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Book Part

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Provided in Cooperation with:

ZBW LIC

Reference: In: The Emerald Handbook of Research Management and Administration Around the World (2023). Emerald Publishing Limited, S. 669 - 677.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80382-701-820231064>.
doi:10.1108/978-1-80382-701-820231064.

This Version is available at:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11159/670058>

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Chapter 5.30

The Profession of Research Management and Administration in France

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Abstract

The contemporary French public research and higher education environment is complex and diverse. This chapter is based on major evolutions that occurred since 2000, particularly for universities. This timespan reflects the period during which the research management and administration (RMA) profession developed in this country. The development of this profession is closely linked to the new need for universities to obtain external resources. The changes in universities occurred differently according to their size and internal organisation. Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) acquired visibility to become important elements in the smooth running of research activities of universities and research organisations. Yet, there are still some challenges to face at organisational level for the profession to become essential and well-recognised, such as the lack of a national network.

Keywords: Call for proposals; EU; France; higher education institutions; pre- and post-award; R&I; RéFérens; research funding; research managers and administrators; research performing organisations; universities

The Emerald Handbook of Research Management and Administration Around the World, 669–677



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doi:[10.1108/978-1-80382-701-820231064](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80382-701-820231064)

Research Ecosystem

Public research is mainly funded and steered by France's Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESR¹), which defines national policies and determines core budgets. In France, research is undertaken by different types of institutions, including 160 higher education institutions (HEIs) and 30 national research performing organisations (RPOs), with the National Scientific Research Institute (CNRS),² the French Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission (CEA)³ and the National Scientific Research Institute of Health (Inserm)⁴ being the largest. Around 70 HEIs are public universities, the others have different statuses and can be public or private (*Grandes Ecoles* and *Grands Etablissements*). In the 2019–2020 academic year, 2.73 million students enrolled in HEIs in France, 60% of which were in universities.

In all universities and especially those considered as 'research-intensive', the majority of research units are jointly managed by one or more universities and one or more RPOs (the so-called 'joint research units' or JRUs). In practice, facilities are managed by one of the partners, while staff and yearly funding comes from all of the partners. These 'mixed' research units are probably the biggest peculiarity of the French system, not limited to scientific discipline, university or region: it exists in all disciplines and throughout the country. CNRS has 1,100 JRUs with universities and employs around 32,000 people, around 16,000 researchers and 16,000 administrative and scientific staff, all over the country.⁵ Likewise, Inserm has 256 JRUs spread over universities and hospitals.

While many universities in France were founded in the Middle Ages, RPOs were created after the World War II. However, it is often recognised that multidisciplinary modern universities in France were born 50 years ago with the reforms of 1968 (Forest, 2021). The involvement of universities in research has become more and more important over the years. They are today at the forefront in delivering their missions of education and research and innovation (R&I), sharing research ambitions with RPOs.

With this context in mind, we argue that *there have been three major events that have transformed the French R&I landscape in relation to the RMA profession*: the creation of the National Research Agency (ANR) in 2005,⁶ the law on the Liberty and Responsibility of Universities (LRU) in 2007 (Légifrance, 2007) and the launch of the *Programme d'Investissements d'Avenir* (PIA, Investments for the Future) Programme in 2009.⁷ Competitive funding started in France in the Health sector through private foundations or associations, then developed with the European Union (EU) framework programme (FP), which began in 1984 with very little funding. The current FP (Horizon Europe) is 95.5 billion € of funds and France is the third largest beneficiary with 1.19 billion € (European Commission, 2023).

With the creation of the ANR in 2005 a completely new era began in France, when obtaining competitive research funds became common practice. French participation in Horizon 2020 accounts for 7.45 billion € (2014–2020), the annual ANR budget is 1 billion € and the one of the current PIA programme (2021–2025) is around 20 billion €.

