

**Report on the
Inaugural AIREN Conference
Research for the Future
Thursday 8th September 2022**

The All-island Research Excellence Network (AIREN) inaugural conference on 'Research for the Future' took place on 8th September 2022 in the legendary Drawing Offices at the Titanic Hotel in Belfast as an in-person event with ~160 registered delegates.

Great progress has been made since AIREN was launched in January 2021 as a two-year project to establish a network of research managers and administrators to support all-island research collaboration. The inaugural AIREN conference on 'Research for the Future' is a significant milestone in widening AIREN membership further and enhancing the network on an all-island basis as we develop AIREN phase 2.

Organised by UCD URMAN, QUB and Ulster University with support from InterTradelreland Synergy Programme, the AIREN Conference brought key stakeholders together to discuss all-island collaborative research and to focus on enhancing the AIREN all-island network of research support staff. The diverse range of sessions also addressed research culture and shared career development inspirations for research support professionals. The Conference opened with Welcome Addresses by Minister Gordon Lyons, MLA, and Minister Simon Harris, TD, and the day was moderated by Sarah Travers, Journalist, TV Presenter & Event Host. The conference programme included two excellent keynote addresses by Dr Deirdre Lillis (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) and Dr Simon Kerridge (University of Kent), and a range of stimulating and interactive sessions, and panel discussions, on topics covering:

- Vision and strategy for research collaboration
- Funding programmes to support North South collaboration, including an overview of the new Peace Plus Programme and insights on the HEA North-South Research programme and Interreg
- Continuing to develop and enhance the AIREN Network
- Research culture and what research integrity means to / for research support professionals
- Sharing career development inspirations.

The Conference Programme and a recording of the Conference are available on the [AIREN website](#).

Key messages throughout the Conference highlighted the valuable powerhouse roles research managers and administrators have in the research ecosystem, the importance of acknowledging this, and the need for the research support professional community to better articulate what we do. The value and benefit of the AIREN initiative in establishing an all-island research excellence network for research support professionals was also highly commended, with full support and endorsement from Government Ministers and all conference participants and delegates for developing AIREN Phase 2.

We thank each of our presenters and delegates who attended for their time and contribution at the inaugural AIREN Conference on 8th September 2022. We also thank the Conference Moderator, Sarah Travers, who contributed greatly to the smooth running and success of the day.

Government Ministers Welcome Addresses

Minister Gordon Lyons, MLA, Northern Ireland Department for the Economy (NI DfE), and Minister Simon Harris, Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), Ireland opened the conference with pre-recorded welcome addresses. They both highlighted the relevance of the AIREN initiative in their respective jurisdictions including the '10X Economy', Northern Ireland's vision for a decade of innovation; and Ireland's research and innovation strategy 'Impact 2030' and the government's vision to strengthen social, economic and political links on the Island. Minister Gordon Lyons highlighted how initiatives such as AIREN are key to stimulating and sustaining innovation and impact. He noted and appreciated the future focus of the AIREN conference title, particularly given the scale of challenges and opportunities facing the economy and society post the Covid pandemic and beyond. He concluded in wishing AIREN success for the future in developing the network and in finding sustainable models to secure longer term valuable outcomes which will impact positively on the economy and quality of life for all our citizens. Minister Simon Harris, similarly, commented that sustaining networks such as AIREN will be critical for future all-island and UK-Ireland research and innovation programmes. Also in his address, Minister Simon Harris acknowledged the important and valuable contribution research support professionals have in building Ireland's reputation as an Island of talent and as a location for research excellence and impact. He stated there is a clear value in developing an all-island network for the research support community, and he commended InterTradelreland on their insight in supporting AIREN through the Synergy Programme.

Vision & strategy for All-Island Research Collaboration

Dr Deirdre Lillis, Assistant Secretary of DFHERIS, set out context, and the methodology through Impact 2030, for Ireland's steadfast commitment to all-island research collaboration which is encapsulated largely in the government's €1bn Shared Island investment programme. She explained that Ireland's government is working with NI and UK counterparts, and with the support of the education and research community North and South, to achieve it. Throughout her presentation, Deirdre emphasised the powerhouse of leadership and multiplier roles research support professionals fulfil, and that Research Managers and Administrators are at the heart of collaboration and are the backbone of the research and innovation system. She highlighted the valuable contributions and leadership the education and research sector, including the research support professional community, gives and that it can be a model for other North South collaborations – a model of working together in a respectful way that is inclusive of all backgrounds and identities; of building connections and relationships that bring diverse disciplines and stakeholders together; of brokering solutions across diverse agendas. The sector also cultivates the key skills needed to build research capacity. Given the global challenges we face as an island, with a shared geography and climate, Deirdre closed with comments that it is more important now than ever to collaborate and to work collectively on shared missions that matter.

