

Deciding if your institution is *ready* for a Research Information Management System



Most institutions that are ambitious about their research programs will eventually need to consider acquiring a Research Information Management System (RIMS). Sometimes called a Current Research Information System (CRIS), a RIMS is a software solution that aggregates and curates an organization's research activities. Its centralized management of research information promotes operational efficiency and consistency, helping to streamline reporting and compliance, support data-driven decisions and optimize collaboration and funding opportunities. Many RIMS also include showcasing capabilities to improve the visibility of academic work and make it easier to track and demonstrate its impact.

To support these capabilities, a RIMS must be deeply integrated with internal systems, so installation can be complex. Your institution may decide to build a RIMS from scratch, use an open source option, or buy a commercial solution. You may even take a hybrid approach and combine two or more of these elements to address your specific needs. Whatever the final decision, an ongoing commitment to data cleaning and change management will be required, along with a significant investment of time and resources.

Key points to consider before you invest in a RIMS:

- A RIMS is an ongoing investment, not a one-and-done purchase.
- Your decision to build or buy a RIMS should be based on your institution's specific characteristics and objectives.
- A RIMS is not a tool or database, it is a critical piece of infrastructure like a finance or HR system.
- You get out of a RIMS what you put into it. Even the best system will underperform if it doesn't get effective institutional support, including high-level leadership, dedicated staffing and sustained user training.

This checklist is designed to help you decide if your institution is ready to commit to a RIMS and show how the benefits might stack up against the investment. The focus is on sparking useful conversations and questions, rather than providing details of processes and potential challenges. You can find more resources about RIMS evaluation, acquisition and implementation at end of the checklist.



Part one: institutional readiness



1. Review your current research system challenges

- Are you experiencing research data fragmentation, with information scattered across a range of unconnected formats and systems?
- Does research management carry a high administrative workload with too many manual processes and workarounds?
- Can you effectively showcase faculty expertise and publications? And does this have implications for how you track research impact?
- Can you produce accurate reports quickly for accreditation, funding and leadership use?
- Do your current systems enable leadership to make decisions based on secure, up-to-date and trusted data?
- Do you experience compliance challenges, such as meeting open access requirements set by funding agencies, institutions, or governments?

If your institution is experiencing these challenges, a dedicated Research Information Management System could be the answer.

2. Evaluate your strategic and cultural readiness

- Is research growth a priority? And is the research output large enough to justify investment in a RIMS?
- Is sufficient funding available for a long-term research management option?
- Is there a clear, leadership-backed vision for what a RIMS should achieve?
- Key stakeholders include leadership, researchers, librarians, IT staff and research office administrators. Do they support the implementation of a large-scale system?
- Is there a project team containing members of these groups that can support tasks like a data audit, process mapping and system implementation?
- Does your institution have clear policies around data privacy and ownership?

Gauge whether your institution is ready to move forward, emphasizing the need for executive support and a shared motivation to reduce administrative burdens on researchers.

Part one: institutional readiness



3. Assess the operational performance of current systems in the research management space

- Does your current system offer real-time availability, with fast response times and minimal downtime?
- Are user satisfaction levels and adoption rates acceptably high?
- Is there a high degree of automation across systems and processes, or do manual processes still dominate?
- Is your current system user-friendly, or is technical help usually needed to retrieve insights or generate reports?
- Can the system be effectively scaled to deal with increasing numbers of users, research outputs and data sources?
- Can the system be easily adapted to assimilate new data types without custom coding or high maintenance costs?

Review your current research ecosystem for inefficient workarounds including spreadsheet management, ad hoc data aggregation, cut-and-paste reporting, slow response times and low adoption.

4. Evaluate the readiness of your IT infrastructure

- Do you have a dedicated IT support team and a reliable high-capacity network?
- Does your technical infrastructure comply with information security standards like [ISO 27000](#)?
- Are your key systems, such as Human Resources (HR) and the Student Information System (SIS), digital and interoperable?
- What proportion of research content and data is in a digital format? (This could include publications, grant applications, compliance information and personnel data.)
- Is there standardization across existing data formats, such as compliance with [CERIF](#), and a process for continuous data cleaning?
- Does your institution consistently use [Persistent Identifiers](#) (PIDs) like [ORCID](#) or [Scopus Author IDs](#)?

Making sure that your institution is ready from an IT perspective is vital, especially if you decide to self-build a RIMS.



Part two: the build or buy decision



1. Will you build or buy your RIMS?

- Consider the uniqueness and complexity of your research use cases and systems. How easily will vendor products integrate with your research outputs and workflows?
- Will strict policies in areas like intellectual property, data privacy and security, prevent you from buying cloud-based solutions?
- Is a fast implementation process a priority? Self-built systems typically take longer to rollout than vendor-acquired ones.
- How attractive is the ability of vendor systems to innovate and incorporate industry-standard practices?
- Do you have a sustainable in-house IT team capable of undertaking software development?
- How risk averse is your institution? Commercial products are already tested and validated and generally offer predictable subscription fees. Custom-made systems can be riskier because of their uniqueness and often entail significant, variable maintenance costs.

