19 May 2022

Dear ███████

Freedom of Information request: FOI2022/00147

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on the 19 April in which you requested the following:

Your request:

Please refer to the following news item, a helpful briefing note, published by UKRI:

https://www.ukri.org/news/ukri-update-on-researchfish/

There is an aspect of this matter which is not covered therein, namely how it came about that your organisation decided to link up with Researchfish and Interfolio.

I should be grateful if you would supply me history of this relationship starting with the original genesis of the arrangement - presumably a thread of internal emails and notes of discussions - and continuing to the present time or at least up to the time the relationship became the subject of public comment/controversy.

Our response

An overview of the history between UKRI and Researchfish has previously been published into the public domain in the Kings College London November 2015 report, which was commissioned by Researchfish, and can be accessed here[1]. Pages 16 to 19 of the report details how Researchfish was formed, and the preceding work that was involved in its creation. As this report requires a specific web browser plug-in to access, I have extracted and updated the relevant information for ease of reference below.

To clarify, UKRI has a customer/supplier contractual agreement with Researchfish, and therefore the following information is provided in this context.

The precursor of Researchfish was a tool developed between 2006 and 2008 by researchers at RAND Europe on behalf of the charity Arthritis Research Campaign (ARC), now Versus Arthritis. ARC wanted to 'develop a new survey system that would provide an overview of the impacts of research ARC funded through an information gathering tool (survey instrument) that would be quick and easy for researchers to complete'. As part of this work a set of ideal characteristics that the tool should aim to fulfil were identified. The tool first became operational in April 2008 using Selectsurvey and was named the Research Assessment Impact Scoring System (RAISS).

During the course of the ARC project, the MRC identified a need to improve the evidence of progress across its portfolio. The MRC was in the process of setting up a new evaluation programme to provide a focus for gathering, understanding and communicating research progress, productivity and quality.

At that time, the MRC largely relied upon researchers volunteering details of achievements arising from MRC funded work each year, a process which identified a few hundred reports, mostly research publications, and clearly could not do justice to the impact of MRC funded work.

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[1] chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://s3.amazonaws.com/rf-downloads/Kings+College+Report.pdf

The MRC was made aware of the RAISS tool and engaged RAND Europe as consultants to the MRC evaluation programme. However, the RAISS tool only scored the presence or absence of output types and the MRC was interested in capturing explanatory qualitative details of research output as well as quantitative evidence. The MRC built on the structure of the RAISS tool and developed the questions to indicate how particular outputs had led to outcomes and impacts. It was decided that the new online, systematic, structured and prospective approach would replace MRC final grant report process and the annual achievement collection exercise. MRC wanted to move away from a narrative, snapshot view of progress at the end of a grant with a biased selection of achievements, towards researchers providing quick structured feedback throughout the lifetime of the grant and after completion. This long-term follow up was considered important to capture the way that outcomes and impacts develop.

The first version of the online survey, the 'Outputs Data Gathering Tool' (ODGT), was piloted in 2008. The survey used the Achieve Forms product supported by Firmstep Ltd., which was already licensed to the MRC for occasional web-based stakeholder surveys. MRC soon found that it lacked the infrastructure to scale the hosting of this process and so Firmstep Ltd. was engaged to develop the survey further based on the ODGT pilot and to provide hosting and technical support. The result was MRC E-Val which successfully supported data gathering exercises between 2009 and 2011. Other funding agencies took an interest in the MRC approach, with the Chief Scientist Office in Scotland and the Science and Technologies Facilities Council (STFC) also implementing their own versions of MRC E-Val, followed by the Wellcome Trust adapting the approach to collect details from their grant holders.

In 2011, Firmstep Ltd proposed to make E-Val into a 'federated' system whereby research funders could subscribe to the platform into which principal investigators would provide research output and outcome data once, and that data could then be attributed, or 'federated', to different research funders. The MRC saw the value in such a system to address the risk that an increasing number of diverging, separate implementations of E-Val, would multiply the burden placed on researchers and to also to open up the possibility of national and international cross funder analysis of output. Firmstep established a new company called Researchfish Ltd in October 2011 to concentrate on the further development of E-Val. The MRC licensed the question set it had developed to Researchfish Ltd. to provide it the freedom to do this.

Since the founding of Researchfish Ltd in 2011, and the launch of the Researchfish system in June 2012, its scope and stakeholder community has expanded. From working with just six clients, including the MRC and STFC, Researchfish grew to work with other funders of biomedical and health research in the UK, including members of the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC). In early 2014, following an open competitive tender process, the UK Research Councils (RCUK) selected the Researchfish system to meet their output collection requirements. Following this decision, the question set was reviewed and amended to address the full range of outputs arising from all research disciplines (a process which took around eight months). The details of the new Common Outcome Types including an overview and information on licensing can be found here[2].

The contract with Researchfish Ltd. has been renewed several times under the Government Cloud computing framework; each time the offering from suppliers was assessed to see if there were any possible alternative providers. The UKRI Research Outcomes Management Board (ROMB) has a service review meeting every 6 months with Researchfish/Interfolio.

In 2019 Interfolio purchased Researchfish and details of the current contract agreement between UKRI and Interfolio has been published on Contracts Finder and can be found here[3].

In 2022 Elsevier announced its intention to purchase Interfolio; the service provision to UKRI will continue under our existing contractual agreement.

If you have any queries regarding our response or you are unhappy with the outcome of your request and wish to seek an internal review of the decision, please contact:

Head of Information Governance
Email: foi@ukri.org or infogovernance@ukri.org

Please quote the reference number above in any future communications.

[2] https://rf-downloads.s3.amazonaws.com/Outcome+type+map.pdf
[3] https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/d14f8982-cba3-45fe-87b2-e08b9108259a?origin=SearchResults&p=1

If you are still not content with the outcome of the internal review, you may apply to refer the matter to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the review procedure provided by UKRI. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: www.ico.org.uk.

If you wish to raise a complaint regarding the service you have received or the conduct of any UKRI staff in relation to your request, please see UKRI's complaints policy: https://www.ukri.org/about-us/policies-and-standards/complaints-policy/

Yours sincerely,

Information Governance
Information Rights Team
UK Research and Innovation
foi@ukri.org | dataprotection@ukri.org