Chapter 5.4

The Profession of Research Management and Administration in South Africa

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the circumstances in South Africa (SA) that led to the evolution of the profession of research management and administration (RMA) in the country. The public higher education (HE) sector has undergone significant change since 1994, and the RMA profession has struggled to keep abreast. However, through its national professional society, SARIMA, a concerted effort is being made to facilitate and advance the RMA pipeline.

SARIMA was instrumental in developing the Professional Competency Framework for SA and is now focussed on creating awareness and providing development opportunities for RMAs to meet the requirements.

RMA in SA is proliferating as the public HE sector expands in response to growing demands and deliberate interventions by the government.

Keywords: South Africa; research management and administration; professional competency framework; public higher education; national system of innovation; SARIMA

The South African Research Ecosystem

In 1994, Apartheid ended with the first democratic elections in April of that year. A new National System of Innovation (NSI) and HE system was introduced, which has been evolving ever since (Lange, 2017). In 1997, the Higher Education Act (Acts Online, 2022) came into being, and in 2001, the National Plan for Higher Education (Asmal, 2001) was released. In 2002, the process of merging institutions of Public HE started (Baloyi, 2015). In 2022, there were 26 public universities, and 2 new universities were announced by the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation. Other Science Councils are publicly funded, although these account for a small portion of the NSI. All public universities are expected to be research active, with only a few considered research-intensive.

The two central units in government responsible for driving the NSI are the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)[1] and the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI)[2] (Department of Science & Innovation, n.d.). These departments form part of the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation's portfolio.

The latest official information published in 2022 is for 2020, indicating that there are 19,636 tasked with conducting research in the public university sector resulting in 21,734 research publication units (see Research Policy section below) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a). According to this report, two-thirds of research publications were produced by males. While there has been some transformative progress in the NSI, more needs to be done to ensure inclusivity. Furthermore, only 49.6% of public university academic staff have doctorates, indicating the need for further capacity development in the sector. The target that has been set for SA in the National Development Plan 2030 is 75% (National Development Plan 2030 | South African Government, 2012).

Research Plans

In 2013, the National Planning Commission (NPC) released the National Development Plan 2030, which set ambitious targets for the country (National Development Plan 2030 | South African Government, n.d.). This plan also determines the allocation of the budget by the government. This plan laid the foundation for several other plans, such as the Research Agenda 2020–2023 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020b), the 10-Year Global Change Research Plan For South Africa (Department of Science and Technology, 2017), and the Framework for Science Technology and Innovation Decadal Plan (Universities South Africa, 2021). These plans guide the research strategies and plans of all public universities.

Research Policy

In SA, research activities at public higher education institutions (PHEIs) are governed by various DHET policies. These include:

- Research Output Policy (Research Outputs Policy | South African Government, n.d.).

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[1]https://www.dhet.gov.za/
[2]https://www.dst.gov.za/

- Policy on the Evaluation of Creative Outputs and Innovations Produced by Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2021).
- Health Research Policy in SA (South African Government, 2001).

The NSI in SA is idiosyncratic because research subsidy to public universities is restricted to a list of DHET-approved accredited journals (Sabinet, n.d.). It uses publication output units (POUs) rather than publication outputs (POs) as its primary measure. POUs are calculated based on the number of authors contributing to a publication. For example, if two authors collaborated, each would be allocated 0.5 POUs; if three authors collaborated, each would receive 0.333 POUs. Every year, the DHET decides on a financial value per POU that will then be paid to the author's home institution in the form of a subsidy. This only applies to authors at South African PHEIs. POUs are the subsidy units awarded for each DHET-approved publication according to the criteria set out in the Research Output Policy based on the submissions made in a particular year.

DHET recognised only the following international indices in 2022:

- Clarivate Analytics Web of Science (WoS).
- International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS).
- Department of Higher Education (DHET) – South African Journal List.
- Norwegian List.
- Scientific Electronic Library Online – SA (SciELO SA).
- Elsevier Scopus.
- Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).

The above indices are reviewed regularly, and new indices are added following a review process by DHET. One of the unintended consequences of this approach is that some of the lists may contain journals that are of low quality or even engage in predatory publishing practices. In such cases, the DHET may withhold funding post-publication despite the journal having been on the accredited list pre-publication (Mouton & Valentine, 2017). It is also possible for a high-impact journal not to be recognised by DHET as it is not listed on one of the approved indexes. While most researchers endeavour to publish in accredited journals, few choose non-accredited journals for strategic reasons. While this may benefit the individual, it denies their home institution from receiving any subsidy.

