

## The Research Information Network: genesis, strategy and role

The Research Information Network (RIN) is a new organization that aims to serve the research community in the UK by leading and co-ordinating the provision of enhanced research information services. This paper sets out how the RIN came into being, how it is organized and funded, and the mission and role that have been given to it by its sponsors: the UK higher education funding councils, the research councils, the British Library, and the national libraries of Scotland and Wales. The essential task for the RIN is to work with the key stakeholders in the research and information communities to meet the challenges of building a more effective, sustainable, and continually developing information infrastructure that meets the needs of researchers. The paper outlines the RIN's key strategic aims, and how it intends to meet the challenges that have been set for it.



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The Research Information Network (RIN) is a new organization set up to lead and co-ordinate the provision of research information in the UK. Its ambition is to serve the research community by helping to cut paths through the ever-growing and increasingly complex mass of information that underpins the work of all researchers.

The establishment of the RIN stems from the central recommendation of the *Research Support Libraries Group (RSLG) Final Report*,<sup>1</sup> published early in 2003. The RSLG was made up of senior representatives of the research community and of information providers, and was chaired by Sir Brian Follett, the former Vice Chancellor of the University of Warwick. It found that while the existing providers of research information often worked in loose collaboration, they lacked the unified and strategic leadership required to pull together a national framework to meet the information needs of researchers. It therefore recommended that a new body – which it termed the Research Libraries Network – should be created to develop, prioritize and lead a UK-wide strategy for the provision of research information.

The RSLG stressed that the new organization should work alongside existing bodies – including the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), the major research libraries, data centres and others – and that its success would depend on securing the co-operation of such bodies. There was some discussion after the RSLG report had

been published as to the precise configuration of the new organization, and its relationships with existing providers. Hence it was only in Summer 2004 that the sponsors of the RSLG – the four UK higher education funding councils, the British Library (BL) and the national libraries of Scotland (NLS) and Wales (NLW) – reached agreement to set up what is now called the RIN for an initial three-year period. At the same time, perhaps belatedly, they approached the UK research councils, which agreed to participate in sponsoring the RIN. Following on from those agreements, in February 2005 I took up post as the RIN's founding Director.

### Constitution

Constitutionally, the RIN is a rather strange beast. Since it has no independent legal status, it depends on the BL to act as its banker and to employ its three members of staff, as well as providing accommodation in St Pancras. But while we are physically based in the BL, we are not part of the BL structure. Rather, the RIN is answerable primarily to two bodies. First, there is a Funders' Group, comprising representatives of each of the higher education funding councils; of the BL, NLS and NLW; and two representatives of the research councils. The Funders' Group is chaired by Sir Howard Newby, as Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE),

and it provides a line of accountability back to all the bodies that are funding the RIN. The second body is the RIN Advisory Board, which is chaired by Professor Robert Burgess, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Leicester, who was a member of the RSLG. The Board consists currently of fifteen members, ten of whom are drawn from various sectors of the research community, and five from the library and information community. The role of the Board is to advise on and to review the development of the RIN's strategy and workplans, within an overall framework of objectives and budgets set by the Funders' Group.

### Mission

The RIN mission as determined by its funders is to:

*lead and co-ordinate new developments in the collaborative provision of research information for the benefit of researchers in the UK.*

Its core concern is thus to lead the development of a hybrid and distributed national research collection, making it available to as wide a range of professional researchers as possible. It will seek – in partnership with other bodies – to develop a sustainable world-class research information infrastructure for the UK. In seeking to fulfil its mission, of course, the RIN will be operating in a complex landscape, where a number of providers are already doing high-quality work; and its role will be to co-ordinate and to provide leadership, complementing and adding value to the work of others, and avoiding duplication.

The RIN thus faces three critical and interrelated challenges in its initial period of existence:

- first, to deliver – in partnership with key stakeholders – a programme of work that will make a visible difference to the research and the information communities
- second, to secure a recognized place in those communities as a leader and co-ordinator of strategy and activity
- third, to gain acceptance as an authoritative voice in speaking to and on behalf of those communities.

A strategic plan has been developed to meet those challenges. It is available on the RIN web site ([www.rin.ac.uk](http://www.rin.ac.uk)) and has been widely circulated.

### Scope of activity

The domain across which the RIN will operate covers all disciplines and subjects, from the physical and life sciences to the social sciences, the arts and humanities. It also covers the professional research community not only in higher education, but in a range of other sectors. Researchers across this domain operate in different ways, with different sets of information resources.

The RIN also seeks to cover the interests of researchers both as producers and as users of information. Serials in general, and learned journals in particular, constitute an important part of the information within the RIN's domain. But both the nature of serials, and their role in the conduct and communication of research, vary significantly across different parts of the research community. Thus the full range of information sources, providers and types with which the RIN is concerned includes, in addition to serials, published books (monographs and much else besides); manuscripts; museum collections; grey literature; sounds and images; and datasets produced and held in a wide range of formats by researchers and many other individuals and organizations. Bodies involved in producing, collecting and making this material available extend across the UK and overseas and include – in addition to researchers themselves – libraries, archives, data centres, publishers, and other organizations both public and private.

It is also important to stress that the RIN is concerned with information in both digital and non-digital forms. In many areas of science and engineering most researchers now work almost wholly with digital information. But for researchers in the humanities and many of the social sciences, that is not yet generally the case. For while the range and usage of digital information sources needed for research is increasing rapidly, the volume and complexity of the resources that remain in non-digital form means that researchers will for the foreseeable future operate in a hybrid digital and non-digital world. Moreover, even in the sciences and engineering a significant proportion of researchers are reluctant wholly to abandon the use of hard copy. Hence the RIN must pay close attention to the needs of researchers operating with both digital and non-digital sources, and the complex interactions and changing balance between them.

