RDA Ireland SPOTLIGHT:
HEALTH RESEARCH BOARD

"The current HRB Strategy (2016–2020) has a mission 'to improve people's health and enhance healthcare delivery.' The overall aim is to support excellent research and generate relevant knowledge, and to promote its application in policy and practice."

Interview with
DR. PATRICIA CLARKE
Programme Manager—Policy and EU Funding

HRB An Bord Taighde Sláinte Health Research Board
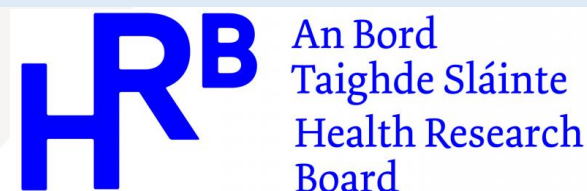
Commitment to good research data management and Open Science

The HRB is the lead funding agency in Ireland for health research and is a statutory body under the Irish Department of Health. The HRB strategy commits to building a strong, enabling environment for health research in Ireland, and to providing leadership to shape the review, conduct and governance of research. The HRB is committed to ensuring that its funded research is open, accessible and usable, so it can have the greatest possible impact. The Open Science umbrella encompasses a wide range of activities however a key immediate focus for the HRB is on research data management and sharing. Data sharing also holds the potential to help reduce avoidable duplication and waste – helping to enable HRB research funds to be allocated effectively and efficiently.

Advocating for a national coordinated approach to Open Science

The HRB has approached the open science agenda from two directions, the development of policy and the development of practical implementation steps. The HRB already mandates open access for peer reviewed publications resulting from its funded research. A new HRB data management and sharing policy will be in place from 1 January 2020. The HRB advocates for a national coordinated approach to open science through consensus building amongst different stakeholders via the National Open Research Forum (NORF). We are involved in discussions on a new National Health Information strategy with the Health Department, and have taken on a new national remit linked to data protection. The HRB has focused on delivering key practical initiatives in partnership with leading experts to support our research community and to develop our own approach as a Funder. These initiatives have provided us with a mechanism to wrap around discussions on how to change practices and cultures within our research system. For example, the HRB has developed an open publishing platform in partnership with F1000. The HRB Open Research (www.hrbopenresearch.org) platform provides a completely open post-publication peer review process, immediate and transparent publication, quick timelines, and open data policies. It is easy to use for HRB grant holders as costs are paid centrally by the HRB, F1000 provide an outreach and support service, and the platform provides a range of supporting polices and tools.

A second example is that of the HRB partnership with the International GoFAIR Office where we have worked to develop common FAIR data stewardship skills and networking amongst key support staff within Irish research institutions, provided access to tools to aid their work on data management with HRB funded researchers, and in 2020 we will run an international panel to review data management planning (DMPs) and their costings elicited under a pilot project. A third example is that of new HRB Funding calls. In 2019 we issued funding calls on secondary analysis of data, and for a Proof of Concept call for a national data linkage infrastructure.

The Challenge

There is a growing international and national recognition of the crucial importance of enabling quality FAIR research data however the speed and complexity of change is daunting and all stakeholders in the research workflow have a role to play. The RDM/ Open Science agenda needs to be considered as a serious investment in infrastructure and people within a long-term business planning process. Systems and support services need to be in place to build a radical change of culture and mind-set in the research community and among key stakeholders. Irish researchers need to have appropriate skills and competences to practice Open Science. Equally, institutions and Funders need to develop skills to support open science that will extend beyond the traditional research supports and disciplinary boundaries to include libraries, IT, information specialists, data stewards, legal experts and others.

Sharing lessons learnt

In July 2019 Ireland published a National Framework articulating a common understanding from different perspectives on transitioning to an open science environment. The HRB played a key role here in co-chairing this national process which combined the activities of working groups over the previous two years. Leadership is crucial to deliver open science and experience elsewhere has shown the benefits of appointing a national coordinator for Open Science to drive the development of national plans and the approach towards aligning of policy agendas across Member States.

Contributing to the open research environment in Ireland and Europe

The HRB will continue to co-chair the National Open Research Forum as it works to develop a national action plan for open science in Ireland. In 2020 we will publish our new data policy, revise our open access policy, and as a San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) signatory we plan to develop our approach to research assessment. We are involved in discussions with a growing range of partners to enhance our efforts in enabling FAIR data practices and in open publishing and hope to give more attention in 2020 to open DMP publishing, developing machine actionable DMPs, and participating in a national mandate for ORCID use.

The HRB is linked into international discussions through membership of Science Europe, by representing Ireland on the Health Programme Committee for the EU Horizon 2020 Framework Programme, by delivering the National Point of Reference (NPR) to scientific information role for Ireland, and within the Go FAIR initiative. We will continue to work bilaterally with other like-minded Funding Agencies and nationally we are keen to participate in a Member States network of open science coordination.