Chapter 5.40

The Profession of Research Management and Administration in the UK

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the circumstances that led to the evolution of the profession of research management and administration (RMA) in the UK, including some of the important drivers. While it is presented in the context of the UK research ecosystem as a whole, this is provided through a university lens as more is known about RMAs in this environment. It also provides a snapshot of the current UK RMA workforce: they are predominantly female and highly educated. With professional certification on the rise, we can see that the profession is developing, and it is argued that RMA professionals can play a pivotal role in research and development.

Keywords: UK; Research Management and Administration; professionalisation; RAAAP; ARMA; RAG*net*; dual support

The UK Research Ecosystem

In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the UK), research is undertaken in a variety of places. While traditionally research is associated with universities, it does occur in many other types of organisations, such as research institutes,

hospitals, and companies. Looking at the broader field of research and development, national statistics (Office for National Statistics, 2022) show that in 2020 only 22.5% by volume takes place in the higher education sector, with the majority (71.2%) in business and enterprise. While RMA is found wherever research is undertaken, most is known about those working in the higher education sector and so this chapter focuses on those RMA professionals clustered in university and analogous settings. Data from the RAAAP-3 international survey (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022) gives information on 476 UK-based RMAs, but 91.8% of these were based in universities, due to the nature of the survey distribution. This means the RAAAP-3 is not representative of the UK position as a whole, but can claim to be for research support in the UK higher education ecosystem.

Universities have a long history in the UK, with six tracing their formation to the 11–15th centuries. By the 1950s there were 22 universities in the country, which more than doubled in the 1960s to 45. In 1992, a further 40 or so were created as former polytechnics were granted university status and became eligible to receive central government core funding for research, as part of the dual support system. This annual core funding for research is informed by a multiannual assessment exercise, the most recent of which was in 2021, where 157 institutions had their research assessed. This 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF), determined the core, so-called Quality Related (QR) funding for the following perhaps seven years, although normally there are inflationary increases in subsequent years. The previous exercise, REF2014, assessed research activities in the 2008–2013 timeframe and informed the QR allocations for the seven years from 2014 onwards. The REF also rewards the societal impact of research, and the research environment; impact can be traced back to research undertaken up to 15 years prior, so this really is a long-term game.

This core funding, QR funding, is then stable until the following exercise and is not hypothecated – it may be spent by institutions on whatever research and related activity they deem appropriate.

The other part of the dual support system is where principal investigators apply for project-specific research grants to funders such as the UK Research Councils. Until 2005 proposal costings consisted of direct costs and a fixed percentage (latterly 46%) of direct staff costs to determine the overhead rate. The Research Councils would then award this amount. The broad assumption was that with the QR allocation, this 46% overhead rate would cover the full cost of doing research. However, in the previous decades, while the QR pot had increased slowly, the amount of funding coming through the Research Councils had increased dramatically. So, a Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC[1]) methodology was developed within the sector in the 1990s to more accurately determine the full cost of activities. From TRAC the full economic costing (fEC) model for research was developed and used across the sector and by the Research Councils from September 2005. However, with the dual support system in place, the Research Councils did not need to pay the full 100% of the fEC, and a rate of (approximately) 80% is paid, with the remainder coming from an institution's QR or other funds. But, universities were then equipped with a better understanding of the full costs and should charge other funders, such as government departments, and industry the full 100% rate.

Fig. 5.40.1 shows the major research funding routes into UK universities. Central government through Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) funds UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) which includes the seven national research

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[1] https://www.trac.ac.uk/about/history/

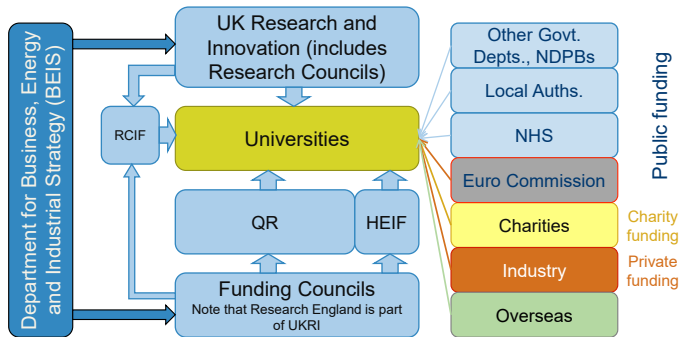Simplified UK Research Ecosystem (English University Perspective)

