The Integrated Research Application System: an introduction

Introduction

'I don't care if you can put a chest drain in blindfolded, or if you can cannulate an intravenous drug user with your hands tied behind your back – what have you done in the way of research during the past 6 months?'

Such intimidating comments are sometimes heard in both job and appraisal interviews for junior doctors, rendering an already stressful situation even more nerve-wracking for the inexperienced candidate. Nevertheless, remarks such as these ensure that young clinicians are alerted from the outset to the fact that their career progress depends not only on their effective clinical practice, but also on the production of peer-reviewed research which can be confidently disseminated among others within their specialism.

Until recently, there were some protracted bureaucratic hurdles which had to be negotiated even before a research project could be embarked upon and, given these litigious times, gaining approval for a project from various committees and regulatory bodies could prove to be more demanding of one's efforts than the project itself. In addition, young clinicians on rotational posts of between 4 and 12 months in any given hospital were liable to discover that this lengthy research application process held back the successful completion of their projects.

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In many cases novice researchers did not know which forms needed to be filled in through no fault of their own, but failure to complete them correctly prevented them from beginning their research. For example if you wanted to study a new drug for osteoporosis you would need to fill out at least three separate forms before you could start: one for your local trust's research and development committee, one for your local trust's ethics committee and one for the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Each of these forms would have needed you to enter the researcher's name, project design, contact details, every time on each form which was time consuming and tedious. Similarly each trust had local forms so if you moved trust then you would have to repeat the whole procedure.

Each research and development form needs to be filled in correctly and approval for each one gained from the relevant local committee before the next form can be considered. A local research committee is unlikely to meet more than once a month. As these committees have large numbers of projects to ratify and approve, any incorrectly completed applications are discarded and amendments requested. Before the development of the Integrated Research Application System this system quickly became a very lengthy and frustrating process, especially if simple errors were made.

Clearly, a new system designed to streamline the research application process was required. Thus it was that, at the end of January 2008, the Integrated Research Application System was launched (*Table 1*).

What is the Integrated Research Application System?

The Integrated Research Application System is an online application system which, by eliminating local variations in forms, acts as a national standard. It allows researchers to complete applications online and has inbuilt filters which guide applicants in their selection of the regulatory bodies which need to be informed about the nature of the proposed research project.

How does the Integrated Research Application System work? A step by step example

Let's assume that we want to investigate if one total knee implant 'brand A' leads to a better outcome for the patient than its competitor 'brand B'. For the sake of argument we will assume that our study design and patient selection has already been determined.

There is an excellent e-learning module available on the website itself which goes through the following steps in detail which will be summarized briefly.

The first step is to register online with Integrated Research Application System at: https://www.myresearchproject.org.uk/

Table 1. Differences between the Integrated Research Application System (IRAS) and the previous system

IRAS	Old system
All forms are the same online regardless of which institution you are in	A different form for each institution
No duplication of data entry	Data duplication required for all the forms
All the relevant regulatory bodies that need to be involved in a project are identified by the filters on the software at the initial stage	Relied on getting correct forms in to the correct bodies through self-directed learning – could lead to severe delays if one body not approached because of an oversight
Is likely to become mandatory in the future	Likely to be more and more progressively phased out

This is a secure server for obvious confidentiality reasons and so you will need to obtain a free username and register to use the site. To do this you will need to create an account (*Figure 1*). Go to create an account and put in the relevant details.

You will need to wait for an email to be sent from Integrated Research Application System to the email address entered on the registration form. Once you have had this you can then activate your account. You can then successfully 'log in' and click on the instruction to 'Create a new project'. This causes a prompt screen to appear, containing filter questions to which you need to respond (*Figure 2*).

What is the big deal about the filters?

The filters are the key to the utility of the Integrated Research Application System as the filter questions fulfil three important roles:

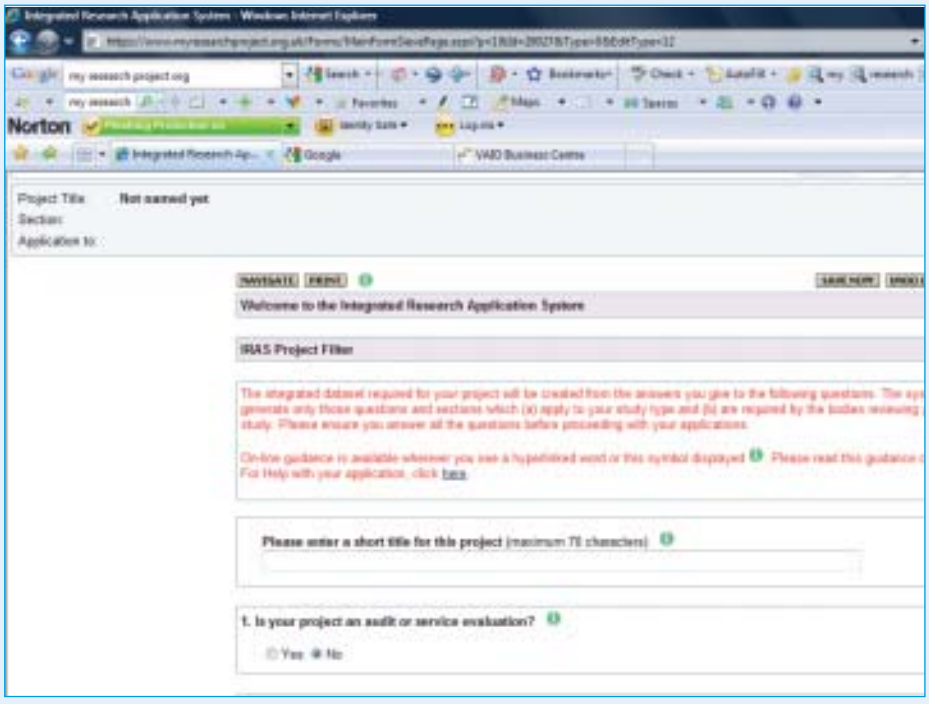
1. They determine which approvals are needed for your particular study
2. They determine what information you need to provide to complete all approval forms
3. They determine which declarations need to be signed and submitted.

The beauty of these filters is that the Integrated Research Application System will automatically select the appropriate forms that need to be filled in based on the answers given to it. The advantage is that researchers and busy clinicians do not need to find out which forms need to be completed before starting. Many of the forms will have areas of duplication, but as long as the data have been entered once, they will be automatically pasted into the relevant box for each form.

You then answer the questions accordingly and all the relevant forms to comply with the relevant regulatory bodies will be generated for you.

Figure 1. The log-in page of the Integrated Research Application System website.

Figure 2. The filtering questions used to generate the correct forms used on the website.



Conclusions

The old National Research Ethics Service forms will no longer be used from 1 September 2009, therefore the Integrated Research Application System system is likely to become mandatory in its stead in the future. Any potential researchers among them would be wise to make themselves familiar with the Integrated Research Application System website, before such familiarity is imposed upon them. Technical help is available from the IT helpdesk on 0207 0992015 and via email at: helpdesk@infonetica.net BJHM

Conflict of interest: none.

Further reading

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Slowther A, Boynton P, Shaw S (2006) Research governance: ethical issues. *J R Soc Med* **99:** 65–72

KEY POINTS

- Research is a major part of career progression.
- Integrated Research Application System streamlines the process.
- In the future the Integrated Research Application System is likely to be mandatory, so it may pay to start becoming familiar with it now.