Professionalising research management

The growth of research management in recent years has been well documented. However, a framework for training in the field is yet to emerge. **David Langley** and **John Green** discuss the results of a recent study of 20 English universities.

Universities have evolved into highly complex organisations, striving to service the external demands of public and private paymasters and balancing the needs of their internal communities. Externally-sponsored research activity, in particular, has gained increasing prominence in recent decades, as universities have sought to increase (and diversify) revenue streams and reduce dependency on block government funding for research.

Research management has developed in line with the trends affecting research itself. Universities that are successful in securing research funding are required to fulfil a range of obligations; research grants and contracts are heavily audited, rigorously monitored and often tied to tightly-negotiated milestones and deliverables. Increasing breadth and complexity in the research portfolio requires broad yet specialist skills and knowledge to deliver effective support. Activities that might once have been left to academic researchers are now more closely integrated with strategic corporate objectives and require dedicated professional support. It is at this interface, between academic research and corporate management, that research support units find themselves. With such demands, it is surprising that the UK higher education sector is typified by a lack of professional training, qualifications and clear career progression within research management.

On 30 March 2009, a conference was convened at Imperial College London, where results of a study entitled 'Professionalising Research Management' were shared with an audience of research management leaders, academics and funding organisations. This study, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Medical Research Council, aimed to evaluate two broad objectives: first, to identify the demand within a rep-

resentative group of 20 English universities for the development of a professional framework (of training) for research management; and, second, to explore approaches to addressing any identified demand.

Through interviews with leading figures from the sample chosen, the study explored how research management has developed, how it has been shaped and exists today, and how staff involved in supporting research are recognised by functional peers and academic customers. An understanding of the context helps us comprehend how demand for a professional framework might be addressed. This study looked to understand whether research support is as clearly defined, structured and recognised as other support departments, or whether there are differences across administrative sectors that require consideration when formulating a professional framework that could deliver appropriate training.

While identifying whether demand exists for 'professionalising' research management was a broad objective of this study, more specifically this research aimed to assess the strength of that demand and to establish whether or not consensus of opinion existed in how professional training might be delivered.

The context in which research is managed

19 of the 20 universities visited in this research were found to have a dedicated, published research strategy. However, confidence in the effectiveness of having a research strategy was at best inconclusive and at worst very low. Only four of the institutions interviewed felt that they had achieved their strategic research objectives, with most others indicating that their research strategy was either under review or likely to be reviewed in the near future. It was also found that only half of the universities in the sample had a dedicated strategic research

budget that could be deployed ad hoc to support strategic objectives. Moreover, in those institutions where a discrete strategic research budget had been established, the amount of money available varied considerably. While it is not possible to draw conclusions as to whether the existence or size of a strategic research budget has an impact upon the effectiveness of strategy itself, certainly those institutions with a strategic budget and a clear process for devising strategy were more confident that their strategic aims had been achieved.

Structure

The findings illustrated areas of consistency and variation in the organisation of research management. Every institution interviewed had dedicated academic and administrative leadership for research support through a pro-vice-chancellor for research (or equivalent) and a director of research support (or equivalent). The relationship between these roles was seen as important in balancing the strategic and operational direction for the research support team; it was clear that the priorities were set by either of these two roles: half of the institutions in the study felt that research support priorities were set by the PVC, with the other half indicating that priorities were set by the director of research support.

Reporting lines for the director of research support vary greatly across institutions. In most instances, the director of research support reported directly to an administrative head (e.g. director of finance or registrar) with a dotted line to a pro-vice-chancellor. Such triangulation of administrative and academic leadership appeared to place great emphasis on strong working relationships and clear understandings of responsibilities. Without strong academic leadership, research support units tended to become isolated from academics and, indeed, five institutions indicated that they felt that the role of research support was not understood by their academic communities.

