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Chapter 5.33

The Profession of Research Management and Administration in Ireland

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Abstract

The Government of Ireland, through the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DoFHERIS), sets the framework for the national research ecosystem. Within that ecosystem, the Research Management and Administrators (RMA) community evolved in response to changing circumstances and continues to evolve becoming a more professional and expert community. The profile of the community, admittedly based on a small sampling, is normal with a hint that females occupy the most senior roles. Most Irish research-performing organisations (RPOs) including the HE sector, College and State Research Organisations (CSRO), and the Health Service have RMA members active in The European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA). The next step in the profession's evolution in Ireland has to be the development of a single, national, and inclusive RMA network providing a representative

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voice for the profession with respect to issues such as career development and career paths.

Keywords: Ireland; Research Management and Administration; Professionalisation; Research Officers Group; Technological Higher Education Association; Irish Universities Association; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; RAAAP; PRTL; Atlantic Philanthropies; CSRO

Research Policy

The Irish Government (Rialtas na hÉireann)¹ sets national research and innovation (R&I) policy through a national R&I strategic plan. Each plan covers roughly a seven-year cycle. Increasingly, in recent cycles, the government has tried to take a broader *whole-of-government* approach with inputs from and actions required across the Public Sector.

The three most recent cycles (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2006; Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, 2013; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022a) have taken an increasingly more balanced outlook on what constitutes a national R&I policy, with a solid emphasis on ‘social and economic impact’ but recognising the need for ‘investigator led’ research as well as more strategic ‘top-down’ initiatives.

A very significant change occurred in 2011 in the structure of the national research system. As a response to the tail-end of the Global Financial Crisis and the fact that the previous 10 years had seen an unprecedented expansion in public funding for research, the Government moved away from the traditional investigator or, curiosity-led model to a model based more on a top-down ‘national research prioritisation’ (Forfás, 2011). More recently, and in particular in the Impact 2030 strategy (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022a) the research system is re-balancing to a more flexible and open model where both top-down and bottom-up have their appropriate places.

In recent years, the political responsibility for R&I in Ireland has moved from the more economic ministries to the new DoFHERIS.² Three particular initiatives in the most recent national strategy promise to dramatically improve the R&I ecosystem in Ireland:

1. The creation of a new, single research council replacing the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI). ‘... will preserve and further advance the progress made in building Ireland’s internationally recognised brand and reputation in research excellence across many disciplines’ and ‘... will be mandated to drive interdisciplinary research engagement, as well as to support continued research excellence within the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics disciplines and enhance collaboration with the enterprise and public sectors’.
2. Embedding R&I at the centre of public policy by re-imagining the current scientific advice structures ‘... to tap into wider networks of expertise, both national and international, so that the latest research developments and innovations are brought to bear on Irish policy priorities and decision-making’.

¹<https://www.gov.ie/en/>

²<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-higher-education-innovation-and-science/>

3. Reestablishing a national R&I forum linking relevant stakeholders including academia, industry, policy decision-makers, and communities. The forum will examine and advise on ‘... key policy considerations to support our drive for a cohesive, responsive and impactful public research system, a world-class innovation ecosystem, and our ambitions for international innovation leadership’ (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022b).

Though the intention to continue to develop the national research ecosystem is clear, the role of RMAs in the ecosystem is more implicit than explicit.

Major Research Funders in Ireland

The history of research funders in Ireland is colourful and complicated. Most of the current funders have been through a series of mergers and moves between various parent ministries and this will continue. All of the most significant funding agencies in Ireland are publicly funded (Table 5.33.1).

Table 5.33.1. Major Research Funders in Ireland and Their Areas of Activity.