¹ <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/>

² <https://www.cnrs.fr/>

³ <https://www cea.fr/>

⁴ <https://www.inserm.fr>

⁵ https://www.cnrs.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/RA_CNRS2020_CHIFFRES.pdf

⁶ <https://anr.fr/>

⁷ <https://www.gouvernement.fr/le-programme-d-investissements-d-avenir>

When the ANR launched its first calls for proposals, universities and research organisations were mostly understaffed and under equipped to face these changes. The birth and subsequent development of competitive-funded research put researchers under increased pressure because of the administrative burden calls and competitive funding bring along. Competitive research funding not only changed the way that research was done in universities, but also triggered the recruitment of RMAs in France to manage ANR grants. This is the beginning of RMAs, at the interface between administration and research, becoming an important component of HEIs.

Among other French funders there are regional funds for R&I specialised agencies such as ADEME for energy and environment,⁸ several associations, foundations and agencies for biomedical research such as the FRM⁹ (Foundation for medical research), ARC¹⁰ (cancer research) and many others, like BPI France¹¹ for Innovation and start-ups.

In 2007, the adoption of the LRU law of Enlarged Responsibilities and Competencies of universities played an important role in the change of research environment. Universities are since then entitled to manage a ‘global budget’, which includes the recruitment of their staff, management of their equipment, facilities and property and an increased autonomy. As a result, universities started to recruit on the basis of short-term contracts (post-doctoral fellows and administrative staff). The autonomy of universities is nevertheless not total, since the bulk of its staff are still recruited through national competitions (*concours*) and are civil servants with permanent positions (around 75% of total staff).

Several changes progressively allowed universities to experience new governance models and the launch of the PIA in 2009 paved the way for a revolution within the French university ecosystem and included mergers into bigger universities, some of which are labelled Excellence Initiatives (IDEX), others I-Site (Initiative-Science – Innovation – Territories – Economy). There are now 17 excellence-labelled universities. Both IDEX and I-Site are a label and a funding, a recognition of their achievements and structuration. They thus represent prestigious national awards allowing laureate institutions to invest in research and education, helping them to gain visibility and to compete in the international arena.

Evolution of the Profession

The first RMAs were recruited as Project Managers or Grant Advisors of R&I projects at RPOs. One can say that the profession developed mainly in the 2000s, when universities started to manage both national and EU funds. So there were only a few RMAs in France before the 2000s, and not identified as a specific profession. Today, universities need to manage grants and diversify their funding sources, thus RMAs play quite an important role.

RMAs are now present in both HEIs and RPOs. Notably due to their larger size, the first beneficiaries of Horizon 2020 in France are RPOs with 2.5 billion € of funding. CNRS is the biggest recipient not only at French level but also at EU level for both H2020 and Horizon Europe. The first university in Fig. 5.30.1 is Sorbonne Université (at the 7th position) with around 100 million € in EU funding. There are

⁸ <https://www.ademe.fr/>

⁹ <https://www.frm.org>

¹⁰ <https://www.fondation-arc.org/>

¹¹ <https://www.bpifrance.fr/>

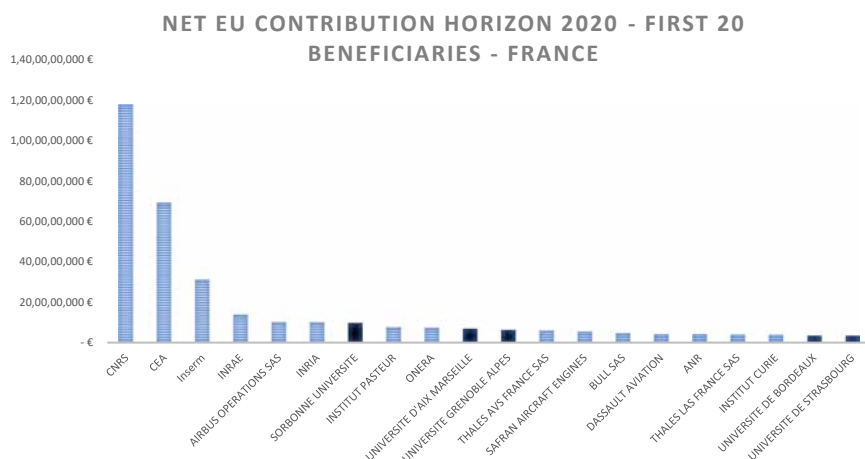


Fig. 5.30.1. Funds from the Horizon 2020 (8th FP) Managed by RPOs and HEIs.
Source: Data retrieved from the Horizon Dashboard in January 2023.

only 5 universities among the top 20 French beneficiaries, accounting for around 300 million € of funding all together.

