

Research Information Network CONSULTATIVE GROUP FOR LIFE SCIENCES AND MEDICINE

NOTE FROM THE FIRST MEETING – 20 MARCH 2006

Action points in red italics

Present:

John Coggins (University of Glasgow) (Chair)
Mary Dixon-Woods (University of Leicester)
Stéphane Goldstein (Research Information Network)
Kevin Hioms (MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology)
Michael Jubb (Research Information Network)
Oliver de Peyer (MRC National Institute for Medical Research)
Emily Quinton (University of Birmingham)
David Shotton (University of Oxford)
Patricia Spoor (University of Leeds)
Jackie Van Bueren (Research Information Network)

Apologies

George Banting (University of Bristol)
Stephen Kennedy (University of Oxford)
Nichola Seare (Leicestershire, Northamptonshire & Rutland Strategic Health Authority)
Vince Smith (Natural History Museum)

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed members to this inaugural meeting of the Group and noted the good cross-cutting spread of its membership; he suggested that there are gaps in coverage that could usefully be filled – see discussion below.

2. Nature and role of Consultative Groups (*paper RIN/LBM/06/01*) RIN Strategic Plan (*paper RIN/LBM/06/02*) (dealt with as single item)

General: Michael Jubb provided some background about the RIN and its mission. He emphasised the significant role of the Consultative Groups in helping the RIN to engage with the research community at a strategic level, thereby allow for a two-way flow of ideas. Members were advised that the RIN has earmarked about £200k from its budget, for the year 2006-07, for ideas and initiatives emanating from all four Groups.

The Chair pointed to the challenge of operating in an international environment. The RIN would also need to think strategically over the long-term, being proactive in relevant areas rather than simply reacting to technological change. The multidisciplinary nature of the RIN's agenda demonstrated the importance of interaction between the four Groups.

Group membership: in the light of gaps in coverage in the Group's current membership, members were invited to suggest how this might be expanded. Representation from the following areas was proposed:

- ▶ large projects with complex, long-term data requirements and involving important ethical/legal/societal issues, e.g. the

▶ *All to nominate potential additional Group members in the light of the suggested areas of coverage.*

<p>e-Diamond project (digital mammography), the Virtual Organisations for Trials and Epidemiological Studies (VOTES) or the UK Biobank;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ the European Bioinformatics Institute (EBI) – with which the RIN has already had some contact; ▶ a further individual with a clinical background; ▶ the Office of National Statistics or some other major collector of data – although it was acknowledged that this might be more appropriate for the LIS Consultative Group; ▶ a further PhD student, to reflect the views and aspirations of up and coming researchers; ▶ a representative from the publishing industry. <p>In addition, the Joint Internet-Based Sources (JIBS) User Group was suggested as an organisation that Consultative Groups could usefully interface with.</p>	<p>▶ <i>Oliver de Peyer to approach the JIBS User Group on behalf of RIN with a view to establishing links.</i></p>
<p><u>RIN web presence</u>: members were invited to reflect on the way in which the RIN’s web presence might be developed as an interactive tool for fostering dialogue with researchers. Examples of approaches might include articles inviting a response, news and views, and providing a space for ‘bridging the gap’. There was some discussion about whether the website could develop a portal function, or piggy-back on the portal of another organisation; it was acknowledged that developing a portal could be risky and counter-productive if it was not well-designed or properly-managed.</p>	<p>▶ <i>All to suggest practical ideas about developing the RIN website as a two-way communication tool.</i></p>
<p><u>Discovery and access issues</u>: the discussion on the web presence prompted members to consider researchers’ different approaches and behaviour in relation to searching. As an example, the relatively selective needs of fundamental biologists were contrasted with those of epidemiologists, for whom the requirements of systematic reviews imply the discovery/identification of all sources of information/data. The extent to which researchers use or by-pass library services also varies according to discipline, although many use such services off-site and unwittingly. This raises questions such as the future role of librarians, the challenges of metadata management and, more fundamentally, the extent to which researchers (especially those in emerging areas) are well supported by the information infrastructure.</p> <p>The Group considered what the RIN might do to help address such questions. An important role might be to offer guidance or incentives to researchers in order to enable them – with minimal difficulty – to acquire the skills necessary for activities such as structuring their data and/or metadata; this would be in their own interest as well as to comply with the requirement of longer-term data management. It was noted that this relates directly to the RIN’s involvement in developing principles on managing and providing access to digital data (see paper RIN/LMB/06/05).</p>	

3. Director's report (*paper RIN/LBM/06/03*)

Michael Jubb gave an overview of current RIN activity. The Group noted in particular the RIN's engagement with the initiative to develop a better understanding of the scholarly communications process, and on that basis to encourage a better interaction between key stakeholders such as researchers and publishers.