Agency	Broad Area	URL
Irish Research Funders		
The Atlantic Philanthropies	Advance higher education, human rights and services for the young and old	https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine	Research related to the Department’s area of responsibility	https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/departments-of-agriculture-food-and-the-marine/
Enterprise Ireland	Research supporting economic and business development	https://www.enterpriseireland.com
Environmental Protection Agency	Environment, climate and environmental policy	https://www.epa.ie
Health Research Board	Health and healthcare	https://www.hrb.ie
Industrial Development Authority	Research supporting economic and business development	https://www.ida.ie
Irish Research Council	All disciplines	https://www.research.ie
Science Foundation Ireland	STEM	https://www.sfi.ie
Teagasc (Agricultural Development Authority)	All aspects of agricultural and rural development	https://www.teagasc.ie
Higher Education Authority	Capital programmes	https://www.hea.ie

Note In 2024, Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council will be replaced by a new, funding agency

Research-performing Organisations

The most prominent RPOs in Ireland are the universities (13 including 1 private university) and higher education institutions (2 Institutes of Technology and The National College of Ireland). The recent establishment of 5 Technological Universities is significant. Technological Universities are required, by their establishment act, to focus on more ‘applied’ research and have a strong regional focus (Office of the Attorney General, 2018).

There is a smaller public research sector with organisations being closely identified with specific areas of responsibility (e.g. Forensic Science Ireland or the Marine Institute). However, in terms of expenditure, the largest sector is ‘industrial’.

As one would expect, larger companies spend more on R&D than smaller ones. In 2019 two-third of Business Expenditure on Research and Development (BERD) (€2.15b) was spent by larger companies but foreign-owned companies in Ireland accounted for more than 70% of that expenditure. This has been a trend for several years and is a reason for some concern (Department of Finance, 2014; Central Statistics Office, 2021). The departure of just one multinational firm could significantly reduce Ireland’s overall BERD.

Evolution of the Irish RMA Profession

Until the late 1980s or early 1990s, because of the low level of national research funding and opportunities, researchers tended to do their own ‘research management’ and as long as the scale was small, this was probably all that was required.

Research management was not seen as a profession but rather an administrative function to disseminate the opportunity, ‘sign off’ proposals and perhaps do budget checks.³ However, since the mid-1990s, the amount and type of public research funding available have grown significantly. Three significant events drove the development of a professionalised RMA profession and confirmed the need to concentrate less on ‘administration’ and more on ‘management’.

1. The development and expansion of Europe’s support for research largely through the Framework Programmes but also through a variety of other programmes.
2. Chuck Feeney’s investments in research and research infrastructure through his philanthropic foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies (see below).
3. The government established the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTLTI) in 1998 (O’Sullivan, 2005, pp. 13–16).

Ireland and Europe

From the mid-1980s Europe began to expand its role in European research, initially through the Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST),⁴ Europe’s Framework Research Programmes provided many opportunities for Irish researchers to engage in collaborative research projects with European and other partners for the first time.

³Technically, they were non-academic roles and were administrative roles. While this is happening less often now, it is still the normal recruitment route for professional RMAs in the new TU sector in Ireland.

⁴<https://www.cost.eu/>

The Irish Government also began encouraging Irish researchers to take advantage of these possibilities. While the European research programmes were (and remain) popular, the additional support, management, governance, compliance, and reporting requirements overwhelmed PIs. It quickly became apparent that a professional service supporting researchers was essential if Ireland was to be sustainably successful in these programmes.⁵

Unlike many other countries, networking of the RMA community in Ireland arose, in the first instance, through European networks such as the EARMA,⁶ in response to the growing importance of EU research frameworks, the need to be internationally collaborative and the earlier recognition in Europe of RMA as a profession. The RMA community in Ireland, whilst seeking now to network nationally, must do so in the knowledge that we represent institutions which, whilst they collaborate, are also competing with each other.

The Atlantic Philanthropies

Chuck Feeney, the famously low-key Irish American billionaire has invested all his wealth through his philanthropic foundation The Atlantic Philanthropies. The Atlantic Philanthropies '*invested \$1.3b in the Republic of Ireland to advance higher education, human rights and services for the young and old*', between 1987 and 2016 (The Atlantic Philanthropies, n.d.).

The Atlantic Philanthropies co-funded many aspects of research and infrastructure in Irish Higher Education across a broad range of disciplines and in many institutions including 18 institutions of higher education and research centres.

