

Chapter 2.4

Research Management as Labyrinthine – How and Why People Become and Remain Research Managers and Administrators Around the World

*Susi Poli^a, Simon Kerridge^b, Patrice Ajai-Ajagbe^c and
Deborah Zornes^d*

^a  0000-0003-4053-4640, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy;

 Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review & editing

^b  Pivot Global Education Consulting Group, London, UK;  Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review & editing

^c  0000-0003-4094-3719, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK;  Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review & editing

^d  0000-0001-5831-9290, Research Services, Royal Roads University, Victoria, BC, Canada;

 Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review & editing

Abstract

This chapter explores the results of an international survey (RAAAP-2) to provide global insight into research management and administration (RMA) as a relatively new field of investigation within the area of higher education management (HEM). Building on that extensive survey, the purpose of this chapter is to investigate qualitatively how and why people become and remain research managers and administrators, focussing primarily on their skills, roles, and career paths.

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Findings from the analysis confirm that a career in RMA is rarely an intentional choice and can be described as *labyrinthine*, which could be even compared and contrasted with a *concertine* academic career described by Whitchurch et al. (2021). While conclusions confirm the gender implications of the profession, which is overall highly 'female'; further conclusion sheds light on RMAs across regions and suggests how this varied ecosystem could even undermine the recognition of RMA as a profession.

Keywords: Research management and administration; profession; professionalism; insider research; labyrinthine career; societal ethos; Research Administration as a Profession

1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how and why people become and remain research managers and administrators, and in doing so, explore the skills, roles, and career paths that enable a transition into and within the field of RMA. In connection with this purpose, the chapter also provide some insights into the level of professionalisation of RMAs in different regions throughout the world as allowed by the extensive RAAAP-2 dataset (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022).

The chapter builds on the work of the Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP) study (Kerridge & Scott, 2016, 2018a), by further investigating the qualitative component of the RAAAP-2 dataset, to explore issues relating to the professional identity of RMAs. The dataset includes responses from individuals in research institutes, research funding organisations, colleges, the private sector, and universities – though the overwhelming majority of responses are from the latter group. The identities of RMAs working outside academia are explored, for example, by Santos et al. (2023, Chapter 2.5).

1.1. Objective of the Study

Research management and administration is one of the managerial functions we find not only in universities but also in an array of research institutions. However, the field of investigation on RMA is inextricably linked with the broader and more general area of HEM and with its vast body of knowledge; this does not mean, though, to exclude any practitioners from any other sector from this view.

Moving from functions to individuals, the distinction between the broad field of HEM and this sub-field of RMA is also made to include RMAs as one of the occupational groups supporting research activities in the HE sector (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009; Shelley, 2010).

Regarding conceptual clarification (Evans, 2002) of the doing and doers in RMA, there is no one simple or standard occupational definition for RMA. Some define RMA via the roles of individuals working in the area (Beasley, 2006), while others point to what these individuals do in their leading or managing research (Chroñister & Killoren, 2006). When we talk about 'research management' or 'research administration', therefore, we refer to the same area of work. It should be noted that the differences in terms adopted to describe those who work in this area may reflect some cultural norms, for example, we refer to 'research administration' in the USA and to 'research management and administration' in the UK (Kerridge, 2021a).

2. Literature Review

The chapter focuses on RMA to further explore the RAAAP-2 dataset and so gain a further level of understanding of roles, skills, and career paths of the workforce of RMAs in each region.

Noting views that it is still debateable refer to RMA as a definitive profession (Agostinho et al., 2018; Dunleavy et al., 2019; Langley, 2012; Poli, 2018a; Poli et al., 2014; Poli & Toom, 2013; Starbuck, 2014), in this chapter, we have adopted the term ‘profession’ refer to individuals in relation to their work in RMA because RMA already fulfils several ‘profession’ criteria, for example, the promotion of advanced qualifications, the establishment of professional associations, and an academic voice for the professional community (Lewis, 2014).

