Research Fairness Initiative (RFI)

Governance and Management

Final draft for consultation / September 6, 2016
The Research Fairness Initiative (RFI) is a COHRED service to improve the fairness, efficiency and impact of research collaborations. Given our origins in "research for health", the RFI was created with the aim of improving global health, equity and development. However, with minor modifications, the RFI is also completely appropriate to be used in any other field of science collaboration. As we discovered, improving the fairness of research is also a strategic advantage in research organisations, institutions and businesses: greater fairness results in greater efficiency, longer-lasting partnerships, less conflict, improved uptake and greater impact. The RFI is, therefore, of relevance to all key stakeholders in any research collaboration anywhere and of any duration - even though we started with the aim of increasing the research and innovation capacity of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in particular. The RFI is in direct support of the Sustainable Development Goals - particularly SDG 17 on Partnerships.

The RFI can be used by all organisations, institutions, businesses or government departments who engage as actors, sponsors, facilitators of research and research partnerships. In particular, the RFI has been designed for use by:

1. Government departments with a major responsibility for supporting or undertaking research including but not limited to Ministries of Science and Technology, Health, Higher Education
2. National Research and Innovation Agencies
3. Academic and research institutions/organizations
4. Private sector / Industry research divisions and organisations
5. Research funders, sponsors, and philanthropies
6. Other key stakeholders – including but not limited to – large non-profits engaging in research, international organisations and multi-national bodies, development organisations promoting and using research and innovation, and others who associate themselves as concerned stakeholders

Research Fairness Index (RFI)
Get Involved with the RFI, contribute to global research fairness, efficiency and impact for health, equity and development.

To become an RFI User:
Visit our website: www.rfi.cohred.org
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The current version of the RFI Governance and Management is a final draft for consultation. We are welcoming any comments for improvement. Please send your comments to botti@cohred.org or upload it on the RFI website (rfi.cohred.org).
## Contents

1. Background of the Research Fairness Initiative (RFI) ................................................................. 1
2. What is RFI Reporting? ...................................................................................................................... 4
3. What is the RFI Learning Platform? .................................................................................................. 4
4. Current RFI Governance and Management – *the development phase* ........................................... 5
5. RFI Governance and Management – *early implementation phase* ............................................... 6
   1. RFI Board of Directors .................................................................................................................. 6
   2. RFI Members ............................................................................................................................... 7
   3. RFI Secretariat ............................................................................................................................ 8
6. RFI Governance and Management – *future* .................................................................................. 9
The RFI has been designed as an evolving Reporting Standard managed by its users.

September 2016
1. Background of the Research Fairness Initiative (RFI)

The RFI is pioneering a global reporting system that is aimed at creating transparency, increasing the use of best practices, and developing new benchmarks to improve research capacity worldwide – especially in relation the needs of low income countries and populations. Here are some key points about the RFI's history and development.

Who we are

The Research Fairness Initiative was initiated by COHRED, an international, independent non-profit organization that has been supporting low and middle income countries in developing research and innovation capacity for health, equity and development since 1993.

What we do

Our focus has been to deliver support for national systems of research and innovation – in other words, maximizing the ability of countries to be able to set their own research priorities and decide which of these to address. See our websites for detailed product and service information for Fair Research Contracting (www.cohred.org/frc), RHinNO Ethics platform for research ethics review optimization (www.rhinno.net) and the Global Forum for Research and Innovation for Health meetings (www.forum2015.org).

Global Reach

COHRED is a small, networked organization with staff and offices in Brazil, South Africa, Switzerland and Thailand. Through our Board members and COHRED Associates, we have a network of key people and organizations in most countries around the world – with access at all levels of public, non-profit and private sectors. Investing in COHRED and our work means that for a small investment you can have a global footprint.

Why Research?

The RFI is premised on the belief that progress – especially sustainable progress – is based on scientific information. All countries and populations, no matter how poor, need to be able to use science or its products to develop – conversely, no country has successfully climbed the development ladder without substantially investing in science and, especially, a ‘culture of science and evidence’. It is difficult to develop such a culture while relying only on ‘external science capacity’ – internal capacity to use or generate credible data is crucial for countries, communities, populations.

Why the RFI?

Irrespective of the socio-economic status of countries, research partnerships are the vehicle required to deliver research results and to build institutional and national capacity to take research and innovation further. It is really difficult to grow a knowledge based economy in isolation – partnerships are crucial – for low- and for high-income countries alike.

The RFI is the first tool designed to optimize research partnerships in a global sense. There are scientific articles, published experiences, and aspirational guidelines prepared to improve collaborations in a variety of scientific fields. There is a host of legal literature and sample contracts. There are Intellectual Property guidelines. There are a few declarations by research institutions, research funders and umbrella bodies of stakeholders that encourage ‘responsible partnership behaviour’. Finally, internationally, there are now a few global agreements on dealing with the equitable distribution of the potential benefits from research.

