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The Profession of Research Management and Administration in Iceland

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Abstract

Research management is slowly being recognised as a profession in Iceland as demands from funders and quality assurance have increased. The Icelandic research community is very small and funding for research is limited. The development of the profession in Iceland is tightly connected to international cooperation in research and participation in international programmes, in particular, the EU framework programmes. This participation has increased the administrative burden on researchers and shown the need for a specific profession that manages all other aspects of the research enterprise. This has slowly developed from being mostly financial management of grants into complete research management from idea to impact. A pivotal moment for research management in Iceland was the founding of ICEARMA in 2012, which has put a spotlight on the role of research managers within institutions, and led to most major research institutions hiring a designated research manager. This has also increased cooperation within the community.



Keywords: ERA action 17; Iceland; ICEARMA; research management and administration; BESTPRAC; INORMS; RANNÍS; QEF, CRIS; IRIS; Research Liaison; RM Roadmap Office; RAAAP

The Icelandic Research Ecosystem

A Macro-level Review of the Icelandic Research I Science and Technology Policy

Public support for scientific research started in 1940 in Iceland with the establishment of a research council (*Icelandic: Rannsóknaráð ríkisins*) and a special Science fund (*Icelandic: Vísindasjóður*) was introduced in 1957 (Bjarnason, 1996; Jónasson, 2015). In 1987, a new law established a science council (*Icelandic: Vísindaráð*) for basic research and a research council (*Icelandic: Rannsóknaráð*) for applied research. Each council could fund work through the Science fund and the Technology fund (*Icelandic: Rannsóknasjóður*) respectively. In 1994, the two councils were joined into one, the Icelandic Research Council (*Icelandic: Rannsóknaráð Íslands*), with the mission to support both basic and applied research (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019).

The next major step in the Icelandic Research Ecosystem occurred in 2003 when The Icelandic Science and Technology Policy Council (STPC¹) and The Icelandic Centre for Research (RANNÍS²) were formed through Act No 2/2003 (2003) (Andersen et al., 2007). The STPC is chaired by the Prime Minister. Its members include the Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs, the Minister of Education, Science and Culture, the Minister of Tourism, Industry and Innovation as well as 16 representatives nominated by different ministries and higher education institutions and by social partners. The role of the STPC is to support scientific research, science education and technological development in Iceland and it sets the official science and technology policy for three-year periods at a time. The STPC has two working committees, the Science Board and the Technology Board (Science and Technology Policy Council, n.d.). The STPC is assisted in its mission by RANNÍS, which is a state institute under the direction of the Minister of Education, Science and Culture. Its role is to provide expert assistance and service in preparing and implementing the science and technology policy of the STPC. It administers competitive national funds, which operate horizontally across all fields of Science, Humanities and Technology, reaching from basic research to technological development, innovation and infrastructure. Furthermore, RANNÍS coordinates and promotes Iceland's participation in European programmes such, as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ and Creative Europe (Rannis, n.d.). Most of the Horizon Europe National Contact Points (NCPs) are hosted at RANNÍS.

In 2010, the Ministry for Icelandic Higher Education established The Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, an independent, international body, to design and implement the 'quality enhancement framework' (QEF) for the Icelandic universities. QEF's mission is to safeguard the standards and enhance the quality of Icelandic higher education and *the management of research activities* (Quality Board for Higher Education in Iceland, n.d.). Since 2010, all the universities have undergone regular

¹ <https://www.government.is/topics/science-research-and-innovation/science-and-technology-policy-council/>

² <https://en.rannis.is>

QEF reviews. QEF2 started in 2017 and included for the first time an explicit section on ‘management of research’ (Sharpe & Sigurðsson, 2017). The Research Evaluation Advisory Committee (REAC), a subcommittee of the quality board, is charged with supporting the evaluation of research management in the universities and proposing ways that research outputs and impact could be evaluated in the future, in line with international best practices (Sharpe & Sigurðsson, 2017). An important element in underpinning any sector wide evaluation of the management of research in Iceland was to be the establishment of the national database of research outputs in a CRIS (Current Research Information System) – aptly named IRIS³ (Icelandic Research Information System). IRIS was anticipated to be available in 2017 but was formally launched in 2022. One part of the REAC’s remit is to consider how an Icelandic CRIS system will contribute to the management and evaluation of research (Sharpe & Sigurðsson, 2017).

