

## Chapter 3.7

# Evolution of Professional Identity in Research Management and Administration

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### Abstract

This chapter delves into the evolving identity of professionals within the field of research management and administration (RMA), examining the shifts in their roles and expectations in the changing landscape in higher education. After the introductory section, Section 2 offers a conceptual framework that emphasises identity as a dynamic process rather than a static concept. This framework sheds light on the changing roles and expectations that define the RMA profession. In Section 3, we explore the contextual backdrop of shifting expectations surrounding RMA roles while stressing the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of identities to comprehend the nuances of the RMA profession. Section 4 analyzes empirical data and explore the diverse pathways that lead individuals into the RMA profession. We uncover that a notable proportion of RMAs possess scientific training and research experience and highlight the complexities surrounding the identity of RMAs with doctoral training (DRMAs). Lastly, Section 5 discusses key observations that yield valuable insights for future research on the evolving professional identity of RMAs. We emphasise that, through self-exploration and

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introspection, practitioners in the field can contribute to a deeper understanding of their roles and actively shape their professional identity.

*Keywords:* Research management and administration; RMAs; identity; role; evolution; skills; professional; gender; gendered profession

## Introduction

In the contemporary academic landscape, there is a growing imperative to ensure the efficient and ethical conduct of research while simultaneously upholding its relevance for academia and society. This evolving higher education (HE) environment, marked by increasing interdisciplinarity and globalisation, has given rise to a dedicated profession known as Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs). Recognising the pivotal role played by RMAs in navigating evolving regulations, facilitating collaboration, and meeting the ever-evolving demands of funders and governments is indispensable for institutions and nations aspiring to maintain a highly skilled workforce for sustained competitiveness. Raising awareness about this profession is essential for nurturing talent in this field, and research plays a central role in cultivating and promoting such awareness. While the literature on RMAs has traditionally focussed on topics such as their skills, careers, and roles, with a geographic emphasis on the US and the UK (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Derrick & Nickson, 2014; Kulakowski & Chronister, 2006; Shelley, 2010), recent works have begun to explore a broader range of issues in various regions. These newer studies delve into topics such as occupational status and the role of professionals as intermediaries between science and practice (Agostinho et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2023), praxis and professionalisation (Acker et al., 2019), professionalisation of the research management and administration (RMA) community (Williamson et al., 2020), and belonging among professional groups (Kurt-Dickson et al., 2018; Poli & Taccone, 2023; Siesling et al., 2017).

The unique domain in which RMAs operate has often been identified as ‘the third space’ (Veles, 2022; Whitchurch, 2008a, 2012), signifying the blend of their knowledge and expertise that straddles both academic and administrative spheres. While not all RMAs work in this space (Santos et al., 2023), discussions on these issues have gained the attention of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in recent years (Lawrence, 2022; Quinsee, 2022; Veles & Carter, 2016). Professional identity is one such area, with Lewis investigating how identities are constructed for staff in professional services and proposing a path to enhance their visibility and acknowledgment of their professionalism (Lewis, 2014). In Chapter 3.1, Poli, Oliveira, et al., (2023) examine diverse definitions and perspectives held by RMAs across Europe, illustrating how they function in a multifaceted domain that goes beyond conventional boundaries.

In the following section, we will argue that viewing identity as a process, rather than a fixed state, enhances our understanding of the development of the RMA profession and its interaction with professional associations. The notion of identity can take contrasting forms, either as a stable state or as a dynamic process. In this context, studies have uncovered how identities take shape and evolve among the diverse members within universities (Baltaru & Soysal, 2018; Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008b; Bossu & Brown, 2018; Caldwell, 2022; Enders & Naidoo, 2022), highlighting the blurring of boundaries and the formation of a ‘patchwork of *communities* of identity’ (Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008a, p. 5). By adopting the perspective of identity as an evolving process,

we aim to encourage professionals in the field, especially those who have worked behind the scenes, to engage in self-reflection, share their perspectives, and ensure their voices are acknowledged (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Rhoades, 2010; Sebalj et al., 2012; Veles & Carter, 2016).