The size and shape of research offices provided similar evidence of differences in approach

across different institutions. More than half (11) of the sample institutions employed fewer than 40 staff within their research office, with three institutions employing over 100 staff within research management (see Figure 1). The lack of consistent office structures, and roles and responsibilities of staff engaged in research management meant it was impossible to propose the 'right number' of staff needed by an institution, a question that was regularly asked during our visits.
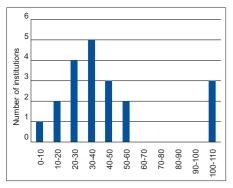

Figure 1: Staff numbers in research offices

Research management staff are generally organised into either central or devolved teams. 14 institutions operate mainly centralised support services, while four institutions indicated that they had implemented highly devolved structures, although these institutions still retained some aspects of central support aligned corporately. The remaining universities were hybrid structures. Across nearly all respondents, research management was said to have experienced structural change or was likely to be reviewed in the future. How best to organise research management is clearly a topical issue within the sector.

Interviewees at eight institutions felt that research management – the function that they worked within – was not considered a professional activity in the same way as HR or finance.

Training and the demand for a professional research management framework

18 institutions indicated that they had a dedicated budget for staff training and development within the research office, and 17 claimed to have used external training provided by organisations. However, the majority of training was delivered internally and relied on the knowledge of existing staff (see Figure 2).

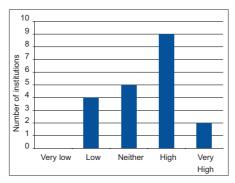Almost three-quarters of the sample (14)

Figure 2: Level of in-house training provided

felt that there was an opportunity to develop a professional research management framework. Nearly all institutions were prepared to pay for training that met the needs of their staff and organisation. Comments from interviews indicated, however, that there were both positive and negative aspects to professionalising research management and this was stressed by most respondents. A number of institutions highlighted concerns that a profession might exclude potential recruits and create a barrier to entry.

Taken in the context of the inhomogeneity across the sector, these findings are not surprising and reflect a profession struggling to create an identity. The difficulties and duplication of activities that this caused was referred to by one interviewee:

'There is huge frustration that we work in an educational sector, and we are professional people, but we have been left to just muddle through. The waste in the sector must be huge.'

In general, the current external training provision was thought useful in enabling staff to be trained quickly and efficiently. However, difficulties in finding courses that were appropriate for specific institutions at a suitable level, at a suitable time and at a suitable price were chief gaps in service delivery. The provision in the core area of research management (as opposed to specialisms such as knowledge transfer) is very patchy, with no coherence or consistency in the quality or scope of the courses.

The most common view of the shape of accreditation for research management was that any qualification must be of high quality and pitched at a level that caught the attention of employers and staff within the sector. As such, the majority of institutions indicated that accreditation should take the form of a postgraduate qualification which gave staff a depth and breadth of theoretical understanding across the sector. As interviewees stated:

'An accreditation would need to be achieved over time and with experience. You should not just be able to walk in off the street and pick this certificate up.'

Conclusions

Research, and the management of research, has assumed greater importance within the university sector in recent years. However, research management has developed in an organic fashion. Reporting lines, structures, roles and responsibilities differ widely from institution to institution. It is this disparity which leads to two conflicting issues. Firstly, such growth has led to confusion surrounding the role of research support – to the extent that staff are not sure if they are part of a clearly defined community, let alone a professional one. Secondly, though there is consensus on the need for a professional, accredited framework to manage and develop research support, the mechanisms through which it might be delivered are less clear.

It is clear that there is demand for a professional, respected and flexible mechanism for delivering high quality training in research management. Equally, the current offerings are not holistic enough to develop the skills needed by staff, nor do they have the right level of flexibility or availability. It is the huge variation in structures and role across the sector that creates difficulties in building a professional framework broad enough to cater for all needs. A broader, more comprehensive framework is required that engages with current providers and senior staff within the sector to develop good practice, greater consistency and a network of research management professionals. Rather than spending money on retrospective audits, universities and funders need to support this as a possibly more long-term investment, which could deliver significant and lasting value in return. RG

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The full report is available at **www.professionalresearchmanagement. com/results.html**