All-Island Collaborative Research

Declan McGarrigle, Programme Manager, Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), presented an overview of the new €1.1bn PEACEPLUS Programme which runs from 2021-2027. He outlined how the programme was developed and that it merges what was previously covered by Peace 4 and Interreg VA into a single programme. It aims to invest in the social, economic and environmental development of Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. The Programme was approved by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2021 and it was adopted by the EU Commission in July 2022 - now that it is in the implementation phase, the programme is due to officially launch soon and a timetable will be published of calls that will open in a phased way over the next 12-18 months. The Programme has 6 thematic areas and 22 investment areas and includes many opportunities to invest in high level research and innovation initiatives. Declan emphasised that economic growth and cross border collaboration are central to the Programme, and some of the key focus areas relevant

to research include Health and Life Sciences, Advanced Manufacturing, Cyber Security, Renewables. Declan highlighted there are potential opportunities for AIREN under thematic areas 2 (delivering socio-economic regeneration and transformation) and 6 (building and embedding partnership and collaboration). He also highlighted the new pre-application supports the PEACEPLUS programme will provide to help applications coming forward. He invited conference delegates to keep informed through the PEACEPLUS website and to email peaceplus@suepb to sign up to the PEACEPLUS mailing list to receive updates.

Dr Rosemarie Gannon, AICRI Project Manager, University College Dublin (UCD). Based on her experience as Project Manager in developing the All-Island Cancer Research Institute (AICRI) application – AICRIstart – to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) North South Research programme, Rosemarie shared her insights and practical advice on building a North South research collaboration and applying for research funding. AICRIstart received maximum points in 8 out of 9 evaluation categories and it was one of only 2 proposals awarded under strand 3 of the highly competitive HEA programme and received €4m to establish an all-island doctoral and post-doctoral research training programme in Precision Cancer Medicine. The project commenced in September 2022 and is an important foundation stone for AICRI which is a virtual 'Institute' involving 10 academic institutions, and other cancer research and patient advocacy organisations. AICRI is established and led by Prof Liam Gallagher, UCD, to develop a cross border research programme in cancer research, diagnosis and treatment and to build critical mass in Precision Medicine & Personalized Health. During her presentation Rosemarie also outlined her background and career development to date across the various positions and roles she has held.

Patrick Cullen, Business Integration Manager, ECME, University of Ulster, presented on the Eastern Corridor Medical Engineering Centre (ECME) which is a collaborative research project led by Ulster University and involves partnership between five leading academic research centres from across the island, and also working with clinicians and the Southern Health & Social Care Trust. It was awarded €8.4M Funding from the European Union's INTERREG VA Programme. The research aims at improving cardiovascular health and is focused around 5 themes including ambient assisted living; smart wearables; big data; smart rehabilitation; and point of care diagnostics. Patrick outlined the key output indicators the INTERREG VA Programme monitors for the project and presented on the research and industry outputs ECME has achieved to date, including the training of 24 PhD studies across 6 sites and the transfer of research into clinical practice. The collaboration also worked also on developing medical interventions and on the front line in to support the global effort and response to the Covid pandemic. The flagship ECME 2020 Academic Conference was held in May 2020 as a culmination of the ECME. Since his work with ECME, Patrick is now the new Northern Ireland Contact Point for Horizon Europe Digital Health Programme.

All-Island Network for Research Managers & Administrators

An interactive session was held for conference delegates to discuss together in small groups, what do we want from an all-island research support network. The session asked six key questions and the responses received were submitted through Padlet and will inform the development of AIREN Phase 2 to ensure the network continues to be member centric:

- What do you see as the main benefit of an all-island network for research support professionals ?
- What unique purpose can AIREN provide that is distinct from other research support networks such as EARMA and ARMA ?
- Are there any topics and activities that you would like AIREN to address going forward ?
- What split between in-person and on-line activities and events would you like to see going forward ?
- What content / resources would you find most useful on the AIREN website ?
- How can AIREN support new ways of working post-Covid ?

