



Tracks laid for international collaboration during two day meeting between Harvard Medical School and The University of Manchester

Organised by Manchester Integrating Medicine and Innovative Technology (MIMIT) the aim of this high-profile meeting was to explore opportunities for collaboration and identify current unmet health problems that could be solved by combining the technical expertise of world-leading research scientists with the power of data and technology.

Hosted at The University of Manchester's Health eResearch Centre (HeRC) the workshop formed part of an innovative 'Researcher Development Programme' (MHEET) that aims to create a framework for nurturing meaningful academic collaborations between the Manchester Academic Health Science Centre (MAHSC) and Harvard Medical School.

Gathering under the theme of "Replication engines between US and EU Clinical Epidemiological datasets" the collaboration was jointly led by Prof Iain Buchan (HeRC) and Prof Isaac Kohane from the Center for Biomedical Informatics (CBMI) at Harvard Medical School.

Supported by a team of esteemed academic mentors¹ at The University of Manchester, researchers from Harvard worked closely with select researchers from Manchester² in an intensive and hands-on workshop that was designed to stretch participants and tease out new ideas.

Breaking away from the traditional 'show and tell' model of collaboration, the workshop deliberately encouraged free thinking. Through an innovative hands-on model of idea generation, the workshop enabled the attendees to identify and shape new ideas organically and, by developing and understanding areas of mutual interest, work them up into robust research proposals.

The first of its kind, the workshop combined collaboration with career development by enhancing independent research skills and providing the opportunity for those in attendance to lead on the development of their own novel ideas within a supported framework.

After setting out the objective for the workshop Prof Buchan and Prof Kohane handed over the reins to the nine participants returning only at the end of day two to hear their ideas. The freedom to explore, speak openly and brainstorm enabled the team to take responsibility for their own ideas and identify collaborative solutions.

Delegate Dr. Matt Sperrin said: "The workshop was a valuable experience and brilliantly facilitated; I'm delighted to be part of this programme and look forward to strengthening the relationships and ideas we initiated."



Following discussions about their interests and how best they might work together, the team set-about the task of identifying, selecting and developing specific ideas and unmet health needs that together, they felt they could address successfully. The project ideas included:

- Trajectory of Autisms
- Predicting/reducing unscheduled care evaluation
- Parental risk factors for neuro-developmental disorders
- Backwards predictions of disease incidence

Developing their thinking over dinner in Manchester the event delegates then set-about streamlining their projects by preparing their ideas into short presentations to discuss with the mentors the following day.

The mentor group were then tasked with evaluating each of the four possible ideas. Through constructive feedback the researchers were challenged to reflect on their processes and the merits of their projects following some suggested areas of consideration and improvement.

Light-touch support for the researchers will continue through the next stages of the programme which includes developing collaborative proposals and grant application submissions.

“HeRC were delighted to partner with MIT and Harvard to host this groundbreaking workshop. We take early researcher development seriously and this kind of investment in the skill development journey is invaluable.” - Dr Amanda Lamb, HeRC’s Head of Operations

The workshop was brought to its conclusion with some structured activities that enabled the participants to focus their thinking and begin the process of identifying just two of their ideas based on both the mentor feedback and the feasibility to build the idea into a fundable collaboration.

The final two ideas will now be developed jointly across the groups with the intention of two HeRC researchers being awarded the opportunity of travelling to Harvard in spring 2016. Whilst there they will intensively develop their proposals in partnership with their Harvard colleagues.

