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Chapter 2.5

Where Do RMAs Work?

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Abstract

In this chapter, we will explore where Research Management and Administrators (RMAs) work, in terms of the types of organisations and their structures. While the majority of RMAs work in research-performing organisations (RPOs), such as universities, research institutes and hospitals, some work in other related organisations, such as research funders, think tanks and consultancy firms (non-RPOs). These different working contexts will be critically analysed in light of previous studies, and data collected through surveys and interviews. Quotes will be used to illustrate different professional settings. The interviewees selected derive from two world regions (USA and Europe) to understand the different challenges and settings associated with the diverse

research ecosystems that each region represents. Finally, major conclusions and recommendations will be highlighted.

Introduction

Existing RMA studies include research on the career of the professionals (RMAs) working in this area. RMA, once considered an emerging profession (HEFCE, 2007; Kirkland, 2008) represents the evolution of the supporting offices to research and academic activities at universities. The activity became increasingly professionalised following the societal trends that transformed the universities and the pressure of the research funding landscape. The definition of the term RMA is broad and has been shifting from the focus on the functions supporting the project lifecycle at universities, including knowledge exchange (HEFCE, 2007) to include the broader areas of research management detailed below (Agostinho et al., 2018). Recently, Santos et al. (2021a) further broadened the concept to include the professionals working at research funding and policy agencies, incorporating such important studies as Whitchurch (2008a), Shelley (2010) and Allen-Collinson (2016). However, to the best of our knowledge, no specific research has been dedicated to those RMAs working within the sector of policy development and funding of Research and Innovation (R&I) activities.

Based on prior studies and data collected by the authors through surveys and interviews, answers will be sought to the following research questions:

RQ1. Which organisations do RMAs work in and how does this relate to their position in R&I ecosystems?

RQ2. In what parts of those organisations do RMAs work?

RQ3. What differences are there in the makeup of these RMAs and what they do, specifically?

RQ4. What is their identity – do they all feel part of the RMA profession/community?

Data from RMA surveys, namely from the 'Research Administration as a Profession' (RAAAP) project and from the 'Professionals at the Interface of Science' (PIoS) project, provide empirical, supporting evidence of the diversity of working environments and common professional traits of RMAs worldwide. Moreover, longitudinal data from the RAAAP surveys allow for a glimpse of the evolution of RMAs´ workplaces over the last years. These analyses are complemented by first-person information gathered from interviews with representative RMAs.

Literature Review

RMA studies is a recent area of research and RMAs were not always identified as such. Research on staff that support academic and research activities started by looking into the role and relations of the several types of staff at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This group was initially branded either as Research Administrators or

Administrative Managers (Drummond, 2003; Whitchurch, 2004). Since those initial studies, the definition and coverage of this staff category has broadened to include more areas of support activities and organisations. On one hand, regarding areas of support activities, these started gradually including communication and dissemination, knowledge and technology transfer, valorisation and impact, science strategy and policy support, research funding, project management, laboratory management, and other areas of scientific affairs working in all types of RPOs (Agostinho et al., 2018). On the other hand, regarding organisations, Kerridge and Scott (2018a) show in their research of RMAs that, while the majority of RMAs work in universities and research institutes, some work in other related organisations, such as hospitals, charities, research funders, government agencies, think tanks, and industry.

We find that the literature about support staff has been led by support staff themselves, motivated (i) by their will to assess their roles and the relevance of their daily tasks, and (ii) as a result of the process of specialisation of their roles in response to the needs of researchers and decision-making structures. This motivation comes from the objective of recognition of the profession. Kirkland (2008) suggests five factors for the increased need of research management activities based on the complexification of the research ecosystem, namely the increased (i) accountability of public-funded research; (ii) competition among researchers; (iii) legal and legislative aspects that frame the governance structures of universities; (iv) project-based research for limited periods; and (v) quality insurance demands of the research outputs. The authors surmise that the increased needs for RMA activities also apply to RMAs working in policy and funding agencies in Research and Development, especially public policy and funding agencies that face the pressure of the increased accountability of publicly funded research.