The wide range perspective adopted in this chapter mirrors the growing number of studies investigating RMA globally; these studies have covered regions throughout Europe, from the UK (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Derrick & Nickson, 2014; Kerridge, 2012; Langley, 2012; Shelley, 2010) to Portugal (Agostinho et al., 2018; Trindade & Agostinho, 2014; Vidal et al., 2015), from Italy (Poli, 2011; Romano & Albanesi, 2021) to Sweden (Widforss & Rosqvist, 2015); and internationally from Japan (Ito & Watanabe, 2017) to Canada (Acher et al., 2019) through Southern Africa (Williamson et al., 2020), to mention but a few.

The studies above have been varied in their coverage of topics, spanning from career paths (Lewis, 2014; Regan & Graham, 2018) to the debate on RMA as a profession (Acker et al, 2019; Carter & Langley, 2009; Langley, 2012; Schützenmeister, 2010; Williamson et al., 2020), and from professional frameworks to the foundation steps to foster the professionalisation of the community (Green & Langley, 2009; Williamson et al., 2020), among others. One further line of inquiry has focussed on university administrators that are more frequently women and also on RMA as a female profession (Allen-Collinson, 2007, 2009; Eveline, 2005; Krug, 2015; Losinger, 2015; Pearson, 2008; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014; Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014; Szekeres, 2004). This evidence of a profession that is largely female is likely to arise from ‘unacknowledged value’ (Angervall et al., 2015), but also from dynamics of micropolitics, or the pervasiveness of gentleman’s clubs or also from a set of gendered cultural barriers preventing women from accessing the most senior roles in academic and professional leadership (Morley, 1999, 2008; O’Connor, 2015) so to mirror the predominant male academic world. In the USA, for example, Shambrook et al. (2015) indicate that research administration has changed over time from a male-dominated to a female-dominated field. Internationally, about 77% of research administrators identify as female (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a), and in Canada, the figure is even higher at 81% (Zornes, 2019). To be noted how this trend of feminisation of the profession is not equalised in leadership roles where there is international evidence that men are over-represented (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a, pp. 26–27) revealing the ‘glass ceiling’.

3. Methods

This section of the chapter describes the method in use, that is, work-based or practitioner research. Work-based research simply refers to the researcher’s context (Costley et al., 2010; Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2016) where organisational, professional, and even personal contexts are likely to influence the way work-based research is conducted. In this sense, work-based research is likely to engage with a wide range of sources (Costley et al., 2010; Whitchurch, 2006) spanning from professional, such as conference proceedings and institutional reports, to academic, peer-reviewed research and beyond.

One of the primary concerns when conducting work-based research refers to the definition of an audience we are speaking to (Costley et al., 2010); this definition helps ensure that motivations and contributions of the work-based research undertaken are fully considered and overtime questioned.

After clarifying for whom this study is written, the next aim is to explain the leading epistemological and ontological elements that lie behind the analysis conducted in this chapter. Following Crotty (1998), we adhere to social constructivism as the epistemology, and to interpretivism as the theoretical perspective.

In addition, to the choice of social constructivism, we explain how the chapter is co-authored by a multicultural team of RMAs, current and past role holders in the field; as it is, the team shows a variety of characteristics, in research and/or in research support, meant to partially fulfil the diversity of a social constructivist stance. Thus, on the one hand, the blend of cultures aims to show the multiple, varied lenses through which the authors interpret the field of RMA; while on the other hand, are these varied lenses that explain and reinforce the choice of social constructivism and interpretivism as the epistemology and ontology.

The main data collection was the RAAAP-2 dataset, namely, an international survey that used an online questionnaire (Kerridge et al., 2020) to collect quantitative and qualitative responses from RMAs around the world (Kerridge & Scott, 2016, 2018a). The approach overall adopted is qualitative and grounded in thematic analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Morse, 2010; Robson, 2002). Hence, qualitative thematic analysis was carried out following Miles and Huberman (1994); in so doing, recurring themes and patterns were manually coded, while categories of analysis emerging from the data itself were meant to reflect and align with the purpose of the research, to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Once identified recurring parts of the data and coding them, we defined codes that have been manually analysed and so included into categories arranged as ‘a chest of drawers’ (Evans, 2002).

