

Backman, Jaana; Haverinen, Soile; Bingham, Ella

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Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics
Düsternbrooker Weg 120
24105 Kiel (Germany)
E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)
<https://www.zbw.eu/>

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The Profession of Research Management and Administration in Finland

Jaana Backman^a, Soile Haverinen^b and Ella Bingham^c

^aUniversity of Eastern Finland, Finland;  Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

^b 0000-0002-9593-7730, University of Turku, Finland;  Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

^c 0000-0003-3036-5900, Aalto University, Finland;  Writing – original draft

Abstract

Finland aims to increase its research and development (R&D) expenditure to 4% of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2030. The parliamentary working group proposed to advance Finland's research, development and innovation objectives which are now strongly committed by the Finnish government. This will allow universities to invest in the research and innovation not only more in the future but also in the long-term and sustainable way.

This would also provide opportunities and challenge the national research management and administration (RMA) community to develop the RMA profession, not only to increase the number of RMAs, but also to better meet the more diverse and complex tasks of the future RMA profession. Finn-ARMA creates a good platform for co-operation between RMAs in various positions and for the professionalisation of the current community and its future new members.

Keywords: Finland; research management and administration; professionalisation; Finn-ARMA; research liaison officers; RAAAP



The Finnish Research Ecosystem

The Ministry of Education and Culture¹ ensures the overall functioning of higher education and science in Finland. The Ministry is responsible for the planning and implementation of higher education and science policy, and it prepares the related statutes, national budget proposals and government decisions.

The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment² is responsible for preparing and implementing Finland's innovation policy. The Research and Innovation Council,³ chaired by the Prime Minister, coordinates the development of Finland's innovation system.

In Finland, both public and private sectors invest heavily in R&D. In 2020, the total investment for R&D was 6.9 billion euros, with private sector funding constituting around two-thirds and public sector one-third of the total. The government is the main source of funding for universities. Additionally, private foundations support the research in many fields in Finland.

The Finnish higher education system consists of 13 universities and 22 universities of applied sciences (UASs) that operate under the Ministry of Education and Culture. The number of universities' research staff in 2020 was approximately 24,700, of which 4,400 were teaching and research support staff.

Additionally, 12 public research institutes work under related ministries. Technical Research Centre of Finland (VTT)⁴ under the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment is a key cooperation partner for companies, research institutes, higher education institutions and policymakers both nationally and internationally. Other public research institutes are more mission-oriented, with a broad range of research objectives. Their mandate can vary from research (both basic and applied) to additional responsibilities, such as monitoring, data collection and management, certification and inspection.

Universities' total R&D expenditure is about 1.4 billion euros out of which one-third is basic funding from the state. Most of the competitive project- and programme-based research funding comes from the Academy of Finland,⁵ Business Finland⁶ and European Union (EU).⁷

The Parliamentary Working Group on Research, Development and Innovation⁸ made a remarkable proposal for R&D funding at the end of 2021. It proposed a new legislative act⁹ (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021) to increase funding. The parties in the parliament, all of which are represented in the working group, are committed to the target of raising R&D expenditure to 4% of GDP by 2030 and to increasing central government R&D funding as needed in order to meet the target. This would require an increase of the public R&D expenditure to 1.33% of GDP,

¹ <https://okm.fi/en/frontpage>

² <https://tem.fi/en/frontpage>

³ <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/research-and-innovation-council>

⁴ <https://www.vttresearch.com/en>

⁵ <https://www.aka.fi/en>

⁶ <https://www.businessfinland.fi/en/for-finnish-customers/home>

⁷ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en

⁸ <https://vnk.fi/en/parliamentary-working-group-on-research-development-and-innovation/background>

⁹ <https://stm.fi/en/-/10616/parliamentary-rdi-working-group-proposes-legislative-act-to-increase-funding-for-research-and-development>

assuming that the public sector accounts for one-third of R&D investments and the private sector for two-thirds. At the moment, the public R&D expenditure varies annually but is clearly less than 1% of GDP.¹⁰ The government has appointed recently a new Parliamentary Working Group on Research, Development and Innovation 2022 (RDI Working Group)¹¹ to draw up a plan for research, development and innovation funding that extends beyond the spending limits period, and to follow the implementation of the decisions and policy outlines of the RDI Working Group 2021.

The Finnish universities welcomed the decisions of the government. Finland's RDI investments are to be increased in the coming years towards the target of 4% of GDP. The massive cuts in science funding planned for 2023 will be reversed and an RDI tax incentive, making RDI investments tax deductible in companies' taxation, will be introduced.