Fig. 5.40.1. Simplified UK Research Funding Ecosystem.

councils that provide traditional research project funds to universities and other bodies. In addition, each devolved nation has a Funding Council (HEFCW),[2] Research England,[3] SFC,[4] and DENI[5] which provides core funding for research (QR), and other pots, such as the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) that rewards working with industry and the Research Capital Infrastructure Fund (RCIF) that provides for large equipment. There are many differences in exactly how the devolved nations fund research, and it should be noted that, in places, this chapter has an English perspective. Universities also receive research project funding from other government departments and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), local authorities, the National Health Service (NHS), Charities, Industry, and Overseas sources, and latterly the European Commission – before Brexit.

This devolved nature of the Funding Councils means, for example, that an identical REF score for a Welsh University might be rewarded with different QR funding than for a Scottish university. To give an indication of scale, the QR funding pot for England in academic year 2022–2023 was £1,974m.

Overall, the UK government expenditure[6] on research and development (R&D) for 2020 was £15,265m. This is made up of £3,356m for the Funding Councils, of which a major element is the QR funding; £5,969m for UKRI (which includes the Research Councils and related bodies); £3,614m for civil government departments; £1,066m for the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and indicative contributions to EU Framework projects and the like of £1,261m.

The more project-based research funding side of the dual support system is provided by the Research Councils, which is generally awarded on a competitive basis through a call for proposals. In addition, UK universities and other research-performing organisations (RPOs) receive competitive funding from other sources such as Learned Societies, Government Departments, Charities and Foundations, (until recently) the European Commission, Industry and Commerce, the NHS and so on.

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[2] https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/
[3] https://www.ukri.org/councils/research-england/
[4] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/
[5] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/
[6] https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/researchanddevelopmentexpenditure/datasets/scienceengineeringandtechnologystatisticsreferencetables/current/rftgoverd2020dataset.xlsx

In the UK, the charity sector is a major part of the funding arena, however, in general, they will not fund indirect costs. However, there is an element of the QR fund that is tied to the amount of charitable research income that an institution has obtained.

Over the past few decades a range of new policy requirements, such as the introduction of fEC and other national drivers such as open access publishing (Tickell, 2016), concordats on researcher development (UKRI, 2020) and research integrity (Universities UK, 2019), Trusted Research,[7] and more recently the recognition of the value of a good research culture (see Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2021), with funding to enhance it,[8] have driven institutions to further develop and professionalise their research support.

Evolution of the Profession in the UK

In the early 1990s, a small group of social science research centre managers created a self-help group – the research administrator's group network – **RAG***net*. This group was born from a frustration of not having anyone in their home institutions that understood their roles and could share experiences. As described by Taylor (2001) and then Walcott (2011) over time this group grew into a formal Association for Research Managers and Administrators (ARMAs) more generally, not just from social sciences, but supporting all subject areas, and covering departmental and central research support staff. By the time it was 10 years old the membership stood at around 300. During the early 2000s, the association transformed into a company limited by guarantee in order to better deliver training, engage with funders, and provide a vehicle for the exchange of good practices. Membership increased to a level where it could support a permanent secretariat, and **RAG***net* rebranded to the ARMA (https://arma.ac.uk/) to better reflect the membership, which by 2011 had risen to around 1,700. In 2008 ARMA hosted the second biennial INORMS (see Kulakowski, 2023, Chapter 1.7) Congress in Liverpool, and the seventh in 2018 in Edinburgh. In the intervening years, ARMA developed a Professional Development Framework (PDF; ARMA, 2011) as a basis for a suite of nationally accredited professional courses, including the Certificate in Research Administration (CRA), Certificate in Research Management (CRM), and the masters level Certificate in the Leadership of Research Management (CLRM). As well as being run in the UK these courses have also been licenced by CARA for use in Canada, and EARMA for use in continental Europe. By mid-2022, 145 UK RMAs had obtained certification at various levels, with a further 121 currently studying.