Methods

In order to explore the differences in identity perception of RMAs working in non-RPOs, in central services in RPOs, and in non-central settings in RPOs, we triangulated information from three sources – –the RAAAP surveys, the PIoS survey and interviews, and subsequent interviews designed explicitly to address that question.

The first RAAAP survey was conducted in 2016 (RAAAP-1) (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a, 2018b) followed by a second survey conducted in 2019 (RAAAP-2) (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022) and a third iteration in 2022 (RAAAP-3) (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022). The PIoS was a survey conducted in 2020, aimed at collecting data on the identity and participation in professional networks of RMAs working at policy and funding organisations (Santos et al., 2021a, 2021b). This was followed up by interviews with RMA representatives of non-RPOs, RPOs central, RPO non-central, from the United States, United Kingdom and Portugal, selected from the authors´ professional networks.

The SPSS software was used for data treatment of the survey data, using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Interview data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire. The interviews were recorded, and the corresponding files were stored at the secure institutional servers of the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (Portugal). Each excerpt used from the interviews was reviewed and approved by the corresponding interviewee. The transcripts are stored at the secure institutional servers of the research team. The participation in this study was voluntary and an informed consent form was obtained before each interview. The collected data is publicly available in an anonymised format (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022; Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022; Kerridge & Scott, 2018b; Santos et al., 2021b). The interviews' data analysis was based on content assessment techniques.
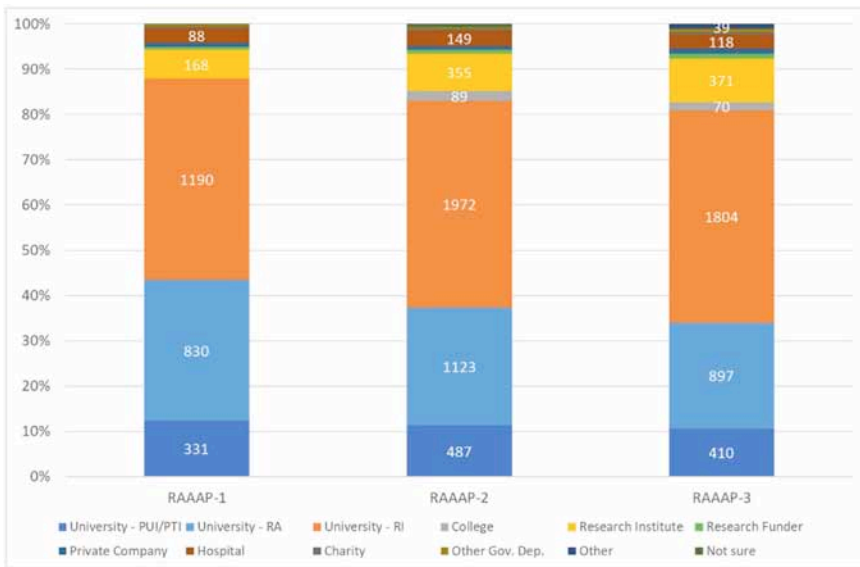
Fig. 2.5.1.   Institution Type by RAAAP Survey Iteration.
Source: Authors, from survey data.
University – PUI/PTI: Primarily undergraduate/training institution; University – RA: research active; University – RI: research intensive.

Evidence From Surveys

The data discussed next was retrieved from the four different surveys forming part of the RAAAP and PIoS series.

