Context and Motivation

We spoke to Dr Jennifer Brennan, Deputy Chair of the National Research Integrity Forum and Director of Research & Innovation at the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and a number of individual institutions about implementing Epigeum’s Research Integrity course across the entire Irish higher education and research system.

The project was managed by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and THEA, working on behalf of the National Research Integrity Forum, which is where the initiative to put this training in place originated. The Forum has been in place since 2015, and was born out of the 2014 National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland. It is, essentially, a partnership between the higher education institutions (HEIs), state research performers, research funders, and other stakeholders in higher education. Following on from the aims in the National Policy Statement, the Forum decided to try to put in place a national training programme on research integrity, an aim that was mirrored in the Irish National Research and

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Innovation Strategy (2015). One of their goals was around harmonising training curricula, so the team felt that ‘having a national subscription to the training was the way to go’, according to Jennifer. She also explained that it would allow them to provide ‘the same baseline training in research integrity across every single higher education institution in Ireland’, as well as some of their state-funded research performing organisations. This was no mean feat, but as you shall see throughout this case study, the benefits to this approach were felt by all.

Uncovering a need for research integrity training came from all areas of the research community. Research funding agencies started to clarify the need for research integrity training and soon made it mandatory for some funding applications, and researchers themselves were saying there was a need for it. There was, at this time, a real sense of a unified research community keen for research integrity training. The conversation about working together on a national level in support of research integrity started in the early 2010s. The realisation that there is always a risk of poor research practice was becoming ever prevalent, and many institutions were keen to avoid this happening. From their point of view, they wanted to provide an environment that, as Jennifer explained ‘allows responsible research conduct to flourish’.

Not only was discussion around research integrity already happening, but in 2020, with the start of a new government, came the commitment to establish the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science. In 2021, this new department is developing a new national research and innovation strategy, and as part of their consultation process they have explored research integrity as a pillar of that strategy, looking towards supporting a healthy research system.

Where does the Epigeum course fit in?

Jennifer describes the Epigeum RI course as an essential part of each HEI’s overall RI training programme. It was important to provide appropriate training for people at different levels, delivering the same baseline level of training to everybody. So whether it was a small research organisation or a larger one, ‘everybody had the opportunity to benefit from the same training’, says Jennifer. While some smaller institutions may have relied on this as a core part of their training, larger institutions have built upon it as part of a wider training programme; either way, the course enabled everyone to have access to the same starting point, while allowing flexibility in how they chose to implement it. As Jennifer put it, ‘no one gets left behind’ when resources are shared in this way.
Success and challenges

One of the main ways the success of this project was measured was through the number of researchers who participated in the course. At the time we were speaking to Jennifer for this case study, there was an estimated 80% completion rate across all the institutions, a sign of just how successful this project has been in raising awareness of a healthy nationwide research culture. Part of the eagerness from researchers to take up the training was due to the change in requirement for research funding from a range of funding agencies; while some agencies made it a recommendation, others made it mandatory.

We heard a number of different stories about the positive impacts of Epigeum’s Research Integrity course. At Mary Immaculate College, Mary Collins told us how they had made the concise version of the course an essential criteria for access to research funding and other supports. For the National Institute of Bioprocessing Research (NIBRT), Dr Ciara McManus said success also came about from being able to demonstrate who had taken the course. A recent example came through one of their Principal Investigators applying for a grant and supplying a list of researchers who had completed the course in their application, highlighting the success of the course in a day-to-day way. Speaking on behalf of Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), Dr Giovanna Rampazzo said that they measured success in numbers, with nearly 600 course registrations since 2018. For University College Dublin (UCD), one of the largest institutions in the IUA, Jill Boyle said they had about 2500 people registered for the course, and were regularly using up their tokens every year, with a list of people who ‘wanted desperately to undertake research integrity training’.

Any challenges that were encountered were generally ones that were expected in a project of this size. The management of tokens proved, at first, quite an administrative burden. While some bigger institutions had the resources to manage the allocation of tokens, other smaller ones struggled. Interestingly, there were some exceptions to this rule! Ciara found that with NIBRT being small, they were able to roll the programme out really quickly, and for them it was great to have such fast access to the online programme. The pre-enrolment feature also worked really well for them. On the other hand, Jill pointed out that with UCD having such a large number of tokens and users, it actually created more administration for them. However, with the start of a new contract and phase of the project beginning, there will now be unlimited token access to the course across all the HEIs, which will allow them to move into a ‘steady state’ of usage.