For example, under the subject ‘why people joined research administration’ themes emerged related to practical, opportunity, skills matched, asked, and other. For the subject ‘why people have stayed in research administration’ the following themes emerged: practical, contribution, purpose, and other. Further examples of these themes included the number and type of roles held; why a person joined research administration; why they stayed), and then these themes were further disaggregated by region (*Analysis Region of Employment: UK; USA; Canada; Oceania; Europe [excluding UK]; and Rest of the World region [including South and Central America, Asia, and Africa]*), so to provide a more insightful perspective on data to readers from all these regions. All these themes were used across regions for comparisons and contrast.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1.1. Why People Join the Profession

Overall, when asked how they came to work in research administration, less than a fifth made an intentional choice (19.8% of $n = 4,313$), most fell into the position (59.5%), and some were moved into an RMA role (9.9%), and the remainder for other reasons. These proportions varied by region, with only 13.0% (of $n = 1,419$) choosing the career in the USA, compared to 27.9% (of $n = 1,000$) in Europe (excluding UK). This seems to be counter intuitive as the profession has a much longer history in North America, and yet is still relatively unknown, or seemingly not initially attractive as a career. This could however be explained by the apparent correlation with the movement of researchers into RMA: 15.5% (of $n = 1,360$) USA respondents indicated (top 2 on a 5-point Likert-type scale) this was a contributing factor, compared to 46.3% (of $n = 955$) from Europe

(excluding UK). Researchers are perhaps more likely to know about RMAs and actively consider this as a career move. However, it is clear that RMAs come from a wide variety of other backgrounds (see Dutta et al., 2023, Chapter 2.3).

Respondents typically felt they possessed the generic skills/experience and/or specialist skills to work in RMA, however, continuous learning was necessary and inevitable due to factors such as ‘organisational context’, and ‘immersion’. RMAs cited practical reasons for joining the profession including flexibility, security, benefits, location, that they needed a job, etc. Many respondents, regardless of region, noted that they felt their skills matched the requirements for the position with communication and writing skills being of primary importance.

Responses indicated opportunities and ease of movement between RMA roles as well as between non-RMA roles and RMA roles. It is not clear whether those who reported career advancement typically joined RMA when the field was much younger and smaller. Overall, there appears to be more of a ‘push’ from Research than a ‘pull’ to RMA with respondents indicating that they enjoyed RMA in large part because of its proximity to research. There was a much less obvious push from regular HE admin to RMA, with respondents typically reporting that they fell from or were absorbed into RMA from this area – while also noting that RMA is a more attractive and challenging area of (HE) admin ... that is, more attractive than regular (HE) admin. However, concerns were noted overall that an RMAs career is rarely spent in the same institution or in the same division. As a result, the career in RMA is seldom something ‘that others could follow’ and so its evolution is more often hard to describe, making it difficult for individuals to ‘choose’ this career path at the start of their careers. Furthermore, there are a number of instances of ‘bi-directional’ careers and instances where individuals have taken more junior positions after holding more senior ones, moving to other HEIs, or even back to research later in their career.

4.1.2. Why They Stay

Overwhelmingly there were comments regarding the wider purpose/contribution of the role to the research enterprise. Repeatedly, respondents noted the value of research in making a difference in society, the role of innovation and the need for innovation, and that research helps address the world’s problems. Research was described as dynamic, creative and vital to society, and the role of research administration in contributing to the effectiveness of research came through in all regions.

There were also strong statements regarding practical reasons for staying including having a permanent job, pension, benefits, being ‘good’ at the role, close to retirement, flexibility, and job satisfaction. In the USA, there were a large number of responses that focused on the networks and relationships that people have within the profession as a reason they stay with respondents citing strong networks, a great boss, great colleagues, team atmosphere, and an ability to mentor as it seems to be in a variety of other jobs. There were concerns raised throughout the responses focused on challenges with the profession, including comments such as there being limited recognition of the role, that it is a very stressful role, insecurity in some regions as a result of cuts, pressure by the administration to work evenings and weekends, and concerns about the risks associated with non-compliance by faculty members.