The UK RMA Community

While much of the RMA space is related to research funding (finding funding opportunities, proposal development, costing and pricing, submission, project management, reporting, and audit), many UK RMAs have a broader remit including activities such as research governance, open research, research student support, research ethics, research integrity, research culture, research information systems, research assessment, research policy, research strategy, the list is almost

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[7] https://www.cpni.gov.uk/trusted-research
[8] https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/RE-021221-EnhancingResearch CultureCircularLetter20212022.pdf

endless – anything and everything to do with supporting research. Many of these areas are dynamic in term of policy and require professionals to understand the nuances to ensure that research grows and runs smoothly. The accompanying growth in regulation has undoubtedly played a role in the development of the cohort of RMA professionals in the UK.

ARMA can perhaps claim to be the predominant professional association for RMAs in the UK, it is however not the only one. The UK research and innovation sector is also served by another strong association, PraxisAuril (https://www.praxisauril.org.uk/) which serves the interests of those professionals who support innovation and knowledge exchange. PraxisAuril is the result of a merger of PraxisUnico (itself the result of a 2009 merger of Praxis, a training company, and Unico, the University Company organisation) and AURIL (the Association for University Research and Industry Links) in 2017. There is of course some overlap in the membership of these two main associations. There are also other less formal groupings which for whatever reason do not find their home within ARMA or PraxisAuril; one example of which is PRISM (https://www.pris-managers.ac.uk/) for Professional Research Investment & Strategy Managers, which in some ways has formed for the same reasons that ARMA itself came into being as **RAG***net*, a group of professionals with a niche interest not feeling understood or served by the larger associations. Conversely, with a wider, more general administrative focus there is the Association of University Administrators (AUA, https://aua.ac.uk/) for those with interests in higher education support wider than just the RMA arena, however, many, if not most, RMAs find their professional home within ARMA.

As an association, ARMA now has around 3,000 members, and in a recent report (King et al., 2020) it was estimated that were approximately 4,700 full-time equivalent RMAs in UK university research offices and departments. Office sizes typically range from 12 to 80 staff, with many of the more research-intensive institutions also having a significant devolved RMA resource. In terms of salaries, few RMAs earn less than £25k per annum, or more than £60k per annum, with those working in the areas of research business development and research strategy more likely to be earning at the top end, and those in research operations more likely to be at the bottom end of the salary spectrum.

UK RMA Demographics

Both of the first two international Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP) surveys elicited high responses levels from UK RMAs with 453 from RAAAP-1 (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a) in 2016 and 525 from RAAAP-2 (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022) in 2019. The most recent, RAAAP-3 survey in 2022 continued that trend with 476 UK-based respondents (those selecting *UK* as ***CountryOfEmployment*** – see Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022) and the following analyses are extracted from there. Note that variables from the data set are in ***emphasised italics***, variable value options are in *italics*, and question text is in '*quoted italics*' (Fischer et al., 2022).

Gender

In terms of gender identity (***GenderExtended***), in 2022, 83.4% (of *n* = 470) of UK RMAs are *Female*, which is a common feature of the profession around the world (see Oliveira et al., 2023, Chapter 2.2). If anything this propensity is increasing from the 79.2% (of *n* = 451) reported from the first RAAAP survey six years prior (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a).

Academic Qualification Level

The RAAAP-3 data show that 42.4% (of $n = 476$) of UK RMAs hold *Doctorate*s, with a further 27.7% having *Master's* level degrees; so nearly three quarters have academic postgraduate qualifications. The overall attainment has increased since the RAAAP-1 figures of 22.7% (of $n = 453$) and 35.5%, respectively, for *Doctorate* and *Master's* level qualifications; so around two-thirds had postgraduate qualifications. For the most recent survey, the qualifications gained while being an RMA were also recorded, with 14.7% (of $n = 476$) gaining *Doctorate*s and a further 14.7% gaining *Master's* degrees. Not only does the profession attract individuals with high levels of academic attainment, over a quarter of all UK RMA survey respondents gained a higher degree during their career.