All of this is to demonstrate how important research partnerships are to research – and to developing the global capacity for conducting and using research to advance global health, equity and development. Partnerships are key to Research, Research competitiveness and to growing the Research Capacity everywhere.
Yet there is no coherent and practical framework to define partnerships as ‘fair’, ‘efficient’ and ‘having impact’. Every new collaboration seems to start from scratch and does not have standards to base new agreements on. That is where COHRED’s RFI wants to make a difference. By focusing on optimizing research partnerships we want to change the way in which research is done and contribute to efficiency, impact and fairness of research – optimizing the benefit for everyone, anywhere. Making research work … for everyone.

To achieve this, COHRED started the RFI – as a global collaborative initiative – involving members of all groups with a major interest in research for health, equity and development. At this time, the RFI is a team work within COHRED: staff, board and volunteers are key in stimulating the RFI concepts and documentation. A global Technical Working Group (TWG) and open global consultations are adding continuous value. And, we are now having our first users beginning to write their RFI Report for their organisations – all of which will feed into the RFI evolution once more. We have set up the RFI as a user-driven reporting system, and a learning platform that will allow global sharing of best practices and development of new benchmarks.

*The RFI focuses on defining practical steps that partners can take from their side to optimize the quality and fairness of partnerships they engage in.*

**Who are the stakeholders?**

Any organization and institution – public, non-profit, or private – that is a key player in making research happen, in transforming research results into actions, services or products, and in scaling these – should be considered as ‘key to success’ of the global research enterprise. For purposes of targeting the RFI tools and publications, we distinguish the following groups of critical users of the RFI:

1. Government Departments with a major responsibility for research, science and technology, including multi-national, international and multi-lateral government bodies
2. National Research Agencies
3. Research and Academic Organizations
4. Private Sector business with a major role in research and innovation
5. Research Funders, Sponsors or Philanthropies with a major research component.
6. “Others” – large non-profits engaged with research or research advocacy; public – private – partnerships; ‘patient’ organizations focusing on research participation or protection and similar organizations from outside the health sector; and any other organization wishing to influence fairness in global research partnerships to improve health, equity and development.

• **Institutional vs National use of the RFI:** The list of 3 ‘domains’, 15 ‘topics’ or determinants of good partnerships is applicable to both institutional/business or state/national levels. Only the indicators may differ.

*For example: a policy on equal access to all data by all partners in a collaborative project can be substantially improved by a national policy requiring such data sharing. In the context of a low income country or population – having an RFI report in which a business states how it deals with ownership of data is fantastic. At a national level, having a ministry of S&T stating a national requirement for external parties on data sharing would clearly be synergistic. The indicator for the institution is ‘having a policy’. The indicator for the Ministry of Science & Technology is ‘having a national directive requiring institutions to have their own policy or comply with a national version’.*
The Research Fairness Initiative in the future

• Our vision is to help create a world in which fairness in research collaborations promotes high quality, efficient and lasting partnerships that enables all countries – at any stage of development – to build their own research and innovation capacity, and with that to contribute substantially to global health, equity and development.

• We will do that by making the RFI an integral part of institutional, organizational and governmental strategy for research and innovation development.

• Our mission is to empower all stakeholders to take action towards becoming better and more fair research partners – using the RFI Reporting System and Learning Platform.

• We believe in:
  o Reporting and Learning – rather than Indexing and Ranking
  o The need for the RFI as a compliance tool – in support of optimizing the use many existing partnership guides
  o The need to develop new standards and benchmarks – through global learning – where there are gaps
  o An inclusive, continuous process involving all key stakeholders in research
  o Research collaboration should be driven by the public interest – whether health, equity or socio-economic development – we want to make research work ... for everyone.

The RFI and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Research Fairness Initiative directly supports achieving the Sustainable Development Goals accepted by the United Nations as targets for global development.¹ For the first time, business has substantially joined the global governments in trying to achieve the 17 ambitious SDGs by 2030. The RFI speaks directly to achieving SDG17 – improving partnerships for implementation. As research system building can be applied to any other of the specific 17 SDGs, the RFI can be applicable to more goals as well.

2. What is RFI Reporting?

An RFI Report is a regular report produced by a key research stakeholder (see previous section) about the actions it has put in place and future actions that it will put in place to optimize fairness in research collaborations and partnerships. An RFI Report also presents the organization’s values and governance of relationships as a key determinant of successful research.

