Chapter 3.1

From Conceptualisation to Action – The Quest for Understanding Attitudes of Research Managers and Administrators in the Wider World

Susi Poli[a], Cristina Oliveira[b] and Virág Zsár[c]

[a] 0000-0003-4053-4640, *Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy;*
Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Visualization,
Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing
[b] 0000-0002-0887-7961, *NOVA University Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal;*
Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft,
Writing – review & editing
[c] 0000-0002-0537-3987, *HETFA Research Institute, Budapest, Hungary;*
Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft,
Writing – review & editing

Abstract

This chapter examines various definitions and perceptions of Research Management and Administration (RMA) from individuals both from within and outside the profession to gain a wider understanding of this field. These definitions and perceptions are expected to trigger reflections on where the boundaries of the profession are more likely to be.

To do so, the authors utilise a mixed method that begins with a discussion of different definitions of RMA. Next, we move from conceptualisation to action and engage the reader by presenting empirical insights from an analysis of specific training programmes within RMA, shedding light on the profession's distinctive features from an insider's perspective. Lastly, we delve into the case study of the project foRMAtion, a training program that introduces RMAs as the 'Professionals at the

Interface of Science.' This case study allows us to explore how individuals outside the RMA profession, such as teachers and students participating in its training courses, perceive and understand RMA.

Keywords: Boundary; students; definitions of RMAs; attitude; hybrid professionals; training

Introduction

Research Management and Administration (RMA) is often described as an emerging profession. It has been steadily and consistently affirming itself and its community worldwide through professional associations, qualifications, professional development frameworks, and European and international conferences and studies (Poli, 2021d, 2022a, 2022b; Poli & Toom, 2013; Romano et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2021a; Trindade & Agostinho, 2014; Williamson et al., 2020). This profession operates within the research and innovation (R&I) ecosystem, which is the space where 'the set of infrastructure and human, financial, institutional and information resources, projects and activities organised for scientific and innovation production' (Agostinho et al., 2018, p. 2). This set of infrastructure certainly includes the human capital that supports researchers to reach their ultimate goals.

RMAs support researchers in a variety of tasks. Nowadays, they are referred to as 'Higher Education (HE) professionals', 'new HE professionals', or simply 'HE managers' (Gornall, 1999; Middlehurst, 2009; Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013). There are a number of terms associated with RMAs, and this definition is ambiguous. Nevertheless, we should strive to be consistent in its naming. An effort to define the profession will help us capture who we are and helps raise awareness among the rest of the university community and beyond.

Furthermore, RMAs have been called and defined in the literature in a variety of ways. They go from *hybrid* professionals, pointing to the blendedness of their credentials and career experiences, to 'semi academic' (Agostinho et al., 2018), highlighting their career trajectory as researchers as well as practitioners. Further definitions map RMAs' variety of skills, competences, and everyday tasks, and so they have been labelled as 'borderless' (Middlehurst, 2009), adding the comprehensiveness nature of the skills and capabilities required for this profession. Several books and theses have come up in recent years pointing to the diversity of their standpoints (Loi, 2021; Oliveira, 2020; Poli, 2018a; Veles et al., 2019). This includes the description as 'scholar-practitioners' (Streitwieser & Ogden, 2016; Whitchurch, 2018), previously theorised by Eraut (1994) with his description of professionals in practice as knowledge creators. These studies have taken several angles to explore the profession, including those of academics, students, and practitioners like us.

This profession has drawn interest to the policymakers at the regional (European) level (see, for example, the Council conclusions on the New European Research Area of December 2020[1]) as well as the national level (see, for example, the The National Recovery and Resilience Plan,[2] Italian documents referring to the 'development of a new generation of research managers' stated as a priority in the 2021–2027 Italian

---

[1]Council conclusions on the New European Research Area: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13567-2020-INIT/en/pdf.
[2]https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility/italys-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en

National Programme for Research). More recently, the European Commission has taken an interest in RMAs as an emerging profession with several funded projects[3] even to pave the way for students to learn RMA and the profession at large.

As such, this chapter aims to dive into this emerging profession to catch more features while attempting to define its boundaries in a less ambiguous way. Views from RMAs, students, and teachers depict a comprehensive picture of the profession and its surroundings, including the variety of stakeholders. These views add insights into the diverse nature of the tasks expected for RMAs and the skill sets as well as the overall competencies needed.

Seeking Clarity in Domains and Definitions

Definition of 'Boundary' and 'Bounded' Professionals

As a starting point, we explore what the term 'boundary' stands for. We do so by considering Whitchurch's (2008b) report 'Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures' as one of the first works covering the topic. Here, Whitchurch (2008b) describes the attitude towards boundaries of

> those managers who located themselves firmly within the boundaries of a function or organisational location which they had either constructed for themselves or which they perceived as having been imposed upon them. This means that these professionals may choose to be governed by the 'rules and resources' within that space; they also often are characterised by a desire to maintain boundaries and performed their roles in ways that were relatively prescribed. (p. 11)

These professionals are the *bounded* HE managers and the boundaries described here are those purposively set by this group of professionals; they move comfortably within the boundaries of the role and their job description, which may even represent the safer working spaces these professionals have been defending from any institutional change; whereas they find it difficult to move out of these safe spaces to interact or connect with the wider world of the profession.

To explain this quest for boundaries further, we move on to follow Whitchurch's description of the so-called *cross-boundary professionals*. This group pictures those

> who actively used boundaries to build strategic advantage and institutional capacity, capitalising on their knowledge of territories on either side of these boundaries. They used their understanding of the 'rules and resources' of more than one type of space and were likely to display negotiating and political skills to perform interpretive functions and become actors in institutional decision-making. Although they were likely to have internal and external networks, they tended to see their futures within the sector. (Whitchurch, 2008b, p. 11)

---

[3]Such as the RM Roadmap (https://www.rmroadmap.eu/) and the CARDEA (https://www.ucc.ie/en/cardea/) projects (funded by the Horizon Europe Programme) focussing on RMA training and networking and the foRMAtion (https://www.formation-rma.eu/) project (funded by the ERASMUS+ programme).

In addition to the two groups described above, we consider *unbounded* professionals, as those who demonstrated a disregard for boundaries, or for the 'rules and resources' that they might represent.

> They have a more open-ended and exploratory approach to the broadly based projects with which they were involved. They undertook work that contributed to institutional development, tended to draw on external experience and networks, and were as likely to see their futures outwith higher education as well within the sector. In a sense, therefore, they were willing to 'let go' of structures and boundaries, tolerating a degree of risk and ambiguity, and embracing innovation and creativity. (Whitchurch, 2008b, p. 11)

These three groups of professionals in HE help identify some of the boundaries limiting the profession, which can be easily found in any context of RMA as well since these [groupings] show how individuals use boundaries for institutional and/or instrumental ends.

