Annual Report - Executive Summary
2016-2017
Executive Summary

This past year The Farr Institute has continued to deliver on its mission to position the UK as a world leader in health informatics research through scientific discovery and the enhancement of patient and public health. Across the 21 academic institutions that make up the Institute, Farr researchers have published an average of six peer-reviewed papers every week over the course of the year.

Our goal in 2016/17 has been to focus our activities across six key domains that act as our guiding principles and provide strategic steer [Box 1]. Most importantly, following advice from our International Advisory Board and funders, we have with renewed determination forged collaborations across the UK so that we act as a single Institute by convening stakeholders from different sectors and localities to share information, establish best practices, enable interoperability and provide expertise and know-how in project management, ethics, regulation, public engagement, technology development and co-ordination of governance. We have also initiated several research programmes that aim to demonstrate the ability to catalyse the sharing and analysis of data at scale. We hope this shared learning will help provide a solid foundation for the new UK Institute for health and biomedical informatics research, Health Data Research UK (HDR UK).

Research excellence is a primary goal, and this year, Farr researchers have published 238 papers, of which 36 were in papers with an impact factor greater than eight. We have also provided pump-prime funding for six high impact cross-Centre research programmes that will facilitate research at scale, and answer questions that individual Farr Investigators would be unable to pursue in isolation, many with collaborators from other organisations beyond healthcare research. It was also a year of leverage with The Farr Institute being the catalyst for several large programme grants including the €20 million Innovative Medicines Initiative (IMI) cardiovascular award (Farr London, Scotland, CIPHER) and £2 million Innovative Healthcare Delivery Programme on Cancer (Farr Scotland).

This year we launched several initiatives to demonstrate secure inter-operability between research data infrastructure investments across the UK, to facilitate data sharing and federated meta-analyses. All Farr Centres are actively participating in the Jisc Safe share project that is at the cutting edge of providing this functionality for health research. The Farr Institute UK Secure eResearch Platform (UKSeRP), continues to go from strength to strength, providing underpinning technology for Dementia Platform UK, with the enticing prospect of hosting up to 33 dementia related cohort studies for collaborative research. The Farr Institute in Manchester has provided the research and analytical platform for Connected Health Cities, a cornerstone of the Northern Powerhouse. Likewise, our quest to mobilise new datasets for research gains momentum, with notable developments in national prescribing and national imaging in Scotland and incorporation of local authority and other public datasets in Wales. Partnerships with The Alan Turing Institute and multiple industry partners are providing novel insights into health data science.

Capacity building is another important goal. This past year we have co-hosted numerous events to create a thriving community of doctoral and post-doctoral researchers across the UK, including over 100 PhD students and the successful launch of The Farr Institute Future Leaders programme, with the aim of training the next generation of fearless leaders in health informatics. This has been supplemented with co-ordinated Masters, CPD and MOOC provision, reaching over 5000 people.

Ensuring privacy, security good governance and public engagement is paramount. In Wales and Scotland, The Farr Institute has continued to build good relationships with NHS, Government and local authority data controllers and this has been instrumental to facilitate access to data, proportionate governance and improve data linkage. In Scotland, The Farr Institute co-designed the Public Benefits and Privacy Panel, launched in 2016, which is a single place of scrutiny for linked data applications. Over 250 projects have now used The Farr Institute technology and governance
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Infrastructure in Scotland. In England, there is senior Farr Institute representation on the research advisory group for NHS Digital, and we have made important contributions to the National Data Guardian (NDG) Consultation, Industrial Strategy and support for Jo Churchill MP’s NDG bill.

Finally, we have had a productive year with public engagement, with multiple exposure in science festivals, creation of the 100 Ways case study series, further development of the #datasaveslives campaign, and strategic input into the Understanding Patient Data initiative led by Wellcome Trust. Many of these materials and activities have been widely used by many organisations and individuals nationally and on social media. Our online presence continues to grow with over 24,000 users of the new Farr Institute website in the past year. All Centres have continued to increase the amount of research co-developed with members of the public.

Since the launch of The Farr Institute, the challenges of leading a single national research Institute have been varied and challenging. This past year was no exception. 2016/17 was notable for the tremendous productivity of our staff and scientists, numerous high impact publications and, for the first time, the ability to execute research and data sharing across the UK. We believe we have strengthened partnerships locally, nationally and internationally, but there is still much to be achieved. Misconceptions about the original purpose of The Farr Institute remain, and the challenges of acting as a single research site across complex data systems are under-estimated by many. Harmonisation of data access, governance and technology and data standards remains challenging, especially in England. We are proud however to have built a vibrant, forward looking community in health informatics as demonstrated by the over 750 registrants for the Informatics for Health 2017 Farr Institute conference in Manchester in April 2017, compared with 120 registrants in 2013.

In 2017/18, we seek to support five activities; (i) continue to deliver on The Farr Institute six priorities as part of the original eHIRC grants; (ii) place a greater emphasis on the scale of research across the UK; (iii) link with bio-informaticians and experimental medicine researchers to harness structured, unstructured and “omic” data for discovery science and precision medicine; (iv) further develop links with The Alan Turing Institute and industry to build collaborative research programmes in health data science; and (v) support the successful launch of Health Data Research UK.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank The Farr Institute teams across the UK for their relentless enthusiasm and support, as well as our collaborators and partners in NHS, Government, other public sector bodies and industry. We would like to thank our funders and also our International Advisory Board, chaired by Professor Nancy Pedersen, for their vision and support. Together we will pursue our quest to a world-leading institute where data, discovery and partnership improve health and healthcare.

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