Implementing Research Integrity on a large scale

Jennifer summed up the main benefit of implementing this training across the higher education and research system as ensuring that ‘no one gets left behind’. This was a theme through the conversations with many of the individual institutions we spoke to, with everyone speaking extremely highly of the consortium agreement and nationwide implementation of the training. Ruth Moran (IT Sligo) said that being part of a consortium agreement gave the training more legitimacy, and ‘so it was fantastic and very refreshing’. Mary also agreed that being part of the programme added weight to the course, and as they were able to explain that it was part of a national agenda, it strengthened the need for it even further. Ciara found that one key benefit of being in a consortium agreement was that they were able to meet other people from other institutes. As they
are somewhat isolated from the other institutions and research organisations, it was a great way to make connections. Both Ann Kane from Teagasc and Jill from UCD built on this feedback further, with both institutes acknowledging the benefits of the user groups that were organised. They both found these groups really helpful and a great opportunity to share knowledge, and as Jill said, ‘it was absolutely brilliant to hear what other people were doing, the techniques they were using’, and she has gained connections through these groups that wouldn’t have happened without the consortium. Giovanna also spoke positively about being a part of the agreement, specifically mentioning the excellent support they had from Jennifer, and that TU Dublin found having clarity on the rules and regulations particularly helpful.

What all this feedback highlights is a sense of unity and cohesion felt across all the institutions. Being a part of something bigger added value and strength to the research integrity training, something which has been reflected in the excellent usage data evidenced across the whole HE system.

Feedback

Each institution we spoke to had lots to comment on about our course. For Ruth, due to funders taking research integrity ever more seriously, she described the course as ‘fundamental to funding application’, with the completion certifications being particularly useful. She also commented on the interactivity of the training, and the flexibility in being able to provide our course alongside their own four sessions of virtual online training. IT Sligo’s main challenge came from some of the original content being fairly UK-focused, but with the creation of an Irish-specific version this challenge has been addressed.

There was some excellent user feedback from NIBRT, with some researchers saying it was the ‘best course they’d done’. For a rather unique institution, a bespoke training institution for bio-pharmaceutical companies, Ciara described their research integrity training as ‘phenomenal’, and we are delighted that the Epigeum course could play a part in this. Once again using our course flexibly, Ciara rolled out two training sessions alongside ours, and moving forward she intends to follow the same approach as it worked so well.

Ann was similarly positive, saying that ‘the research integrity course was vital [for Teagasc], before it was rolled out we didn’t
really have any formal way of training our staff in this discipline’. She had very positive feedback regarding the content of the course, and also found it hugely beneficial to have the pass certificates. She often used those as a selling point when they were advertising the training, and also found that the online aspect of the course was a benefit for her institution as they have sites all over the country. Something that Teagasc particularly liked was a tailored email scenario challenge that Epigeum provided, which was inspired by course content. This email was sent to the institution and circulated among their staff, and included a scenario that many researchers may encounter, requiring the researcher to choose an option as to how they would react, and they were then able to see how other researchers had responded to the same scenario. Ann noticed a jump in usage after circulating the challenge amongst their researchers. On the technical side, she found the pre-enrolment function that Epigeum provides especially useful ‘when it came to managing the training and tracking the usage’.

At TU Dublin, Giovanna said that their ‘research integrity training has been quite successful’ and found that the change in funding agency requirements meant that a lot of their staff were keen to voluntarily take the training. The majority of their users gave very positive feedback, and while some people found the original course a bit too long, the new modular version will, she feels, improve their satisfaction.