Definition of 'Boundary Work'

Regarding RMA, it represents an emerging forms of 'boundary work' (Schützenmeiser, 2010; Whitchurch, 2006), referring to functions at organisational boundaries for defining purposes, which may not always be in a university context. Boundary work is not meant to reflect segregations or to imply a silos effect within universities. On the contrary, it strives to promote the ongoing exchange between those belonging within and outside of organisation between research and its social environment (Schützenmeiser, 2010). Within this type of work, specialised boundary units have been established with their own identity; for example, technology transfer offices as the connectors between what lies both outside and inside the university. However, discussing regarded boundary work in research is not something new.

In conjunction with the definition of boundary type of work, we move on to dig more specifically to discuss RMAs as those *at the interface of science* (Agostinho et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2021a). This definition embraces a wide and comprehensive list of identities and functions in today's RMA. As Santos et al. (2021a) seem to suggest, this includes those RMAs working at research funding and policy agencies. But is there any other inner category missing from this extended definition? While describing these professionals at the interface of science, Agostinho et al. envisage the existence as well as a creation of a broad community that encompasses the widest range of profiles, ranging from grant writers and managers to knowledge transfer officers, and from science communicators to policy analysts. Whilst Santos et al. (2021a) focus on the extended definition of what is missing from that broad definition, they focus namely on the work of those at research funding and policy agencies that could feel excluded from some definitions but that claim their place in the profession at any cost.

Definition of 'Hybrid' Professionals

One more definition is broad and considers RMAs as *hybrid* professionals. Here, the focus sheds light on the hybridity of the profile of those with academic and professional experience. These individuals have experienced a variety of sectors and roles in careers and this may facilitate their sense of 'fitting in' any professional community

they find themselves involved. The focus is on their mixed credentials, career choices, and backgrounds. In this sense, they show career paths from a variety of sectors even within HE. They leverage these mixed credentials when performing their professional-oriented roles so to make their hybridity visible in their performance of the role; the hybridity is therefore in the self as it is in the role itself. From the points above, we see that individual use of boundaries could be the result of their hybridity, not to say of opportunistic use of their mixed, blended, or unique credentials and identities (Poli, 2013; Whitchurch, 2018).

Further definitions found in the literature capture the characteristics of those in RMA. For example, the combined definition of *hybrid* professionals as 'borderless' (Middlehurst, 2009) adds more features to the profiles and identities of its holders. This combined definition aims to highlight a way of thinking about professionals, their roles and identities. This to be regarded as *an art and practice of 'developing professionals' is a multi-layered enterprise involving a variety of contexts, many different actors, and a range of processes over time*. These further definitions have regarded RMAs as *invisible intermediaries* within the profession of RMA (Derrick & Nickson, 2014; Poli, 2018a; Romano et al., 2019; Szekeres, 2004). Others investigated these professionals in their attitude as servant leaders (Krauser, 2003) or the 'others' (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Shelley, 2009). The nomenclature has confirmed the perception of 'otherness' felt by other professionals in HE, positioning themselves outside RMA (Loi, 2021).

Exploring RMA Perceptions: Profession, Boundaries, and Educational/Training Needs

Intending to explore how individuals in this profession see themselves and how they understand and present their profession and its boundaries, we turn to the research conducted by Virágh et al. (2020) by investigating the relevance of specific education and training programmes. The research was carried out in two phases. The first aim was to identify those conditions, skills, and competencies that are necessary for the preparation and implementation of excellent European educational and research projects. The second aim was to gather empirical information on training and education needs as well as on existing opportunities to prove the relevance of specifically developed programs.

The mixed-method research consisted of an online quantitative and qualitative survey, a workshop, and online qualitative semi-structured interviews. The anonymous questionnaire dedicated to RMAs based in Europe included 35 questions, covering the topics of demographics, educational and professional background, place of work, advantages and disadvantages of the job, recruitment, skills and competencies, and RMA-related training and associations. It was primarily distributed through the mailing list of BESTPRAC COST action[4] but also on social media. 136 respondents filled in the questionnaire, and 89 of them completed it fully. Respondents came from 31 different European countries (country of work) and 73.0% of them were female. Then, a workshop was organised with the involvement of Hungarian stakeholders, including researchers, RMAs and representatives of research funding organisations to present and validate the results of the survey. Finally, interviews were carried out with selected respondents of the survey from nine different European countries to gather information with a special focus on the training, including their scope and structure,

---

[4]See https://bestprac.eu/home/.

the certificates received if any, and the views on the most suitable form, structure and timing of training for research managers.

How Do RMAs Across Europe Describe Their Jobs?

This question was directly raised during the interviews. All the interviewees gave a compact definition of their job and the RMA profession. Facilitation ('…*facilitate researchers to focus on what they should do'*. Interviewee, DK), providing support ('*Supporting those clever people with outstanding skills managing issues and complying with requirements'*. Interviewee, HU), as well as ensuring compliance with and translation of programme requirements ('*Supporting researchers to attract funding, ensuring the compliance of proposals with eligibility criteria, improving projects to increase the chances to get the grant through various means'* … '*spicing up the proposals'*. Interviewee, PT) were the key phrases mentioned repeatedly. Various ways of cooperating with researchers were highlighted in all cases.

When RMAs were asked about why they would recommend the profession to others on the one hand, and what kind of disadvantages they perceive as professionals on the other hand, respondents provided definitions presented above as well as in other chapters of this book (Poli, Kerridge, et al., 2023, Chapter 2.4).

A number of RMAs describing the advantages and disadvantages of the job talked about working 'within boundaries', and most frequently, within self-constructed boundaries. Providing support for researchers or carrying out customer service, facilitating and managing research projects to secure excellence, organising the daily work of researchers, and arranging administrative issues to guarantee compliance with the funders' requirements were the most frequent answers in this case including RMAs from all levels, from the advisory role through the project manager till the administrator. One of them even mentioned that '*research managers feel more as an integral part of an institution, and part of something bigger and meaningful'* (respondent, PT). In short, each of the respondents, with various levels of educational degree and RMA positions, put the focus on services such as supporting, managing, organising, and administering, which, from the view of RMAs, belong clearly to research management and not to the responsibilities of the researchers.

While Whitchurch discusses about imposed boundaries, RMAs themselves hardly referred to such boundaries which were assigned to them by external colleagues or institutional regulations. On the contrary, a large majority of them complained about the lack of understanding of the RMA job referring to the unclear expectations from other colleagues towards RMAs or to the fact that RMAs are '*just perceived as part of the support services'* (respondent, IT) and it is difficult to '*defend your position in the organisation'* (respondent, NL). Closely connected to this, some also mentioned the lack of a clear career path and the lack of professional identity as well.

