RRI-Practice response to Advisory Board advice

Nov 17 2017

This document is the response of the consortium to the feedback from the Advisory Board presented in the consortium meeting September 21st 2017. We do not comment upon all the input received, but have instead chosen to focus on a few key messages where we would like to share with the public our position. We are grateful for the contributions of the Advisory Board and have taken all their advice into consideration.

Science in transition towards Open Science

We were advised to relate to perspectives on science in transition and to Open Science. More information about this can be found for instance here: https://ec.europa.eu/research/openscience/index.cfm and http://scienceintransition.nl/en/. It was made clear that the current vision of the European Commission (EC) connects RRI to the Open Science agenda, and that the two reinforce each other. We were encouraged to explore cases of new organisation of research in the spirit of RRI and Open Science.

There is a substantial degree of sympathy in the RRI-Practice project for these new developments in research policy. However, as the project has a practical nature and presupposes close collaboration with organisations in the research and innovation systems, we cannot force an agenda of transformative change on these organisations - unless they themselves share the situation analysis that such radical changes are required. Still, the consortium regards the RRI keys and the AIRR dimensions as incremental steps on the way towards transforming science in a more socially responsible direction. We do not have a unified vision for the endpoint of such a development, but are committed to engage with our organisations to explore such futures and how they might get there.

The consortium agrees that examples of new ways of organising research is both academically interesting and makes the project more policy relevant. We will therefore strengthen our focus on identifying and describing such examples of transformative practices related to the organisations we study in the project and highlight any examples identified in the national mapping. It will be interesting to focus specifically on what kind of leadership has made such innovations possible, and to what extent they are officially embraced or acknowledged in the organisations, or remain on the margins. The examples we identify may be used as inspirations for the organisations in the development of their individual RRI Outlooks and in our description of good practices in the later phases of the project.

The role of actors outside the research conducting and research funding organisations

We heard from the Advisory Board that actors outside the organisations we study can have significant agenda setting power for the organisations and thus for their RRI work. The policy level was stressed as potentially the largest influencer. However, the Board also mentioned the role of industry and of external stakeholder groups who exist outside of the research and innovation systems. We were advised

to highlight and describe these actors, and include in our recommendations to the EC, recommendations for how these actors can be mobilised to promote the implementation of RRI in organisations.

The consortium believes that this is already part of the organisational approach in the project (i.e. the organisation as an open/interchange system) and in the design of the national mapping. However, we agree that this can be further highlighted and intend to do this in the subsequent work; both in comparisons and in developing recommendations.

With regard to studying industry more explicitly, this is outside the scope of the RRI-Practice project. However, we may identify interesting examples of innovative collaborations between universities and industry with specific societal aims (see point above about identifying examples of open science).

The scope of the RRI keys

Although all organisations recognise the importance of the RRI keys, we have repeatedly been advised that the scope of the keys is too narrow; an opinion the consortium shares. As we work with concrete organisations, we cannot force them – for instance - to only focus on gender, when they believe that a focus on overall diversity is more urgent. Also, many organisations relate open access with open science more generally. We will include these learning points in our advice back to the EC.

Identifying the value proposition(s) of RRI and developing metrics to demonstrate that value

We were advised to be clearer in describing what is the value proposition of RRI. In subsequent discussion it became clear that there is probably not one value proposition for RRI. Instead, there may be multiple value propositions related to the different challenges each country and organisation faces. For example, for some RRI may be a response to a decrease in public trust in science. For others, a response to expressed concerns with irresponsible development of emerging technologies. For others again, RRI may be related to societal grand challenges (climate change, epidemics, etc.) that are high on the public and political agenda. The consortium agrees that the value of RRI will be important to specify vis-à-vis our organisations, and will keep this in mind in our further dialogue with them.

We were also advised that metrics to show the value of RRI would be useful to convince the organisations to do RRI. The consortium has concern as to whether this can be proved by measurement and what the correct outcomes to measure RRI against would be. Should it be a reduction in the number of scientific misconduct cases? Should it be a higher number of the general public taking an interest in, or trusting, science? Or a higher number of new, affordable medicines? Even if these indicators relate to broadly acknowledged objectives in the science policy arena, it is not certain that they measure the success of RRI as an integrative concept (including the AIRR dimensions).

The project does already include indicators related to the individual RRI keys and the AIRR dimensions. However, these indicators concern whether or not expected results are achieved from the planned actions; they do not provide ultimate arguments for why organisations should commit to e.g. research ethics as a goal. The project believes that RRI is a normative agenda, and that the value propositions of RRI must be related to the social importance of conducting research and managing research organisations in a responsible way.