

Report from the ARMA Working Group on Secondments

Preamble

The Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) have been working with colleagues at the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) to look at certain key issues around secondments between research related organisations i.e. Funders, Universities and NHS Trusts. A working group was set up and co-ordinated by Mark Taylor, Head of Strategic Partnerships from NIHR.

The working group has met online at regular intervals from 2021 to 2023. Notable activities have included a broad online survey, advertised to the ARMA, NIHR and AMRC communities; a number of blog posts hosted on a specific ARMA webpage (and disseminated through sites such as LinkedIn) and two online roundtables for senior leadership of our community. All work has been designed to highlight the advantages of secondments to the research management and administration ecosystem as well as seek out opinion around what is necessary to encourage and promote its adoption.

Background

Information on what a secondment is, the scope of the project and its Terms of Reference can be found on the appropriate ARMA webpage here ([ARMA Secondments Project – ARMA](#)). In summary a secondment takes place when an employee (or group of employees) is temporarily assigned to work for another organisation or a different part of their employer. Secondments are part of the modern workplace. As flatter management structures become more usual, traditional promotion opportunities through a series of line management roles are limited. This is particularly acute in organisations such as Universities and Funders where there are not always defined routes to promotion for professional services staff. Secondments offer valuable career development opportunities and are increasingly used as part of talent management programmes. They also help organisations to be agile and flexible by expanding capability, skills and knowledge across the business.

Members of the working group believe that secondments can play an important part in the development of the research management and administration ecosystem. From anecdotal discussion amongst the working group, it was clear that most current secondment arrangements are purely serendipitous in nature and tend to happen because of unofficial or informal ties or relationships rather than workforce planning.

The working group was keen to ensure a myriad of diverse views was considered, above and beyond the lived experience provided by the group members themselves. To this end, an online survey was designed and run online for the ARMA and AMRC membership and an NIHR Co-ordinating Centre.

Online Survey

The survey was designed by the working group and tested with a small group from ARMA's Research Directors Forum. A final question set is available at the ARMA website [ARMA Secondments Project – ARMA](#) and was designed to gain an understanding of what experiences people who work in research management and administration had of secondments, either organising or being seconded. The survey was designed specifically to identify knowledge, views and experiences of **external** secondments i.e., between institutions, not within institutions.

Summary

There were 150 respondents to the survey. The anonymised data is available at [ARMA Secondments Project – ARMA](#). The survey indicated that sector knowledge and experience of secondments amongst those that responded is low. Unsurprisingly such knowledge improves with length of service i.e., people new to the sector know less about secondments than those with more years behind them. In basic terms 38% of the cohort rated their knowledge poor against less than 2% excellent; almost 80% had not been or arranged a secondment.

Considering that over 20% of the cohort had arranged or been seconded or both, there was only a small number in which the follow on, more detailed questions were relevant for. Only 8% answered the follow-on questions with, for example, 4% of the total respondents stating that it was somewhat difficult to organise a secondment but the same number indicating various degrees of ease with the process.

The survey therefore did not come up with definitive detailed information above and beyond showing a lack of sector knowledge overall.

Next Steps

The working group met to discuss the survey results and ways forward. The group debated several ways forward including running a series of online workshops (The What, Why and How series), producing a set of articles for the ARMA website and other relevant publications and potentially producing a set of short 10-minute podcasts from people who have had positive experiences (people who might become sector-based secondment champions who would promote secondments as a professional development tool). We discussed ideas around guidance notes and templates to reduce the 'bureaucratic friction' of arranging and contracting a secondment.

The debate came to a simple conclusion. Whatever direction or set of initiatives the working group wished to suggest to ARMA, we will need to ensure there is proper buy in at a senior leadership level across the research management and administration ecosystem. The ARMA Working Group on Secondments is a temporary vehicle; for long term change senior leadership needs to want that change. As such we agreed to run two roundtables with such an invited audience. We first informally approached a small number of potential participants to gauge interest and test the concepts we wished to explore. The working group then agreed a set of questions to pose, and the invitation list was based on the ARMA Research Director's Forum with input from the AMRC and NIHR. Four members of the working group ran the workshops and collated the feedback.

Roundtables

Both roundtables were held on Teams, recorded with no objections and held over a 90-minute period. The following questions were used as the structure to engage the participants.

- 1) What is your experience of cross institution secondments / how do secondments figure in your staff development plans?*
- 2) What are the barriers and enablers to secondments from your point of view?*
- 3) What one thing would you change, in order to move forward and make external secondments more feasible and accessible?*

Summary

Both roundtables had remarkably similar feedback in terms of the barriers and enablers. Neither roundtable suggested barriers nor enablers that we had not previously considered. Issues around paperwork, capacity,

short term resource cover issues and culture / risk (because in some instances HR/legal processes were an issue) all played out as barriers whilst enablers were perceived in terms of better facilitation and learning, cultural change and better visibility for relevant opportunities.