Moving to Whitchurch's definition of 'cross-boundary professionals' where RMAs use boundaries and build their intuitional capacity from interpretive functions to decision-making, the survey respondents mentioned several examples. They highlighted the opportunity of being involved in strategy-making, providing advice to institution leaders, and being leaders; all of them related very much to the activity described by Whitchurch as 'becoming actors in institutional decision-making'. Going further, making or contributing to '*impact'* (respondents, PT, BE, UK), '*bringing added value to the society'* (respondent, NO), '*working with different people with different backgrounds'* (respondent, AT), and the opportunity of '*interacting with'* (respondent, ES) and '*influencing internal and external stakeholders'* (respondent, BE) were also

mentioned; being in line with performing interpretive functions, building institutional capacity. The profiles of respondents in this category are rather similar: most of them have a doctoral degree and work in leading or advisory positions.

It is also possible to relate certain responses with the category of 'unbounded professionals' which Whitchurch refers to as those disregarding the boundaries. They have a more open-ended and exploratory approach and are willing to 'let go' of the structures. These respondents referred to the flexibility and dynamics of the profession, as well as to the continuous need for creativity. One of them also mentioned that '*institutional settings such as universities hinder the flow of operations and set forth way too much red tape*' (respondent, HU). Interestingly, most of the respondents were managers except for two leaders.

As described above, the definition of the 'Professionals on the Interface of Science' aims to embrace a long list of activities and identities connected to R&I in various ways. As was mentioned by an important number of respondents, working with and for science was an important part of their RMA identity; based on our understanding, this might be understood as an added value of this definition which puts the contribution to science and scientific development in the centre through multiple formats. In the survey, respondents highlighted that they '*love science*' (respondent, PT) and as an RMA they have the '*possibility to be involved in R&D projects from multiple research areas*' (respondent, PT) by being engaged '*in research while not being a researcher*' (respondent, NL). Working on the interface of science also means being '*at the forefront of the advancement of knowledge*' (respondent, CH) which provides a '*broad view on R&D&I, enhances expertise, gives an insight on the state of technology and research development*' (respondent, HU). Besides the fact that this position provides an opportunity for continuous learning and self-development, RMAs also highlighted that they '*provide the skills for successful research*' (respondent, PT) activities and '*facilitate and manage research projects*' giving the '*cornerstone for excellent, innovative and successful research projects*' (respondent, DE). It was also underlined that RMAs can have diverse positions without being specialised in one major area. In this category, respondents had either master's degree or doctoral degree and were managers or leaders.

Lastly, we arrive at the definition of 'hybrid professionals' referring to those having academic and professional experience and use their mixed credentials and career choices and backgrounds to fit in the professional community and then we combine this definition with the 'borderless' concept of Middlehurst, denoting professionals in multi-layered enterprises. One-third of the respondents hold a PhD (similarly, 35.7% and 38.7% of RAAAP-3 respondents from Europe and the UK hold PhD (total *n* = 973, PhD *n* = 347) but work as RMA on the one hand; on the other hand, they had diverse educational background coming from social sciences, economics, natural sciences, humanities, art, law, etc., just as in case of RAAAP surveys. In addition, a variety of their responses illustrated this definition too describing the profession as dynamic, challenging, necessitating '*creativity*' (respondent, BiH), multitasking, and '*transversal skills and competencies*' (respondent, FR) on the one hand; on the other hand, it was revealed that RMAs had lots of '*opportunities to learn*' (respondent, HR) and fulfil diverse positions without being '*specialised in one area*' (respondent, CH). The possibility of working with different people from different fields, networking and living in an '*international environment*' (respondent, ES) was also mentioned.

It should be noted that several respondents emphasised the importance of several skills and competencies which were only owned by RMAs within their institutions, and which were essential for successful R&I projects. The importance of these skills,

competencies and knowledge was also revealed because they could be considered as boundaries of the RMA profession as neither researchers nor other parts of the university administration use them daily.

What Skills and Competencies Are Needed by RMAs?

As a respondent in Belgium said: '*it [the RMA job] requires a set of skills that are only partially acquired as a researcher*', and one of the additional skills which is very much needed in research management is multitasking:

> I would only recommend it [RMA job] to people with a particular set of soft skills, such as the ability to switch between tasks fast and efficiently; be extremely organized; work under deadlines; be a people-person; be a leader. (Respondent, PT)

Fig. 3.1.1 presents that most of the skills listed were considered either very important or rather important by the respondents.

In terms of competencies, reliability, efficiency, flexibility, planning and strategic thinking, teambuilding, as well as motivation building were identified as the most important, as presented in Fig. 3.1.2. The last two are especially interesting considering the relatively low rate of leaders among respondents (9.6%) suggesting that these competencies were marked as important also by RMAs not in a leadership role; although mid-level respondents might also have teams in different set-ups (either within their institution or in the frame of a project).

The least important skills and competencies were IT skills, initiation, cultural and diversity skills, and creativity.

Referring to the definition of Barnet (2008) dedicating the role of RMA to females, all surveys, including this one, were completed by a significant majority of females (73.0%); in the case of RAAAP-3, from Europe 77.3% and from the UK 82.5% were female.

How and Why Research Management and Administrators Should Be Educated and Trained?

It must be highlighted that very few respondents claimed to have any kind of professional accreditation or certification related to RMA. When they were asked about how RMA as a profession could be taught and what could be the best way to educate and train students to become future professionals, the particular importance of skills and competencies necessary for RMAs was reflected again. Due to the continuously changing knowledge required in RMA, a potential educational programme was supposed to focus primarily on the development of skills and competencies (Virágh et al., 2020), as several respondents highlighted that RMAs '*learn [their] skills on the job*' (respondent, NL) as it cannot be learnt at '*the university*' (respondent, AL).