What also came through in the analysis, was that RMAs can be (perhaps uniquely, compared to other areas of HE, and so it was throughout the regions) involved in generating their own career opportunities as effective RMA helps grow and diversify an institution’s research function, thus providing more opportunities and roles within RMA. There is scope for RMA roles to change and develop over time, into a greater range of

tasks. Respondents reported scope for creativity in RMA roles, and this was highlighted as an element of job satisfaction in RMA, that is, why people stayed in the profession.

4.2. Results on Careers, Roles, and Skills

4.2.1. Labyrinthine Careers

RMA are well educated with 72.0% (of $n = 4,317$) holding a masters' or doctoral degrees and just under half (49.2%, of $n = 4,273$) are over 45 years of age, and only a few (0.5%) are under 25. Careers in RMA were found to be non-linear and labyrinthine in that they were more likely to arise from other roles previously held (e.g. administrative roles in a library, in department management or finance; or from research). These careers may therefore be represented as a 'labyrinth' consisting of multiple choices and directions, including moving laterally. In addition, these careers were likely to have spanned across the university, from departments and local offices to the central administration. As a result, individuals were more likely to have held roles non-exclusively in RMA, roles in other university functions, and often roles in research. These careers appear to have been constructed moving from both specialised and generalist roles with no clear pattern represented – chance and opportunity were critical factors. RMAs tend to come from other sectors both inside and outside of research and RMAs were less used to getting stuck in the 'same HEI, function, division or even job'. Consequently, RMA careers are not easy to describe and span from temporary positions to moments of serendipity, or second-choice careers to passion-driven choices (for research and the social mission embedded in a university institution) to a good compromise between research and management (or between passion and a job that makes a living and money).

4.2.2. Broad Spectrum Roles

Overall, 77.0% (of $n = 4,109$) RMAs who responded noted that this was not their first RMA role, and 52.3% had had at least two other RMA roles before. This 'mobility' translated within the RMA role itself with a common thread being the variety of functions or tasks, changing responsibilities, and changing titles. An RMA may be in research support and research, and they appear to be keen to embed research-based skills coupled with research support skills and responsibilities. Some also hold other administrative roles and/or research roles as part of their remit. Respondents felt that RMA is a flexible profession and provides opportunities to do new and varied things (compared to other areas of HE admin) – for example, 'meet people', 'progress in career'; utilise existing skills. Research management and administration was also seen as a 'prestige function' in that it was regarded as challenging and creative, an aspirational profession. However, in a small minority of responses, RMA is regarded as a 'no rule profession' or a 'no rule field of practice'; this means that individuals see themselves not just as invisible but also as not led by a common ground of understanding and knowledge. This also highlights the search for recognition, the unclear or varied professional qualifications paths, and the distance that some of these individuals feel towards those peers working in different support functions to which they may feel disconnected.

4.2.3. Wide Ranging Skills

Overwhelmingly, people noted the importance of having relevant skills for the position, and then further developing those skills and adding new skills after taking on the role. Skills are described to be 360-degree or wide ranging and they even look like never enough for the role. These skills appear to vary a little across the regions

and so – if pre-existing the role or gained later through practice or professional associations – seem to depend on where research managers and administrators find themselves. In addition to skills, we see how the role played by professional associations in relation to professional development and training on these skills is generally unclear in the majority of the regions and only in the USA does its added value come to be highlighted. This should be of particular importance to the INORMS organisations with regard to the need for professional development, network with colleagues, and for mentorship possibilities.