UCD’s approach to their training was to promote a positive research integrity culture. Jill described how they made a concerted effort to open up the discussion around research integrity at an early stage, and described their mission as ‘to raise awareness of research integrity in a good way’. Formal training was a key part of raising this awareness, as their researchers had to have knowledge of what constitutes a breach in order to have that open discussion. Their users fed back two main areas of improvement. Some departments felt that specific areas of the course weren’t necessarily as applicable to them, such as some of the publication processes within Arts & Humanities. Also, some users found the language complicated at times, but in the updated version of the course, this has been improved. On the other hand, she received a number of emails from students and academics saying that they found the course very useful, that it made them think, and raised awareness.
of issues they previously hadn’t thought about, showcasing the overall usefulness of the course to UCD’s main mission. Something Jill wanted to highlight was that ‘we got great support from Epigeum’ and that our team were ‘very patient’ and responsive when it came to supporting UCD.

Overall, it’s great to see that the Epigeum course has become an essential part of these individual institutions’ missions and aims in developing a positive research integrity culture.

Future plans

Each institution shared with us their plans & priorities for future use of the Epigeum course, as well as their wider aim in implementing a culture of research integrity.

MIC and Teagasc will carry on using just online training, as they found it has worked well for them without a blended approach at the moment. Ann specifically highlighted that Teagasc will use the pre-enrolment function again, as it had proven extremely useful for them. NIBRT are likely to continue with their blended learning approach, and Ciara is also considering how to offer a refresher course using specific modules from the Epigeum course. IT Sligo are focusing on ensuring that all their researchers understand that the training is essential, and continuing to advertise it effectively. As Ruth put it, ‘you’re bringing people on a journey’, and described how she was keen to continue shouting it from the rooftops to get people involved! TU Dublin are planning to continue to ensure that researchers are in the best possible place at the start of their journey, and will deliver research integrity training to all researchers in the same way. UCD will continue to focus on their core message of open discussion and awareness about research integrity.

On a wider note, Jennifer Brennan’s main aim for the future is to reach a steady state of research integrity training, with a regular cohort of people going through the programme every year. She would like to see more use of the training as part of a blended delivery, which we have seen some institutions are already working towards. She also mentioned that some seven organisations have completed a ‘train the trainer’ programme in research integrity, and are now offering that training in any other institution which would like it, and she would love to see more of that happening. Her broader vision is to see the new national research and innovation strategy incorporating research integrity, and providing additional supports to help institutions reinforce a healthy research culture.

Summary

The benefits of a nationwide approach to research integrity are clear. It has provided each of the institutions we spoke to with an excellent starting point, allowing everyone to have access to the same baseline training. For some institutions this was enough, for others it was a brilliant foundation on which to build on with blended learning. Either way, we are delighted to see how the Epigeum programme has formed an essential part of the Irish higher education and research system’s approach to research integrity training, and the growth of a healthy research culture.
Dr Jennifer Brennan is Director of Research, Development and Innovation at the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and is Deputy Chair of the National Forum on Research Integrity and Chair of the Athena SWAN Ireland finance committee.

Ann Kane is the Research Operations Administrator at Teagasc, where she has worked in the Head Office since June 2005. Her current position includes managing the administration of training programmes for Teagasc’s Research Directorate and, in order to further enhance this role, she is studying a Masters in Education (MEd) in Teaching and Learning at Waterford Institute of Technology.

Dr Giovanna Rampazzo currently works in the TU Dublin Graduate Research School as the Programme Coordinator for Research. Giovanna also assists the Head of the Graduate Research School in all projects related to the PhD programme structure, and is the Secretary of the Research Programme Committee.

Jill Boyle is the Senior Research Policy and Governance Specialist at UCD. She is the UCD representative on the National Research Integrity Forum and has been actively involved over the last 3 years in managing, implementing and monitoring research integrity training in UCD.

Ruth Moran is the Graduate Education and Research Integrity Officer at IT Sligo and one of the founding members of CIRIT (Cross-Institutional Research Integrity Trainers), a collaborative group of seven higher education institutions delivering research integrity training on a national stage.

Dr Ciara McManus is the Senior Research Contracts and IP Officer at the National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training. Ciara plays a supportive role for all PI’s and researchers, with a focus on the post-award management, and administers the Research Integrity Training.

Mary Collins is the Research Office Manager, Research & Graduate School Office at Mary Immaculate College, where she has seventeen years’ experience in research administration. Among the services provided by the Research & Graduate School are coordination and support for institutional research; full academic administration services for all research students; research networking, and more.