Beyond the training of newcomers, educational programs could strengthen the professional identity in RMA, clarify the boundaries, set the expectations about the job, raise awareness about the existence of the profession, enhance the talent pool, and reduce the investment needed in newcomers regarding time and energy (Virágh et al., 2020). Virágh et al. (2020) argue that problem-oriented hands-on training with case studies, examples of possible challenges and their solutions would be useful if included in educational programs. As underlined above, the main focus should be on skill and
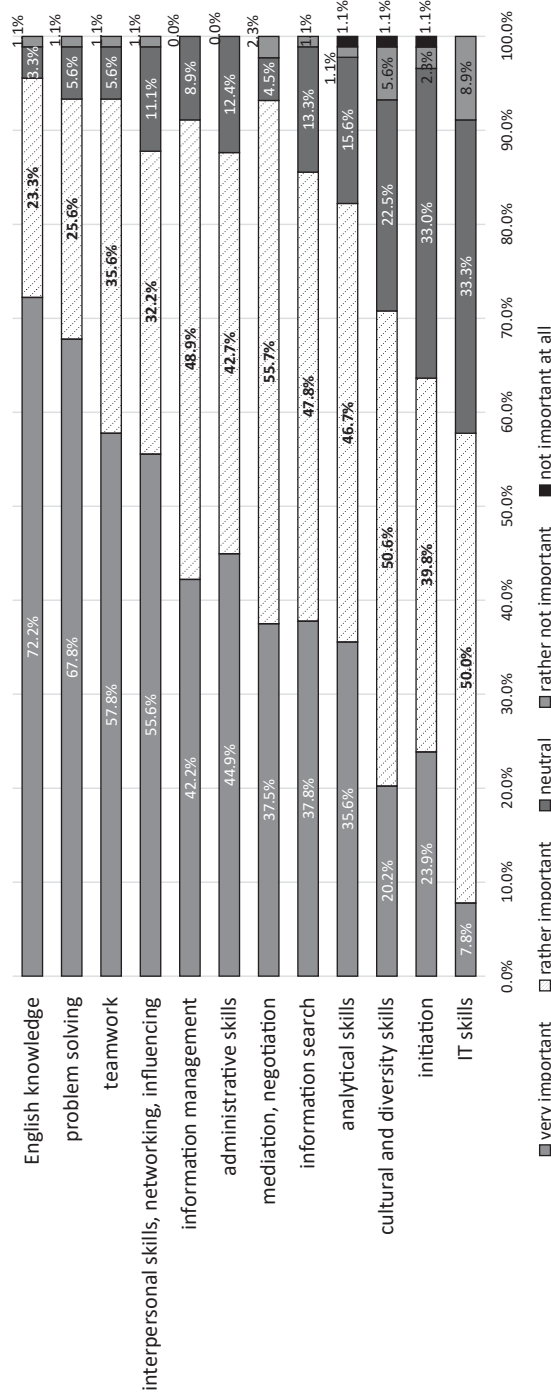
Fig. 3.1.1.   Most Important Skills to Fulfil the RMA Job, by the RMA Respondents (*n* = 90).
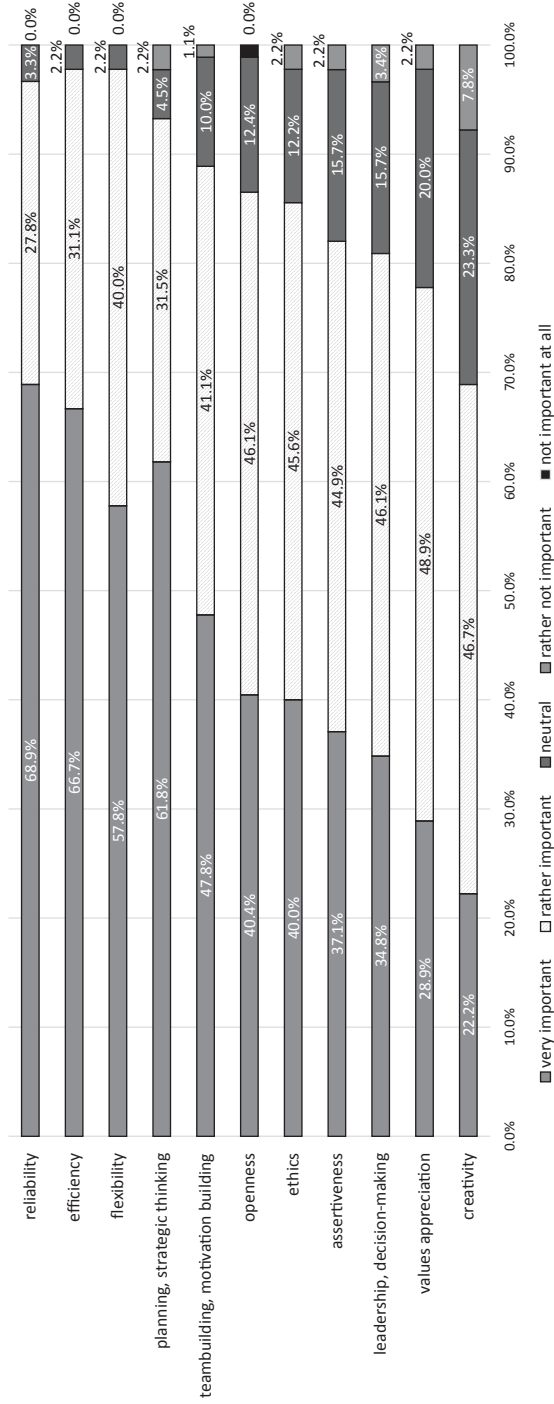
Fig. 3.1.2.   Most Important Competencies to Fulfil the RMA Job, by the RMA Respondents ($n = 90$).

competence development. The elaboration of modules organised around the different fields of RMA could contribute to the flexibility of the education or training material. The educational programme should be organised hand-in-hand with a mentorship programme to close the gap between education and labour market needs (Virágh et al., 2020).

Although currently very few RMAs across Europe has a certificate, according to Virágh et al. (2020), the value of a certificate in case of a new educational or training programme would be also highly important; it would not only provide more visibility to the profession but recognition to the knowledge, skills, and competences of RMAs and contribute to the development of a possible career path. From the view of boundaries, the development of an educational or training programme could also contribute to standardising the already high requirements of the profession and make all participants (including institutions, researchers, and policy-makers) aware of what RMAs can offer and what their added value is. In short, to set and clear up the boundaries.

Identify Boundaries of the RMA Profession: An Empirical Case Study

The literature review provides us with relevant insights into the boundaries of the profession and related identity challenges, proposing new definitions for the profession. Previous studies have looked at how these boundaries are seen by RMAs and how they are reflected in their professional practices. But are these boundaries clear also to non-RMA professionals? How is the RMA profession seen by others? Do we have similar perceptions about the profession's identity, skills and boundaries? In this last section, we present the foRMAtion project as an interesting case study to collect possible answers to these questions.

The foRMAtion project[5] started in 2019 with the main goal to develop new training opportunities in RMA targeted university students. This international project gathered partners from Portugal, Italy, Hungary, Romania, and Slovenia, including three universities that developed and implemented a new training offer about RMA for their bachelor's students. Developing an international curriculum (common to the three universities), training the teachers (with different educational backgrounds and RMA experience level), and engaging the students with the profession (that were discovering the profession for the first time) lead to fruitful discussions and reflections about the boundaries of the profession, as practical evidence of the debates highlighted in the literature review.