## Resources and partnerships

The RIN has a budget of just under £1million for each of the initial three years of its existence. Given that level of resourcing and the breadth of the RIN's domain, there is an obvious need to establish clear priorities. And in line with the original RSLG vision it is critically important also that the RIN should work in partnership with key stakeholders, and secure their engagement and some of their resource in pursuit of shared strategic goals. The RIN is thus seeking to establish effective working relationships with bodies such as the JISC, the Consortium of Research Libraries (CURL), the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL), the Publishers Association and others in the information world. But for many purposes the key stakeholders and potential partners are in the research community, and so the RIN will be working with key learned societies and other representative bodies as well as with the research councils to seek their active engagement in its work. Indeed, one key test for the RIN will be the extent to which it can build better connections between the range of information providers on the one hand, and of research communities on the other.

## Strategy

The Funders' Group and the Advisory Board have approved a strategic plan that sets a framework for the RIN's activities for the three years 2005–2008. The plan builds on the vision set out in the RSLG report as well as taking account of significant developments since its publication and of the agreements between the funders. It is to be expected, of course, that in what is a rapidly changing world the plan will develop further, not least in the light of the results of early work that the RIN itself undertakes. But the plan provides an important early statement of the priority areas in which the RIN intends to be active.

The plan is structured around six strategic aims.

**1. To develop, with the active involvement of key stakeholders, a strategic framework for enhancing the UK research information infrastructure.** The prime purpose of the RIN is to give the strategic leadership required to establish a national framework for research information provision. Early work here is to establish the RIN's

structures and programme of work, and its relationships with key stakeholder bodies. On the basis of the initial work the RIN undertakes, the aim is to produce an initial draft of a strategic framework in 2007.

**2. To ensure that the research community contributes to and collaborates in a programme of action tailored to its needs.** The RIN will work with key learned societies and related bodies to ensure that members of the research community are alerted to key issues and are actively engaged in the development of information services and strategy. Early work here will be to establish a series of consultative groups and to review and commission user studies to provide a better understanding of how services might be developed constructively to meet the needs of researchers in a variety of subjects and disciplines.

**3. To act as an advocate for research information provision at the highest levels of policy-making in the UK, and to represent the interests of UK researchers in relevant international forums.** The RIN will seek to stimulate greater recognition from Government at all levels, from the higher education funding bodies, and from institutions across the HE and research sectors, of the need for enhanced information services. Such recognition is a key requirement in developing strategies and the infrastructure to support the activities of the UK research base. The RIN will also seek with a strong voice to represent the interests of UK researchers in discussions and decision-making in key international bodies in Europe and elsewhere.

**4. To co-ordinate action to improve the arrangements for researchers to find information sources relevant to their work, and how they may gain access to them.** Over recent years, publishers, libraries and others have made great strides in improving the finding aids for research resources, and access to them over the Internet. But evidence suggests that researchers give very high priority to the need for further improvement in discovery and access services. The RIN will with others undertake and commission work that seeks to:

- extend the range of resources covered by key catalogues and other finding aids;

- enhance quality control and user-friendliness of the materials presented to users through such finding aids, and the associated metadata;
- improve the connectivity between currently separate catalogues and services; and
- move towards integrated discovery and access services, enabling users not only to find the resources they need, but to gain access or submit online orders for them.

**5. To lead the development of a programme to sustain and enhance management and development of the aggregate UK collection of published hard copy research resources.** The UK's distributed collection of printed books and serials, and of other research resources such as archival and museum collections, is among the richest in the world. And it will continue to grow for many years to come. The RIN will with others undertake and commission work that seeks to:

- ensure that researchers from all parts of the UK have user-friendly access to the national distributed collection, irrespective of where individual items are held;
- improve the management, storage and development of the UK distributed collection, and facilitate more systematic collaboration between libraries; and
- ensure that, so far as possible, at least one copy of the most significant information resources needed to support the activities of UK researchers is available somewhere in the UK.

**6. To co-ordinate action to ensure that the outputs researchers produce and need are retained and made available for use in the most effective way.** As the information outputs produced by researchers continue to grow in volume and complexity, we need to ensure that important material is preserved and made available for use by other researchers. The RIN will seek in collaboration with others, including the major funders of research, to ensure that:

- as much relevant material as possible is made available to researchers through sustainable stores;
- published and unpublished material from different sources is made available interoperably, with as few restrictions as possible on accessibility; and

- material is properly authenticated and quality-assured, and made secure from unauthorized change.

## Conclusion

The essential task for the RIN is to work with the key stakeholders in the research and the information communities to meet the challenges of building a more effective, sustainable, and continually developing information infrastructure that meets the needs of researchers. The challenges are increasing in scale and scope as the volumes of research, and of the information produced and needed by researchers, continue to grow. Building and providing access to a hybrid intellectual infrastructure covering the full range of resources and to meet so many different requirements is not straightforward. Not the least of the challenges is that the needs of researchers in different subjects and disciplines vary so greatly, though they are typically not well articulated. Indeed, as both research activity and information services continue to develop and change, it is not clear what some of the essential features of the intellectual infrastructure of different disciplines and subjects will look like in a few years' time. The RIN will have succeeded if it helps to bring greater clarity to such key issues as how we manage and preserve the outputs that researchers produce; how we provide assurance as to the quality and standards of the different kinds of information resources that researchers seek and find; how we describe and identify such resources; and how and on what terms we provide access to them. If it succeeds in this, the RIN will have made an important contribution towards establishing the kind of sustainable and effective information infrastructure that UK researchers need and deserve.

## Reference

1. *Research Support Libraries Group Final Report.*  
Available at: <http://www.rslg.ac.uk/final/final.pdf>

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