Dr Simon Kerridge, Kerridge Consulting and Honorary Staff at University of Kent, presented a keynote talk on establishing and All-Island Research Excellence Network. Simon is also a Board Member of European Association for Research Managers & Administrators (**EARMA**) and Past Chair of UK Association of Research Managers and Administrators (**ARMA**) and shared his views and thoughts on 'The Value of Networking for Research Support Staff'. He spoke firstly about the 'why' and the advantages of building (international) networks, including that it can enhance your career, increase your chance of success, and that networking is fun! Simon highlighted the important impact networking can have in developing your skills – for instance engaging in mentoring and shadowing is easier if you have a network around you. Networks also help you understand different perspectives and ideas on research and research support, and gives an important diversity dimension. Simon outlined findings from the RAAAP survey about the perceived importance of soft /transferable versus hard / technical skills across the different levels of Leaders, Managers and Operational staff categories. He then shared advice on 'how' to network by getting involved through joining committees; volunteering for professional organisations; attending conferences and following up with contacts afterwards; and by writing and publishing; and by reaching out. He cautioned against letting the 'imposter syndrome' set in and hold you back, and this was a recurring point raised also during the Panel Discussion that followed. The importance of 'following-up' and keeping in touch with key individuals after networking events is crucial.

Panel discussion on 'What it takes to set up and all-island network: next steps for AIREN'. Panel members included Simon Kerridge who was also joined by Jan Anderson, University of Southern Denmark and former Chair of EARMA, and ARMA Board Member; Dr Susi Poli, Staff Development and CPD Lead in University of Bologna; and Dr Jo Ui Chruaioich, CARDEA, UCC. AIREN currently has over 200 members registered, split broadly as 75% from UCD/QUB/Ulster and 25% from other institutions / organisation and the discussion opened with a question about expanding membership further during the next Phase of AIREN. The advice shared during the discussion highlighted the importance of getting members involved; being inclusive to all types of research organisations, large and small, and to industry; having diversity both North-South and East - West. The role of funding bodies and their participation in the network was also raised. Dr Jo Uí Chruaioich commented specifically about the role networks such as AIREN have in giving visibility to the research support profession and to acknowledging the Research Support Profession, noting this is a core driver of the EU funded CARDEA Project that she is co-investigator on. The involvement of UCC HR unit in driving the CARDEA project was also highlighted, and that it helps to build new alliances and synergies with others. Dr Susi Poli advised there is a lot of valuable literature by practitioners and researchers / academics available to read about the research support profession that can help to understand and position ourselves – in terms of role, career, identify, and community – within the sector. Other questions and discussion highlighted the importance of letting people know what we do, and yet a show of hands amongst delegates revealed how many of us do not feel confident that we can clearly articulate what we do. The discussion closed with comments about the tremendous value and fun people get from being in networks, with strong advice also that we should be proud of what we do and our contribution to the sector and come out of our silos.

Research Culture & Environment

Research Integrity

Dr Jennifer Brennan, Director of Research Development & Innovation, THEA, and co-Chair of the National Research Integrity Forum on 'What does Research Integrity mean to / for Research Support Staff'. Jennifer opened by acknowledging the vital role research support staff have in research integrity. She explained how the thinking on research integrity has evolved over the years to become more imbedded in research culture. This is reflected across the national strategies, commitments, and training resources developed to support

Research Integrity both in Ireland and the UK. She highlighted that Research Support Staff can use a mix of “soft” and “hard” power to influence and promote research integrity as they are central to their institution’s research effort, knowledgeable about the latest research policy trends, and they are also aware of funder’s requirements. She spoke about the National Research Integrity Forum – a voluntary body, led by the two higher education representative bodies, that was first established from the 2014 National Policy Statement on Research Integrity. The forum now involves 30 organisations including funders, research performers and stakeholder organisations. It was recently restructured in 2022 to set up a Steering Group and a Community of Practice focused on Research Integrity which is led by and for Research Support Staff. In 2022 the Form published a Research Integrity Collaborative Framework with input from Research offices, research funders, the HEA and Royal Irish Academy, that can be used globally as a guide for Research Integrity within collaborations and help avoid any potential problems that might otherwise arise from differences in practice between countries, disciplines and sectors.

An interactive session was held for conference delegates to discuss together in small groups ‘**The Role of Research Support Staff in Research Integrity**’. The session asked six key questions and the responses received were submitted through Padlet and will inform future initiatives and events AIREN will plan to hold to support members in the contribution and roles they have in Research Integrity:

1. Where and how do research support professionals contribute to research integrity and support good conduct in research? What are some of the challenges faced?
2. How important is the role of the research support professional in facilitating communication/as a central resource to advise and sign post about research integrity?
3. Is the research support community adequately trained/knowledgeable about research integrity?
4. How well do you feel your voice / contribution to Research Integrity is heard and acknowledged?
5. How should research support professionals be acknowledged for their support and contributions in academic work e.g. in proposal development / preparing grant applications / compiling data and information for publications?
6. How can the next phase of AIREN support its’ members with enhancing Research Integrity?

