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Chapter 5.17

The Emergence of the Research Management Profession in Australia

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Abstract

The creation of a Unified National System of Higher Education in Australia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dawkins_Revolution) in the late 1980s resulted in many new universities and significantly increased research funding for the sector. The result was the emergence of the modern Research Management Office (RMO) and eventually the establishment of the Australian Research Management Society (ARMS) to support the development of research management professionals in the region; including Singapore, New Zealand, Pacific Islands, and Papua New Guinea. In 2013, ARMS launched an accreditation program to recognise and develop careers in research management. There are now more than 3,500 ARMS members with nearly 30% only having been in the profession for less than 5 years. The role of ARMS in helping Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) redefine their roles and upskill is ever important in growing the profession and its leaders.

Keywords: Australia; Australian Research Management Society; ARMS; Research Managers and Administrators; accreditation

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The Australian Research Ecosystem

The end of the 1980s was a period of transformational change for higher education in Australia as the so-called Dawkins revolution of higher education resulted in a Unified National System of Higher Education. This Unified National System replaced a previous binary system of universities consisting of Institutes of Technology and Colleges of Advanced Education, and a smaller number of eight universities. The result was that many new universities formed (now 41 in total) as a result of the accreditation and merger of the former Institutes and Colleges. Higher education became more accessible; by 2018, more than 30% of the population held a degree or higher (up from 8% three decades before). New government funding for research in higher education was made available and there was a significant increase in the number of university researchers. This resulted in an intensified competition for peer-reviewed government research grants, and led to the birth of the modern Research Management Office (RMO) in Australia.

The Australian Government invests in research through a number of mechanisms such as competitive awards, contracts and tenders, block grants, and untied appropriations to higher education institutions and government and other research agencies. Examples include the government agencies, as well as bodies like the Lowitja Institute (Lowitja Institute, 2023), which is an independent indigenous health research entity. The Medical Research Institutes (AAMRI, 2023) also have a unique place in the Australian research and innovation system. Now numbering 58, these institutes are exclusively focussed on researching health outcomes and receive funding from the Federal Government and industry, as well as relying on philanthropic gifts.

A dual support system exists for Federal Government funding of research in Australian higher education institutions, consisting of Research Block Grants ($AUS 2 billion annually) and competitive research grant programs (approximately $AUS 3 billion annually). The former provides a base allocation that adjusts gradually over time and allows for strategic investment in research programs by universities. The latter is more responsive, rewarding merit and allowing the government to set a research agenda and priorities to which universities and research institutions can respond from year to year.

The Research Block Grants are allocated directly to eligible higher education institutions using a combination of performance metrics at an institutional level. The measures include the amount of competitive research funding granted over the previous two years and the number of students receiving doctorates and masters by research. These Block Grants are designed to help higher education institutions meet the indirect costs of their competitive grant research and to help build systemic research capacity.

Basic research is widely recognised as having an important role in Australia's innovation system for two key reasons. Basic research is a systematic study directed towards greater knowledge or understanding of the fundamental aspects of phenomena and of observable facts, without specific applications towards processes or products in mind. First, conducting basic research ensures that there is diversity in the national research base and a capacity to expand into new and emerging fields of research. Second, conducting basic research may inspire researchers, including those in training, to create new knowledge and/or lead to novel research applications. The primary source of funding for basic research is the Australian Federal Government, through its two key agencies the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2023) and the Australian Research Council (ARC, 2023). Whilst the outcomes of basic research cannot be predetermined, researchers and administering organisations must still account for how the funding has been spent.

The ARC and NHMRC both award close to $AUS 1 billion of research funding annually, and rely on rigorous peer review in decision-making, even though it represents a significant investment of time and resources for all those involved. This is because the Commonwealth Grant Guidelines (Department of Education, 2023) require government funding processes to protect public money, by emphasising merit and 'value for money'.

Finally, the Australian Government contributes to the demand for research skills across the economy by directly stimulating business R&D investment and activity through R&D grants and taxation incentives. Without such government stimulus, there would be a greater risk of market failures, which in turn could discourage private investment in research (such as access to seed funding for innovative but high-risk projects), and reduce demand for, and utilisation of, research skills.