More generally, members took note of Vince Smith's remarks, in his email circulated to the Group, that the RIN would need to focus its activities to avoid the danger of spreading itself too thinly across its very broad remit. It was agreed that the Consultative Groups should help by guiding the RIN about prioritisation.

- ▶ *All to suggest the names of researchers who might be invited to join the RIN-sponsored and newly-established scholarly communications group.*

4. BioImageWeb proposal (*paper RIN/LBM/06/04*)

David Shotton provided some background to this new initiative, based on the concept of a data web and harnessing the potential of intelligent searching through the semantic web. In the biological sciences, images are characterised by their highly distributed nature (across publications, repositories and private collections) and a relative lack of integration of resources. This provides a strong rationale for BioImageWeb, which seeks to harvest metadata deposited on relevant websites and to map them against a central ontology – images are not self-describing, so metadata (or the context provided by any publications in which the images appear) are particularly important. It was noted that this model does not infringe publishers' rights, since they need provide nothing more than metadata.

The proposal had been discussed earlier in the day at an informal steering group meeting which included publishers and had met with an enthusiastic response.

The timing of the proposal in relation to the first meeting of the Consultative Group was coincidental, and the RIN executive team had used the opportunity to highlight BioImageWeb as an example of the sort of initiative that the Group might wish to support in some way – bearing in mind its relevance to RIN's mission.

The Group agreed that, in principle, BioImageWeb is an interesting initiative that relates to the RIN's remit. However, irrespective of the merits of this particular project, some members expressed concern about the process for evaluating whether proposals should receive RIN financial support. Questions were asked about the protocols for reviewing ideas and proposals; how different proposals might be compared; how Consultative Groups are expected to prioritise between proposals; and the transparency of the process for allocating any funding.

The importance of clarifying the RIN process for supporting such initiatives was noted. However, members were reminded that Consultative Groups have advisory rather than budgetary powers, and that the RIN Director earmarks yearly funds for Group-initiated ideas on a discretionary basis. Accountability and transparency are provided by the Funders' Group, which approves the overall RIN budget and business plan (including the broad

- ▶ *David Shotton to submit to RIN a request for supporting specific and appropriate aspects of the BioImageWeb proposal.*
- ▶ *Stéphane Goldstein to insert into the Consultative Groups' ToR a short statement setting out the principles dictating the use of funds earmarked to the Group.*
- ▶ *John Coggins to report on the Group's views to the next Advisory Board meeting.*

programmes of work), and by the Advisory Board, which oversees the implementation of RIN strategy. Within these parameters, the RIN's memorandum of understanding allows the Director some leeway in determining the resource allocation to RIN strands of activity. Two other points were highlighted:

- ▶ RIN resourcing for the Groups is too small to provide core funding for projects; its more likely purpose would be to support networking or interaction – sometimes associated with research projects – for instance meetings or workshops; any support to BioImageWeb would conceivably be in this vein and would reflect the RIN's co-ordinatory role.
- ▶ Although small, such targeted support could have an influence in moving forward the overall research information agenda.

In the light of this discussion, members agreed to consider specific requests for support for BioImageWeb, on the understanding that this is made to form part of a clear but lightweight process for considering all such proposals.

5. Digital content (*paper RIN/LBM/06/05*)

Digitisation: to date, digitisation of research resources had been characterised by a 'systematic scattershot' approach. Group members noted that there is now a need for the formulation of strategic priorities for future investment – i.e. setting out a framework for identifying areas where there is a genuine demand for digitisation. This presupposes the elaboration of criteria to help determine these priorities. What might such criteria be in the life sciences? The Group did not have any answers, but agreed that there is a real challenge in achieving a balance between what does and does not need to be preserved digitally; part of the challenge lies in predicting what material might be useful in future – including material which, at present, is considered to be of little value.

It was understood that digitisation applies to images of objects (e.g. collections of microscope slides) as well as documents.

Digital data: there was no time to discuss this issue. Members were invited to comment on the first draft of the principles on managing and providing access to digital data.

▶ *All to comment on the draft principles by 13 April.*

7. Other business

There was none.

Next meeting: 27 June 2006, at 14:00 (lunch at 13:15) – School of Oriental and African Studies