### **Conceptual Framework: Identity as an Evolving Process**

The identities of professional staff have been thoroughly explored within a static framework. Whitchurch (2008b, 2008d), for example, introduced the initial categorisation of bounded, unbounded, cross-boundary, and blended professionals, and later described them in relation to their level of knowledge, legitimacies, spaces, and relationships. Some of these identities, categorised following Giddens's (1991) definition of 'rules and resources' within predetermined institutional structures, can be regarded as static concepts. Specifically, bounded identity is an example of static identity. This concept denotes that professionals choose to be governed by the 'rules and resources' within the given space and maintain these imposed boundaries throughout their careers (Whitchurch, 2008b, p. 11). More discussion on this group of professionals and a full description of their 'bounded' traits are covered in Chapter 3.1 (Poli, Oliveira, et al., 2023).

In contrast, other studies have depicted professional identity as a fluid concept that develops over time. They highlight various recent categories of professional staff and view their identities as something adaptable, residing in the 'third space' between academic and professional domains (Whitchurch, 2008d). More recently, RMA identities have been recognised as even more dynamic, evolving alongside complex organisational and occupational expectations, extending beyond the 'third space' (Barnett, 2008; Callender et al., 2020; Krücken et al., 2013). This process of adaptation has led RMA professionals to move towards a new territory with an expectation to serve as 'a living project of knowledge in action' and 'a practising epistemologist and a practising ontologist' (Barnett, 2008, p. 206). In other words, the domain where the RMAs operate is described as a dynamic testing ground, where these professionals experiment and engage in a search for their identity within the higher education (HE) sector.

Their search surrounding professional identity has led to a discussion of 'HE professionals' and 'new HE professionals' as described by Whitchurch (2018) and Gornall (2010). Furthermore, the fluidity of identity has been acknowledged by Caldwell (2022). Her presentation of the acquired visibility of individuals in professional services and a clearer definition of RMAs as a workforce in today's higher education institutions (HEIs) are well aligned with a previous recommendation by Lewis (2014). These studies (Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008b; Giddens, 1991) treat identity as a dynamic concept, viewing it as a 'reflective, iterative process between the individual and the structures in which they find themselves' (Whitchurch, 2012, p. 112). Such an approach also applies to the process through which individual RMAs reflect on themselves through a 'reflexive understanding of their own biography' (Giddens, 1991, p. 53) as professionals.

Viewing identity as a process not only enables us to examine the evolution of the RMA profession but also perceives professional identity as continually under construction; it is an ever-evolving process without a fixed endpoint. There might be interim or provisional agreements on what constitutes a certain identity; however, it implies that there is no ultimate, definitive form of an RMA identity. This perspective also directs our attention to the potential impact of associations on the profession. In other words, when understood as a process, the concept of identity opens the door to looking into a dynamic interplay between individuals and professional associations, potentially

fostering a unique sense of belonging influenced by the distinct histories and attributes of each entity. This perspective aligns with the findings in Chapter 3.6 (Zsár, 2023b), suggesting that RMA associations play a role in shaping the culture of their members, and vice versa. In summary, perceiving identity as a process empowers us to scrutinise the factors affecting it and analyse the effects of professional associations on one's identity.

## **Context: The Transforming Landscape of RMA Roles in Higher Education**

Administrative staff in HE sector have often been considered an invisible workforce (Gordon, 2010; Rhoades, 2010) and have received limited attention as a subject of academic inquiry. Similarly, RMAs were traditionally pictured as 'invisible intermediaries' in the literature (Derrick & Nickson, 2014; Poli, 2017; Romano et al., 2019; Szekeres, 2004), and this portrayal remained largely unexplored. Consequently, RMAs' identity has long been seen as static. When we shift our perspective to view identity as a dynamic process, how does this affect our understanding of the development of professional identity among RMAs? In this section, we trace the changing roles of individuals in research support positions and show how the career path of RMAs have transitioned from linear to more fluid and dynamic trajectories.

It is important to note that the traditional discussion about the 'roles' of administrative staff in HEIs has limited our understanding of the evolving nature of this emerging profession. Traditional discussions often portrayed administrative staff as disengaged civil servants and categorised them either as professionals, specialists, or generalists (Barnett, 2008; Whitchurch, 2008a). This is not to suggest that the previous discourse was entirely inaccurate, but rather, RMAs have evolved from administrative positions into a dynamic profession that encompasses a wide array of tasks and responsibilities. Nowadays, RMAs are often described as 'blended' or 'hybrid' professionals, reflecting the diversity of their qualifications, experiences, and perspectives.

### ***Changing Landscape and Shifting Expectations Surrounding RMAs***

To understand the transformation in RMA's identities, we can trace back to a time when tasks for professional staff roles were clearly defined without overlap with those of academic staff. This model emphasised the aspect of service, with responsibilities geared toward the betterment of society as a whole. In this view, the role of research administration was straightforward and unambiguous. That conception of the university was initially introduced by Clark (2008) in his study of global HE systems and has since gained widespread acceptance.