In 2017, a second attempt at making a national research infrastructure roadmap was started and The Icelandic Roadmap for Research Infrastructures was published by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in 2021 (The Board of the Infrastructure Fund et al., 2021).

Major Funders of Research and the Research Ecosystem in Iceland

The Icelandic STPC provides strategic guidance for the three main research funds in Iceland: The Icelandic Research Fund, The Technology Development Fund and The Infrastructure Fund. Given that Iceland (population 369.000) is a (very) small economy with limited financial capabilities in Science, Technology and Innovation (STI); the absolute amounts of the national funds are low and competition for them is fierce (Andersen et al., 2007; Independent Expert Group Report prepared for the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the European Research Area and Innovation Committee, 2014).

There are other minor national funding opportunities through government departments, industry and charities but they are few and far between, often field specific, and do not follow a fixed schedule. As such there is strong incentive to apply for international co-operational research funding such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, NordForsk, Nordic Innovation Centre, Nordic Energy Research, etc.

Universities, public institutes and private research organisations engage in research in Iceland. Most research managers and administrators (RMAs) however are employed by universities. The higher education sector in Iceland is small but very diverse with its own history and traditions. There are seven universities in Iceland, as defined by law. No distinction is made between research universities and other tertiary colleges. Both types are referred to as ‘háskóli’ (university) locally, some of them are public and some are private. The University of Iceland is the only comprehensive university as well as being the oldest (1911) and largest (15,000 students).

Evolution of the Profession

Research administration (Kaplan, 1959) or the profession of research management and administration, often referred to as RMA (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a) has not been and is not yet a formally recognised profession in Iceland. RMAs are most often labelled as ‘project managers’ or in some cases ‘research directors’. Often in smaller

³ <https://iris.ra.is>

entities RMAs will be researchers working part time on research management and highly dependent on grant income (soft money).

It can be said that research management and administration started in Iceland in 1986 when the Research Liaison Office (RLO) was founded as a specific entity within the University of Iceland, established directly under the university council. The objective of the new RLO was to transfer research results from the university to industry and commerce through effective technology transfer. A later objective (ca. 1994) was to increase the participation of the university in European research cooperation through the EU framework programmes, which had become available to Icelandic institutions through the European Economic Area agreement.

By establishing the RLO, the road to specialisation and professionalisation was started. The RLO operated as the secretariat for the university and university hospital's intellectual property committee, was responsible for the university's innovation prize, handled project management of large international research grants and formed an international research grant strategy for the university. They also served as the National Agency for the Leonardo programme and directed the EU Innovation Relay Centre (IRC) network from 1994 and 1995 respectively. At its height RLO employed 17 energetic people, 15 in RMA positions (but not called RMAs) and two assistants (see Fig. 5.32.1). Decode Genetics was a pioneering private research institute which established an RMA office of two 'Alliance managers' in 2005, developing and expanding as their participation in EU funded research increased.



Fig. 5.32.1. A Picture of the RLO Staff in 1997 (University of Iceland Research Liaison Office et al., 1998). Front row from left: Tryggvi B. Thayer, Ester Þorsteinsdóttir, Birna Árnadóttir, Auður Loftsdóttir and Þórdís Eiríksdóttir. Middle row: Gylfi Einarsson, Marta Matthíasdóttir, Guðbjörg Danielsdóttir and Ásta Sif Erlingsdóttir. Back row: Sigurður Guðmundsson, Sigríður Jóhannsdóttir, Sigurður T. Björgvinsson, Hulda A. Arnljótsdóttir, Ágúst H. Ingþórsson and Jón Páll Baldvinsson. Two people are not in the picture, Guðmundur R. Árnason and Örn D. Jónsson. This is still today the largest collection of RMA staff in one office in Iceland.

The RLO merged with the university's Division of Science and Innovation in 2013. This was just after the formation of ICEARMA in 2012, see below, which caused an awakening in Iceland's research institutions (Icearma, 2021). The foundation of ICEARMA has led to all the Icelandic universities establishing the position of research director, as well as in all the schools/faculties of the University of Iceland. Three public organisations established a research Project Management Office (PMO) between 2010 and 2016, but only the PMO at the University of Iceland is still active and expanding today. Additionally, a few consultancy companies in Iceland provide pre-award services.