Evolution of the Profession in Australia

In late 1989, the Australian Federal Department of Employment, Education and Training (as it was then known) convened an inaugural meeting of Australian research managers in the national capital (Canberra) to outline government research policy and research funding arrangements. At the 1998 meeting, a group of research managers met and 'agreed to take responsibility for the profession' (Dibb-Leigh, 2007). If research managers were to be more than 'grant processes' and to add value to the research enterprise, they decided, they should take control of the annual gathering and set a broader agenda for the meeting encompassing strategic, political, and funding input from a variety of sources. It was also agreed that there would be a benefit of including a New Zealand perspective given they are a near neighbour with similar interests in the region (Dibb-Leigh, 2007).

The inaugural meeting of Australian and New Zealand Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) was held in Adelaide in November 1999, and the Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS) was born. From the beginning, ARMS encompassed membership broader than the university sector including medical research institutes, government agencies, and national research organisations. Membership was international in nature with New Zealand having a separate chapter and delegates attending ARMS events from the US, UK, Denmark, Korea, South Africa, and Canada. In the later years, an ARMS Chapter was established in Singapore, with the Pacific Islands joining the New Zealand Chapter and Papua New Guinea the Queensland/Northern Territory Chapter.

Throughout the early 2000s, ARMS moved from a volunteer-based organisation to a contracted professional secretariat. This continued through until 2012 when ARMS appointed its first full-time Chief Operating Officer and support staff. The first ARMS strategic plan was developed in 2006 to guide the progress of this newly formed professional society and ensure financial sustainability and relevance to members and the broader research enterprise.

The Australian RMA Community

Many RMAs in Australia belong to ARMS, whose membership exceeds 3,500 across Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, and other nations in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as some from other countries. Members span from executive leaders of institutions to early career RMAs. There are also several formal and semi-formal networks and communities of practice that provide a platform for RMAs to network,

share ideas and learnings, and collaborate in specialist areas of research management and administration and/or institutional groupings – e.g. ARMS Special Interest Groups (ARMS, 2023a), Australasian Ethics and Research Training Networks (ARMS, 2023b).

In 2013, ARMS launched its Foundation Level Accreditation Program (ARMS, 2023c). To gain accreditation, candidates must complete five modules, each assessed by multiple choice questions, and a case study assessment. The three modules cover the Australian research landscape and the Australian legislature; understanding research and researchers is compulsory. The remaining two modules are chosen from a suite of 20 modules (ARMS, 2023d) encompassing a wide variety of issues confronting RMAs. ARMS also has Accreditation Programs at Established and Advanced Levels and has developed a Continuing Professional Development framework to enable those accredited to maintain relevant knowledge, implement good practices, develop careers, and mentor other RMAs.

Australian RMA Demographics

The 2019 RAAAP-2 (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022) and 2022 RAAAP-3 (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022) surveys are used to inform this section.

More than 80% of ARMS members reside in Australia and work in a university, with the rest coming from independent medical research institutes, as well as government and public sector research agencies.

In Australia, the research management profession is dominated by women, although representation declines with seniority (83% women in operational roles compared with 72% women in leadership roles). In 2019, ARMS took measures to address this imbalance by releasing a Strategic Plan 'Towards 2025' (ARMS, 2023e), which aimed to optimise the uptake and delivery of education and professional development programmes to members and to foster the future leaders of the society.

At the entry level in the RMA profession in Australia, the average age is perhaps higher than one might expect, with 75% of those surveyed identifying in an operational role and over the age of 34. Identifying as an RMA early in your career is the exception in Australia, with many coming to the profession for the first time having already had some experience elsewhere. Often this is an administrative role in another part of the organisation, but increasingly RMAs have had some experience as a researcher themselves.

Not surprisingly, the average age of RMAs increased in more senior roles. Those in leadership positions were mostly (65%) over the age of 44. It seems that in Australia experience counts for a lot when RMA leaders are appointed. But it is difficult to know whether this experience was gained in the area of research management or from a satellite profession such as finance, legal, or human resources.

The 2019 RAAAP-2 survey of RMAs in Australia showed that 85% of those respondents in an operational role held a university degree qualification or higher. This is an exceptionally high percentage given that in 2019 only 28% of the population in Australia held a bachelor level degree (Statista, 2023). What is even more surprising is that more than 20% of those RMAs in an operational role had a doctoral degree, increasing to nearly 40% in a leadership position. This speaks to the notion that in Australia research trained professionals are not always going to find a long-term career in research. Job security could be one reason, but more importantly, the profile of research management has increased significantly in recent years through the advocacy work of ARMS in the Australasian region, raising the profile of research management as an alternative career pathway.

