

Chapter 4.6

A Profession in the Making: Insights from Western Balkan Countries

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Abstract

The research management and administrator (RMA) profession in the Western Balkans (WB) has not yet been investigated. In this chapter, we provide a first insight into the current state of the profession, its evolution and existing network of peers within the region and between the region and Europe at large. We focus on the RMAs' opinions about the policy level, on the institutional background and on networking initiatives that allow for the understanding of further development of the profession. Based on the findings of a focus group and a survey with the region's RMAs, we provide insight into the challenges and opportunities as perceived by the RMAs themselves.

Keywords: Research management and administration; research manager and administrator; RMA; RMA profession; higher education; networking; Western Balkans; BESTPRAC

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) and research performing organisations (RPOs) around the world have been fiercely competing for research excellence that propels their global rankings while struggling to cope with declining funding from public sources (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Huther & Krucken, 2016). As a result of constant competitiveness pressure (Vidal & Ferreira, 2020), universities tend to focus on their research priorities and regularly evaluate research productivity. Hence, university departments and researchers are pushed into more complex projects that require multifaceted teams capable of supporting research activities from various angles. This phenomenon has become a driver of emerging non-academic professions that support research activities (Schützenmeister, 2010; Whitchurch, 2008c, 2017) including multiple roles simultaneously that range from covering legal, financial and research aspects to managing projects (Tauginienė, 2009). In this chapter, we use the term ‘research manager and administrator’ (RMA) to encompass the entire profession.

This chapter looks into the RMA profession as an emerging field in the WB. This politically correct term encompasses economies from South-Eastern Europe that have not yet become members of the European Union (EU): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

The chapter is divided into four parts. First, we look into the existing literature. Second, we present the methodology and the combined approach of survey and focus group used to obtain the data from the targeted population. In the third section, we present research findings followed by a discussion encompassing the key challenges and potentials identified through the data analysis. The reader will find the concluding remarks about the emerging RMA profession in the WB and several recommendations for the future in Chapter 5.26 in Part 2.

Literature Review

The existing RMA literature dominantly deals with the profession in affluent Western societies (Collinson, 2006; Kirkland, 2008, 2009, Rytberg & Geschwind, 2017), while Eastern and Southeast Europe are marginally represented. Virágh et al. (2019) have argued that ‘there are hardly any countries in which RMA is a recognized profession by the law or institutional regulations’ in continental Europe (p. 12). Even Western and Northern countries where RMA has been advancing more rapidly compared to other parts of Europe have so far failed to recognise the RMA as a separate profession (Santos et al., 2021a; Virágh et al., 2020). The existing RMA literature focussing on Eastern Europe is rather limited, while studies looking into RMAs in the Western Balkans (WB) are practically non-existent.

To ensure that we learn about all research papers related to RMAs we used Google Scholar advanced search. We searched for ‘research administrators’, ‘research managers’ and ‘research managers and administrators’ coupled with each of the region’s countries, and the ‘Western Balkans’ term. This exercise yielded a total of 984 crude results. Apart from sporadic mentions of individual terms or the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA), only studies by Virágh et al. (2019, 2020) mention the WB countries as part of the ‘Eastern countries’ without going into detailed analysis. The present chapter attempts to fill this gap in the literature by providing an overview of the emerging RMA profession in the WB.

The focus of this chapter is twofold. First, we aim to identify the existing macro-level policy framework that enables or discourages the RMA profession’s development and recognition in the region. In addition to this, we look at existing initiatives

enabling networking and building the identity of the RMA community. Second, we aim to uncover the RMA professionals' perceptions, challenges and obstacles they face and opportunities for the future recognition of the profession. The following sections present the methodology and this study's findings.

