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Chapter 5.26

Research Management and Administration in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

In this chapter, we provide further insights into challenges and opportunities as perceived by Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) and previously described in Chapter 4.6 (Professionalism section, Part 1). The study provides a bird's-eye view of the current state of the RMA profession in the Western Balkans (WB) and offers a set of recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Research management and administration; research manager and administrator; RMA; RMA profession; higher education; BESTPRAC; V4+WB

The focus group discussion that was fully explained in Chapter 4.6 (Marčić & Pepić, 2023a) revealed several important challenges and obstacles that stand in the way of recognising the RMA profession in the WB. Before engaging with those challenges, we first provide an overview of the research ecosystem in the WB.

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Research Ecosystems in the Western Balkans (WB)

To understand the context within which the profession is developing, it is important to emphasise that the population of the WB is estimated at 17.6 million (OECD, 2021a). As opposed to the European Union (EU), where research and development (R&D) expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) stood at 2.3% in 2020 (European Commission, 2021b), average expenditure in the region was significantly lower at around 0.4%. In 2020, R&D expenditure in Serbia accounted for 0.9% of its GDP, followed by Montenegro's 0.5% in 2018, North Macedonia (0.4% of GDP), and Bosnia and Herzegovina at 0.2% in 2019.

The share of R&D personnel in total employment follows a similar distribution. Serbia is the frontrunner at 0.71%, Montenegro 0.24% in 2019, and North Macedonia at 0.22%. Similarly, compared to the EU average of 1.44% of R&D personnel in total employment in 2020, the WB is largely lagging behind.

Since the collapse of communism, the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) has increased several times (Table 5.26.1). As an illustration, at the moment of the disintegration of Yugoslavia – that included Croatia and Slovenia without Albania – in 1991, there were 19 public universities in a country of 21 million people (Zgaga et al., 2012, p. 13).

All WB economies are fully associated to the EU's Framework Programme 9 on Research & Innovation 'Horizon Europe' meaning that researchers and research entities can take part in the programme with the same status as their EU counterparts. Five countries have been fully associated to the previous EU research and innovation programme 'Horizon 2020', whereas Kosovo was associated to Horizon Europe in 2021. Considering modest R&D investments in the WB, association with the EU's Framework Programmes has proven the most instrumental vehicle for increased cooperation and capacity building in these fields with nearly 1,000 organisations participating and 170 million EURO being received in direct EU contribution through Horizon 2020.

Similar to other regions, the RMA profession has been evolving from the necessity of managing and administrating projects funded by the EU Framework Programmes (and other R&D programmes) in the WB. Thus, the existence of the EU and other funding schemes has been one of the catalysts for the RMA profession's development in WB. Against this background, we look into this evolving profession in the WB.

Discussion

Some studies have shown that understanding and researching the RMA profession is challenging for many reasons, including the small population of RMAs doing research into the profession, scarce knowledge of the surrounding HE contexts, or low response levels to online surveys (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a). The present study's findings are similar to other studies conducted in Europe (Virágh et al., 2019). While the authors cannot accurately identify the number of RMAs, we estimate that there are less than 250 RMAs in the entire WB. Considering the size of the region's population, this is a tiny and unstructured group of professionals. However, this is not surprising bearing in mind the level of research intensity in the WB compared to many Western universities. Having in mind our 7 focus group participants and 16 online respondents, this number can be broadly considered to be representative of the RMA profession.

It appears that RMA is a dominantly female profession although additional research is needed to reach reliable conclusions. These findings are broadly consistent with previous findings in Europe (Virágh et al., 2019) and globally (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a; Oliveira, Trindade, et al., 2022; Shambrook & Roberts, 2011), although Nembaware

Table 5.26.1. Number of Accredited HEIs in the WB.

Country	Total HEIs	Universities
Albania	29 ^a	13
Bosnia and Herzegovina	41 ^b	25
Kosovo	38 ^c	7
Montenegro	10 ^d	3
North Macedonia	23 ^e	15
Serbia	164 ^f	15

^a<https://www.ascal.al/en/accreditation/accredited-institutions>

^bhttps://cip.gov.ba/images/pdf/ListaVSU/Lista_VSU.sr.pdf

^cZgaga et al. (2012, p. 48).

^d<https://www.enic-naric.net/page-Montenegro>

^e<https://www.enic-naric.net/page-North-Macedonia>

^f<https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/obrazovanje/visoko-obrazovanje/>

et al. (2022) have found that African countries have twice as many male RMAs compared to the UK. RMA professionals are mostly situated within public HEI/Research Performing Organisations (RPOs).