To better understand how these students and teachers, as non-RMA professionals, perceive this profession, an anonymous questionnaire[6] was distributed and included 17 questions covering the demographics, role in the foRMAtion project, perceptions about the RMA profession, skills, and competencies of RMAs and definitions about the profession. The questionnaire was sent to all teachers and students that participated in/completed the foRMAtion course at NOVA University, Corvinus University Budapest, and the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania. 28 answers were collected in total, 4 from the foRMAtion teachers and 24 from undergraduate students that attended the foRMAtion course from the different participating universities.

---

[5]See https://www.formation-rma.eu/.
[6]Available at https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1U6p4EihA_a6tEW4s4mq0-o1ax 4BXWkp8.

How Do Students and Teachers Define the RMA Profession?

In the survey, respondents were asked to describe the RMA profession in a short sentence. Both target groups (teachers and students) emphasise the supporting role of RMAs, as the following answers illustrate: '*As an RMA you are the organising and structuring link between all participants of the research life cycle*' (student) and '*The RMA is the right hand of the future's scientific researcher*'.

Regarding the main tasks related to the profession, both groups described a diversified list of tasks, from project proposals to management of projects. Interestingly, students provide a more holistic view of the profession while teachers focus more on the tasks related to projects. For students, the role in '*connecting us with the knowledge and the rest of the world*' or in '*the development of societies, decision making*' reflects a more integrated vision of the profession along the '*whole research lifecycle*' (students' answers). This broad vision of the profession, as 'professionals at the interface of science', is clearly stated by one student that provided the following definition '*diversified professions that all work in favour of research*'.

This understanding of the variety of tasks performed by the RMAs is also visible in other questions of the survey, with 58.0% of the respondent students and 75.0% of the respondent teachers strongly agreeing that 'RMA professionals are called to fulfil multiple tasks and roles'. Related to that, both students and teachers acknowledge that 'RMA professionals need a wide variety of different skills and competencies', with 71.0% of students and 75.0% of teachers strongly agreeing with that.

How Do Students and Teachers Understand the Profession's Boundaries?

With such a broader vision of the profession, the boundaries between what is within the role of RMA and what is beyond that is a challenge also perceived by both students and teachers. This is already visible in some of the descriptions provided by the respondents: '*A Jolly Joker who is ready to learn and is not afraid to start things from the beginning*' (teacher) or '*Everything with everyone*' (student). In particular, the intersection between developing research and managing research, as a 'hybrid professional' that included the previous role of the researcher in the current RMA practice, was noticed by both teachers and students. The answers to the statement 'RMA professionals do not perform research' varied from 'Strongly agree' (21.0%, students) to 'Strongly disagree' (13.0%, students), with 42.0% of the students selecting 'Disagree'. Also, to the teachers, this is the question with a higher diversity of answers, with half of them (50.0%) agreeing with the sentence, 25.0% disagreed and 25.0% neither agreed nor disagreed. This is also linked with the perception about the background knowledge RMA have, with 92.0% of the respondent students acknowledging that 'many RMA professionals have academic/research experience' and 100.0% in the case of the respondent teachers.

What Skills and Competencies Are Seen as Most Important?

Students emphasise the need for transferable skills, namely describing the profession as '*The perfect job to put interpersonal skills in action*' or '*A profession which requires management skills, ability to focus on more things at the same time, ability to analyse information to finish the job more efficiently*'. In addition, students and teachers were asked to select the five most important skills (Figs. 3.1.3. and 3.1.4) and the five most

important competencies (Figs. 3.1.5. and 3.1.6) for RMA. The same skills and competencies categories were as in the study of Virágh et al. (2020) about the RMA profession, previously presented, to enable comparisons.

Regarding the relevant skills (Fig. 3.1.3) students highlighted problem-solving (75.0%), teamworking (75.0%), interpersonal skills, networking, influencing (58.3%), information search (54.2%), information management (45.8%), administrative skills (45.8%), and analytical skills (45.8%).

Similarly, teachers (Fig. 3.1.4) also highlighted interpersonal skills, networking, influencing (100.0%), problem-solving (75.0%), analytical skills (75.0%), administrative skills (50.0%), mediation, and facilitation skills (50%). Comparing these results with the ones from the RMA community, also problem-solving, teamworking and interpersonal skills, networking, and influencing are among the top four most important skills.

Regarding the most relevant competencies, students' and teachers' selections are different. While students (Fig. 3.1.5) highlight the planning, strategic thinking (87.5%), the leadership, decision-making (79.2%), the flexibility (62.5%), the team building, motivation building (58.3%), and the efficiency (58.3%).

On the other hand, teachers (Fig. 3.1.6) select reliability (100.0%), flexibility (75.0%), planning, strategic thinking (75%), and assertiveness (75.0%) as the most relevant ones. Leadership and decision-making competencies (the student's first choice) were not selected by any respondent teacher. A possible explanation for that is the scarcity of leading roles in the RMA profession in the context/countries of the respondents (Hungary and Romania).

How Is the Profession Acknowledged and Recognised by Others?

Although for both students and teachers 'the majority of RMA professionals have positive feedback about their profession', with students 50.0% agreeing and 42.0% strongly agreeing with that, while 100.0% of the teachers agree, both groups acknowledge that there is still a deficit in its recognition of the profession by others. In this regard, 46.0% and 50.0% of the students agree and strongly agree that 'The RMA profession lacks recognition by others outside of the profession'. Similarly, 50% of teachers agree with that, 25.0% strongly agree and 25.0% neither agree nor disagree.

Discussing Results from the Two Surveys

As presented above, when these professionals have to describe their main role as RMAs, the provision of support is mentioned in the first place. This was the same in the case of students and teachers who filled in the questionnaire. This role could be the basis for the development of the new definition, however, it should integrate the enormous complexity which is included in this supporting role.

The understanding of RMA tasks by those working in the field differs significantly based on their position, responsibilities, tasks as well as the institutional frames in which they work. It was interesting to learn, however, that during the foRMAtion course, students gathered a more holistic understanding of the profession, whereas teachers developed a more task-based understanding.