4.3 Results by Regions

4.3.1. Canada

For many Canadian research administrators, when asked why they joined the profession, it appeared that it was not an intentional choice. Respondents focused on practical reasons (e.g. needed a job, relocation, and job security), or on the opportunity the role provided. Respondents from Canada saw their skills as a match for the role citing legal skills, project management skills, accounting experience, grants experience, writing skills, and considerable relevant prior experience or expertise. When asked why they have stayed in the profession, the tone of responses changed. While there were still practical reasons for why people stayed, there were also those that focused on the bigger picture, the contribution of research to the wider world, the importance of research, and the idea of contributing to society. A number of respondents talked about the importance of the work noting that we ‘help researchers address the world’s problems’ and that we are ‘able to reduce the admin burden of PIs’. There were cautions however as well with one respondent noting ‘while I love the work, it is the most stressful job I have ever had, not only due to its complex nature but because of the extremely heavy workload, without a break from constant demands’, these high stress levels in RMA are explored by [Shambrook \(2012, 2022, 2023, Chapter 4.5\)](#) and [Watson \(2009\)](#). Respondents noted that ‘there is also high risk in terms of determining eligibility, giving advice on budget development, strategy, etc.’. In response to questions regarding when their skills were developed there was a mix among respondents. Some noted that their skills were a good fit upon joining the profession while others noted the development of skills on the job and their growth with regard to the changing environment. For many, it was a conscious blend of the two – an acknowledgement of what they brought to the role, and their own development since being in the role.

4.3.2. Europe (Excluding UK)

With regard to why they joined the profession, responses ranged from intentional to falling into the role. Many respondents noted practical reasons for joining the profession including ‘job insecurity and continuous search for funding as a scientist contributed to my career switch’, or ‘after four and a half years of post doc decided I wanted a permanent position’, or ‘my research funding ran out before the next grant was confirmed’. Many identified RMA as a distinct opportunity, making an ‘active decision not to become a postdoc scientist’, or as a way to become a leader. For many, there was a shift in a role from industry or government to the academic sector. Within this group of respondents, many are highly educated and were researchers themselves before shifting to an administrative role. There was also a strong focus on the match of skill sets to the position as being a reason for joining the profession. When asked why they have stayed in the profession, respondents noted practical reasons (e.g. flexible working hours, it suited where they were in terms of their family life) as well as the purpose and contribution

the profession makes. Respondents focused on the possibility of making a difference, of helping researchers navigate the various funding systems, and contributing to ‘making important research happen’. Responding to questions regarding when their skills were developed, overwhelmingly for this group it is a ‘both’ scenario – skills were developed before taking on the role and continued to be developed once in the role. Comments also point to the complexity of the role with respondents stating that ‘rules are undefined, and decisions depend in part on the relationship of the directors with the researchers’ and that ‘research is a dynamic constant changing business’.

4.3.3 Oceania

When asked why they joined the profession, responses focused on practical reasons, opportunities, and a match with their skill set. Within this group, there was a very strong recognition of a ‘contribution’ to the bigger picture – the idea of being part of something that makes a difference. Respondents cited practical reasons for joining including location, good working conditions, wanting to work in a university environment, and the likelihood of more stable employment. Respondents also focused on the opportunity that the role provided in terms of a career path, chance for advancement, and a desire to influence the sector. The pressures of academia were also noted with one respondent stating they ‘did not want to make the sacrifices that a high career researcher needed to make and did not see older people in the labs’. When asked why they have stayed in the profession, there was a strong connection to the purpose of the role and the larger purpose of research more generally with respondents identifying the ‘contribution to something bigger’, the value and importance of the work, and the ability to make a difference. As one respondent pointed out,

the main focus of a university is a dual one of education and research. Education is the single most powerful tool to change the lives of individuals and of communities, and research is the key to resolving many issues. I can contribute a small part to this greater goal in my work in the university.

Respondents also noted the importance of networks with colleagues and the support that research management societies provide. In response to questions regarding when skills were developed, most spoke of bringing skills to the position and then either adding skills, or further developing their existing skills. As with other groups, the importance and opportunity for professional development comes through clearly.