Research Funders

Funding for research at PHEI is mainly from two sources. The first is from DHET in the form of subsidies and grants. The second is from the National Research Foundation (NRF), part of the DSI. Some universities are also able to acquire additional funding through contract research and donations.

Table 5.4.1 shows the allocation of research subsidies based on actual research outputs to the sector according to the Ministerial Statement on University Funding: 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 (Ministerial Statement, 2021).

Research subsidy is only allocated for publications appearing in accredited journals, as listed above. Subsidy can also be earned for publications in peer-reviewed conference proceedings, scholarly book chapters and books. These submissions are evaluated by the DHET on an annual basis and use an algorithm to determine the subsidy amount.

Table 5.4.1.   The Ministerial Statement on University Funding: 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 (Ministerial Statement, 2021).

Budget Category	Budget Totals for the SA University Sector				Increase in Budget From Previous Financial Year		
	2020/2021 (R'000)	2021/2022 (R'000)	2022/2023 (R'000)	2023/2024 (R'000)	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024
Total funding for SA universities	**36 560 858**	**37 833 659**	**39 697 659**	**40 058 531**	**3.5%**	**4.9%**	**0.9%**
Research funding for SA universities	4 847 816	4 986 527	5 226 955	5 313 190	2.9%	4.8%	1.6%

The submission of research publications to DHET for subsidy purposes is made annually. This differs from systems such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[3] in the UK or the Excellence in Research (ERA)[4] for Australia, which works in multi-year cycles.

Apart from research publications, the DHET also recognises and subsidises creative research outputs (Government Notices No. 395, 2017). While the volume of these creative outputs is still low, and only a few PHEIs contributing, initial indications are that it will grow with time (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2021).

In 2020/2021, the NRF invested R2.127 billion (approximately $120 million) in grants and bursaries to support students, researchers and research infrastructure (National Research Foundation, 2022). The number of NRF-funded researchers was 3,000, of which 1,320 were female. The NRF also funded 3,984 Master's and 2,789 Doctoral level students (Register of Grants – National Research Foundation, n.d.). During the same period, 8,324 Master's and 3,522 Doctoral students graduated (NRF Annual Report 2020/21, 2022).

Evolution of the Profession

The Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA)[5] celebrated its 20th year of existence in 2022. SARIMA was created as a stakeholder organisation that provides a platform for promoting and facilitating best practices in research and innovation management in Southern Africa. It is funded by the DSI and through voluntary membership.

SARIMA embarked upon developing a Professional Competency Framework (PCF) for research management which was released in December 2016 (Professionalisation – SARIMA, n.d.). The PCF, as discussed in more detail by Dyason and Pillay (2023), focusses on three levels: administrative, management and leadership/strategic. The PCF was then implemented through a partnership with the International

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[3]www.ref.ac.uk
[4]www.arc.gov.au/evaluating-research/excellence-research-australia
[5]https://www.sarima.co.za/

Professional Recognition Council (IPRC),[6] which was established in 2016. Three different levels of professional recognition are available:

- Research Administration Professional (RAP).
- Research Management Professional (RMP).
- Senior Research Management Professional (SRMP).

The first professional recognitions were awarded in 2018 and numbers have grown steadily. Total designations awarded up to 2022 are shown in Table 5.4.2.

The professional recognition process is a very rigorous process that is based on the submission of a comprehensive portfolio of evidence. Peer reviewers are appointed to then assess the portfolios and make a recommendation.

A major part of professionalising research management and administration (RMA) is knowledge development, sharing and dissemination. Apart from its own annual conferences, SARIMA also hosted the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) conference in 2010 and will do so again in 2023 (SARIMA, 2022a).

For the 10-year period 2013 to 2022, SARIMA also (SARIMA, 2022a):

- Facilitated 70 exchange/learning visits.
- Hosted 43 regional and national forums.
- Supported 79 individuals to complete university-accredited short courses in research management.
- Supported 154 individuals through travel grants to attend SARIMA and INORMS conferences.
- Supported 17 research managers in applying for professional recognition.

Table 5.4.2.   SARIMA Professional Recognitions (SARIMA Celebration Report 2013–2022, n.d.).

Professional Designation	2018	2020	2021	Total
Research Administration Professional (RAP)				
Research Management Professional (RMP)		4	5	**9**
Senior Research Management Professional (SRMP)	2		9	11
Honorary Senior Research Management Professionals			1	1
Total	**2**	**4**	**15**	**21**

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[6]iprcouncil.com

The Southern African RMA Community

SARIMA is based in SA but also includes members from other Southern African countries. While SARIMA is the predominant professional association for RMAs in SA (84% of membership in 2022), it is not the only one. Many RMAs also join other global societies such as the Society of Research Administrators International (SRAI)[7] and National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA).[8] This gives them access to international networks and broader exposure to internationalisation and collaboration opportunities.

