

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Research Management Staff Towards Greater Professionalism: Associations, Training Opportunities and Qualifications

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**Research Domain:** Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

**Abstract:**

Higher education is under attack following a period of transformation and identity crisis; staff in the sector is not exempt from this crucial juncture which, following Barnett, involves re-setting a discourse as modern professionals in an age of *super complexity* where even knowledge has a limited lifespan. Research managers are one of the groups making the professional workforce in this sector and the one under the lens here. This paper provides an overview of their associations, professional development frameworks and qualifications to show what has been done to boost these professionals. Moving from a national report, the paper maps frameworks globally before focussing on an example developed in South Africa. The question is whether these frameworks fit for *super-complexity* and aligns with an up-to-date idea of greater professionalism. The paper suggests that associations move towards doing research into the practice to cope with even more complex scenarios.

**Paper:**

Higher education worldwide has been experiencing a period not only of continuous transition but also of identity crisis. Staff in the sector is not exempt from this reality-check which, following Barnett (2008), involves re-creating the discourse of competencies and, consequently, one of qualifications and professional frameworks, in an age of *super complexity* where even knowledge has a limited lifespan.

Indeed, according to Barnett “modern life is one of the contrasting and alternative discourses ... professional life and its self-understandings are under assault (Barnett, 2008:192-3). Super-complexity, as the condition of multiplying and contending frameworks of understanding (Barnett, 2008:194), is the right term to catch this period of transformation for research managers (RMAs) as the professional group that is expected to refresh the discourse for the understanding of themselves and their role in universities. But what *is* professionalism for these RMAs in an age of transition? Again, following Barnett “the very idea of ‘profession’, ‘professionalism’ ... fade from view and even dissolve, as they are overtaken by other swifter currents” (Barnett, 2008: 192), entrepreneurship or

quality assurance, among others. So what do RMAs require in this age of *super-complexity* to align with an up-to-date idea of greater professionalism?

To answer this question, this paper shows how RMAs' professional associations have progressively developed their personnel development (PD) frameworks and qualifications to meet the demands of those seeking competitiveness and improvement in their professional development portfolio. For example, looking at ARMA UK, the first association to develop its PD framework and launch its certificates, counts on three professional levels, with two of them (Foundation and Advanced) accredited by Awards for Training and Higher Education (ATHE). Within the European association, EARMA, we can also identify three professional levels, split into an ATHE accredited certificate, a workshop targeting early-stage RMA, and an established leadership programme.

To provide an overview of these associations and their PD frameworks, we follow an Italian report (Romano and Albanesi, 2021) mapping the 22 professional associations gathering RMAs worldwide; among these, four have developed their professional national frameworks (ARMA, ARMS Australia, NARMA Norway, SARIMA South Africa), while a fifth framework has been set up as an outcome of the BESTPRAC project.

This report, the output of a study done by an inner working group of CODAU, the Italian branch of heads of administration, aims to promote the investigation of professional associations and map national and transnational qualifications. Specifically, the report strives to depict a comprehensive picture of the variety of competencies needed by RMAs nationally prior to developing its professional framework. Thus, we see how the discourse of how developing a national framework while purposely equipping modern RMAs has purposefully begun in Italy.

Next, following the same line of enquiry, we move to explore the case of SARIMA, the last association to develop its PD framework and to offer its qualifications to its members. Here, the research team discussed stages of development of this framework in a paper recently published (Williamson et al., 2020), moving from understanding what RMA is about to set the boundary of the profession in RMA even in relation to research; the development of this framework stands as the strategy set out to make research support acknowledged while equipping its members with the most up-to-date skills and requirements. The paper shows how the research team developed the Professional Competency Framework (PCF), following a process of 'organising reflection' and experiential learning (Reynolds and Vince, and Pfeiffer and Jones, quoted in Williamson et al, 2020,) coupled with Schön's (1983) conceptualisation of 'reflection in action', which stands for a conversation with the situation professionally. The discourse of positioning the field of research management (provocatively, even as a continuum of research itself), but also that of knowledge and competencies, all lies at the core here.

To follow this line of action, SARIMA has also launched the call for experts to carry our research into RMA, specifically on developing articles on the use of the PCF for research management in the context of a project titled "Building the profession of research management through the Professional Recognition of Research Managers Programme."

In conclusion, following the cases at SARIMA and CODAU, this paper suggests that associations are inexorably expected to strengthen their mapping of competencies and training needs; moving from here, to implement their PD frameworks in line with the more complex scenarios to come. These

targets are recommended to be coupled with carrying out research into the professional practice for RMAs as creators of new discourses in research management (Barnett, 2008).

**References:** Barnett, R. (2000). University knowledge in an age of supercomplexity. *Higher education*, 40(4), 409-422.

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