As expected, the RMA profession is not recognised either institutionally or by appropriate policies. Many managers and researchers are not even aware of the existence of the RMA profession. That is the case with some RMAs who have not realised that their job description makes a standalone profession until joining broader networks. Having in mind that most RMAs are not aware of networking opportunities, we argue that most RMAs in the WB are not familiar with the RMA profession either. Unsurprisingly, RMAs have very limited institutional and policy support. In the view of Respondent 2:

RMA is something that is niche and needs to become mainstream. At the moment it is very ad hoc and linked to individuals who have been very proactive and successful. It is not something that has to do with the strategy and policy of the university.

This partly explains why institutional and policy support is missing. The present study also identified that without structured institutional support, the EU research and innovation funding schemes appear to be the main driving force of the RMA profession's growth in the region (see e.g. Bonnici, 2018). Respondents 1 and 4 elaborated that a powerful engine towards institutionalising the RMA profession in the region could be the so-called 'ring-fenced' twinning projects for the WB funded by the EU and to be implemented as of 2022. Experiences from such projects may have a 'spill-over effect at the university level and maybe even in the region'.

Studies have found that organisational culture has a significant impact on knowledge management (Lehman, 2017). We argue that the overall HEI/RPO's organisational culture determines the RMAs' institutional embeddedness. Overall, there are no rules since some RMAs tend to be embedded in the Rector/Dean's offices or other organisational units at RPOs. HEI/RPOs that cherish and support competitiveness are more likely to have RMAs and value RMA at large. Some cases from Serbia indicate that faculties with such prevailing cultures make the most of their institutional autonomy to build their internal capacities.

Networking has proven an ‘eye-opening’ activity for many RMAs. Before joining networks that promote the RMA profession some RMAs were not aware of the profession’s existence. BESTPRAC network is regarded by many RMAs from the region to have contributed the most to the emancipation of the RMA profession in the WB. This is largely due to the fact that before BESTPRAC there have been no such actions targeting or involving the professionals from the region apart from the usual National Contact Point (NCP) structures. Furthermore, BESTPRAC included many researchers from the so-called inclusiveness or widening countries (WB included) that enabled them to access the community on a European level more easily, share experiences, and learn from their peers across Europe. It is worth noting that none of the respondents mentioned existing opportunities for professional development offered by the EARMA (for an overview of the EARMA qualification see [Poli et al., 2018](#)). On the surface, this partly indicates the lack of awareness about the Association. However, the authors know that at least four focus group members are knowledgeable about the EARMA. One of the possible explanations may be the high costs associated with the EARMA membership and additional costs of attending conferences and competency-based training programmes that are not affordable to many RMAs from the WB. In addition to this, some scholars have contended that existing training programmes for RMAs are mainly available in the north and likely to differ between countries offering content that does not equally address the needs of less developed countries ([Campbell, 2010](#); [Nembaware et al., 2022](#)).

Recommendations and Future Research

The surveyed respondents have identified several groups of recommendations that may empower RMA professionals in their institutions and regions. The first group of suggestions are linked to the undefined status of the RMA profession. RMAs believe that the general promotion of the profession would serve them well. Such actions were mentioned by both, the focus group participants and online respondents and revolved around promotional events, training opportunities, sharing ‘tips and tricks’ on where to start reading and learning, etc. Respondent 6 put it simply: ‘keep promoting the importance of the profession hoping that it will eventually stick in the minds of decision-makers’.

The RMA professionals in the region desperately need training opportunities. These could be non-formal education sessions, workshops, or trainings for project managers in the WB or formal post-graduate courses similar to those emerging in the USA, Europe, and Africa ([Langley & Barsby, 2020](#); [Smith & Torres, 2011](#)). Considering their relatively modest payment grades, it is essentially important to secure external funding to ensure that such training opportunities are either free or less expensive for RMAs.

The surveyed RMAs understand the importance of their roles in project implementation but feel their profession is poorly understood by both the management and academic staff. RMAs find support from upper management extremely important on par with other benefits such as positive relationships in the work environment or adequate compensation ([Welch & Brantmeier, 2021](#)).

In addition to this, RMAs in the WB share concerns that neither managers nor researchers understand the key trends in higher education and the direction in which academia is likely to develop in the future. With continuing pressure to secure limited resources for research excellence, the need for RMAs will grow in the future. Therefore, the RMAs need wider promotion within their institutions, at the state and regional levels. Some studies have contended that the promotion and advancement of the

profession should rely on various macro and micro-level strategies from introducing incentives to organisational flexibility (Derrick & Nickson, 2014). Both institutional management and policymakers should consider ways of recognising the RMA profession in the future.

Networking is another avenue of cooperation that could propel the RMA profession in the region, both at the country and wider regional level. Networking provides avenues for the exchange of best practices, but also a space for collaboration and mutual learning.

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 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.

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