4.3.4 UK

When asked why they joined the profession, research managers and administrators in the UK provided a mix of practical reasons, opportunity for career advancement, and/or skills matching. For those respondents in this region, there were a number of cases where there was a reorganisation of the university/department, or a redeployment. There were many incidents of individuals shifting from positions as researchers into RMA. For example, one respondent noted that they were ‘one of those people who got a PhD and didn’t know quite what to do next’. Respondents also noted a desire to work in an academic environment and to ‘stay connected to research but not do it myself’. When asked why they have stayed in the profession, individuals noted job satisfaction, flexibility, less stress than other roles, and excellent professional development

resources. Respondents also commented on a sense of purpose of the role and the support it provides for the research conducted. Individuals in this region also raised concerns regarding uncertainty overall in the sector. With regard to skills development, more than half noted a mixture of developing the skills needed prior to joining the profession, and then continuing to develop those skills and add new ones once they were in the profession.

Similarly, another individual noted that

most of the generic skills (problem solving, communication, collaboration and writing) were developed in my previous roles. However, my understanding of research impact, and the complex subtleties of handling academics and their research in general, has been entirely developing in my research admin position.

4.3.5 USA

When asked why they joined the profession, the majority of comments under this section focussed on the practical or the fact that skills matched. As compared to other regions, there were fewer instances where comments would be classed as 'opportunity'. The reasons why people joined the profession included a clear 'evolution' of the role and this group of respondents had a large number of responses included that a person 'fell into' the role, that it was an accident, or that they hadn't known they were in research administration. This group also spoke about excellent mentors they had, which played a role in their joining the profession. Practical reasons for joining the profession included a change in career path, good benefits, stable work, and flexibility. Concerns were noted around a lack of prestige or appreciation of the role with one respondent stating 'It is not an easy job to learn or to be an expert at and takes a lot of work. However, you are undervalued and underappreciated with no real say in university decisions'. When asked why they stay in the profession, this group of respondents focused on practical reasons including a number who stated they were close to retirement. There were a high number of reasons that focused on purpose, that is, on the bigger picture and importance of research in society. A number of respondents spoke about the purpose and contribution of the profession and the ability to make a difference. As one respondent suggested 'It's cool to be on the front lines of where change really happens'. Another noted that they stay in the profession because of 'the feeling that I'm supporting life-changing research and making the world a better place'. It was not all positive however with one person noting 'I have a love/hate relationship with the challenges of this job, especially some days'. More than any other group, this set of respondents talked about the value and importance of networks, mentors, and the various associations for the profession. When asked when their skills were developed, there was an overwhelming majority of responses indicating that skills were brought into the position and then additional skills were added, or existing skills evolved. One respondent noted 'I've learned a great deal through professional training over the years. I've learned equally as much from peers and mentors'.

4.3.6 Rest of the World (Including South and Central America, Asia, Africa) and Those That Did Not Indicate a Region

When considering why they joined the profession, there was a mix between those who made an intentional choice and those who 'fell into' the position. For example, for

some it was a practical decision in that ‘it seemed a better way to advance’, for others it provided an opportunity ‘to contribute to the improvement of research support, policy, leadership’. Some respondents however stated that ‘I did not know what I was getting into’ or focused on the evolution noting that ‘it just evolved, I liked it, so I kept at it and climbed the ladder’. Respondents saw a clear match of their transferable skills to the profession citing various academic backgrounds, and for one respondent the intentional decision was to ‘demystify the world of research and to provide the kind of support I did not receive’. When asked why they stayed in the profession, nearly every response was focused on the contribution they could make. Responses included aspects of helping others, making a difference, sharing knowledge, and acknowledging the need for this service in the university. There was concern raised however with the role of research administration with one respondent stating there was ‘limited recognition of the importance of the role’. In response to questions regarding when skills were developed, that is, before they took on the role, after, or both, the importance of both existing skills and the development and/or adaptation of skills while in the position was highlighted. It was clear that the role evolves that there is ‘a need to learn constantly and while working’. It should be noted that while the *Rest of the World* is not a cohesive geographic region, the broad experiences of RMAs are similar to the other regions.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Labyrinthine Careers for RMAs