Methodology

Considering that RMA is not a recognised profession in most of the world (Santos et al., 2021a; Virágh et al., 2019, 2020), we hypothesise that the RMA is an unrecognised profession in the WB. Consequently, we argue that policies favouring the RMA at institutional or state levels are scarce. In addition, we contend that RMAs operate in an institutional vacuum without clear roles and job descriptions compelling them to juggle between simple and complex tasks (for an overview of tasks in Horizon 2020 see Andersen et al., 2019). Consequently, we suggest that RMAs confront numerous obstacles and challenges in their daily work. Furthermore, we aim to identify the importance of networking engagement, potential benefits for RMAs and the RMA profession in general and its current maturity level.

The authors used a mixed approach to determine the status of the RMA profession in the WB. We assembled a focus group to learn about the key elements surrounding the RMA profession through a semi-structured discussion. In addition, the authors developed an online questionnaire to survey RMAs from the region who could not participate in the focus group. Due to the Covid-19 travel restrictions, the focus group discussion was organised via the Zoom application in the first half of April 2022. It lasted for about 80 minutes and the respondents' opinions were transcribed after the session. The focus group featured four participants from Serbia (57%), and one each (14%) from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and North Macedonia. In addition, the authors developed an online questionnaire to broadly mimic and check the focus group's findings. The authors contacted 108 RMAs from the region to complete the questionnaire between April 14 and April 21. In total, 16 RMAs filled in the questionnaire, six from Serbia (38%), four from Albania (25%), two from each Kosovo and BiH (13%), one from BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia (6%).

Out of the focus groups' seven participants, six were women (86%) and one man (14%), whereas twelve online respondents were women (81%) and four were men (19%). When asked whether most RMAs in their countries are men or women, half of the online respondents believe that most are women (8, 50%), followed by four respondents (25%) who believe there is a balance between men and women and four (25%) respondents who say they are mostly men. One of the focus group members has a BSc degree, four have completed master's and two hold PhDs. While online survey respondents have not fully provided information about their educational levels, experientially we believe that RMAs professionals in the WB are highly qualified.

Six focus group participants work at public research organisations (86%) and one at a private research organisation (14%). Similarly, 13 online participants (79%) work at public Higher Education Institution/Research Performing Organisation (HEI/RPO) as opposed to 3 (19%) from private HEI/RPOs.

The study tried to reveal how many RMAs are there in each of the region's economies. The offered responses ranged between 5 and 10 press 'space' button and more than 50 per country. Based on the online survey and focus group's responses, we conclude that there are less than 30 RMAs in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, less than 50 in BiH and Montenegro, while in Serbia this number could be anywhere between 30 and more than 50. The size of the RMA community is well explained by Respondent 4 (Serbia): 'I think that I know everyone in Serbia who works as an RMA

professional'. Although the gathered responses range significantly, this finding is very indicative and shows that in the entire WB there are between 150 and 250 RMAs.

Having in mind that some RMAs are simultaneously acting as National Contact Points (NCPs), we wanted to determine how many of them have double roles. For example, some of them are senior associates for research and development, for some, their principal job title is university lecturer while they are assuming additional roles as project managers and NCPs and so forth. The discussion has shown that RMAs in the region feel disadvantaged compared to the EU countries that

have strong NCP network there, can easily respond to minimum standards for NCPs, and much more. I think that this is a big challenge for the Western Balkans. (Respondent 4)

Two groups of seven respondents (44%) believe that RMAs are simultaneously NCPs in their countries and that only a few of them have both roles. Two respondents (12%) believe that most of them have double roles. These responses indicate that RMAs assume multiple roles occasionally having in mind the seven-year cycles of the EU's research and innovation framework programmes.

Policy and Institutional Frameworks

The second set of questions focussed on identifying policy frameworks in each of the WB economies that encourage the RMA profession. Both, the focus group discussion and the online survey showed no policy frameworks conducive to the development of the RMA profession exist in the WB. Also, there are no systemic policies, neither at the level of RPOs nor at the state level. Respondent 2 (Albania) commented that various governmental agencies designed to build capacities, including those of research managers, mostly fail to fulfil their mission and aim instead to participate in externally funded projects that offer this type of support. Some RMAs mentioned several international instruments (e.g. widening participation and spreading excellence actions under Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe) that substitute the lack of opportunities at the institutional or national level. As remarked by a few respondents, RMAs from the WB resort to the EU's Horizon 2020/Horizon Europe, or mostly Erasmus +, programmes to access modest funding allowing capacity development for RMAs. This is an indication of external drivers that encourage the expansion of and support for the RMA profession.