Data From the RAAAP Surveys

The vast majority of RAAAP respondents are based in universities, followed by research institutes, and then by a combination of different types of organisations (Figure 2.5.1.). The distribution of the respondents per type of institution shows a very similar structure among the surveys. Nearly one in every two respondents were affiliated with University – RI. If we extend the affiliation to universities as a whole, they cover around 85% of all respondents. Other categories of organisations mentioned by the respondents include: (freelance) consultants, temporary organisations ('programs', 'projects'), 'across' institutions (e.g. a health research centre located in a hospital that reports to the faculty of medicine at a university and the research institute that is affiliated with the hospital), 'hybrid' institutions (e.g. state medical school with hospital), and other such as intergovernmental organisations and museums.

The responses from RMAs at organisations other than universities and research institutes show that RMAs work in institutions that cover all sectors of the R&I ecosystems, specifically science policy making and research funding entities, knowledge and technology producers, and knowledge and technology users (*RQ1*). RMAs are therefore considered to be a cornerstone of contemporary R&I ecosystems.

The majority of respondents work at 'Central Offices/Services or Departments' (62.7%, 57.9% and 58.4% for RAAAP-1, RAAAP-2 and RAAAP-3, respectively), followed by 'Academic/Research Departments' (23.0%, 23.8% and 23.2%), 'Non-Central Offices/Services or Departments' (9.8%, 13.0% and 12.0%) and others
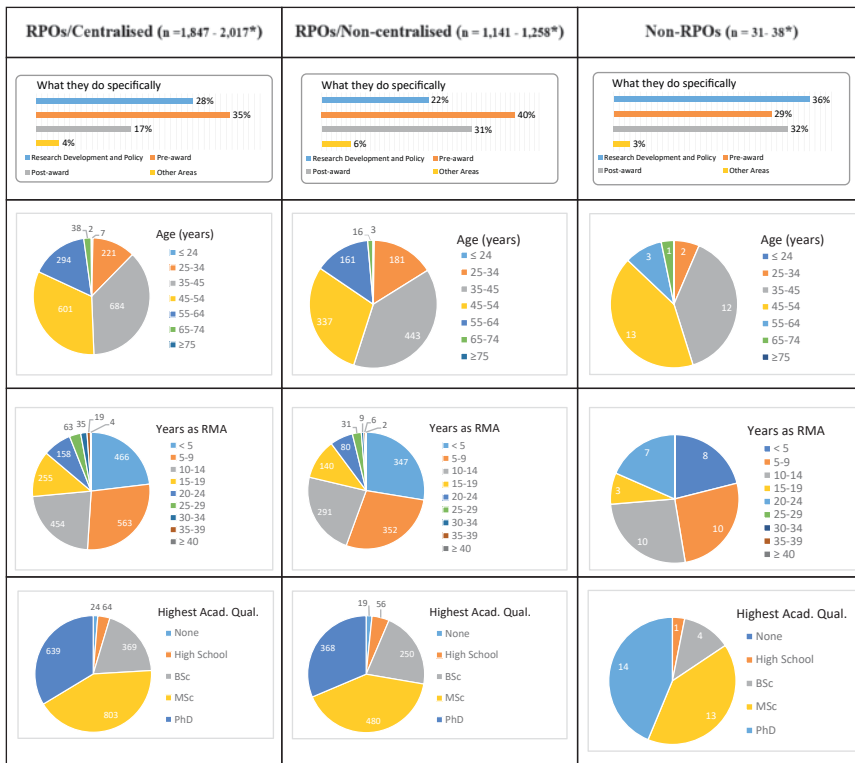
Fig. 2.5.2. Selected Characteristics of RMAs and Their Relation With Task Types and Working Settings.
Source: Authors from RAAAP-3 data.
* Range of the number of respondents for the set of four questions being analysed.

(4.5%, 5.3% and 6.3%). From RAAAP-1 to RAAAP-2 and RAAAP-3, the relative proportion of 'Central Offices/Services or Departments' decreased slightly, and that of 'Non-Central Offices/Services or Departments' increased.