Research Support – Developing a Career and Working in the Profession

Dr Dara Fitzgerald, Director Fulbright Commission Ireland presented the Fulbright Programme which provides grants to study / engage in research / lecture / bring a programme to the US. In addition to offering grants for students and scholars, it also has professional grants available to research support professional staff across all disciplines and some sponsored awards in targeted areas. Eligibility to apply is generally open to those who have a PhD and/or over 5-years relevant professional experience and intending applicants are advised to check the details for the full criteria and a dedicated section for Professionals Campus Ambassadors in our local institution. The grants offer support for visits to US HEI’s / Research Organisations that can be for a minimum of 3-months, and some can be for upto 6 – 12 months. The Fulbright is truly a special lifetime experience for those who participate on the programme and can be extremely career enhancing. The programme is open now for applications and welcomes diverse applications.

Jan Anderson, University of Southern Denmark and former Chair of EARMA, and ARMA Board Member presented on the EARMA European Certificate in Research Management & Leaders in Research Management Event. He first spoke about the importance of professional development for research managers and administrators, particularly given the range of demands they must meet and adapt to with the many challenges and complexities in today’s research environment presents, with needs in new areas emerging such as in open science, gender in research and diversity. He outlined how ARMA first started in 2010 to develop a framework for the professional development of RMA’s which led to a UK certificate in research management.

It then joined forces EARMA to make it an accredited programme offering a broader set of courses, and to build in an EU dimension. Jan also explained the programme structure, the many optional units it offers, and how face to face networking is a core element of the EARMA programme. He pointed to the EARMA website which includes further information about the various modules and trainers. The next new cohort of participants on the course begin at the end of November 2022 – there are currently 12-15 participants. He also spoke of the EARMA Leadership event programme which has run since 2016 and is aimed at those who are heading up offices / running a group – this year the event is taking a strategic look at research in EU and leadership skills.

Brendan Whelan, PhD Researcher Ulster University Business School, Department of Tourism, presented an overview of his career and how he has developed his mountaineering instructor business over 30 years. Based in Donegal, Brendan takes people rock climbing all over the World. He also works with tourism organisations and offers rock climbing tours. Brendan is now undertaking part-time PhD studies at Ulster University that enables him to link theory and practice, and this has led to work he does with the courts as a mountaineering expert re accidents in the outdoors. Drawing on his personal experience of undertaking further and higher education studies while also working full-time, Brendan advises it is possible to do both – it is a question of price and value. For Brendan the price is that he is self-funding his own studies, and the value is the new opportunities his PhD training and qualification will create for him and his business in the future. Brendan closed with a stimulating message about how no one knows the opportunities the future can present. He told the inspiring story – linking time and place - of Marconi the Italian Irish inventor. Marconi developed the first long wave communication that was then used by the Titanic, that launched in Belfast in 1912, for its' first communication ironically sent to Malin Head, the place where Marconi happened to live while in Ireland.

The Panel discussion with Dara Fitzgerald, Jan Anderson, and Brendan Whelan focused on **career development opportunities for research support professionals**. The discussion opened with a question about access to development opportunities as it generally requires time and money. Panel members agreed that investing in your career development goes back to understating your purpose and value and your contribution to the research. They also shared some tips and advice on how to obtain support and noted that many development opportunities, such as the Fulbright scholarships, have flexible arrangements to enable easier access. The issue that some important development opportunities, such as fellowship programmes with Funding Bodies, require that candidates have a PhD qualification was also discussed as they seem to target the postdoctoral researcher rather than the research support professional (many of whom incidentally do have PhD's). It was agreed networks such as AIREN have an important role in representing concerns from the community on this to the relevant bodies. In his comments, Dr Fitzgerald reiterated that the eligibility criteria for the Fulbright does count professional experience and they do want professionals to apply. The important role and value of mentoring was also discussed, and it was noted there are different perceptions in the community about what mentoring is. A show of hands amongst delegates indicated that less than 50% have had mentoring. Panel members advise those seeking a mentor should choose their mentors carefully and to those considering becoming a mentor to be aware that it can be a lot of extra responsibility. The importance of induction was also raised. The discussion closed with advice for AIREN as it enters its next phase on how it might support career development for its' members, with final comments that we should know researchers value and appreciate the support research managers and administrators give and that AIREN should continue doing what we are doing !

Word Cloud

During the Conference Networking lunch delegates were invited to share a single word best describes their role as a research support professional. Words submitted using slido formed the following wordcloud.



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ⁱ The AIREN Project is being delivered with support from InterTradelreland's Synergy initiative. Synergy is a cross-border cluster initiative set up by InterTradelreland, the cross-border trade and business development body. It aims to scale cross border collaboration among SMEs and other players such as universities, third sector organisations and government agencies using cluster and networking supports.