Initially, at the RLO, the roles of RMAs focussed on technology transfer. When Iceland started participating in the EU framework programmes the focus broadened to promoting grant opportunities and handling financial matters. Currently the focus is developing and expanding to include most research-related matters, for example, organising events, working with ethics institutional review boards, etc. In 2018, the Icelandic universities and the largest research institutions formed a national Technology- and Knowledge Transfer Office (TTO Iceland)⁴ to provide professional services for technology transfer, in a way completing the circle started back in 1986.

Current Community

ICEARMA⁵ is the national association in Iceland, and the only formal RMA association in Iceland. ICEARMA has a chair, treasurer and secretary plus two substitutes which meet on average four times a year. A small membership fee (about US\$70) is collected to fund meetings, trainings and events. ICEARMA does not provide any certifications.

There are no other formal national associations of RMAs in Iceland at the moment but the University of Iceland has a large, formal group (29 members) which works on streamlining in-house procedures and compliance between the schools of the university. Most of the university group members are also members of ICEARMA. Some RMAs are associated and certified in project management by the Icelandic Project Management Association (IPMA Iceland).

Concerning international associations, Icelandic RMAs work mostly with EARMA,⁶ INORMS⁷ and the BESTPRAC⁸ network (now merged into EARMA). Iceland is also a member of the NUAS⁹ – the Nordic University Administrator's collaboration which is a member-driven collaborative organisation established in 1976. NUAS has 14 interest groups that focus on specific administrative disciplines. The international community of RMAs is very important for Iceland because Iceland is a small country with limited research funding and resources.

Demographics

ICEARMA is the professional association for research directors, research managers and research administrators in Iceland (48 members in 2021). The idea for ICEARMA was initiated when RMAs, mainly from the University of Iceland, participated for the

⁴<https://ttoiceland.is>

⁵<https://icearma.is>

⁶<https://earma.org>

⁷<https://inorms.net>

⁸<https://bestprac.eu/home/>; <https://earma.org/bestprac/>

⁹<https://www.nuas.org>

first time in the INORMS Congress, in Copenhagen 2012. ICEARMA was formalised on 23 November 2012. Ásta Sif Erlingsdóttir (see Fig. 5.32.1) is the founder of ICEARMA and former chair, as well as a former member of the INORMS council. By founding ICEARMA and attracting members from most research organisations in Iceland, Ásta Sif connected RMAs in Iceland and encouraged the exchange of best practices among other things (Table 5.32.1). This is particularly important in Iceland where organisations are small, and most do not have full time research managers or research directors. The first board included representatives from the University of Iceland, the University of Reykjavík, the University Hospital and the Icelandic Academy of Arts. A major topic in the first few years was pressure for the establishment of the aforementioned IRIS system for Iceland.

ICEARMA is intentionally very inclusive, and from the start open to all that work in or around the research enterprise. However, most of the members work with the financial management of research grants. In recent years, this role is slowly changing

Table 5.32.1. An Overview of the Remit of ICEARMA.

The Objectives of ICEARMA	What Does ICEARMA Offer (Yes or No)
RMAs to share best practices	Development/training (Yes)
Provide training opportunities for RMAs	Publication (No)
Increase the weight and role of RMAs in the research environment	Code of practice (No)
Come together as a group to pressure for changes in the research system/environment	Special initiatives (Yes)
Participate in the European and international cooperation of RMAs	Certification (No)
	RMA academic education (No)

Table 5.32.2. ICEARMA Membership and Analysis.

Year	Members	University Members/ Non-university Members	Women/ Men	Founding and General Meetings	Fee per Member (ISK)	Board Meetings
2012	24	20/4	13/11	23 November 2012		3
2013	30	18/12	23/7	24 April 2013	15,000	5
2014	36	21/15	29/7	30 April 2014	15,000	4
2015	38	22/16	28/10	25 March 2015	10,000	4
2016	41	25/16	32/9	20 April 2016	10,000	3
2017	44	33/11	28/16	05 May 2017	10,000	4
2018	46	31/15	30/16	12 September 2018	10,000	5
2019	46	34/12	27/19		10,000	2
2020	46	34/12	27/19	COVID break		1
2021	48	35/13	29/19	COVID break		0

and widening and taking on many other transversal aspects, including the recruitment and working conditions, open science aspects, ethics and other matters. ICEARMA members are mostly women and primarily from universities but between 17% and 40% come from other organisations (see Table 5.32.2). Most members have been of Icelandic nationality, but universities and research organisations are advertising internationally for these opportunities.