In addition, neither of the focus group discussants believe that RMA is a recognised profession in the region. All respondents in the online survey confirmed this finding. The discussion delivered an important insight into the perception of RMAs. In the view of Respondent 7 (Serbia) the

RMA profession is maybe not just recognized but somehow specific compared to other duties of administrative office workers. So, they are not just RMAs in that sense, they do many other tasks within this job.

In North Macedonia, for example, RMA positions were mainly project based in the past and have not been therefore recognised institutionally (Respondent 3, North Macedonia). Considering that many research projects are externally funded by the EU (and other organisations) we can assume that some HEIs share similar paths.

When asked to define what the RMA profession is, focus group participants provided interesting insights ranging from almost scholarly definitions to emotionally

charged observations. For example: ‘a person who helps the academic staff in the pre-award and post-award phase of the management of projects at all stages’ (Respondent 5, Serbia) or ‘RMAs are people who have so many obligations and not enough time almost for their families’ (Respondent 6, BiH). Also, ‘they are the ones who have to be a one-man show, they have to do everything’ (Respondent 6). There is limited understanding of the profession by RMAs since ‘very few identify themselves as research managers’ (Respondent 2). A part of the explanation could be that ‘RMAs are more or less in offices and nobody knows who they are’ (Respondent 4). Yet, the self-appreciation of the importance of the RMA profession has been noted in several cases. As Respondent 4 put it:

Nobody has the time at the management level to read all those documents, grant agreements, rules for participation etc. but they have to sign everything. And they don’t want to do that unless they are not sure that someone has read it carefully. Apart from being research support staff, we are on the other side very important for the management because they can lose a lot of money due to small mistakes of researchers or administration. Because of us, our deans, vice-deans or rectors and management are pretty much safe.

Respondent 7 resonated with this view by highlighting that RMAs are important for researchers because they can use the time for their primary research instead of doing administrative and management tasks. However, there has to be an understanding on the side of researchers that reading documents is not enough per se unless you have the background and skills to understand what is in them. Other discussants reiterated the importance of taking up the administrative burden off the researchers’ agendas. Finally, Respondent 3 underlined that the coordination role between research staff from diverse departments that RMAs assume is sometimes critically important for the successful implementation of research projects.

The study also aimed at discovering if RMAs’ work is embedded within a dedicated project management office (PMO) or not. A PMO is usually established to provide support to researchers involved in complex research consortia that require the mobilisation of research, infrastructure, and financial and legal resources (see [Wedekind & Philbin, 2018](#)). The discussion has shown that the region’s institutions have diverse approaches. Respondent 3 explained that RMAs in North Macedonia are habitually embedded in the dean’s office, while some other responses mentioned the rector’s office or separate departments. The online survey confirmed that some RMAs tend to be employed either by the Rector (3, 19%) or Dean’s Office (2, 13%) which depends on a university governance model. One RMA works in the Grant Office, a dedicated RMA Office or a separate centre (such as the technology transfer office, entrepreneurship, etc.). Half of all respondents (8, 50%) say there are no specific names that tend to range between research offices, departments for monitoring, evaluation and analysis of researchers’ work, science and innovation agencies, line ministries and research institutes.

Key Challenges and Obstacles

The focus group discussion revealed several important challenges and obstacles that stand in the way of recognising the RMA profession in the WB. For example, Respondents 4 and 7 believe that the lack of knowledge of and awareness about this profession is the main challenge. Respondent 6 finds the lack of understanding and support from

the university decision-makers, particularly following the changes in management, the biggest obstacle. 'If you have to struggle with decision-makers you are wasting your energy and your willingness to continue to work.'