The Atlantic Philanthropies investment, which had a large matched funding element, was predicated on the existence of robust, comprehensive, and efficient support from the individual hosting institutions. This was a further 'incentive' to the HE sector to put these kinds of services in place and to develop those that already existed.

The Atlantic Philanthropies was also a significant co-funder of The PRTLIs programmes.

The Programme for Research in Third-level Institutions

The PRTLIs was an Irish government programme that focused on developing a modern research ecosystem in Ireland. At the heart of PRTLIs was the requirement for investments solidly based on institutional research strategies. PRTLIs supported the development of physical infrastructure and research programmes within the context of an institutional research strategy and extensive intra- and interinstitutional collaborations. The programme also included some investments in RMA resources as a key enabler. PRTLIs ran for six iterations between 1998 and 2010, starting with a small pilot which became known as PRTLIs '0' and then 5 cycles known as PRTLIs 1–5.

The twin aspects (strategy and collaboration) were in their infancy but as institutional-level bids, they required a substantial degree of institutional-level management which almost invariably was taken on by the research offices now, more often

⁵This also drove the requirement for a European level network for RMAs to collaborate with each other. In the Early nineties a group of European RMAs established The European Association of Research Managers and Administrators. At least three Irish RMAs were involved in the group that established EARMA.

⁶<https://earma.org>

than not, headed by a dedicated vice dean for research role. Research managers now needed to learn and develop evidence-based institutional research strategies and to start developing potential collaborations between researchers both within and without their institutions. RMAs are uniquely placed to deliver these strategies and networks because of the central place they occupy in the national research ecosystem.

It is interesting that expanding Irish involvement in European programmes and The Atlantic Philanthropies investments both set the stage for the PRTLTI programme and that PRTLTI investments were a significant enabler of future and continuing Irish success in Europe.

The scale of investment was such that both in terms of application support and post-award reporting, RMA expertise was necessary to develop and deliver coherency. Successive cycles called for more co-funding and more interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration both within Ireland and beyond. Greater RMA support was needed to support the changing demands of funders and proposers.

A 2004 assessment (Higher Education Authority & Ireland. International Assessment Committee, 2004a, 2004b) concluded that PRTLTI had changed institutional-level strategic thinking and had had a transformational effect on the HEI sector's approach to research. Outside of the PRTLTI process, other agencies were formed such as SFI (2003) and the size and complexity of projects also increased from the funding of large-scale single PI (a model used subsequently for the European Research Council (ERC⁷)) and research centres and the need for dedicated administrative support became evident.

At the same time as national funding was increasing, access to information about opportunities in other places by other funders was also growing. Paper-based catalogues of research opportunities brought this information to a growing group of researchers. As these catalogues moved fully online the opportunities for researchers only increased.

These trends, more researchers, better, and more substantial funding and access to many more programmes using international peer review processes meant that securing research funding was becoming increasingly competitive and relying on researchers to navigate around the requirements of a particular research funder from pre-award to grant close-out was no longer tenable. The RMA community became more specialised as eligibility rules, concept development, contract, and consortium agreements through to post-award support including pathways to innovation had to be understood and supported.

The development of, what we now call, RMA was a direct evolution of these trends. The most efficient way to provide 'research management' was by having a cohort of experienced RMA who could concentrate on those, often specialised tasks, to enable researchers to concentrate on the research itself more effectively. This has continued as funder requirements have broadened and engagement with data management, Open Scholarship, and impact agendas including citizen engagement are now mainstreamed.

As the original RMA cohorts gained experience, the subdivision of the RMA service into more specialised roles was inevitable. An RMA working with more proposals in a year than a researcher would write in their lifetime and who built strong research-funder relationships gained very valuable insights into what works and what doesn't that they brought to bear the next time they engaged with a researcher on a proposal.

