

NATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR ACCESS BY RESEARCHERS TO RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE HOSTED BY HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OR OTHER RESEARCH BODIES IN IRELAND

Introduction

Access to research infrastructure, usually hosted in publically funded higher education and research institutions, is an essential element of most modern scientific enquiry. In the 21st century, the state-of-the-art-research infrastructure required for cutting edge research has become ever more complex and specialised and consequently much more expensive. Frequently, there is a requirement for “suites” of research equipment which need to be operated and maintained by specialised support staff and may require tailored space in which to house them. The costs of establishing and sustaining large items of research infrastructure are often very high.

In Ireland, there has been significant investment in research infrastructure throughout the higher education sector over the last 10 – 12 years. Facilitating the widest possible access to this research infrastructure is essential in order to achieve the greatest return on investment and value for money for the state and for the research community in general.

Currently, there is no nationally accepted set of guidelines in place governing access to items of research infrastructure hosted within publically funded institutions. This document sets out for the first time a set of agreed national guidelines that should apply, *in so far as is practicable*, to all items of research infrastructure within these institutions.

In doing so, it acknowledges that the enabling of access to research infrastructure by other researchers from Ireland and internationally and industry has cost implications. It also recognises that proper access to research infrastructure requires that there be in place a professional and customer-orientated support service including *inter alia*:

- (i) open and transparent access policies
- (ii) auditable access cost basis
- (iii) proper record keeping including records of access requests including where relevant, decisions and reasons in the event of a refusal, usage data etc...
- (iv) proper service and maintenance contracts in place, where relevant
- (v) support staff who can operate the research infrastructure and assist in the training of postgraduate students and other researchers.

Definition of a research infrastructure

The term Research Infrastructure is being used throughout this document in its broadest sense – it should be interpreted to encompass a wide variety of physical items of research equipment, including individual and collections of such equipment, as well as dedicated research facilities that provide centralised access to suites of specialised items of equipment. It can include items of research equipment that are located in one single host institution or items of research equipment that are distributed across a number of different host institutions.

The term Research Infrastructure may also include e-infrastructures and scientific collections (e.g. biobanks/repositories/data collections). It should be noted that many of these infrastructures have very specific access requirements associated with them. For example, there are guidelines in place for the collection and storage of clinical data, including local ethics committee policy, data protection. It is not intended that this policy will override any of these requirements.

It has deliberately been decided not to define the term Research Infrastructure more precisely (for example by using arbitrary monetary threshold values). The Large Item of Research Equipment database has a €100,000 threshold which may be considered as a general rule of thumb. However, this is not to suggest that only those items of research equipment listed on this database fall under the scope of these access guidelines.

However, it is not anticipated that these guidelines should apply to routine items of research equipment that are required for a normal functioning laboratory.

Self-regulation

It will be the responsibility of the host institutions in the first instance to determine what items of Research Infrastructure should/should not be accessible to external researchers.

However, the onus is on the host institution to adequately justify the exclusion of any item of Research Infrastructure from its access policies.

It is expected that this will be a largely self-regulating position, in that other higher education institutions, research bodies, funding agencies and/or other stakeholders seeking access to certain Research Infrastructure to challenge a host institution as to why it might not be accessible. This should be done in the first instance with the host institution but may also be raised with either the HEA or, if relevant, the appropriate funding body. In the absence of satisfactory justification, HEA/funding body may require the host institution to make the Research Infrastructure accessible to other researchers.

The HEA may conduct periodic audits of higher education institutions and other research bodies in respect of their access policies.

GUIDELINES

1. *Where practicable*, all Research Infrastructure in publically funded higher education institutions and other research bodies, including existing infrastructure supported wholly or in part by Exchequer resources, should be available for use by other researchers regardless of which Higher Education Institution (HEI) or other research body hosts it (host institution). This should include access by other international researchers and external users (including, where relevant, researchers from civil society), particularly industry users.
2. Access to Research Infrastructure may be provided free or may require payment of an access charge by the user.
3. The host institution may, in the first instance, decide what Research Infrastructure may be accessible to external researchers. However, the host institution must be able to satisfactorily justify why an item of research equipment should not be available for external access.
4. It will be open to other higher education institutions, research bodies, funding agencies and/or other stakeholders seeking access to certain Research Infrastructure to challenge a host institution as to why it might not be accessible. This should be done in the first instance with the host institution but may also be raised with either the HEA or, if relevant, the appropriate funding body. In the absence of satisfactory justification, the host institution may be required to make the Research Infrastructure accessible to other researchers.
5. Funding agencies may require that host institutions make certain items of Research Infrastructure accessible to external researchers as a specific term or condition of the agency providing Exchequer funding for that item of Research Infrastructure.
6. Host institutions should have clear, publically available policies outlining how access to the Research Infrastructure(s) will be prioritised. Any reasons for refusing access should be recorded as part of the access process and should be based on objective grounds.
7. Access policies should include an independent appeals process in the event access is declined.
8. Access policies may differ between host institutions and even within a host institution depending on the Research Infrastructure involved. However, in order to be eligible to recover any Exchequer-funded access costs, the access policies must comply with the overarching principles outlined in this document.
9. Free access to Research Infrastructure(s) in the context of academic collaborations and partnerships will continue to be encouraged. However, access charges may be used by host institutions as a means of spreading costs among research collaborators, supporting the sustainability of the Research Infrastructure and a partnership approach to funding.
10. Access charges must be clearly linked to actual use of the Research Infrastructure itself and all terms and conditions associated with use of the Research Infrastructure should be transparent and publically available.
11. Access costs to different types of Research Infrastructure are likely to differ. However, all access costs must incorporate the following principles:

- a. that they are auditable
 - b. that they are traceable to the work done on the item of Research Infrastructure, including maintaining appropriate records outlining access requests (successful and unsuccessful), reasons for declining access if relevant, usage data etc.
 - c. that there is no element of duplicate funding from Exchequer sources
 - d. that they are compliant with all relevant EU and national funding terms and conditions and competition legislation.
12. Normally, industry access costs should be recovered at full commercial rates. This does not preclude the establishment of other Exchequer-supported access routes for industry (e.g. particularly for SMEs or HPSUs).
 13. External users may be required to demonstrate that they have the knowledge and/or skills required to use the Research Infrastructure. Where the user does not have the required knowledge/skills, the option to train new users in return for appropriate funding (which should not include any element of cost that is already Exchequer funded) should be available. The direct costs for such training should be borne by the user's home institution and may be included as a specific cost item on a grant application.
 14. Access will be facilitated by the establishment of an accurate, up-to-date and searchable database of Large Items of Research Equipment (LIRE) that provides relevant contact information. This database will be available on line via the HEA's website and will be maintained with the help and co-operation of each host institution. However, this is not to suggest that only those items of research equipment listed on this database will fall under the scope of these access guidelines.
 15. Research funders will recognise agreed¹ access costs to accessible Research Infrastructure as an eligible cost and a discrete eligible budget item should be included in funding proposals and where relevant in subsequent research funding awards. Research funders may audit such access charges as part of their regular audit process.

¹ Access costs must be agreed between the specific funding agency and the host institution. In the case of a distributed Research Infrastructure, access policies and charges associated with a network must first be agreed with the host institutions involved.