Respondent 7 remarked that, unlike many European countries, Serbia's higher education system is disintegrated, meaning that each faculty (school) of a university represents an independent legal entity. Many faculties have no RMAs which affects researchers who experience various challenges when preparing project applications or during the implementation of projects. However, this is not the case with all universities. Respondent 1 (Serbia) argued that faculties within some universities

have very strong research managers and very strong support to research development and management as well. Very often the faculties excel and the university's central project office or a similar structure lags behind.

In the view of Respondent 6, institutional decision-makers repeatedly say that 'projects are important and we need to participate in many projects but fail to appreciate the complexities and obstacles RMAs have to deal with during their preparation and implementation'.

The online survey attempted to determine if these assumptions are grounded in reality. The online respondents addressed several groups of challenges and obstacles that RMA professionals confront in their institutions and countries. First, our findings indicate that both, researchers and the leadership of respondents' institutions, have limited understanding and appreciation of what RMAs are doing. On a scale between 0 (not at all) and 10 (very well), we received mixed responses. The overall conclusion is that RMAs are slightly more in favour of believing their fellow researchers and institutional leaders do not understand their roles well (weighted average score of 4.54 where 5.5 is the middle). Similarly, RMAs from the region believe their work is not sufficiently appreciated (weighted average score of 4.94). In addition, the respondents identify several other obstacles RMAs have to deal with. First, there is a sense of inadequate recognition of the profession by institutions' leaders. Second, institutional leaders seem to be unfamiliar with the RMA profession and are not equipped to work with RMAs. Third, some RPOs lack project offices that would naturally embed RMAs. Finally, respondents perceive that there is still the lack of understanding and awareness of RMAs' roles and their true value for RPOs at the level of RPOs management.

Networking Opportunities

Another goal of the present study was to understand how well RMAs are informed about past or existing networking opportunities, the added value of networking and key roadblocks that stand in the way of networking. Therefore, we asked the following question: 'If you are aware of networking opportunities for RMAs in your country, Western Balkans or Europe please provide some examples.' The surveyed RMAs are only partly familiar with networking opportunities. Some participants joined the COST Targeted Network BESTPRAC Action¹ (that most recently turned to EARMA BESTPRAC thematic group²) several years ago which led to additional joint actions

¹<https://bestprac.eu/home/>

²<https://earma.org/>

over time. Those who participated in RMA-related networks have identified several networking benefits.

The first is the identification of colleagues and organisations that work in the same field. Respondent 4 referred to BESTPRAC as one of the most important networks. It was only after she joined the network that:

‘I realised that everything I do in my workplace is a profession, recognised by the rest of Europe. And that I’m not alone in this terrible job.’ Some other RMAs were not familiar with the RMA concept either before joining their networks. For example, becoming part of the network enabled Respondent 6 to realise that ‘research managers and administrators are proper positions’, for example, that it is not simply something additional ‘you do with everyday work if you are dealing with projects’.

Second, follow-up activities of networking initiatives often contribute to second-tier networking through joint actions. Respondent 3 from North Macedonia explained that attending meetings and participating in alumni projects helped gain connections for future projects, alongside learning about the general project process. Respondent 2, for example, explained that she became a part of the working group and network event on research management ethics and gender through a network of women in STEM. In addition, a respondent from Albania has identified the WB research and innovation (R&I) network supported through the EU’s R&I framework programmes focussed on research management. This respondent mentioned trainings, workshops and networking opportunities organised by Horizon NCPs and previously during 2015–2016 the Berlin Process initiative, of the Joint Science Conference by the Leopoldina Academy of Science in Germany that allowed her to expand her initial round of contacts.