This imbalance in participation and funding is due to many factors, both historical and organisational. RPOs have been the main research organisations in France since World War II. They are larger in size than universities; in 2020, CNRS employed around 16,000 full researchers while, for example, a large university like Sorbonne Université around 2,500, Université Paris Cité around 2,600, Nantes Université around 1,500, most of all devoting half of their time to teaching.¹² They had time to structure and organise at the national level, with procedures defined at the central level for the whole country. Their scope is national, whereas universities act at a 'site' level. Moreover, their mission is doing research, whereas universities have a double mission of R&I and education but have mainly focussed on education until recently, as the national competitive funding ecosystem blossomed. In general, associate professors at universities, in contrast with researchers employed by RPOs, find it difficult to dedicate time to research, since they have an important teaching load.

Both HEIs and RPOs employ RMAs. Differences pertain more to the organisational model of each individual institution (centralised, decentralised, thematic or not) than to the type of institution (HEI or RPOs).

The main profiles of French RMAs are:

- Project Officers (*Chargés d'affaires*): assist in setting up projects, primarily with administrative and financial aspects and negotiate contracts with all partners (collaboration, partnerships, material transfer agreements, etc.), not only grants (pre-award). These profiles are often located in the CNRS regional offices and in some universities.

¹² https://www.sorbonne-universite.fr/sites/default/files/media/2021-12/Bilan_social_2020.pdf; https://u-paris.fr/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rapport-Social-Unique-UP-2020_8022022_compressed.pdf; <https://www.univ-nantes.fr/decouvrir-luniversite/fonctionnement/bilan-social-de-luniversite-de-nantes>

- Grant Advisers (*Chargés de projets/Chargé de contrats*): experts in project set-up, knowledge of funders, their rules (eligibility and financial) and applications (pre-award). They are the most widespread type of RMAs in universities. They also monitor funding opportunities and disseminate information to the scientific community through communication activities (newsletters and mailings) and awareness-raising activities (webinars, training and on-site meetings). Once funding is granted, Grant Advisers are responsible for formalising legal commitments.
- Research Administrators/Grant Managers (*Managers de projets*): RMAs who are placed within research units that have reached a sufficiently critical size to internalise such specified missions. They are responsible for liaising with other departments for the legal and financial follow-up of the grants obtained or they support the research unit in other research tasks (communication, transfer, certifications and Open Access).
- Project Managers: these are profiles recruited with their own dedicated funding. They are generally committed 100% to one or two projects (national or European). They take on project coordination, communication and post-award tasks and are located at central or unit level.
- Heads of Offices/Directors of Research Support Offices (*Responsables de département Ingénierie de projet, Directeurs de services recherche*): these are less specialised profiles or senior profiles with management responsibilities overseeing the implementation of research policies in the university.
- Post-award Officers (*Gestionnaires financiers*): these professionals are in charge of declaring and reporting costs.
- Legal Officers or Valorisation Officers (*Chargés de valorisation*): they work on engagement and transfer activities with industrial partners.

National competitions as well as job descriptions for RMAs in both HEIs and RPOs are based on job types, which are outlined and described in the directory of professional activities called *RéFérens*. In this directory, there are specific referential sheets (*Fiches RéFérens*), which outline the type of competences and tasks for administrative and technical staff, mainly ([French Ministry of Higher Education and Research, 2023](#)):

- J2B44 – Chargé-e d'appui au projet de recherche (typically Grant Advisers).
- 2B43 – Chargé-e du partenariat et de la valorisation de la recherche (typically Project Officers or Valorisation Officers).
- J1B43 – Responsable du partenariat et de la valorisation de la recherche (typically Directors of Research Support Offices).