However, the notion of a progressive neoliberal university linked to New Managerialism (Exworthy & Halford, 1999) introduced a new approach to management in HE. This shift from an administration to a managerial model represents a significant change in our understanding of roles expected of RMAs (Whitchurch, 2008a). In this paradigm, positions within universities become less rigidly defined, with a blending of academic and professional qualifications. Career paths for HE occupations are no longer linear but rather resemble a 'concertina' (Whitchurch et al., 2021) or a 'labyrinthine' (see Chapter 2.4, Poli, Kerridge, et al., 2023). This transformation in RMA roles may well be connected to the rise of academic capitalism, a concept that refers to the commercialization and market-oriented practices increasingly prevalent in HE (Kulakowski, 2023, Chapter 1.7; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

This transition in RMA roles, from administrative to managerial within the framework of neoliberalism carries important implications. It implies that professionals in today's HE environment are motivated solely by compassion but also by opportunism. The university's service, once tailored to the needs of students and faculty, might prioritise market competition and the establishment of reward structure. This transformation is often described as a shift from a focus on service to a focus on performance (Barnett, 2008). This viewpoint also implies that RMAs are under growing pressure to demonstrate institutional success as well as individual achievements. Although this viewpoint may not universally apply to all situations involving RMAs, it serves as a foundation for introspection. It encourages the professionals in this field to scrutinise their roles as their professional identities evolve within the changing HE environment.

### ***Blurring Boundaries and Evolution of RMA Identity***

In light of the evolving HE landscape, issues surrounding academic and professional identities have become prominent topics of discussion (Locke, 2014; Marini et al., 2019; Whitchurch et al., 2021). As mentioned in the preceding section, there is a growing perspective that RMA professionals have transitioned from primarily serving the academic community to adapting to market competition. This shift also implies a transformation in the partnership between academics and RMAs, resulting in overlapping workspaces, functions, and responsibilities (Whitchurch, 2008a). As a result, the traditional distinction between highly visible academic positions and less visible or invisible administrative roles has progressively blurred.

The evolution of RMA professions from service-oriented administrative roles to market-driven managerial roles hints at a potential shift in the required skill sets, with an increased emphasis on technical competencies to remain competitive in the changing environment. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that recent studies indicate that RMA leaders highly value soft skills (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a) such as emotional intelligence, agility, and adaptability. These soft skills also align with the requirements of the start-up sector (Poli, 2022b), suggesting that the RMA profession is not only adapting to neoliberal changes in higher education but also embracing the traditional qualities that hold timeless value.

### **Professional Associations and Impact on RMA Identity**

Professional groups, communities of practice, and professional associations are crucial for shaping a collective identity (Poli, 2013; Zsár, 2023b, Chapter 3.6). This formation of professional identity is often seen as a socialisation process which involves both 'the acquisition of specific knowledge and capabilities required for professional practice' and 'the internalisation of attitudes, dispositions, and self-identity peculiar to the community of practitioners' (Hall, quoted in Borden, 2008, p. 145). Similar to academic identities, this process of shaping professional identity comes with its own set of beliefs, artifacts, rule, and dynamics (Becher & Trowler, 2001), suggesting an ongoing process with stages that foster an understanding of individual and collective growth while emphasizing the connection between individual and shared identity.

In some countries such as the USA (Borden, 2008), professional RMA associations are well established (Shaklee, 2023, Chapter 5.7) and have a significant role in shaping the identity of their members, attracting individuals from both academic and professional roles. However, in some European countries, as found in a 2013 study (Poli, 2013), benefits of belonging to professional networks and associations has

shown mixed and less clear results. Another study found that, despite having high academic qualifications, professionals in research administration in Switzerland hold a distinctive position straddling the realms of science and administration, resulting in an ambiguous professional group identity (Yang-Yoshihara, 2019).

RMA networks provide diverse and supportive environments for discussing identity. They prioritise professionalisation and skill sharing as key collective goals, influencing how engaged their members are and how they perceive their professional identity. Social capital plays a pivotal role in achieving these objectives and influences individual decisions to participate actively in these networks (Poli, 2013). These dynamics not only affect engagement levels but also the formation of identity within these groups. In some countries, such as the US (Borden, 2008), well-established professional RMA associations (Shaklee, 2023, Chapter 5.7) have a significant impact on their member's identity. However, in certain European countries, as revealed in a 2013 study (Poli, 2013), the benefits of being part of professional networks and associations have yielded mixed and less clear results.