The data shows that RMAs work mainly in organisational units that provide services across the whole institution (Central Office/Service or Department). However, an increased representation of decentralised RMA services (with functions other than academic or research) and other organisational settings can be observed (*RQ2*). This can be due to a tendency to decentralise RMA units, specifically dedicated to particular organisational subunits (e.g. faculties or schools). If so, are there any differences in the nature of the tasks these RMAs perform?

In order to assess what differences there are in the makeup of these RMAs and what they do specifically (*RQ3*), data from the most recent iteration of RAAAP (RAAAP-3) was used. The non-RPO considered was 'research funder'. The RPOs considered were university, research institute and hospital. The other organisation categories were not analysed as they can be either RPOs or/and non-RPOs, and this was not possible to derive from the survey data. The centralised services correspond to 'central office/service', and the non-centralised services correspond to 'non-central office/service'. The analysis results are summarised in Fig. 2.5.2, which collects the most significant features in terms of (1) tasks, (2) age, (3) years employed as RMA, and (4) highest academic qualification level of the respondents. The non-RPOs respondents were not split

into 'centralised' and 'non-centralised' as the response number ($n = 34$) is relatively low and, consequently, the data should be considered exploratory in nature.

It should be noted that, in this context, 'research development and policy' includes research policy, strategy, research assessment, ethics, governance, policy development, delivering research development or other training and development activities. It can be observed that (*RQ3*):

1. At non-RPOs, a greater number of tasks is performed at the research development and policy levels, followed by post-award and pre-award activities.
2. At RPOs, a greater number of tasks are performed at the pre-award and post-award levels at 'non-central services' than at 'central services', the difference being particularly prominent for post-award.
3. At RPOs, 'centralised RMAs' perform more tasks related with research development and policy than 'non-central services'.
4. At RPOs, the age range of 'centralised RMAs' is similar to that of 'non-centralised RMAs', although somewhat lower for the latter.
5. The average age range of the respondents at non-RPOs is somewhat greater than that of those at RPOs.
6. On average, RMAs at non-RPOs have been in the profession for longer than RMAs at RPOs.
7. On average, 75% of the RMAs, both at non-RPOs and at RPOs, have been employed for less than 15 years.
8. Non-RPO RMAs have higher average academic qualifications, in particular, a higher proportion of respondents with a PhD degree.

Data From the PIoS Survey

To assess if RMAs at non-RPOs feel part of the RMA profession/community (*RQ4*), data from the PIoS survey was used (as there were no questions in the RAAAP surveys that allowed for this analysis). The PIoS survey was disseminated directly among professionals at non-RPOs, and also among RMA associations. A total of 37 responses were obtained for RMAs working at non-RPOs (Santos et al., 2021b). No inferential statistical analyses were undertaken as the response level was too low for this to be meaningful. Thus, this study was exploratory in nature.

Around half of the respondents (48.6%) were working at research funding organisations. The second most representative institution type was that of science policy making (21.6%), followed by think tanks (13.5%), and other types of organisations (16.2%). The three most mentioned tasks are: 'operationalisation of funding mechanisms' (13.9%), 'liaison with stakeholders (e.g. RPOs)' (11.4%) and 'advising on programs and projects' (11.4%).

The respondents were asked whether or not they felt part of the same community/profession as RMAs working in other types of settings in the research ecosystem. Around half (55.0%) of the respondents would include their profession in the same category as that of RMAs working at HEIs and R&D centres, but 27.3% are not sure, and 18.2% do not. This indicates that there is a significant 'mixed identity' or 'undefined identity' in this specific community of professionals. The 'identity certainty' (i.e. the percentage of those that responded 'yes' when asked if they feel they belong to the same category as RMAs at HEIs and R&D centres) increases with increasing academic qualifications (33.3%, 47.6% and 77.8% for BSc, MSc and PhD, respectively). This is thought to have a contribution from a greater involvement of PhDs in the academic world and, thus, from an extended contact with RMAs at HEIs and R&D

centres (e.g. in the context of R&D projects). Also, the 'identity certainty' is greater for former 'scientists/researchers' than for 'managers from outside science' (66.7% and 60.0%, respectively). Possible because the former had a more extensive contact with RMAs at HEIs and R&D centres.