Looking at the set of skills arising from the two surveys, we notice that, apart from English knowledge, teamworking, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving seem to be the core skills for an idealistic profile or attitude in today's RMA. Both students and teachers ranked these skills as the most important.
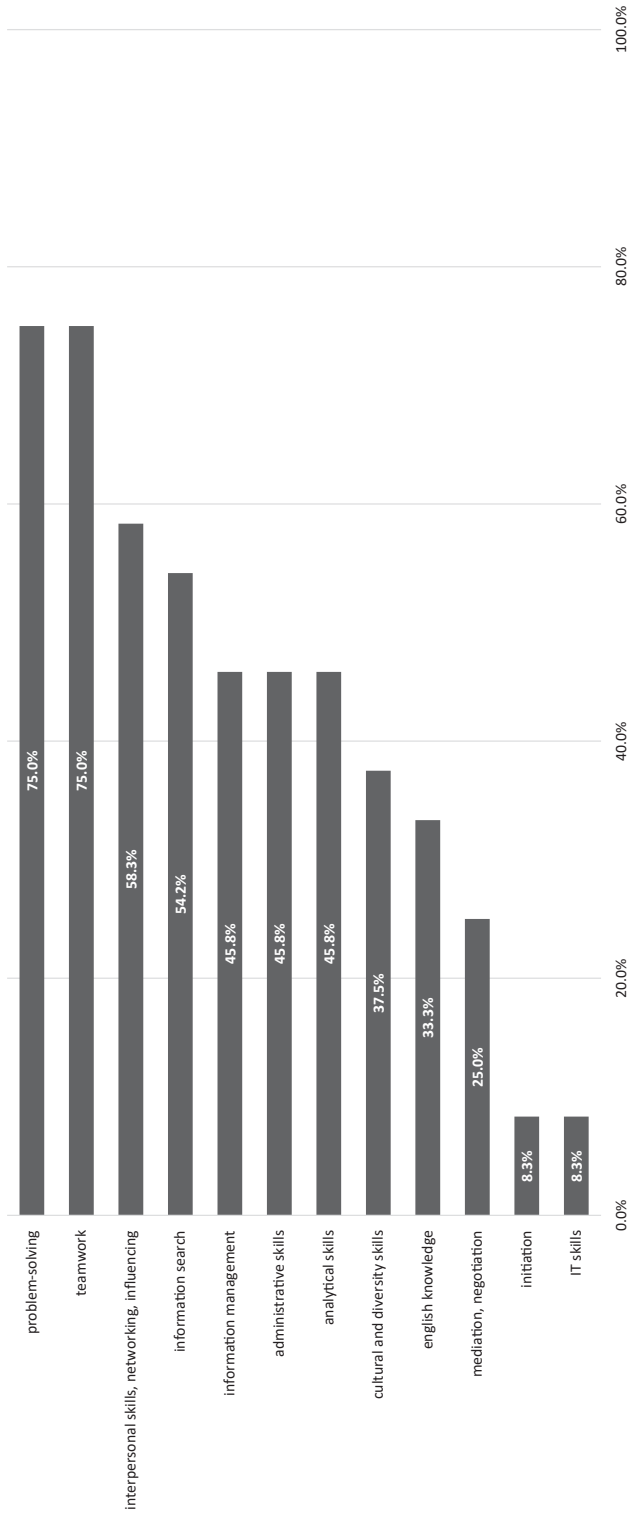
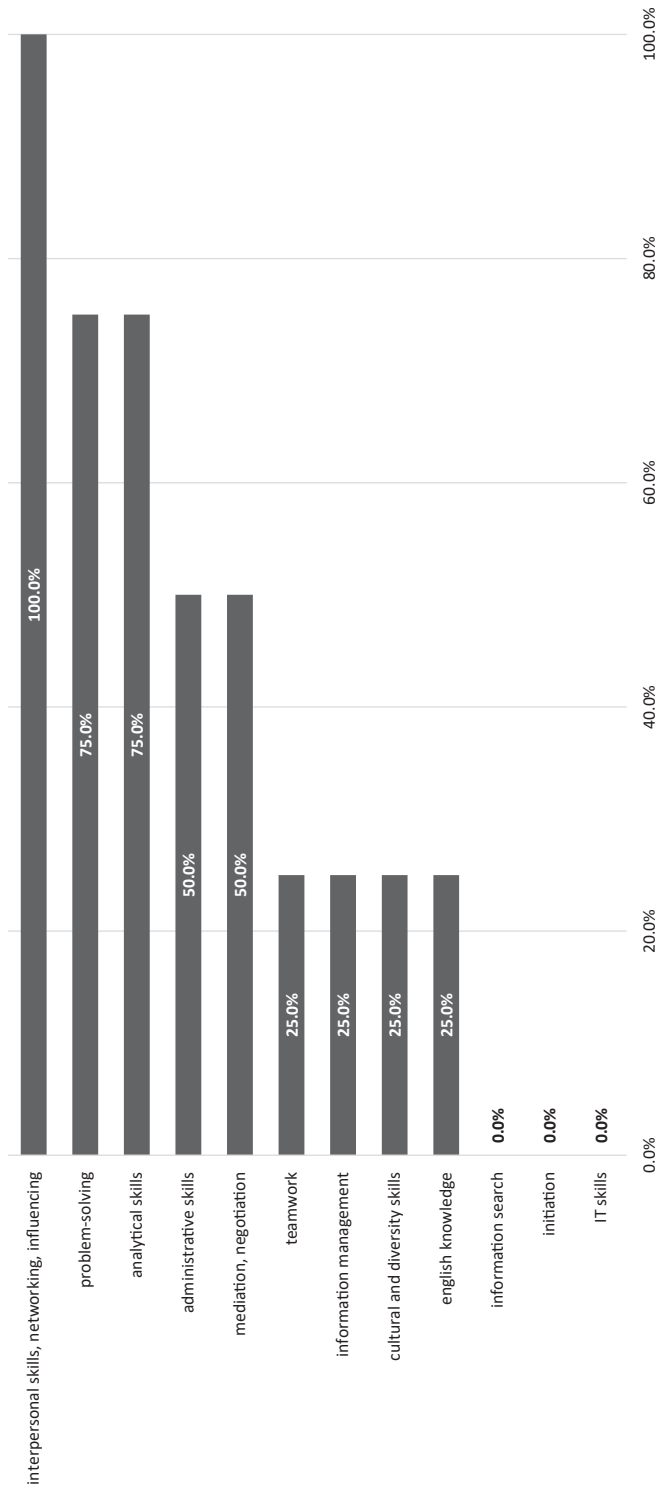Fig. 3.1.3.   Most Important Skills to Fulfil the RMA Job, by the Students.