The only available indicators of the size of the RMA community in Southern Africa are based on the SARIMA membership. The data are dynamic as memberships expire and new members join. The data available are shown in Table 5.4.3.

This shows that the RMA community in Southern Africa is well represented across the sector. There is however a growing interest in other Southern African countries such as Botswana, Kenya, Malawi and Zimbabwe for individual RMAs to join SARIMA as members and explore its wide range of activities.

South African RMA Demographics

The third Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP-3) survey covered in Oliveira, Fischer, et al. (2023, Chapter 2.2), elicited low response levels from South African RMAs with only 36 (1.0% of n = 3,532) responses (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2023). Of these respondents who indicated a gender, 10 (29%) were male, while 24 (71%) were female. This is aligned with the global trend of RMA professionals being predominantly female. The overwhelming majority (34, or 94%) were from universities. Only 5 (14%) indicated a National RMA certification, aligning with the relatively low number of professional designations issued since 2018. Twenty four (69%) respondents indicated that they would recommend a career in RMA.

Table 5.4.3.   SARIMA Community.

	FY 2021– 2022 (1 March 2021–28 February 2022)	FY 2022– 2023 (To Date)
SARIMA members (Total)	727	617
SARIMA members (SA)	542	521
SARIMA members (Outside SA)	185	96
Countries represented	20	17
Universities represented	40	33
Non-universities (e.g. Science Councils) represented	30	33

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[7]www.srainternational.org
[8]www.ncura.edu

The Future of RMA in SA

As the primary funder of research at PHEI, the DHET is putting pressure on universities to increase their research productivity and impact (The Decadal Plan Charts the Way Forward | Universities South Africa, n.d.). This means a steady growth in research activity resulting in more outputs. Based on this, it is clear that the demand for RMAs to support researchers will continue to grow. The support required from RMAs will also expand as funding instruments become more complex, monitoring and evaluation systems require more detailed and comprehensive evidence, and the submission of research publications to DHET becomes more convoluted requiring more information and evidence to be captured.

The role of professional societies such as SARIMA becomes crucial in ensuring an expanding pipeline of RMAs for the NSI. Not only are professional designations vital in advancing professionalism in the sector, but it also creates awareness of RMA as a career. Further efforts are required to establish the adoption and buy-in from the leadership of universities, science councils and other stakeholders, such as Universities South Africa (USAf),[9] an umbrella body representative of the 26 public universities in SA. Professional recognition is not yet a compulsory requirement for employment in the RMA sector.

However, for RMA to further advance as a professional practice requires growing and disseminating the existing body of knowledge and overall engagement of RMAs. A quick survey of RMA journals such as the *Journal of Research Management and Administration* (JoRMA), *Journal of Research Administration* (JRA), and *Research Management Review* (RMR), reveals limited publications on RMA within the Southern African context. RMAs in SA often consider themselves practitioners and do not actively transform their tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge through journal publications or scholarly books such as this one. While participation in national conferences hosted by SARIMA is generally good, the knowledge presented is usually not formalised or disseminated beyond the conference attendees. Unless a concerted effort is made to create and contribute more formal knowledge to the sector, South African RMAs will always remain at a disadvantage.

One of the most significant challenges for those in RMA positions is the absence of a formal career path. Career advancement for RMAs often involves switching employers or leaving the RMA sector. Many RMAs also choose to further their qualifications in the same field as their undergraduate studies rather than pursue qualifications in RMA in the hopes that it will provide other career opportunities such as entering academia. This lack of investment in RMA as a career hinders the progression of the pipeline. The development of a career path can assist in attracting and retaining RMA talent.

Summary

In this chapter, we have seen that the NSI in SA has been constantly changing as it attempts to correct the past. The significant challenge for the sector remains to fund as the government reprioritises its spending.

RMA in SA has a history stretching back around 20 years. Recently, a concerted effort was made to professionalise the practice by developing and implementing a PCF.

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[9]www.usaf.ac.za

While the uptake is still low, positive growth is evident. The success thereof is dependent on SARIMA's ability to secure funding.

The future of RMA in SA is promising as the sector is expanding. It is up to the RMAs to decide whether they want to professionalise and get recognised for their work.

Acknowledgements

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