

AIREN Conference 2025 Report

Looking Ahead: The Future of Research Management and Administration on the Island of Ireland in an Era of Change and Disruption

**Thursday 3rd April 2025
The Convention Centre Dublin**

The All-Island Research Excellence Network (AIREN) conference on "Looking Ahead: The Future of Research Management and Administration on the Island of Ireland in an Era of Change and Disruption" took place on 3rd April 2025 at The Convention Centre Dublin with approximately 180 registered delegates.

Significant progress has been made since the establishment of AIREN and the strengthening of collaboration between AIREN, the Irish Research Managers & Professionals Association (IRMPA), and the Northern Ireland Research Professionals Network (NIRPN). The 2025 AIREN conference represents an important milestone in enhancing cross-border research management and administration while addressing future challenges and opportunities in an era of significant technological and structural change.

Organised by AIREN, IRMPA, and NIRPN with support from the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the conference brought together research management professionals to discuss the future of research administration across the island of Ireland. The diverse range of sessions addressed technology integration in research management, research governance and integrity standards, Framework 10 preparation, and cross-border collaboration development. The conference was opened with welcome remarks by Dr. John Bartlett, Head of Research at ATU Sligo and Chair of AIREN Governance Committee, and featured keynote addresses by Rupert Lorraine (University of Plymouth), Prof. Anita Maguire (UCC), Dr. Sean McCarthy (Hyperion Ltd.), and Peter Osborne (Centre for Cross Border Cooperation).

The conference programme included a range of stimulating and interactive sessions and panel discussions covering:

- Building networks and strategic integration between AIREN, NIRPN, and IRMPA
- Approaches to AI implementation in research management and administration
- Professional excellence in research ethics and governance
- Preparation for the upcoming Framework 10 Programme
- Strengthening and sustaining cross-border research partnerships

Welcome and Opening Session

The day began with registration and welcome refreshments followed by the opening address from **Dr. John Bartlett**, Head of Research at ATU Sligo and Chair of the AIREN Governance Committee. Dr. Bartlett welcomed delegates and emphasized the importance of collaborative approaches to research management in addressing emerging challenges in the rapidly evolving research landscape.

Building Our Networks

The first major session brought together representatives from the three primary research management networks on the island of Ireland. The panel featured:

- **Sinéad McGinley**, Research Partner at UCD Research & Innovation and Chair of AIREN
- **Chris Browne**, Head of Research Strategy and Engagement at Queen's University Belfast and NIRPN Chair
- **Jane Kavanagh**, Head of Research Operations at Teagasc and Chair of the IRMPA Steering Committee

This session focused on the strategic objectives of each network and explored opportunities for enhanced collaboration. The panel discussion emphasized the importance of network integration and partnership development in advancing research management excellence. Each speaker highlighted their network's unique contribution to the research management ecosystem while identifying opportunities for joint initiatives that would benefit the wider research community.

Key outcomes from this session included commitments to develop shared professional development resources, coordinate event calendars to prevent duplication, and create joint working groups to address common challenges such as funding application support, research governance frameworks, and technological advancement.

Innovation and Technology Session

The innovation session featured a keynote address by **Rupert Lorraine**, Director of the Arts Institute at the University of Plymouth, titled "Approachable AI for Research Managers and Administrators: Building confidence through understanding." Lorraine provided insights into how AI can be ethically and effectively integrated into research management workflows, emphasizing the importance of human oversight and the role of research managers in guiding implementation.

This was followed by a panel discussion on practical implementation strategies for research management technologies, featuring:

- **Rupert Lorraine**, University of Plymouth
- **Mark Kelly**, Founder of AI Ireland
- **Liam Cleere**, Senior Manager at UCD Research & Innovation

The panel explored real-world applications of AI and other emerging technologies in research administration, sharing case studies and practical advice for implementation. Discussions centered around ethical considerations, addressing skills gaps, and the importance of maintaining human judgment in technology-enabled processes. The session also addressed concerns about technological disruption to existing workflows and emphasised the importance of inclusive and accessible technology solutions.