Institutions with distinctive requirements may favor building a RIMS over the more standardized vendor offerings. Commercial systems excel in areas where external connectivity is required such as showcasing, collaboration and funder liaison. More guidance is available [here](#).



Part three: the build option



1. Preparing to build a RIMS

- If you decide to build, set up a cross-functional steering group with stakeholder teams from faculty, library, IT services, research office, finance and HR. You will need high-level support, too — is there someone who can act as an executive sponsor?
- Have you documented the rationale for the system and described what success will look like?
- Have you mapped your current research information landscape, identifying data silos, overlaps or omissions?
- Can you use surveys or workshops to gather user requirements? If so, focus on current workflows and their pain points.
- Decide how comprehensive the RIMS needs to be. Are integrations with existing institutional systems (e.g., HR, finance and SIS) necessary?
- Is there short and long-term planning for areas like data governance, staffing and cost-benefit analyses?

Key areas are automation, integration and easing administrative burden on staff. After the planning stage, self-build projects tend to be highly specific to their institutions, so *this scenario will not be pursued further here.*

Part four: the buy option



1. Preparing to engage with vendors

- Have you identified the stakeholders who will liaise with the vendor (e.g., librarians, IT staff, research administrators and faculty)?
- Have you defined the key use cases for a vendor system, such as showcasing, tracking research outputs and impact, automating faculty reporting systems and open access compliance, etc., and set goals associated with them?
- Look for vendors with an established track record in higher education. Have you taken the time to review case studies and testimonials from institutions similar to yours?
- Does the vendor offer a clear implementation strategy, including training and post-implementation support? Will they import data from your existing systems?
- Does the vendor offer a Software as a Service (SaaS) or on-premise solution? SaaS systems can reduce the internal support burden, while on-premise solutions might offer more options for customization.
- Have you evaluated commercial systems against open source options? Typically, a commercial choice offers convenience, dedicated support and robust features/analytics. With an open source system, you may be able to combine greater flexibility with lower costs, although this may not always be the case.

Clearly define your research needs and the specific problems you are trying to solve before engaging with vendors.

2. Evaluating a vendor's RIMS system

- Can the RIMS host research content and data in one place, ensuring records and reports are consistent and accurate?
- Can it be readily integrated into other relevant systems (e.g., HR, library, finance)?
- Does the RIMS reduce the need for manual input and automate tasks like publication management, grant tracking and reporting?
- Can the RIMS manage compliance with open access mandates and research assessment exercises?
- Will the RIMS provide institutional leaders with access to analytics that support decision-making in areas like research strategy, grant strategy and talent acquisition?
- Will the RIMS provide portals to showcase faculty expertise and research impact?
- Will the RIMS offer robust security and data privacy protection and be compliant with data protection regulations like GDPR?

While technical considerations are important, the key task is to align the capabilities of a vendor system with your institution's strategic research goals and workflows.

Part four: the buy option



3. Calculating the total cost of ownership

- Implementing a vendor RIMS will entail a range of costs beyond the price of the upfront license, usually referred to as the total cost of ownership (TCO). These are likely to include:
 - o **One-time costs** – could include software licensing, setup fees and implementation charges (e.g., data migration, training, infrastructure setup for non-SaaS solutions).
 - o **Annual costs** – could include license or subscription fees, maintenance costs (e.g., software updates), support costs, or charges connected with further internal integrations.
 - o **Hidden costs** – could include charges for the migration of data from existing systems, data cleaning and mapping, or the employment of system administrators to manage the RIMS.
 - o **Future development costs** – could include changes to ensure the system supports new compliance requirements or research assessment metrics, plus the downtime these changes might involve.

Ensure pricing is as transparent and inclusive as possible. Clarity on your total investment costs will help you avoid unwelcome budgetary surprises later on.

4. Evaluating the return on investment (ROI) for your RIMS

- It is wise to carry out a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis during and after implementation. These factors should be considered:
 - o Increases in usage frequency.
 - o Increases in research funding success rates.
 - o Increases in administrative efficiency due to automation and the consolidation of legacy systems, and reflected in time and cost savings.
 - o Enhanced research visibility and collaboration, indicated by improved research profile views, collaboration rates, etc.
 - o Successful compliance and risk reduction in areas like cybersecurity (consolidated systems offer fewer entry points to prospective attackers).
 - o Has the system measurably advanced strategic goals – e.g., success in global rankings or furthering digital transformation?

Note that the ROI exercise should be repeated both during and after implementation.



Discover more about RIMS

The following resources provide extended coverage of RIMS evaluation, acquisition and implementation, including:

- [Why you need a Research Information Management System](#) (Elsevier)
- [What are Research Information Management Systems](#) (Association of College and Research Libraries)
- [Procuring a research management system](#) (JISC)
- [Why does one need a CRIS?](#) (euroCRIS)

You can explore Elsevier's RIMS, Pure, [here](#).