The third group of answers was knowledge transfer about ‘what the others have done, how they have done it, how they succeeded and what were the main challenges’ (Respondent 2). Essentially, new connections allow RMAs to gain new knowledge such as project administration techniques, skills needed to find the right calls and apply for projects, a better understanding of the prospects for project funds and peer-learning on good practices in the emerging profession. In addition, networking allows RMAs to meet people from various scientific disciplines which offer opportunities to see projects from diverse perspectives. Most importantly, networking gives RMAs opportunities to reach out and consult more experienced RMAs about the most appropriate solutions.

Among the online respondents only 1 out of 16 identified past or ongoing networking opportunities, that is, BESTPRAC, while another respondent vaguely mentioned COST Actions, WBC-RRI.NET – Responsible Research and Innovation in the WB (WBC-RRI.NET³), Horizon Europe and the HETFA led V4+WB RMA network project⁴ funded by the International Visegrad Fund. However, none of them mentioned EARMA. The overwhelming majority of respondents say that participating in projects (81%) constitutes the main benefit of RMA networking, followed by three-quarters of surveyed RMAs (75%) who profit from learning opportunities (trainings, workshops, etc.), and participating in project preparation (50%) and exchanging contacts (44%). Six surveyed respondents (38%) claim that networking builds a sense of belonging to

³<https://wbc-rr.net/>

⁴<https://hetfa.eu/international-projects/v4wb-rmas/>

a wider RMA community. One respondent has singled out ‘professional, straightforward, and immediate help in case of urgent questions/needs’ as the key added value through RMA networking.

Participation in Networking Events or Projects

Further, we aimed to identify the main reasons RMAs do not participate in any RMA-related networks or projects. The results indicate three key roadblocks. Three-quarters of RMAs face the issue of limited resources, while half of them either lack institutional support or are not aware of such opportunities.

Typical Set of Tasks in RMA

Finally, we aimed at determining typical tasks RMAs are involved in. Having been unregulated professions we hypothesised that RMAs in the WB do not have a clear job description, instead, they tend to be ‘jacks of all trades’. During the focus group discussion, this topic surfaced on several occasions. The online survey results show that RMAs in the region cover two distinct groups of tasks. First, 10 respondents (69%) are involved in the actual project management, closely followed by pre-grant, proposal and post-grant tasks.⁵ The other group of tasks include research development training (31%), audit and compliance (42%), project proposal writing training, project implementation training and translation (19%).

Conclusion

Despite many limitations, the present study has shown several important findings that could serve as a stepping-stone to the subsequent studies on RMAs in the WB and the wider region of Southeast Europe. Although widely unconnected, RMAs in the region share a profession that could evolve into a community of practice in the future (see e.g. Agostinho et al., 2020; Arthur, 2016; Derrick & Nickson, 2014). For that to happen, some of the recommendations mentioned in this chapter should be taken into consideration.

This research shows that there is a need for increased networking opportunities between the RMAs both within the WB region and between WB and Europe as a whole. On the other side, there is a need for greater recognition of the RMA profession as such within the WB countries, which corresponds to the overall concerns of the RMA profession at the European level. Furthermore, the research shows that the RMA professionals are yet to discover their belonging to this particular profession, largely due to their participation within the networks, such as BESTPRAC. Thus, it is

⁵This question has mirrored the BESTPRAC’s Research Support Staff Framework that defines the following tasks as: *project management* – supporting financial and technical reporting, managing/providing support in project implementation, communication and dissemination, exploitation, functioning as a helpdesk and providing administrative support, and liaison between the coordinator and the European Commission and the consortium; *re-grant* – before the proposal identifying and disseminating funding opportunities, advising and training; *proposal* – supporting and facilitating/managing the submission process, support in the budget framing, advise on and support of writing process, linking to information or advising on IP, ethics, open access and open data; and *post grant* – grant preparation, facilitating/managing the grant preparation process and communicating project success (internal and external).

necessary to work further on networking but also empowering and raising awareness among the RMAs in the region themselves to self-identify with the profession to be able to argue for their recognition at the institutional and country-level as well.

More findings and results from this study will be available in the country specific chapter on WB (see Marčić & Pepić, 2023b; Chapter 5.26).

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