The make-up of RMAs in Iceland is very different between institutes and even within institutes. The routes into the profession are ad hoc and from different angles and career tracks. Reasons for joining the profession also vary widely, this is certainly a challenging profession and often very deadline driven. Many come from financial background, some from an academic career, some from project management. It is common that people start doing financial management and then end up doing whatever is necessary. Job advertisements usually seek project managers for financial matters. RMAs in Iceland have taken part in the RAAAP surveys (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a) with the impressive +60% response rate of members (INORMS, 2019) (<https://inorms.net/activities/raaap-taskforce/raaap-survey-2019/>) in the second iteration (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022). The age group 35–44 years was the largest with 45–54 years closely following. More than half of the participants were older than 45 years. The majority (>80%) of the participants had a Master's or Doctorate degree.

As stated above, RMAs are not usually formally identified as RMAs but rather as project managers. There is little room for career development at the moment and no real advancement from junior to senior as there are so few working in the field. Most RMAs work both pre- and post-award as well as handle legal negotiations. Most often have to be a 'Jack of all trades'. It can, however, be difficult to have to be an expert in so many areas and therefore studies on burnout and occupational stress among research administrators (Katsapis, 2012; Shambrook, 2012; Tabakakis et al., 2020) are extremely pertinent. In Iceland, we struggle with low retention of new people which may possibly be a side effect of low visibility of the profession and constant stressful work environment. A recent study of the research management at the University of Iceland (Gíslason, 2017) describes the style as operating adhocracy where there is no real hierarchy of functions and roles and much depends on the individual initiatives of staff.

A few RMAs who were already working as RMAs at a university have started along the EARMA certification path¹⁰ – but have not yet completed it. Therefore, it remains to be seen if it can lead to job advancements or a salary raise. A few have completed the shorter (3 day) EARMA course and the PM²¹¹ training certification.

Iceland is a small country with short communication routes. It is a country where 'everybody knows your name'. In general, this leads to close contact with national funders and policymakers. Still ICEARMA has not been able to have much influence, but communication is ongoing. The policy/funding landscape in Iceland is relatively short term, which makes it difficult for RMAs and researchers to plan ahead and no funding is guaranteed in the long term. ICEARMA has had good interaction and cooperation with The Icelandic Centre for Research (RANNÍS). Several RANNÍS staff are members of ICEARMA. Some EU NCPs are also members of EARMA. International lobbyism is virtually non-existent. RMAs can interact with funders and policymakers through institutional groupings and lobbies, but not through ICEARMA.

¹⁰<https://earma.org/courses-and-training/> ; <https://earma.org/media/documents/crm.pdf>

¹¹<https://www.pm2.eu>

Directions/Future

Although RMAs operate below the radar and the profession is not well known in Iceland, the work is very well appreciated by researchers and management at institutional level. An awareness of the RMA profession is slowly building through steps taken after INORMS (2012), the formation of ICEARMA (2012), participation in BESTPRAC (2014), European Research Area (ERA) action 17 (2021),¹² and RM Roadmap (2022).¹³ It is still a small community but has benefitted greatly from international connections, with usually very good representation at EARMA events and INORMS congresses, relative to the size of the community. Several of ICEARMA members participated in the various BESTPRAC activities and continue to do so in the current BESTPRAC–EARMA events and RM Roadmap events. Erasmus+ job shadowing opportunities are also important to continue cooperating with international colleagues, with constant contact going both ways.

International contact and benchmarking is crucial for the further advancement of the profession in Iceland. It is foreseeable that administrative demands from funders will continue (despite promises of simplification), and certified, professional administrators will be of great value for advancing the research field in Iceland. It would be preferable to be recognised formally at least within the universities and further specialisation within the field is likely as the roles are expanding beyond financial matters.

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¹²<https://earma.org/news/action-17/>

¹³<https://www.rmroadmap.eu>

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