Evolution of the Profession in Finland

The RMA profession originated in Finland in the 1980s, when external research funding became more common, and the need for administrative support was identified. The concept of research funding was not new at that time although the amount of external funding at universities was small and managed by the researchers. There was a growing number of business-funded projects, which meant that legal issues became more important. As funding grew and diversified, more conditions had to be taken into account and interpreted into the relational context of the organisation.

The first RMAs were called Research Liaison Officers. RMAs focussed on the pre-award support, helping researchers to find funding opportunities and understand the funding guidelines as well as assist with technical issues. The tasks were quite administrative and reactive.

Legal Counsels were hired for research funding agreements and legal aspects. Next up were the Innovation Managers who were needed to support the technology transfer activities.

Over time, as the competition increased, pre-award tasks evolved strictly from administrative to support proposal writing and content development. Grant Writers and Grant Coaches positions were established. Research Funding Specialists were hired for other pre-award tasks. Project Coordinators or Project Managers were needed for administrative support in coordinated projects.

Participation in the EU's research and innovation framework programmes brought many new compliance requirements. Organisations also had to take more responsibility to apply for and receive funding. For example, research ethics, open science and impact stood out. Large universities have RMA experts who focus exclusively on these issues.

The Finnish RMA Community

In Finland, Finn-ARMA¹² is an umbrella organisation covering a multitude of RMA areas of interest. It brings together research administration and management experts from higher education institutions and research institutes in Finland. Finn-ARMA's

¹⁰ https://research.fi/en/science-innovation-policy/science-research-figures/s1_4

¹¹ <https://vnk.fi/en/parliamentary-working-group-on-research-development-and-innovation>

¹² <https://finn-arma.fi/>

core mission is to promote co-operation, exchange information and enhance the professional development of its members.

Currently, the network has ca. 500 members working in ~20 thematic groups where most of the actual activities take place. The thematic groups range from research funding to bibliometrics, research information systems, responsible research, research policy and so on. The network is open to all and there is no membership fee. The Finn-ARMA network co-operates with other national parties providing its expertise for joint projects and contributing to the general development of its field.

In Finland, there is no certification system for RMA. In many cases, having a doctoral degree is seen as an advantage in recruitment, but the hiring decisions are made case by case. To support the RMAs in their work, especially those in managerial positions, University of Tampere offers a national study module in HEI management and leadership, but only a minority of people working in RMA enrol to the study module.

Finnish RMA Demographics

As Finn-ARMA, the national network of research administrators, has approximately 500 members, and we estimate that half of RMAs in Finland belong to the network, the total number of RMAs is estimated roughly as 1,000. The research management community in Finland covers universities, universities of applied sciences, research institutes and national funding bodies.

About three-quarters of RMAs work in research-intensive universities, and the rest of them work in universities of applied sciences or research institutes. Before their current position, they have most typically worked as a researcher, sometimes also in another public sector or in the corporate sector.

In terms of gender balance, the authors estimate that about two-thirds of RMAs are female. The international survey RAAAP-3 in 2022 (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022) shows that the division between male and female respondents has been even wider. The proportion of female respondents was 88% and that of male respondents was 12% ($n = 76$).

According to the RAAAP-3 survey (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022), almost two-thirds of the survey respondents have worked for less than 10 years and about 85% have worked for less than 15 years. The number of respondents in this survey was $n = 76$ for Finland. The number of RMA positions has increased in recent years, and this is also visible in the survey which indicates that over 26% of RMAs have been in position for less than 5 years.

In the above-mentioned survey, 40% of RMAs are in the age range 35–44, almost as many are 45–55 years old, 22% are 55–64 years old and only a small minority are 25–34 years old.

According to the RAAAP-3 survey, 91.9% are permanently employed and 73.3% work in research administration central offices.

Almost all Finnish RMAs have an academic background at the master's or PhD level. Almost half of them have a doctoral degree while the other half have a master's degree, with only a few exceptions having a bachelor's degree only.

Their academic background is typically in Science or Humanities, but any discipline can provide a successful background for RMA work.

The Future of RMA in Finland

We estimate that the profession will more and more emphasise compliance in many ways: supporting open science, research ethics, responsibility, export control, etc.

aspects which the surrounding society is expecting from the researchers, and where RMAs can help.

At the same time, we estimate more and more emphasis on supporting the societal impact of research: supporting multidisciplinary, innovations, outreach, etc. This is also something that the society is demanding from the universities and the research sector.

The role of the RMA has already shifted from administrative support to high-level expertise support, and this trend is continuing. The diversity of the RMA profession seems to be increasing, and the requests posed to RMAs are more and more complex. RMAs not only interact effectively with the research teams but are valued and trusted actors of those research teams.

Summary

In this chapter, we have seen that RMA originated in Finland in the 1980s, when the administrative support need was identified. Since 1980, the RMA profession has grown, diversified, shifted from administrative support to high-level expertise support and has become more professional.

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