The analysis confirms that careers in RMA are more often non-linear and could be tentatively defined *labyrinthine*. They are more likely to follow unpredictable trajectories that span sectors (in higher education and other sectors), functions (e.g. in RMA or in finance or in HR), and even roles (even within RMA, individuals may move from grant writing to post-award). This career framework not only means upward and downward mobility for RMAs, but it may frequently include their choice of so called ‘lateral careers’, as explained by Whitchurch (2016, 2019), among others; with this latter confirmed to be a growing trend in higher education both for those in professional services and for academics, even those in a ‘concertina’ career (Locke et al., 2016; Whitchurch, 2019; Whitchurch et al., 2021). The results above suggest an unsurprising similarity between today’s professional and academic careers in the HE sector globally.

Defining as ‘labyrinthine’ these professional careers points to the ‘idea of the labyrinth’, which is a metaphor purposively borrowed from the literature on gender studies in use to describe women’s careers as represented by a labyrinth for the complexity of the journey, its challenges, and goals (Eagly & Carli, 2008). Hence, this ‘idea of the labyrinth’ helps us describe the unpredictability of careers in RMA.

In addition, building on the quantitative part of the survey carried out by Kerridge and Scott (2018a) and Shambrook and Roberts (2011) representing RMA as a predominantly female profession, the analysis confirms the femininity of the profession with women still making the majority of the workforce in RMA. However, the *labyrinthine* career, visibly widespread in all regions, may be explained by several factors. For example, it may showcase women’s postdoc precarity and the fact that they may have little choice other than to join the professional workforce to earn a living. It may also reveal their heavy family burdens associated or not with a lack of parental support. Also, this labyrinthine trend could also stem from *labyrinthine* choices required to women as single mothers (O’Keefe & Courtois, 2019).

5.2 Falling Into the Profession or Sliding Into it Moving From Other Career Paths or From Different Functions

From the results shown above, we see that a large proportion of RMAs have career paths that do not intentionally lead to RMA; often, these RMAs have been absorbed or appointed from more traditional researcher/faculty positions to research administration so to highlight the array of shades that the access to the profession may have.

However, once becoming RMAs, most are satisfied with their choice, only 10.2% (of $n = 4,097$; top two choices on a 5-point Likert-type scale) want to leave. This supports the often-expressed view that RMA is a hidden profession, lacking in visibility, perhaps there is more that the INORMS member associations can do to raise the profile of the profession.

5.3 Remaining in the Profession May Have a Gender Component

The analysis indicates that RMAs generally value the stability and benefits of working in research organisations (e.g. flexibility, security, location) as much as the nature and content of their work. Though some respondents highlighted the stress of RMA, others highlighted the ability to carve out their own paths – and noted this as a positive aspect of RMA. It could be interesting for further investigation to explore whether the profession co-incidentally retains a predominantly female workforce because they typically have greater family burden/responsibilities and so remain in careers that provide positives and benefits as mentioned above. It might also be that women are actively shaping the professional culture and valued skills within RMA – this could be self-reinforcing.

6. Limitations, Recommendations, and Future Research

While the dataset was extensive, the pool of regions varied and in some ways arbitrary based on the response rate. Furthermore, the research questions in the survey were very broad and could not enable further follow-up questions or insights into the data, it is hoped that the RAAAP-3 survey (Oliveira, Fischer, et al., 2023, Chapter 2.2) will address some of these issues.

The main threads identified refer to career paths and their trajectories in RMA and to how RMAs roles developed over time. While further lines of investigation may focus on the importance of professional associations for the RMA role and for RMAs themselves; and on the role or contribution of less or more mature professional associations supporting these RMAs. Lastly, whether gender issues in RMA are a result or indeed depart from the generic gender pattern in HE management as pictured by Morley (1999, 2008) and O'Connor (2015).

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