This high level of qualification can be partially explained by one of the reasons for joining the profession '*I was previously an academic/researcher and moved into research administration*' for which (combining the top two responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale) 37.7% (of $n = 453$). However, clearly, there are other routes into the profession (see, e.g., Dutta et al., 2023, Chapter 2.3).

Professional Accreditation

In the UK, the main professional association (ARMA, 2011) has developed a certification for RMAs based on their PDF. The certificates are accredited by ATHE[9] and mapped onto the European Qualification Framework (EQF[10]). Originally there were three levels of certification, CRA, CRM and the more senior CLRM. Following a recent consolidation and rebranding there are now just two awards, the CRM (Foundation) and the CRM (Advanced) the latter being the equivalent of the original CRM. Over the 10 or so years that the programmes have been running there have been over 100 graduates and a further 100 or so studying – the courses take a minimum of 18 months to complete. There have also been funder-specific variants of the original CRM. The ARMA certification programme has also been franchised to the European (EARMA) and Canadian (CARA) associations, although the latter has now developed their own certification – see Chapter 2.7, Ritchie et al. (2023) for further details.

In 2022, the RAAAP-3 survey showed that 12.4% (of $n = 476$) UK RMAs held a professional certification (*AnyCRA*), as compared to 9.5% (of $n = 453$) in 2016. It can be expected that this number will continue to grow as the certifications become more recognised and perhaps even required for certain positions.

Overall in the UK, 83.3% (of $n = 467$ who also selected a **CurrentRoleLevelR3**) identify (**GenderExtended**) as *Female*. But there are differences when looking at Role Level (see Fig. 5.40.2), with none of those in Assisting (0.0% of $n = 19$) roles identifying as male, but increasing proportions of males in Operational (16.2% of $n = 117$) and Managerial (18.6% of $n = 237$) roles. However, this proportion then drops for Leadership roles to only 11.1% (of 90); there is little evidence of a glass ceiling for women RMAs in the UK, contrary to the global findings from the 2016 survey (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a).

Overall in the UK 42.3% (of $n = 469$) who also selected a **CurrentRoleLevelR3** in the range *Assisting.Leader*) have (**HighestQualification**) a *Doctorate*. There are

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[9] Awards for Training and Higher Education: https://athe.co.uk/.
[10] European Qualifications Framework: https://europa.eu/europass/en/description-eight-eqf-levels.
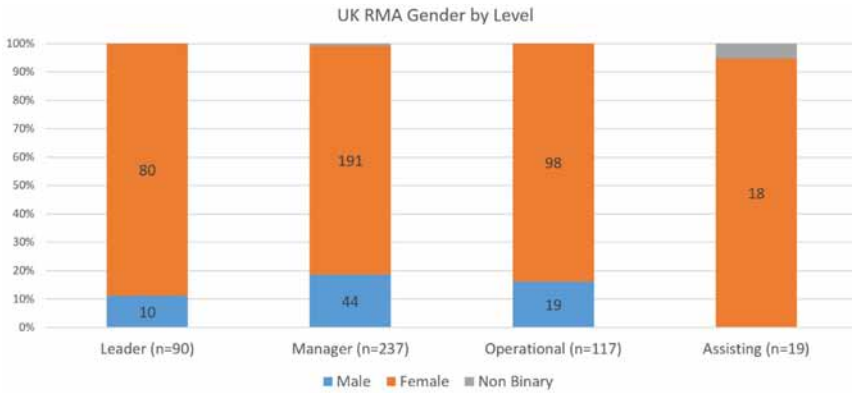
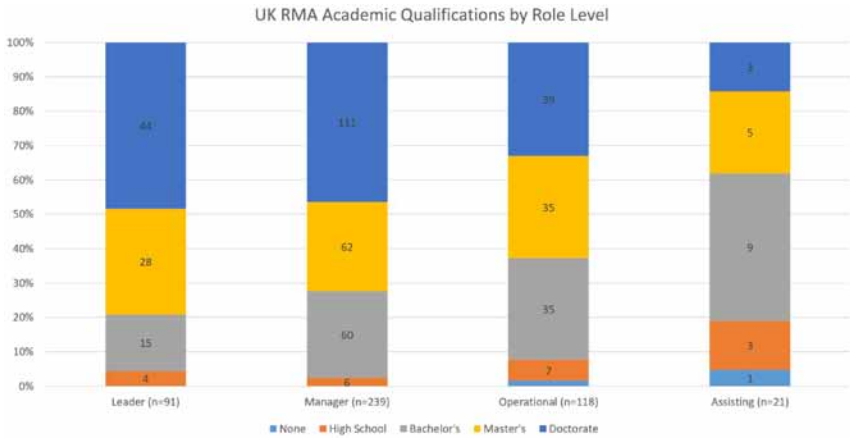Fig. 5.40.2.   UK RMA Gender Identity by Role Level.