Producing an RFI Report is a strategic advantage to users because the measures needed to create and enhance fairness in research relationships are also measures that improve research efficiency, functionality and duration of research relationships, maximize trust and minimize disruptions through disagreements or miscommunication. It reduces reputational risk of collaborations and enhances investments into developing partnerships. An RFI Report will be read by prospective partners, by institutions and countries seeking to build out their partner-base, and by sponsors and funders aiming for ‘capacity building’ as part of the financial support they provide. Increasingly critical researchers will read the RFI Report to search for those conditions that advance their careers most or that deliver most impact on health, equity and development in low and middle income countries. The RFI Report is also an important value statement towards your own staff: “you are working for a company / organisation that wants to make research work … *for everyone*”

RFI reporting can be considered as one of the essential parts of non-financial reporting. Increasingly companies and organisations produce not only reports on what is achieved – financially and otherwise – but also how this is done. The RFI Report is meant to become a critical component of integrated reporting 2 that provides insight into both financial and non-financial performance – for institutions and organisations for whom research and innovation are key deliverables.

3. What is the RFI Learning Platform?

Why a “Learning Platform”?
What the process of designing the RFI taught all involved is how little agreement there is about how to constitute, operate and evaluate partnerships – and research partnerships in particular.

Moving away from an “Index” – where rating and ranking are key tools – to a ‘Reporting System’ – where comprehensive reporting and transparency are the major tools is a logical consequence of the low level of agreement. If there are few – if any – agreed standards, few – if any – measures, and few – if any – globally comparable indicators for research collaborations, then it may become hard to ‘rate and rank’ without creating substantial controversies. And, these controversies may well distract from the overall purpose to be served by the RFI.

Instead, we can begin the RFI as a system of reporting actual practices in research collaborations. Looking at 3 ‘domains’, 15 ‘topics’ and 45 ‘indicators’ of fairness in research partnerships through a report that seeks specific information – we will be in a position, for the first time, to learn, analyse, and compare research collaborations globally, systematically, and over time.

How does the “Learning Platform” work?
The added value of a web-based reporting system – in addition to Members using, publishing and disseminating their own RFI Reports to their own stakeholders – is the learning platform.

The RFI Team will not only create a web-portal for increased visibility, the RFI Web will enable analyses, meta-analyses, regional or industry-specific comparisons, encourage use of existing standards by increasing their visibility … and, over time, find possible convergence in how specific problems are solved and potentials are exploited.

These then have the potential to become ‘best practices’ or ‘benchmarks’ – in areas where currently none exist, or for the application of which there is no accepted agreements.

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The RFI Web

The RFI Learning Platform will – most likely – take the form of a highly informed web-page or set of web-pages that will allow for sharing experiences, best practices, analyses and resources – some of which will be provided to members only.

The RFI Secretariat is in the process of developing a demonstration web-site in consultation with stakeholders.

4. Current RFI Governance and Management – the development phase

The Research Fairness Initiative (RFI) started its inception as an “Index” – a mechanism to rate and rank performance in the field of research collaboration and partnerships.

COHRED developed and still provides contracting support to research institutions in low and middle income countries under the name of ‘Fair Research Contracting’ (www.cohred.org/frc). FRC was initiated to help fill the vacuum in research contracting expertise in most institutions and governments in low and middle income countries. While very useful in individual cases, it is clear that a consulting service will not be able to impact globally. This became the basis of looking for a complementary mechanism to encourage better contracts and more fair partnerships that would have global impact and be cost-effective.

The CFI or COHRED Fairness Index was the first effort – developed by a small COHRED Team of staff, board members and associates, with the support of a Technical Working Group of 32 key people around the globe (http://rfi.cohred.org/technical-working-group/), a web-based global call for comments (http://rfi.cohred.org/rfi-source-documents/) and an 80-person, high-level global consultation in London, at the Wellcome Trust, in April 2015 (http://rfi.cohred.org/colloquium-4/).

Following these, a major re-design was undertaken to move away from an ‘Index’ towards a ‘Reporting Initiative’ and ‘Learning Platform’ – the two key components of the RFI it its current form.

The re-design was, once again, undertaken by a small team of COHRED staff, board members and associates. The renamed Research Fairness Initiative (RFI) has subsequently been presented for comments to the Technical Working Group, and has been subjected to wide global consultations in most continents. (http://rfi.cohred.org/get-involved/global-consultation/)

As we are making the transition from the RFI Development towards the RFI Implementation, so we want to formalize the governance and management of the RFI.

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5. RFI Governance and Management – *early implementation phase*

Over the course of the next few months, we want to achieve the following governance and management structure – a mix between the RFI being ‘organisationally independent’ and ‘cost-effectiveness’. In future, the stakeholders that are going to constitute the RFI Board of Directors may well change the structure further where appropriate to maximizing global uptake and impact.