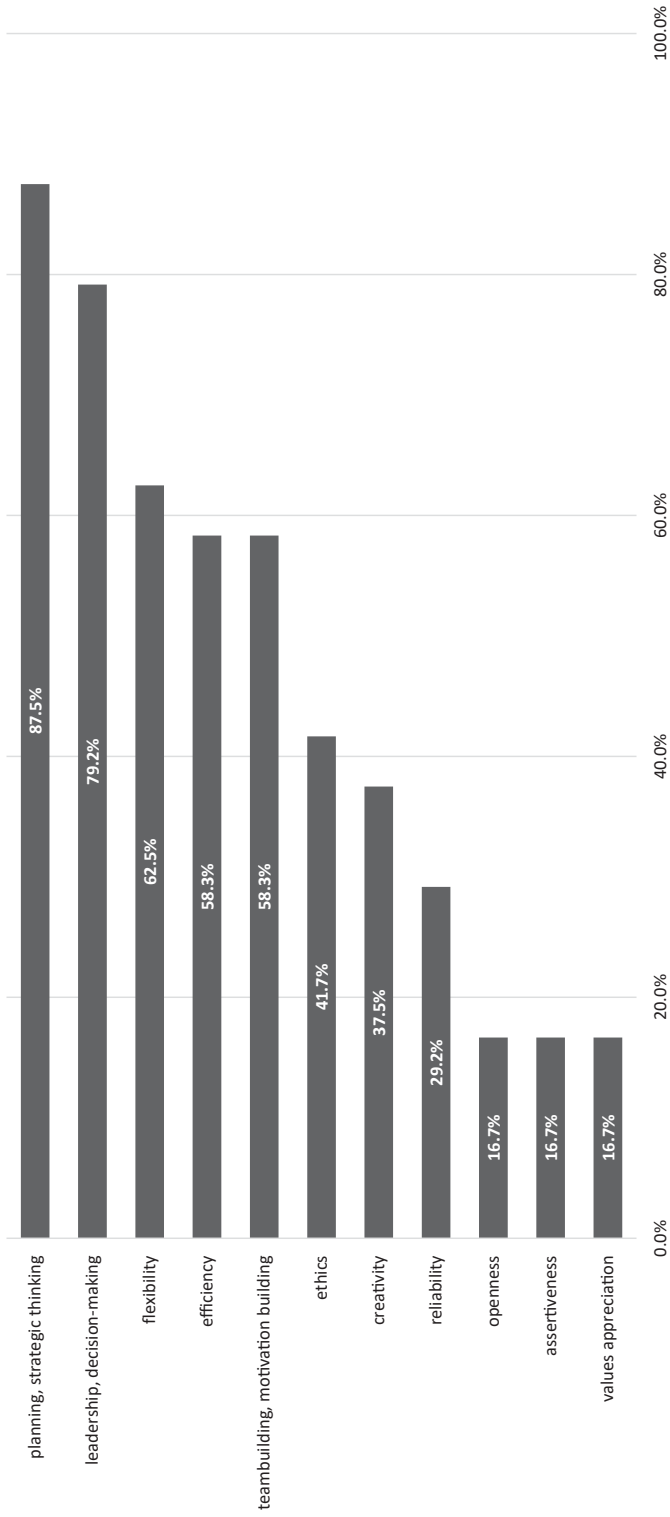Fig. 3.1.4.   Most Important Skills to Fulfil the RMA Job, by the Teachers.

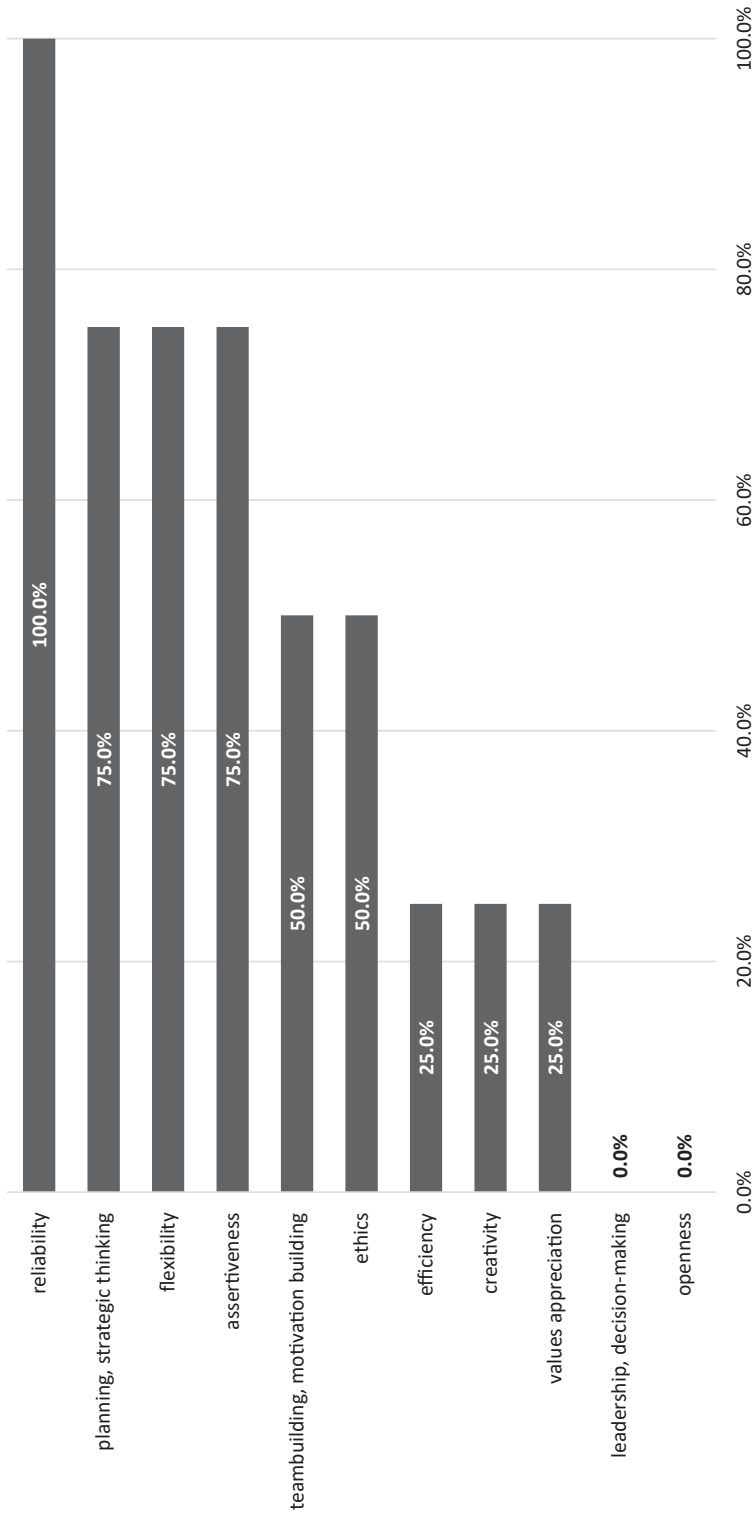Fig. 3.1.5.   Most Important Competencies to Fulfil the RMA Job, by the Students.