Understanding a profession like RMA requires considering multiplicity of identities. Academic and professional managers may have taken varying paths to enter this profession (Borden, 2008; Dutta et al., 2023, Chapter 2.3; Locke, 2007; Marini et al., 2019; Poli, 2017; Poli, Oliveira, et al., 2023, Chapter 3.1), and this could lead to a blended identity, especially for those with a background in research. When examining the identity of RMAs, we see how 'individuals can be on the border of different forms of identity or move between these according to circumstances' (Whitchurch, 2012, p. 9). This introduces additional identity-related considerations, such as whether RMAs perceive a divide between their administrative and research roles, which we will explore further through empirical analysis of the RAAAP-3 data and a case study in the next section.

## **Examining RMAs' Evolving Identities through Empirical Data Analysis**

### *Diverse Trajectories into RMA Profession*

The 2022 RAAAP-3 survey data offers insights into how RMAs perceive their roles, highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of their professional identity. Among the 3,480 respondents, 63.2% identified themselves as Research Managers and Administrators, while an additional 26.1% found some level of identification with this role (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022). However, when asked to choose an identifying title from a list (Professional at the Interface of Science, Project Manager, Research Administrator, Research Adviser, Research Consultant, Research/Researcher Development, Research and Innovation Manager, Research Manager, Research Manager and Administrator, Researcher, Other – please state), only 13.9% of the 3,435 respondents selected 'Research Manager and Administrator.' Respondents from various geographic regions opted for different titles, underscoring the absence of a unified definition or identity based on self-perception.

Moreover, the survey unveiled a diverse trajectory into the RMA profession. Some transitioned from administrative roles to RMA positions, constituting 25.6% of the 3,408 respondents. Conversely, others embarked on a different path, moving from RMA roles to research or hybrid positions. This lack of a distinct career path contributes to the multifaceted and complex nature of their professional identity, aligning with the literature's insight that there exists no ultimate, definitive form of an RMA identity.

### ***RMA*s with Scientific Training and Research Experience**

It is important to point out that a significant minority of RMA's have scientific training and research experience. In regions such as the UK, Scandinavia, Europe, Canada, and Asia, more than one out of three respondents held doctorates (Dutta, Oliveira, et al., 2023, Chapter 2.2). These RMA's with doctorates (DRMA's) who move from research to administration possess a strong scientific background and commitment to scientific endeavors. In the RAAAP-3 survey, 33.3% cited their research background as a factor influencing their choice to become an RMA. In addition, a large proportion of DRMA's believe that their educational background should align with the research they support. Among those transitioning from research backgrounds, 30.4% made an intentional choice to join the profession; this is higher than the rate (20.2%) indicated by those who transitioned from other administrative areas.

The matter of identity becomes particularly intricate for DRMA's, who operate in a specialised 'third space' straddling the scientific and professional realms. The RAAAP-3 survey highlights that DRMA's are notably concentrated within the scientific field across all regions (Kerridge, 2023a). A similar concentration of scientific talent was observed in a case study of DRMA's in Switzerland conducted between 2015 and 2018 (Yang-Yoshihara, 2019). In this study, many RMA's working in federal institutes held doctoral degrees, with some possessing postdoctoral research experiences, and mostly specialised in natural sciences. For these individuals, their close connection to the scientific community served as a strong motivation to enter the RMA profession. Their unique position, bridging the realms of academia and administration, equips them with distinctive expertise and attachment to science, which manifest in comments such as "Research management is like a science experiment," and "In a way, I'm doing a different type of research than what I've done in the past (as a scientist)." However, while these DRMA's clearly have deep emotional ties to science and scientific pursuits, they also acknowledge the need for a thoughtful decision "to leave science" when transitioning from research to research administration. Their close proximity to science can create a sense of ambivalence in their identity as they navigate this highly specialised space with no clear boundaries separating it from the scientific community (Yang-Yoshihara, 2022). This situation prompts questions about the most effective approach and mindset for harnessing the potential of these highly trained talents.

## **Prospects for Future Research on the Changing RMA Identity**

### ***6.1. The Gendered Profession***

This section discusses key observations that yield valuable insights for future research on the evolving professional identity of RMA's.