From the mid-1990s the emergence of dedicated Research Offices became widespread and became integral parts of normal RPO institutional structures whilst the

⁷<https://erc.europa.eu/homepage>

supports and the specialisations that they provide have increased in response to the changing complexity in the research funding landscape. This process is continuing today. However, despite the normalisation of research offices, and research managers, the use of external funds for so many RMA positions has made the use of short-term contracts commonplace creating precarity for many RMAs and undermining research management as a true profession in Ireland.

Community Networks in Ireland

The unique set of drivers described above didn't require any sort of national 'RMA network', however, that need has only become more and more obvious in recent years. This lack of a coherent national voice for RMAs militates against the development of professional status, defined roles, and an adequate and appropriate career development structure. While Europe has now identified specific actions to support RMA as a profession (European Commission, 2021a); as of September 2022, there is no single inclusive professional network for RMAs as a community and Ireland risks losing out.

The Research Officer Group (ROG) is a very informal network of RMAs from across most RPOs. The two Associations representing higher education institutions (Irish Universities Association (IUA) and The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)) have RMA networks for their members.⁸ Newer networks such as the National Research Services and Infrastructure Forum (RESIN)⁹ and, more recently, 'The All Island Research Excellence Network (AIREN)',¹⁰ have been established but, while AIREN may ultimately be the Irish- ARMA, it is still too early to say how this network or any of the others will evolve into a genuinely inclusive *Cumann Bainisteoirí agus Riarthóirí Taighde na hÉireann*.¹¹

Demographics

Based on the RAAAP-2 survey (admittedly a small sample of $n = 50$) (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022), The RMA community in Ireland is 'normal'. In every age group, the majority are female and the ratio of Female:Male is as high as 5:1 in some groups. It's not a young profession, the vast majority of those who responded (44) were aged between 35 and 54.

Most of those who identify as 'Leader' or 'Manager' are female (80% in both cases). 66% of those who responded had entered the service with Masters or PhD level qualifications and are distributed across 'Leader', 'Manager', and 'Operational' roles.

The majority of RMAs have been in the service for 10 or more years, probably reflecting the 'evolution' of the profession described above.¹²

⁸The ROG is based on those universities that form the Irish Universities Association (IUA; <https://www.iua.ie>). There is a similar and similarly informal group within the Technological Higher Education Association (<https://www.thea.ie>). There are several other smaller similar groups based on various constellations of RMAs arising and declining as required, for example, the Enterprise Ireland Horizon Europe IDIRUS Group (<https://horizon2020.idirus.com/>).

⁹RESIN itself does not have a website but is hosted by HEANet the agency that provides networking services to Irish Higher education (<https://www.heanet.ie>).

¹⁰<https://airen.network/>

¹¹Translates as *The Irish Association of Research Managers and Administrators*.

¹²Although the number of RMAs in Ireland is relatively small, it is likely that the lack of any formal national network makes completing the RAAAP survey a little more difficult as there may not be an easy way to contact everybody!

Future: What Now?

The RMA community in Ireland is now quite large. There are 88 members from Ireland in EARMA, but there are larger groups of RMAs in individual Irish universities.¹³

The Irish Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science, has recently described Higher Education Research as a ‘*strategic national asset*’ (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022b) and also stated ‘*I recognise that research managers and administrators play a key role in supporting our research and innovation system*’ – Simon Harris TD – 08/09/2022. Translating that open invitation to engage into policy supporting the professionalisation of the service and a career framework depends on the willingness of Irish RMAs to work together to achieve that. Ireland’s recent reluctance to support actions at the EU level to support RMA development should be a call to action for Irish RMAdom.

Summary

RMA in Ireland continues to evolve. It has grown rapidly in response to dramatic changes in the Irish research ecosystem, most notably the large increase in funding that has been in the system since the mid-1990s. The profession is becoming increasingly expert and diverse but remains without a local voice. In the future, Irish RMAs must start to cooperate and engage, as a national RMA community, with the policy developers and implementers if Irish RMAs want to realise the full potential of the profession.

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¹³Getting a definitive figure for the size of the RMA population in Ireland is fraught. Estimates range from 500 to more than 1,000.

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