The data from the PIoS survey (see Santos et al., 2021b) also shows that the tasks 'advising on administration procedures', 'advising on funding opportunities' and 'disseminating funding opportunities' are more common for those who identify themselves with RMAs at RPOs (75.0%, 69.2% and 64.3% of the respondents that perform these tasks, respectively). On the other hand, the tasks 'definition of funding mechanisms', 'definition of policy and strategy' and 'other activities' are more common for those who consider they do not belong to the same professional category as RMAs at HEIs and R&D centres (33.3% for each of these tasks). The tasks 'operationalization of funding mechanisms', 'liaising with funding agencies' and 'liaising with stakeholders' are more common for those who responded 'not sure' (34.8%, 28.6% and 26.3%, respectively). The professional identification with RMAs at RPOs seems to be more representative in the case of 'managerial' levels than at the 'strategic' level. But the 'identity uncertainty' is clearly observed at the 'operational', 'managerial' and 'strategic' levels.

Evidence From Interview Data

To further explore *RQs 2*, *3* and *4*, the use was made of interviews with RMAs working in different organisations, to illustrate typical and atypical work contexts. We will look at Europe and North America as the two most mature regions in terms of the RMA profession, and consider the RPO, central and non-central, and non-RPO work settings. Bearing in mind the heterogeneity of professional contexts in Europe, interview quotes will be presented from two distinct countries (the UK and Portugal). Quotes are attributed to interviewees by number and a letter, either P for PIoS or N for those New in this research. Those wishing to be identified are listed in the Acknowledgements section.

Interviews to RMAs Based at RPOs

Awareness About the RMA Profession
The perception of RMA as a profession was a common observation of the interviewees, although this was not always the case:

> I definitely think that it is a profession. We have a very unique skill set, but in a knowledge base that you have to have. – Senior Research Administrator at a University (RPO, Central, USA). (Respondent #1N)

> I knew that I wasn't a researcher and I knew I wasn't … a secretary. (…) I didn't know what I was, … and it was very hard to explain to people what I've done and what I was doing and the importance of what I was doing. – Research Manager and Administrator at a Research Centre of a University (RPO, Non-central, Portugal). (Respondent #7N)

On the Different Roles of RMAs at Central and Non-central Levels
Some differences between the roles of RMAs at central and non-central levels are commonly identified, but the organisational culture is key:

> The specialisation increases when you go to the central levels. That's why for example, I do everything. Because, I'm in the lower level. Because

if you go to the central services you will have a pre-award even if they do other things but it's a separate pre-award [as different offices] and the people that do the financial issues [also have their own section]. The amount of work and the diversity of work and specialisation changes a lot. – Research Manager and Administrator at a Research Centre of a University (RPO, Non-central, Portugal) (Respondent #7N)

It's a lot more nuanced depending on where you are in the culture of your organisation and I think in many cases there is a power struggle, but who feels more important, who is the alpha office? There doesn't need to be but it is just, I think, a human culture issue. And again, I think that goes back to organisation and how leadership and how that culture is formed, created and nurtured from that leadership down. Right? I've seen a lot of battles between central and department levels. – Senior Research Administrator at a University (RPO, Central, USA) (Respondent #1N)

[speaking about departmental vs. central] '… I very much consider us part of the same community. We're just two sides of the same coin'. – Senior Grants & Contracts Administrator at a University (RPO, Non-central, USA) (Respondent #10N)

Are RMAs at RPOs and Non-RPOs Part of the Same Professional Community?
The sense of belonging to the same professional 'area' is common, though keeping in mind relevant specificities:

I consider that the scope of our work, the audience of our work is different. Maybe in the objectives, but I don't feel we belong to different professional communities. There are specificities but we are more common than different. – Head of Research Funding Affairs Office, non-profit private Foundation (RPO, Central, Portugal) (Respondent #3N)