“What One Thing”

We asked what one thing the participants would like to see to help encourage secondments. This question was posed to help identify possible ways forward for the Working Group and ARMA as a whole. We have collated and grouped the roundtable reflections into three areas:

1) Ecosystem facilitation

- A common strategy – the creation of a secondment Concordat that Funders would sign up to that would address inequalities in opportunities for different job families and allow career pathways to be considered holistically.
- Facilitation and learning to demonstrate value –
 - for individuals to understand that secondments may have a part to play in professional development as much as going on training course etc
 - for managers and senior leaders to help develop process and mind sets that establish a culture where secondments are planned and executed as part of a long-term workforce plan (to counter act the perception that secondments are a ‘deficit’ and not a development tool)
 - for organisations to help build long term partnerships, greater depth of understanding of the entire research management ecosystem as well as ensuring that internal cultural norms are constantly refreshed.

2) Resource Depository

- In the long term a model agreement and / or guidance documents for secondments across the research management and administration system that was organisation neutral (i.e., neither University, Research Organisation or Funder centric). Such documentation to be reviewed and (if appropriate) on a timed basis.
- In the short term a collection of best practise documents around process/policy

3) Opportunities Board

- A formal website to advertise secondment opportunities allowing individuals to access opportunities in a more transparent and less ad hoc way.
- A more interactive website that systemised the “matching” of individuals (with organisational / management approval) with opportunities based on training and development need.

Future Work

Opportunities and Considerations for ARMA

Both roundtables and the informal interviews before hand have shown a real interest in the Working Group and the promotion of secondments as a workforce development tool and a way of strengthening strategic ties across organisations. To date, no one has dismissed or question the idea that secondments can add value to both organisational and professional development and the status of management culture and supporting policies and processes could be much improved.

The opportunities in this space are for facilitation and learning based on the three (admittedly overlapping) categories above. Work packages could look as follows.

- 1) A production of not how but **why** secondments are important would be an extension of the simple work we have done so far; more articles, podcasts, workshops et cetera. Some thought would need to be undertaken on differentiation of these dissemination products to different audiences based on different needs (small research funder compared to British Heart Foundation compared to UKRI). Slots could be taken at the ARMA conference, training discussed et cetera.

The outcome of such work would include evidence that organisations were considering secondments as part of their workforce planning and that there was a significant shift away from ad hoc secondments and a mentality that perceives secondments as a 'deficit' i.e. losing staff rather than a resource i.e. developing staff or bringing in new skills.

- 2) The Resource Depository is the **how** and any such Depository should not be finalised until a significant amount of work has been achieved on point one. A discovery process for best practise will take some resource and time and may not highlight anything more than discovered or discussed at the roundtables.

That could be the starting place for a model agreement for the sector. We would need to learn from the lessons of the Lambert Group and their experiences of producing model agreements. This would need a set of scheduled regional and organisational specific workshops to go through the text and guidance notes. A secretariat would need to be formed to manage the process with named and empowered facilitator(s) to lead.

The outcome of such work would be a model agreement with (possibly) sector specific guidance notes with evidence of its adoption across the sector. A pilot could involve a small number of research organisations and Funders. If organisations visibly sign up to use the model agreement it would show that they are willing to use secondments and it is part of their culture of CPD/progression. It reaffirms 1).

- 3) The Opportunities Board is the final enabler although this should be considered as part of a pathway of change, its creation undertaken (whilst managing expectation), in parallel with other initiatives.

Summary

The roundtables and survey have produced a lot of rich information about the sectors appetite and needs. We believe there are three potential areas in which support could be given that may have a positive impact on workforce development and strategic partnerships across research and research funding organisations.

It should be noted that there is likely a pathway that needs to be followed in terms of ‘what next’ but also resource implications to be considered. For example, we have learnt from the recent Tickell Review¹ that, where other areas of research management have produced standardised paperwork and associated guidance (i.e. Lambert Agreements²), their long term utilisation was not what was expected³. Resource implications need to be considered but long term. Who owns such process is something that needs to be discussed across several organisations.

Guidance, templates, a possible secondment Concordat will all need to be reviewed and renewed on a regular basis. Even a set of web-based articles and podcasts will need to be refreshed to ensure relevance to an ever-changing audience. This is not a one-off investment and consultation will need to be undertaken to ensure any work that is done remains relevant.

ARMA is well situated to lead this work but, for full effect and long-term impact, a broad coalition of interested parties need to be engaged beyond the AMRC and NIHR. As such it is time to consider whether the current working group remains the best way forward. The Terms of Reference⁴ does allow them to “develop an appropriate and proportionate set of pathways or tools based on stakeholder engagement and available resource”. However, we believe the nature of the work as we have now outlined does requires more resource and a broader coalition across a number of disciplines (including greater representation from HR and non-health and social care Funders) than a small group of volunteers.

The ARMA Working Group on Secondments has enjoyed the work it has undertaken and had taken its findings and recommendations to the ARMA Board. Thank you to everyone who has taken part in the survey and roundtables. Your thoughts and insights have been invaluable. We hope that this work can move forward after due consideration of the resources necessary to create a sustainable support structure for secondments.

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1094648/independent-review-research-bureaucracy-final-report.pdf

² <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20100911054535/https://www.ipo.gov.uk/whyuse/research/lambert/lambert-intro/lambert-history.htm>

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/311757/ipresearch-lambert.pdf

⁴ <https://arma.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ARMA-Secondments-Working-Group-FINAL-1.0-Dec-21-1.pdf>