#### ***Gender Dynamics and the Visibility of the RMA Profession***

The current landscape of RMA's reflects a gendered profession. The belief that female practitioners are well-suited for this role is encapsulated in the phrase, *She knows, practices, and is the one who explores the doing. And she is in action with courage, in today's fragile domain of professionalism. She dares to be the pioneer or the creator of these new discourses, ontological and epistemological.* (Barnett, 2008, p. 206)

While further affirmation of the predominantly female nature of the profession can be found in Chapter 2.4 (Poli, Kerridge, et al., 2023), it is worth considering the role of gender in shaping professional identity. Notably, a contrast becomes evident

when examining responses about professional identity. A higher percentage of females (31.3% of 2,688) identify as Research Administrators compared to males (23.6% of 679). However, this pattern displays regional variations that warrant further investigation. Interestingly, the RAAAP survey results indicate a notably lower concentration of female RMAs in regions like Asia and Africa, where the profession is relatively new further investigation. Interestingly, the RAAAP survey results indicate a notably lower concentration of female RMAs in regions such as Asia and Africa, where the profession is relatively new.

One significant implication of the female orientation could be the potential invisibility of the RMA profession within HEIs, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Some researchers have argued that administrative staff in HE sector are often overlooked, considered them part of the invisible workforce (Gordon, 2010; Rhoades, 2010). It is possible that the invisibility of the RMA profession has been exacerbated by the gender discrimination prevalent in workplaces, including HEIs, where women historically had limited opportunities to make their voices heard (Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2015). This lack of visibility for female professionals, particularly in leadership roles, has raised concerns for researchers. The topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion is explored in greater detail by Christensen and Smith (2023, Chapter 4.8).

### *Navigating the Expanding Complexity and Diversity of RMA Identity*

RMA is a profession in constant evolution. There is an increasing diversity and complexity surrounding the responsibilities and roles within the field (Langley, 2012). While some scholars may regard RMAs as a subset of the broader professional staff in university administration (de Jong, 2023, Chapter 2.1), many chapters in this book demonstrate that the RMA profession extends beyond the boundaries of universities. It encompasses professionals in various sectors, including companies, hospitals, research institutes, government agencies, charities, foundations, policy organizations, and funding agencies (Santos et al., 2023). As discussed in this chapter, there is no single, uniform identity that encompasses all RMAs; rather, this field is characterised by a growing diversity of roles. However, there are specific domains within the profession where individuals have the potential to cultivate a strong community with a more defined shared identity. For example, in the US, 'research development professionals' have established their own specialised associations (Shaklee, 2023, Chapter 5.7). In the ASEAN region, there is an emergence of 'STI Coordinators' (Sonobe & Saito, 2023, Chapter 3.5). RMAs working in these domains can develop a specific sense of shared norms as emerging professionals.

### *Fostering the Evolution of RMA Identity through Self-Exploration and Research*

A group of RMA practitioners has taken the initiative to investigate their profession as a distinct field of research (Agostinho et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2023). Their self-exploration and introspection efforts aim to deepen their understanding of their roles and actively shape their professional identity. This undertaking plays a pivotal role in increasing the visibility and recognition of the professional RMA community, effectively showcasing the value of their contributions (Caldwell, 2022; Lewis, 2014; Poli, 2022b). By scrutinising their intricate professional identities, these practitioners can offer a fresh perspective on the existing research on RMAs, potentially

propelling the RMA profession forward. Ultimately, research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities within the RMA, driving its overall development.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided an exploration of the evolving landscape of the RMA profession within the changing HE environment. Our discussion has emphasised the need for practitioners to engage in self-exploration and introspection. This perspective aligns with discussions in the field of HE studies, as highlighted by Tigh (2020). As Eraut (1994) suggests, practitioners' potential for knowledge development often remains untapped, resulting in redundant efforts and the repetitive reinvention of existing methods and processes. We recommend that RMA practitioners embrace this evolving process and actively participate in shaping their professional identities. Through this endeavour, they can increase the visibility and advancement of the RMA profession and potentially become the 'creative pioneers or the developers of the most up-to-date discourses' (Barnett, 2008, p. 206).

In conclusion, we emphasise that the modern HE landscape is characterised by increasing diversity and complexity in RMA roles and responsibilities. This diversity leads to an absence of a one-size-fits-all identity for RMAs. Instead, the RMA profession is in a constant state of evolution, marked by ongoing changes. By shedding light on the dynamic evolution of RMA identities, we aimed to provide valuable insights at a time when a growing number of practitioners are beginning to study RMA as a distinct field of research.

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