

Governance, Policy, Funding & Impact - Implications for remote research infrastructure

The eRImote project has successfully concluded a series of three workshops held between September 2022 and April 2023, which laid the groundwork for a landscape analysis on the current practices, challenges, and opportunities connected with remote/digital access to Research Infrastructure (RI) services.



The third workshop in the series – held on 26th April in London, co-organised by the UK Data Services (CESSDA-UKDS) and Euro-Biolmaging ERIC – was framed around the topic of *“Governance, Policy, Funding & Impact – implications for remote research infrastructure”*. To facilitate effective and targeted discussions on these topics, the workshop was held as an in-person event and assembled 30 high-level representatives from the Research Infrastructure

ecosystem, including representatives of national funders, the European Commission, the ERIC Forum, and EOSC Association.

The event included introductory presentations around the four focus areas – Governance, Policy, Funding and Impact – followed by small group discussions on the effects of remote/digital access on the respective topics, where challenges and drawbacks of remote access lie, and what changes are needed to facilitate remote access to Research Infrastructure services.

The presentation and subsequent discussions surfaced a large number of key issues around the focus topics and the implications and challenges arising from remote access more generally. We present here a brief overview of some of the key discussion points.



Speakers at the 3rd eRImote workshop (from top left to bottom right): Darren Bell (UKDS), Bonnie Wolff-Boenisch (CESSDA), Antje Keppler (ERIC Forum), Martyn Chamberlain (DG Research and Innovation, EC), Richard Welpton (ESRC UKRI), and Ute Gunsenheimer (EOSC Association)

Governance

On the topic of governance implications, the presentation from Bonnie Wolff-Boenisch, Director of CESSDA ERIC, and the subsequent discussion focused on the need for RIs to maintain good governance, especially through times that challenge their existing processes and systems, such as the shift to remote access service delivery during the pandemic. During that time, the change to remote access had to be made rapidly in many cases, which may have resulted in 'emergency' arrangements. Consequently, many organisations that made adjustments to support remote access during the pandemic will need to revise and reflect on the adopted changes and ensure that decisions and processes are embedded into standard business planning. If the pandemic-driven changes have brought forward opportunities and created more dynamic ways of implementing RI service, organisations should take the opportunity to look at adopting more flexible/faster/iterative planning cycles to support this opportunity.

When remote access modifies the RIs service model, it can pose a challenge to the identity of various components of the RI (e.g., between Hub and Nodes of distributed RIs). This is because users' interactions with the RI and its components undergo changes. The shift in the user base resulting from remote access, may also need to be addressed in governance considerations, through the inclusion of new stakeholder groups.

Policy

On the topic of policy changes and needs for remote access, the presentation by Antje Keppler, Chair of the ERIC Forum, and the subsequent discussion highlighted the need for policy adaptations to support remote access. Collaborative efforts were deemed necessary to amplify the voices of RIs in the policy-making process. Outlined areas of policy challenge that were discussed included a diversity of data-related policy questions, such as access security and researcher accreditation in remote access; science diplomacy policy; and policies and regulations around international sample shipping which significantly impact remote access processes for those RIs where samples have to be exchanged between users and RI service providers.

Funding

Funding organisations can play a key role in shaping remote access – and the workshop included contributions from both the national and international funders perspective, with presentations from Richard Welpton, Strategic Lead of Data Services Infrastructure at ESRC UKRI, and Martyn Chamberlain, Policy Officer in DG Research and Innovation at the European Commission. Through the presentations and subsequent discussions, it became evident that the shift towards remote access disrupts expectations regarding funding and its sources. This highlights the necessity for sustainable models for access funding for RIs, a particularly critical overlap area of national and international funding considerations. On one hand, increased remote access can serve to make already allocated funding more efficient, by increasing efficiency of capacity use and granting access to existing data and systems to researcher groups eliminating the need for costly data or systems acquisition. However, expanding remote access capacity at the RIs requires additional funding for the RIsto support the heightened staffing needs and training requirements. Therefore, targeted funding is crucial for advancing remote access, both in terms of technical advancements as well as for fostering its adoption by diverse groups of researchers.

Impact

One of the key impacts of remote access is the opportunity to increase the scale and scope of access potentially enabling collaboration across domains and geographical locations. This intersects with the needs for advances in Open Science and FAIR data. This intersection was presented by Ute Gunsenheimer, Secretary General of the EOSC Association. The presentation and following discussion highlighted that remote access does not guarantee to an increase in Open Science. However, Open Science principles provide an opportunity that remote access initiatives can synergise with. The development of processes for remote access that are inherently 'FAIR by design' can drive Open Science forward.



Participants at the workshop engaged in active discussions on a range of focus areas concerning the impacts of remote access.

Conclusion

Through the intense discussions on the day, it became evident that while remote access offers numerous benefits, it cannot be seen as a panacea or single future access modality, as it also brings significant drawbacks. These drawbacks are centered around two main aspects: 1) the irreplaceable hands-on training researchers and RI users receive through physical access visits at RIs and 2) the challenging changes in the connection between researchers and their data if significant portions of the data acquisition and analysis are carried out by RI staff remotely. The discussion and exchange crucial for scientific progress, which is facilitated through direct physical visits to the RIs, is another aspect of the RI services that has proven challenging to replicate in a fully remote context.

A combination of access modalities, including hybrid models, is necessary for effective and impactful science. Therefore, future policies and funding should not automatically aim for increased remote access in all contexts, but rather support balanced access options. Additionally, RIs should be centrally included in the decision-making process, as the experts in their specific stakeholder and user groups and are therefore best placed to judge the most suitable access model combinations.