According to the 2022 RAAAP-3 survey, most respondents (29.9%) have been in the profession for 5 or less years. This is closely followed by those who have been in the profession between 5–9 years (26.2%) and 10–14 years (22.7%) (Fig. 5.17.1). It is interesting to note that even though a formal RMA community in Australia has existed via ARMS for close to 25 years, 56.1% of RMAs in Australia have only been in the profession for under 10 years. It is still a young profession, but one that continues to expand as people move across employment sectors and becoming an RMA becomes a conscious career choice.

For the following RAAAP survey data, an individual RMA may have had multiple responses to the same question.

Fig. 5.17.2 shows the detailed breakdown of the main reasons RMAs entered the profession. The two key reasons, as per the 2019 survey, are because the role

Fig. 5.17.1. 2022 Survey of RMAs in Australia by Period of Employment in the Profession.

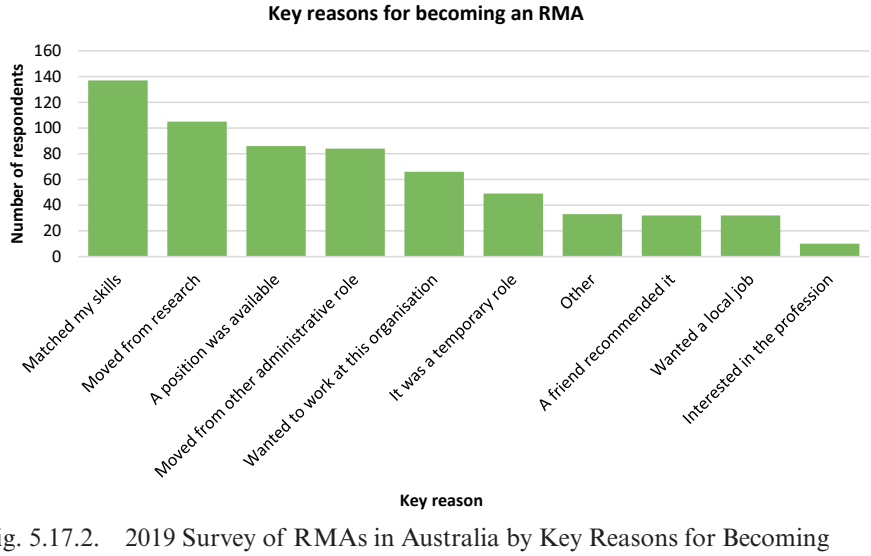

Fig. 5.17.2. 2019 Survey of RMAs in Australia by Key Reasons for Becoming an RMA.

matched their existing skill set and/or moved across from a researcher position. One would not find these reasons surprising, and it is highly likely that this would be similar in many other countries. Also, unsurprising is that interest in the profession scored the least number of responses. As mentioned above, RMA is still a young profession. But it is gathering momentum, especially in the tertiary, health, and medical sectors. With time, this could become one of the key motivators for entering the profession.

Fig. 5.17.3 shows the detailed breakdown of the main reasons RMAs stayed in the profession. RMAs often move within the work areas of the profession, across organisations, and/or even create new areas of work, but tend not to completely leave the profession. It is encouraging to see, as per the 2019 survey, that the top five reasons for staying in the profession are liking the challenging work, working with academic staff, job security, it is never boring, and it is a fun profession. These reasons indicate that the profession is moving in the right direction in terms of providing job satisfaction and creating an environment that will continue to attract and retain highly skilled RMAs.

Fig. 5.17.4 shows a detailed breakdown of the number of RMAs by their job description (2022 survey). RMAs can be in specialist or generalist roles, with the types of activity and level of seniority within these roles depending on a number of factors. These factors include organisational strategic directions, organisational structures, number of research/academic staff and research students (doctoral and masters), research support and services provided and corresponding volume of work, national assessments, external regulatory requirements, and others.

Most respondents identified themselves as Research Administrators (24.5%) and Research Managers (18.3%), with another 13.7% making no distinction and identifying as both RMAs. On the opposite end of the scale, there were Researchers (0.9%), Research Consultants (1.5%), and Professionals at the Interface of Science (1.8%).