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**Research Fairness Initiative:**
**Governance and Management Structure – at inception**

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**1. RFI Board of Directors**

1.1. **Responsibilities:**

1. **Impact Assessment and Performance Improvement of the RFI**

2. **Evolution of the RFI**
   - Modification of the current framework of Domains / Topics / Indicators / Reporting Requirements over time
   - Modification of any other aspect of the RFI mechanism, governance, management

3. **Assuring Due Process and Quality Assurance of the RFI Secretariat**
   - Including serving as a review panel for disagreements about validation and certification of member RFI Reports
1.2. Constitution:

1. The Technical Working Group will be superseded by the “RFI Board of Directors”. In the transition phase, a first Board of Directors will be constituted from existing TWG members who wish to continue, early RFI Adopters, Sponsors and members nominated by stakeholder groups from existing members” – to the extent that there are maximally two representatives from each stakeholder group – one of whom must be a resident of a low or middle income country. COHRED will have one seat on the Board.

2. Membership of the first Board is for a period of 3 years maximum, unless such members are re-nominated by their constituency. In future, Board membership will be for 4 years, renewable twice.

3. Meetings will be held at least 2x per year – virtually where possible – to reduce the environmental footprint of the RFI.

4. Membership is non-remunerated.

5. COHRED will provide the Secretariat function for the Board. This will include ensuring optimal communication between the Board and the members.

6. The first Board of Directors will have the additional responsibility to prepare and set in motion further rules and regulations governing Board membership, including nomination, termination, changes in numbers, and more.

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2. RFI Members

Full RFI Members are individual stakeholders (institutions, organisations, businesses, government departments, funders and sponsors, others) • who have paid their subscription fees AND • are producing validated and certified RFI Reports

Members are registered through the RFI Website and membership is activated once the annual subscription fees have been received.

RFI Reports will be submitted to the RFI Secretariat, and will be validated for compliance with the RFI Reporting Guideline (http://rfi.cohred.org/how-does-it-work-in-practice/), after which the RFI Secretariat will certify this compliance, list the organisation on the RFI Website, and issue permission to use the RFI logo on its websites and reports.
3. RFI Secretariat

The implementation of the RFI around the globe is the responsibility of the RFI Team that will – for now – be hosted by COHRED, and will have the following responsibilities:

3.1. Responsibilities:

1. Member and Stakeholder Engagement
   - Member support in RFI Reporting implementation
   - Marketing the RFI to stakeholders

2. Revenue Generation
   - Creating a business model that is viable within by the end of 2019 AND continues to serve research system capacity building in low and middle income countries and populations.
   - Ensures RFI independence of any stakeholder group
   - Remains cost-effective, but able to realise all benefits of the RFI system to partners

3. Validation of RFI Reporting
   - Compare RFI Reports submitted by members against the RFI Reporting Guideline to ensure compliance
   - Connect with members to improve submitted reports to achieve full compliance
   - Dealing with disagreements – forwarding the Board of Directors where needed

4. Provision of Certification
   - Listing RFI compliant Reports and Members on the RFI website
   - Controlling the use of the RFI logo

5. Website and Learning Platform operation and maintenance
   - Produce Analyses, Meta-Analyses and Ad Hoc Reports
   - Ensure high and increasing RFI website use by both members (premium services) and non-members (to advocate and inform)

6. Provide training, or contract partners to provide such training, arrange appropriate meetings, and more
   - Additional services, courses, contracting support or any other service that members may require to ensure that RFI Reporting is implemented and acted upon – will be a key to success. The Secretariat will be responsible for either offering such services or having others do so under a license.

7. Provide the Secretariat for the Board of Directors

3.2. Constitution:

The Secretariat will require a small team to begin the process. At this time, it is expected that at least three Full-Time Equivalent staff are required to help kick-start the process.
6. RFI Governance and Management – future

The RFI is being designed as a financially self-sustaining service / product. It started within COHRED as a logical extension of its work in research system strengthening, but there is no sense that this would need to remain the case.

In the way the governance structure is being constructed, there is wide opportunity for the RFI to become an organisation independent of COHRED, should this be the most strategic option. It will be the responsibility of the Board of Directors, Members and any other stakeholders to reflect on this and make changes that will have the best interests of global health, equity and development in mind.

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Research Fairness Initiative - the missing step in fair partnership compliance tools

- Generating legal obligations
  - e.g. the Nagoya Protocol
- Actively managed reporting system
  - e.g. the Research Fairness Initiative
- Creating practical tools
  - e.g. Fair Research Contracting (FRC)
- Establishing principles of best practice
  - e.g. KFPE: 11 principles, 7 questions
- Raising Awareness
  - e.g. Costello & Zumla (2000)

* See RFI Website resource pages for full reference to examples