Professional Excellence in Research Governance Session

Prof. Anita Maguire from University College Cork delivered a comprehensive keynote on the "Evolution of the National Landscape in relation to Research Integrity - Insights from the National Research Integrity Forum 2015-2024." As the inaugural Chair of NRIF, Prof. Maguire shared valuable perspectives on how research integrity frameworks have evolved over the past decade and the growing importance of robust governance structures in maintaining public trust in research.

The subsequent panel discussion on "Advancing Professional Standards in Research Ethics and Governance" featured:

- **Prof. Anita Maguire**, University College Cork
- **Dr. Brendan Jennings**, Vice President for Research & Innovation at TU Dublin
- **Dr. Niall Smith**, Head of Research at Munster TU

This session explored strategies for establishing and maintaining exemplary research governance systems, with particular focus on ethics, open research, integrity, security, IP, and compliance frameworks. Speakers shared insights on fostering a culture of research excellence while navigating increasingly complex regulatory environments. The discussion highlighted the crucial role research managers play in translating policy into practice and ensuring ethical standards are maintained across diverse research contexts.

Key recommendations from this session included the development of shared training resources for research integrity, establishment of peer support networks for research governance professionals, and the importance of embedding ethics considerations at the earliest stages of research design.

Navigating the Future - Framework 10 Preparation Session

Dr. Sean McCarthy of Hyperion Ltd. provided a comprehensive overview of the upcoming Framework 10 Programme, addressing key aspects of preparation and engagement. His presentation examined the evolution from Horizon Europe, analysed effective lobbying approaches in the research context, and outlined the crucial role of Research Support Offices in positioning institutions for success.

This forward-looking session equipped delegates with practical insights into the new funding landscape and strategies for maximizing success in the next framework programme. Dr. McCarthy emphasized the importance of early preparation, strategic positioning, and collaborative approaches to proposal development. Particular attention was given to new thematic priorities, changes in evaluation criteria, and the increasing importance of impact demonstration.

Cross-Border Collaboration Session

The final substantive session of the conference focused on cross-border research partnerships, beginning with a keynote by **Peter Osborne**, Chair of the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation, on "Signposts on the Road to Sustainable Cross-Border Cooperation." Osborne explored key elements that enable cross-border cooperation to work effectively, successfully, and sustainably.

The panel discussion on "Developing and Sustaining Cross-Border Research Partnerships" featured:

- **Dr. John Bartlett**, ATU Sligo and Chair of AIREN Governance Committee
- **Francine Moran**, Principal Lecturer in Sustainability and Social Responsibility, Northwest Regional College
- **Grainne Lennon**, International Funding and Collaborations Broker, InterTradeIreland
- **Peter Osborne**, Chair of the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation

This session addressed the strategic development of sustainable research partnerships and infrastructure, emphasising the crucial role of Research Managers and Administrators in fostering cross-border collaborations. Speakers shared practical examples of successful partnerships and discussed strategies for overcoming common barriers to cross-border collaboration. The discussion highlighted funding opportunities specifically designed to support cross-border initiatives and emphasized the importance of building relationships and trust as the foundation for successful collaboration.

Closing Remarks - Charting the Path Forward

The conference concluded with a strategic overview synthesising key insights from the day and outlining concrete actions for advancing cross-border research management collaboration and excellence. The closing remarks emphasized the importance of continued network development, professional standards advancement, and collaborative approaches to addressing common challenges.

Key Messages

Key messages throughout the Conference highlighted:

- The transformative impact of emerging technologies on research management and the importance of embracing change while maintaining focus on research excellence
- The critical role research managers and administrators play in ensuring the highest standards of research governance and integrity
- The importance of cross-border collaboration in addressing shared challenges and maximising research impact
- The need for continued professional development and networking to ensure research support professionals can effectively navigate an increasingly complex research landscape
- The value of AIREN, IRMPA, and NIRPN collaboration in creating a strong, unified voice for research management professionals across the island of Ireland

We thank each of our speakers, panelists, and delegates who attended for their time and contributions at the AIREN Conference on 3rd April 2025.