

The Professionalisation Status of Research Services Staff in Australian Universities. (0130)

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Background

A ten year reform agenda for innovation: Powering Ideas: *An Innovation Agenda for the 21st Century* released by the Commonwealth Government in May 2009 highlighted that:

Most public sector research is done by universities. They also do most of the research training in Australia....We depend so much on universities, in fact, that if their performance slips, the whole innovation system suffers (DISR, 2009, p. 32).

The reliance on Australian university research performance to drive innovation reflects on the underlying importance of effective research management and administration (RMA). However, such connections are rarely drawn out in the Australian higher education literature or in related government policy documentation. By contrast, links between national research performance and international research standing and effective RMA have been identified in other nations, with an increasing focus on the professionalisation of this group (Green & Langley, 2009; Kirkland, 2008, 2009; Klumpers, 2009; Novak, 2009; Sogner, 2009; Weir, 2009).

There is very little known about those who work in RMA in Australia, even though Australian centralised university research service offices constitute some of the oldest in universities in the Commonwealth (Stackhouse & Day, 2005). The functions of Australian research services are typically:

- policy development and implementation,
- research grants administration,
- higher degree administration and scholarships,
- ethics and safety clearances,
- committee administration,
- information systems and statistics.
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This paper reports on the first in-depth multi-site study of RMA in Australia (Sebalj & Holbrook, 2006). The study was driven by 4 questions:

1. What changes have been occurring in the Higher Education sector that directly impact on the work of Research Services?
2. What is the profile of Research Services staff in Australia and what are their specific duties?
3. How do Research Services staff make sense of and view and interpret their roles?
4. What does the operational environment of Research Services staff look like from their perspective?

Data was collected through a nation-wide electronic survey conducted in 2006 which elicited 194 respondents from a total defined population of 640 university research services staff drawn from 36 participating universities. Of those who responded 37 were interviewed.

This paper draws together all the detail collected for the study specific to perception of professional status and the professionalisation process. In the first section of the paper professional identity is explored together with perceptions about stakeholder recognition. Second, demonstrated professional characteristics of the group are measured against Moore's (1970) professional scale. Third, evidence of a professionalisation process is examined using Gargan's (1993) three stage progression model. The final section compares the Australian situation with documented developments in the UK and USA.

Professional Identity

The respondents to the study indicated strongly that they were a professional group, however, understandings varied, and there was a spread of opinion on degree of professional status. Less than a quarter of respondents perceived that academics regarded RMA as a profession and around one half were unsure what other external stakeholders' perceptions might be.

Professional Characteristics

Principally this study found that: over one quarter of respondents held no university level qualification (Sebalj & Holbrook, 2009); there was poor uptake of ongoing professional development training; and, no respondent indicated they had initially chosen the RMA career path, i.e., no evidence of what Moore (1970) described as a "calling". According to Moore's (1970) professional scale, degree level education and ongoing professional training are characteristics expected of a profession. This study reveals that despite the recent 'naming' of RMA as a professional group, the profile signifies otherwise on accepted indicators.

Evidence of Professionalisation

Gargan's (1993) three stage model of a profession's progression was also applied when all sources of information were drawn together in the analysis. The three stages are: Initial - Enhancing the Knowledge-Skill Base; Middle - Building Professional Capacity; and, Final - Legitimacy (Gargan, 1993). In Australia there is evidence of some development in all three. The most significant indicator of the commencement of a professionalisation process is the 1999 formation of the professional association of the *Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS)*, of which there are currently 1,000 members.

UK and USA RMA

There are a number of salient differences and similarities when comparison is undertaken with the UK and USA. Green and Langley's (2009) review of the professionalisation status of UK university RMA indicates an occupational group which has yet to establish a common identity, purpose, function and operation, with a 'haphazard range' of relevant training and development offered by various providers. Nevertheless, the researchers found a "...significant demand and appetite for a professional Research Management framework..." (Green & Langley, 2009, p. 22). In 2010 the *Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA)*, which formed in 1991, had 1,600 members.

The USA has two of the more established RMA professional associations in the world, namely the *NCURA* and *SRA International*. These associations operate with: a comprehensive body of knowledge; a code of ethics; a broad suite of professional development courses; annual conferences; plus publish their own research administration journals (the *Research Management Review Journal* and the *Journal of Research Administration*). There is a formal RMA accrediting body (RACC) and a foundational textbook *Research Administration and Management* (Shambrook & Cooper, 2006). The NCURA reports 7,000 members and SRA International over 5,000 members (with a cross-over membership of some 2,000 members (SRA International, 2009)).

While the activities of professional bodies are more advanced in the USA than in Australia, it must be noted that their associations are also not capturing the majority of RMA staff (only about 20 per cent). In terms of general momentum toward national recognition of need, the UK can be seen to be taking the lead. This is in no small part due to Green and Langley's (2009) research on the professionalisation of RMA, underscored by the focus on the professionalisation of UK university administrative and support staff in the recently released *Higher Education Workforce Framework 2010* (HEFCE, 2010). Similar government led direction is not yet in evidence in Australia.

Word count: 999

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