Since the 7th European R&I FP, the success rate of French participation has been very satisfactory,¹³ but participation remains below the estimated potential.¹⁴ To address this, the Ministry targeted a plan called PAPFE to improve French participation ([French Ministry of Higher Education and Research, 2018](#)). Actually, researchers tend to disregard EU grants if they can obtain national funding (in particular, ANR funds). National funds seem more accessible and easier to manage to researchers, even though it is not necessarily true. Still, EU grants are key instruments for HEIs and

¹³ 17% versus an average EU rate of 12.2%.

¹⁴ France represents around 15% of research forces in % of FTE of R&I staff in the EU, but only 11% of allocated funding.

RPOs not only from a financial point of view (EU grants are generally larger than national ones), but also and maybe above all, for scientific prestige and international visibility.

The PAPFE plan has highlighted *the importance of European Grant Advisers in the French R&I landscape*. Research Support Offices have thus focussed their recruitment strategies on these profiles. A good European Grant Adviser needs to speak English fluently (which is not the case of all French RMAs) and have skills in training and communication in order to motivate researchers to participate in the FPs, bridging researchers with the European Research Area.

Nonetheless, *Pre-award support is not always followed by an equivalent quality in Post-award support*, as the latter is not very highly valued or professionalised. This in return often discourages researchers from wanting to attempt the European project adventure and possible funding despite all of the efforts and support provided upstream. They fear that their funding will be mismanaged. In fact, university administration is not always adapted nor used in managing projects. These positions are too often reduced to a purely financial dimension. This is one of the main difficulties observed and is one of the reasons why *RMA professions in France are still not entirely recognised in their diversity of profiles*. It is thus important to put the same effort in recruiting and organising post-award teams and procedures as in specialising European or national pre-award Grant Advisers.

Current Community

RMAs in HEIs and RPOs do not participate in the same networks and there is limited exchange of good practices between them, partly because institutions are in competition to get funds, and this even if they always collaborate. This is perhaps one of the reasons why there is no national RMA network in France (such as ARMA or DARMA respectively in the UK and Denmark) and no professional certifications. However, there are a few Master's programmes to prepare RMAs in some universities like Université Paris 8, Cergy, Strasbourg, among others – a full list is compiled on the blog *Projets européens*.¹⁵ This blog is a job search reference for all RMAs interested in European projects because it publishes all open positions in French HEIs and RPOs.

Instead of having one national RMA network, there are however a few networks focussing on specific aspects of research support or funders.

Most EU Grant Advisors working in French universities are part of a large network called *Correspondants Europe*.¹⁶ The network is managed by the French Rectors Conference (*France Universités*). It brings together around 80 people from around 100 HEIs twice a year in Brussels and benefits from presentations of different representatives of the EU institutions or professionals from lobbying associations. Working groups are organised to work on specific topics such as interactions between Structural Funds and Horizon Europe, European Alliances or the preparation of guide on H2020/Horizon Europe projects.

Another important organisation for RMAs in France is *CapRecherche*.¹⁷ Born as CapANR, a self-help network on the management of ANR projects, it quickly became essential. Its operation and animation has been provided by the active participation of those who had specific experience in the setting up and management of ANR projects

¹⁵ Website curated by Vincent Arnoux: <https://projetseuropeens.com/formations/>

¹⁶ <https://franceuniversites.fr/>

¹⁷ <https://www.capanr.fr/>

and were willing to share their experience with others. CapANR was so dynamic that it evolved to become an association devoted to several national funders, not only ANR. At present CapRecherche has a website that counts 120 members and 330 participants.

Another useful network is the *C.U.R.I.E. network*¹⁸ that has been federating professionals in the field of public research for 30 years and totals 180 members. Its main mission is to promote valorisation and technology transfer.

There are also regional networks such as CAP Europe,¹⁹ an action supported by the Pays de la Loire Region in the West of France and European Development Funds. Support is provided to the three universities in the region, the universities of Angers, Le Mans and Nantes, to fund initiatives that promote the participation of the scientific community in European projects.