Fig. 5.40.3.   UK RMA Academic Attainment by Role Level.

differences when looking at role level (see Fig. 5.40.3), with the propensity for doctor-ates to increase as the role level increases: *Assisting* 14.3% (of *n* = 21), *Operational* 33.1% (of *n* = 118), *Managerial* 46.8% (of *n* = 239), to *Leaders* 48.4% (of *n* = 91). The proportions with master's degrees are much closer ranging from 23.8% for those in *Assisting* roles to 30.8% for those in *Leader*ship roles. Overall 70.0% of UK RMAs have a postgraduate qualification, with almost 4/5ths (78.1%) in leadership roles hav-ing a master's or doctoral degree. Conversely, there are 4.4% of Leaders who do not hold a degree level qualification, indicating that while academic attainment is seen as being important it is not a hard requirement for progression in the profession.

The situation for professional certification is less clear, with 19.0% (of *n* = 21) of those in *Assisting* roles having a certification, as compared to 9.3% (of 118) of *Opera-tional* staff, 13.0% (of *n* = 239) of *Manager*ial staff, and 12.1% (of *n* = 91) of RMA *Leader*s. It should however be noted that as the UK professional qualifications have only been available for just over 10 years, those in more senior positions now would not have been able to undertake a CRM while in a more junior position. It would be interesting to track the uptake of professional RMA qualifications in the UK over a longer time period.

The Future of RMA in the UK

The ARMA enjoys a strong position in the UK, with membership stretching into the thousands and almost all RPOs having RMAs who are involved. The association and hence its members has good ties with the funding bodies and is regularly consulted by them on matters such as research efficiency and policy, and this seems likely to continue and perhaps even intensify. With the UK having recently left the European Union there were doubts over the continued importance of the European Commission's Framework Funding Programmes in the UK, but in September 2023 an agreement was made to associate the UK to Horizon Europe from January 2024 (European Commission, 2023b). In addition, there are the possibilities of new funding sources, for example, the new Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA[11]) and in particular 'Plan B' (BEIS, 2022). With the support for open research still being strong, continuing focus on the societal and economic impact of research, more emphasis being put on the responsible conduct of research, and research culture, all in the context of growing international collaboration, there are real opportunities for UK RMAs to make a difference.

As a founding member of INORMS, the UK also very much has an outward looking aspect and those wider international networks are likely to be even more important with the continued internationalisation of research, driven by global funding initiatives such as those addressing the United Nation's Strategic Development Goals (UN SDGs). RMA must also globalise, to best support research, and the UK is well-positioned to play a leading role.

Summary

In this chapter, we have seen that RMA in the UK has a history really only stretching back around 30 years. Nevertheless, in some respects, it can be considered to be a profession – or perhaps more formally, according to the definitions of Etzioni (1969), a semi-profession. Certification is available at various levels, and support for RMAs in the UK is mature, however, recognition for and visibility of the profession still need to be increased. With the increasing importance of research culture and related initiatives, RMAs can play a key role not only in the development of their own profession but also in research support and the research environment more generally.

Acknowledgements

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