A significant number (14.6%) did not identify with any of the roles presented in the survey. They indicated they are in the following areas related to the management

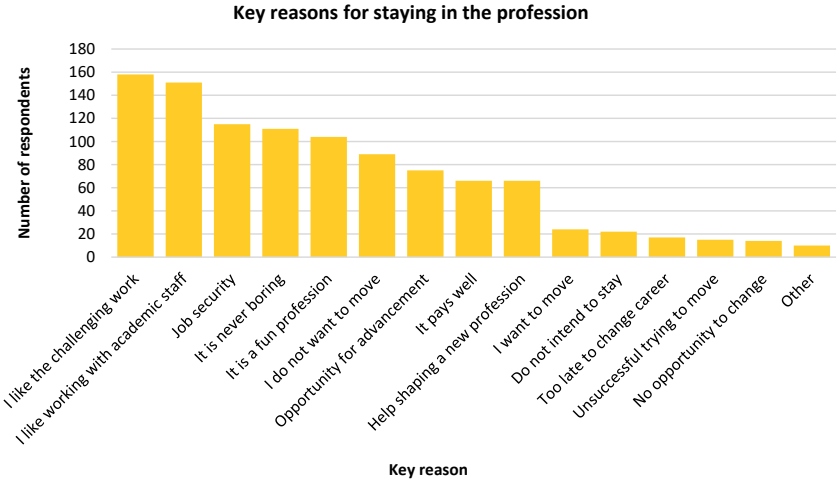

Fig. 5.17.3. 2019 Survey of RMAs in Australia by Key Reasons for Staying in the Profession.

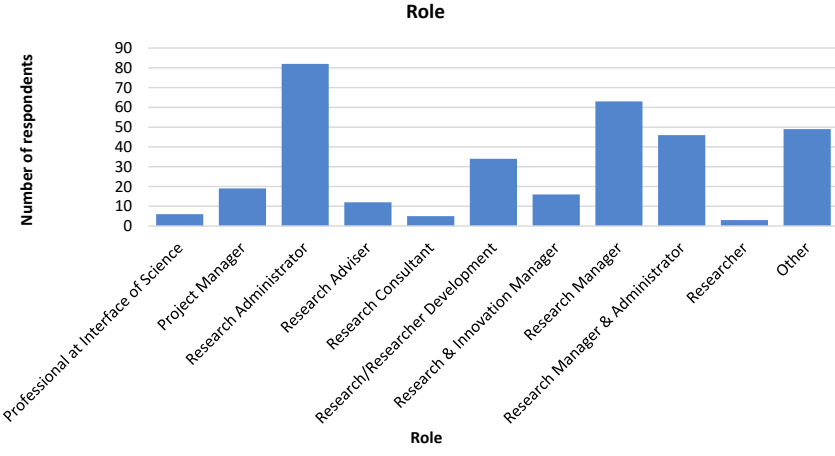

Fig. 5.17.4. 2022 Survey of RMAs in Australia by Role.

of research: business development; internal business partners; external engagement (industry, partnerships); data analytics and systems; information technology; finance; fundraising/philanthropy; research training/graduate research; grant and contract proposal development; leadership; project/program manager; legal; library; capability development; organisational development; knowledge translation and impact; due diligence and risk; ethics, integrity and compliance; strategy; communications; funder.

The eclectic nature of research management in Australia is clearly portrayed by the above figures and the corresponding narrative.

The Future of RMA in Australia

The future of the Australian RMA sector is and will continue to be impacted by the increased understanding and recognition of its diversity and the role RMAs play in influencing, enabling, and advancing research, globally. Much of this change has been shaped by the need to achieve research excellence and high impact in an extremely competitive and fast-moving world where nations constantly strive to address national and international challenges.

From being mostly grant administrators in the 1980s (Dibb-Leigh, 2007), RMAs currently work across the research lifecycle – from strategic development to translation and impact. The economic, medical, political, societal, environmental, and technological challenges that arose in recent years, are prompting the RMA sector to think more creatively on how to address and sustainably solve these challenges.

The authors believe that the future will see several changes to the RMA workforce profile, their skills, collective wisdom, and the ways they work. Increasingly, those who join the profession are likely to have doctorates and certifications from professional organisations. Bespoke positions will be established as the management of research activities and responses to national challenges and regulations become more complex. An increased number of RMA consultant groups, which include RMAs and ex-academic staff, will provide high-quality expertise to research institutions striving to enhance and extend their research portfolios.

As RMAs upskill, reskill, and redefine their work in the current digital boom, 'power skills' – the skills, often referred to as 'soft skills', that will successfully enable

RMAs to be collaborative, people-centric, creative, and agile – will play a pivotal role. RMAs will work in program-based, cross-skilled teams, also known as 'tiger-teams', across international borders to achieve excellence. Partnering with researchers on research projects, with First Nations People, and other diverse communities to solve communal challenges, and with other sectors to obtain shared benefits will become common practice. RMAs will also actively engage with their global peers to define best/next practices and grow the profession and its leaders.

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