I definitely consider those people colleagues, but I guess I still probably don't consider them research administrators in the same vein that I would somebody sitting on … our side of the fence, so I feel like there may be a schism there. (…).– Director of Sponsored Programs at a Private Not-for-profit Institution (RPO, Central, USA) (Respondent #6N)

Nevertheless, for some interviewees, this has never been questioned at all:

It's funny I've never really thought of our funders as being research management professionals, I thought … they work at a funder … they give us the money. – Research Support and Development Officer, University (RPO, Non-central, UK) (Respondent #5N)

Interviews to RMAs Based at Non-RPOs

Awareness about the RMA profession:
    The interviewees showed, generally, to be unaware of the existence of a RMA profession. But in some cases described their profession as research 'facilitator' or

'enabler', and in others mentioned the familiarity with scientific aspects as a common trait with RMAs at RPOs:

> I actually don't believe that most of us, if even any of us, know that there is a name for what we do. – Team Leader at a National Funding Agency (non-RPO, PT) (Respondent #4P)

> I don't think I am doing research management, I think I am facilitating research management … In the broadest possible sense I help manage research but not in a narrow field of research management in that you are providing day-to-day support for the research lifecycle and providing advice, so I would say maybe I am a research manager at the national level rather than at the institutional level, possibly?! – Head of Product at a Not-for-profit Institution (non-RPO, UK) (Respondent #1P)

Are RMAs at RPOs and Non-RPOs Part of the Same Professional Community?
The sense of being part of the same endeavour is clear:

> We are also part of the project and I felt that on several projects, especially when the final meeting takes place and we are invited to go and there's always this gratitude toward us that I never really felt as a consultant, and that really makes us feel like we're part of the team and for me that sensation makes me more of a professional in that area than when I was a consultant. – Team Leader at a National Funding Agency (non-RPO, PT) (Respondent #4P)

The existence of cultural barriers in public administrations is mentioned to inhibit greater professional proximity between RMAs at RPOs and non-RPOs:

> [in relation to their role] '… it's like the frontier between being on the hunt for funding and being the ones getting the funding. Sometimes it might create this barrier and it shouldn't exist'. – Team Leader at a National Funding Agency (non-RPO, PT) (Respondent #4P)

Conclusions

RMAs work mostly at universities and research institutes but cover the entire chain of R&I ecosystems, including non-RPOs.

At RPOs, the majority of RMAs work at central services and perform tasks related to research development and policy, pre-award and post-award, but their presence at non-central services is increasing over time, namely in tasks that require a closer, tailored contact with researchers, in particular, pre-award activities. These RMAs provide a personalised service to researchers that central services often do not. This hints to an increased institutional recognition of the professional profile of RMAs, leading to clearly identified organisational units (i.e. reorganisation of functional units) and/or to an increased demand for RMAs (i.e. creation of new job positions and functional units). This is supported by the fact that the majority of RMAs at RPOs, namely at non-central services, have been employed for fewer than 10 years. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that the decentralisation of RMA services is a real trend needs to be addressed in future studies. Some tensions and a need for close cooperation between central and non-central RMA services, are evidenced.

At non-RPOs a somewhat greater number of RMA tasks is performed at the research development and policy levels, followed closely by post-award and pre-award activities.

Generally, RMAs at non-RPOs consider themselves as part of the wider RMA profession, although 'mixed identities' or 'undefined identities' are significant. Shared vision, mission and aims are mentioned as commonalities. Political drivers and public policy perspectives are examples of differences. RMAs at RPOs also see colleagues at non-RPOs as part of the same community, sharing the same general objectives, in terms of advancing science and technology, only from a different perspective. Increased proximity and lowered barriers among both categories of RMAs are welcome and seen as important to the overall mission of R&I ecosystems.

Acknowledgements

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