Demographics

It is difficult to have access to data because there is no central collection of data regarding RMAs in France. This is also a sign of a profession, which is very much scattered and not fully recognised. In the last RAAAP-3 survey (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022), there were 61 respondents working in France. The demographic from this small sample appears similar to other parts of Europe. The profession seems particularly feminine (70%) and with Master's degrees (61%) or Doctoral degrees (34%).

There are about 86,000 non-academic personnel in French HEIs (French Ministry of Higher Education and Research, 2022), among which the authors have estimated 4,000 are RMAs, which grows to perhaps 6,000 RMAs if we also count staff at RPOs. This estimation is based on the numbers of non-academic personnel and size of Research Support Offices on average.

Directions and Future of the Profession

The RMA profession offers several possibilities to young graduates. It is clearly a challenging profession and in continuous evolution, making it attractive and interesting. It represents an opportunity to work in an inspiring and stimulating environment without necessarily being a researcher. However, there are also major challenges to face in the short as well as the long term.

The importance of RMA is increasing and leaders of HEIs and RPOs are becoming more and more aware of the key role that these professionals play in their institutions. They acknowledge the fact that RMAs are the administrative staff that researchers rely on for many aspects linked to their projects. The French government is perfectly aware of the need for French HEIs to modernise their structure and functioning: in addition to the PAPFE plan, it is launching new programmes to better support researchers in the submission of European projects. For example, the PIA opened a call of 200 million € at national level focussed also on attracting European grants in 2022.²⁰

The most recognised role of RMAs lies in their involvement as interfaces and translators of the complexity of the EU funding system towards researchers, thus as European pre-award Grant Advisers. Nonetheless, most universities manage very little funding coming from the EU FPs as shown in Fig. 5.30.1. The importance of most 'non-EU

¹⁸ <https://www.curie.asso.fr/>

¹⁹ <https://www.univ-angers.fr/fr/international/projets-et-financements/cap-europe.html>

²⁰ <https://anr.fr/fr/detail/call/acceleration-des-strategies-de-developpement-des-etablissements-denseignement-superieur-et-de-reche/>

oriented' RMAs and of post-award Officers is not fully visible, thus a majority of RMAs are not fully recognised.

Moreover, although RMAs are generally well identified, the organisation of research support offices vary according to the policy and size of the institution, therefore *the community is quite diversified and it is difficult to speak about a homogenous RMA community*.

What is complicated for RMAs is the type of employment contract that they are offered. As mentioned earlier, most RMAs start working on the basis of fixed-term contracts. The contracts are often renewed, but they do not always evolve into permanent ones. Salaries are not particularly high and management or strategic positions are very rare. Although all these positions concern the highest category for civil servants (A and A+ category in public service), the starting salary in the profession is around 1,400–1,600 € net per month, the minimum net salary in France being about 1,350 €. This represents an obstacle for universities to recruit highly qualified professionals. Quite frequently, RMAs stay at the same level for many years with no change of status, almost no salary raise or obtain just small bonuses. As for fixed-term contracts, salaries vary according to the funding source of the recruitment creating disparities among RMAs and consequently a feeling of dissatisfaction (Stromboni, 2016). On top of this, the attractive salaries offered by the private sector do not make things any easier: it is not rare that RMAs leave for similar positions at consulting companies. Moreover, the difficulty of drafting winning proposals often leads universities to subcontract these tasks to private consultants (either for EU projects or national PIA projects). This externalisation can result in losing internal expertise. Given the salary limitations and these considerations, one could argue that the retention of RMAs in universities is not easy. It is worth noticing that a recent article in the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* (Le Nevé, 2022) addressed recruitment difficulties as a crucial issue that French universities are facing when it comes to filling administrative positions (and not limited to RMA positions).

It is clear that RMAs are thus recognised as key staff for research institutions, the future of the profession seems thus not to be at risk. However, this does not necessarily mean it will be bright because of organisational and economic reasons explained above. Their recognition as specialised professionals and the attractiveness of the profession are not yet fully achieved.

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