information knowledge about information methodologies, for instance, may be more important than in-depth knowledge about given fields.

Researchers often have the impression that libraries are anonymous and remote. This matters little to the extent that some services, such as online subscriptions, are well provided remotely, but the increasing complexity of information issues may require a more personalised service in future.

Members noted the point about exposing metadata to generic discovery services; this suggests a clear responsibility for researchers in relation to metadata design.

6. Other business

There was none.

Date of next meeting: date in April to be confirmed.