Fig. 3.1.6.   Most Important Competencies to Fulfil the RMA Job, by the Teachers.

When it came to indicating the most needed competencies, flexibility was a common denominator of their views of RMAs both for professionals and teachers/students. Beyond that, professionals highlighted the importance of reliability and efficiency; and students and teachers gave higher rankings for planning, strategic thinking, leadership and decision-making, reliability, assertiveness, and planning.

As the results of the first survey prove, all these skills and competencies are of utmost importance for RMAs and we may even say that they may make the distinction clearer between RMAs and other actors within the HE sector, including researchers. It is important to note, however, that the majority of the skills above are soft skills, while the hard ones are seldom reported. This aligns with what has been investigated on different professional groups in HEIs, for example, educational support managers in their 'extended/restricted' views of professionalisation (Poli & Taccone, 2023, Chapter 4.3). In addition, we notice how the set of skills above has progressively converged with those held in other sectors, for example in start-ups, so to move RMAs closer to a wider range of professional groups (Poli, 2022a, 2022b).

Conclusions

After matching definitions in the literature with empirical results from the two surveys, we can conclude that the boundaries of the profession are not only multiple but wider than expected. Students, teachers, and RMAs position these boundaries differently, depending on their stance as insiders or outsiders they take to look at them and the overall knowledge that they have of the profession. These boundaries may even be group-specific both in their extension and core and so vary depending on factors such as the maturity of the institution, the country where the institution lies, see Chapter 3.2 (Poli, Oliveira, et al., 2023) so to be country-specific to some extent, the culture or subculture of these groups, or even their culture or gender.

For these reasons, we may infer that these boundaries are still undefinable and however that the debate on the boundaries surrounding the profession has moved forward in recent years and we hope that more can be done in the following stages of research even through the engagement of more 'scholar-practitioners' like us.

Regarding the various definitions of RMAs mentioned earlier, such as bounded and unbounded groups, we see that RMAs agree on positioning themselves within institutional boundaries. However, some of these boundaries may have been self-created. In addition, they take pride in being closely associated with research and consider themselves as operating at its interface. Lastly, their use of boundaries can be seen as a result of their hybridity, including occasional deviations from institutional rules, and opportunistic application of blended or unique credentials within the profession in RMA.

In today's RMA profession, soft skills seem to prevail and even align RMAs with other actors inside and outside today's HEIs.

The issue of professional invisibility of this professional group is no more an issue at stake in consideration of the mounting research covering this functional group and of the increasing self-recognition of professionals combined with recognition of outsiders thanks to educational programmes, as this chapter has confirmed. And indeed RMAs are still hybrid professionals for the growing number of working spaces in which they can be found at work, and they continue to serve as interface in the realm of science since their roles are still on the rise and so their number cannot precisely be fixed.

References

Agostinho, M., Alves, C. M., Aresta, S., Borrego, F., Borlido-Santos, J., Cortez, J., Lima Costa, T., Lopes, J. A., Moreira, S., Santos, J., Trindade, M., Varela, C., & Vidal, S. (2018). The interface of science: The case for a broader definition of research management. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*.

Allen-Collinson, J. (2009). Negative 'marking'? University research administrators and the contestation of moral exclusion. *Studies in Higher Education*, *34*(8), 941–954.

Council of Europe. (2020). *Council conclusions on the New European Research Area* (No. 13567/20; ECOMP.3.B). Council of Europe. https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13567-2020-INIT/en/pdf

Derrick, G., & Nickson, A. (2014). Invisible intermediaries: A systematic review into the role of research management in university and institutional research processes. *Journal of Research Administration*, *45*(2), 11–45.

Eraut, M. (1994). *Developing professional knowledge and competence*. Psychology Press.

Gornall, L. (1999). 'New professionals': Change and occupational roles in higher education. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, *3*(2), 44–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603109981847

Krauser, P. A. (2003). The research administrator as servant-leader. *Journal of Research Administration*, *34*(1), 14–18.

Loi, W. Y. (2021). *Understanding the role of research professional staff in supporting academic researchers in a university* [Master's thesis].

Middlehurst, R. (2009). Developing higher education professionals: Challenges and possibilities. In *Academic and professional identities in higher education* (pp. 241–262). Routledge.

Oliveira, F. S. (2020). Administração e gestão de projetos de pesquisa e sua contribuição às atividades de pesquisa, desenvolvimento e inovação: estudo de caso da Embrapa. Embrapa Agroindústria Tropical-Tese/dissertação (ALICE).

Poli, S. (2018a). Who are today's research managers? Roles, professional development, and evolution of the profession. In J. Anderson, K. Toom, S. Poli, & P. F. Miller (Eds.), *Research management: Europe and beyond* (pp. 1–29). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-805059-0.00001-82121

Poli, S. (2021d). *'Research management staff towards greater professionalism: Associations, training opportunities and qualifications' Session in the panel discussion titled 'Are higher education managers becoming more professional and if so, how?'* Held at the SRHE – Society for Higher Education annual conference 2021.

Poli, S. (2022a, March 1–3). *Understanding professionalism in research management in a post-pandemic age – How we can build up a professional portfolio consistently in the long run* [Conference presentation]. VICRA annual conference (SRAI) – virtual international conference for early-career research administrators.

Poli, S. (2022b, May 4–6). *Research management striving to re-invent an up-to-date idea of professionalism in a post-pandemic age* [conference presentation]. EARMA 2022 annual conference. Oslo, Norway.

Poli, S., Kerridge, S., Zornes, D., & Ajai-Ajagbe, P. (2023). Research management as labyrinthine – How and why people become and remain research managers and administrators around the world. In S. Kerridge, S. Poli, & M. Yang-Yoshihara (Eds.), *The Emerald handbook of research management and administration around the world* (pp. 141–154). Emerald Publishing.

Poli, S., & Taccone, D. (2023). Professional staff in support services in education and research – How to connect research with practice. In S. Kerridge, S. Poli, & M. Yang-Yoshihara (Eds.), *The Emerald handbook of research management and administration around the world* (pp. 341–353). Emerald Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80382-701-820231028

Poli, S., & Toom, K. (2013). Exploring the theory. Research management as a newer field of investigation. *EARMA LINK Professional Magazine*, 7–8.

Santos, J. M., Varela, C., & Kerridge, S. (2021a). Professionals at the interface of science: Is there more than meets the eye? *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 1–6.

Schneijderberg, C., & Merkator, N. (2013). The new higher education professionals. In *The academic profession in Europe: New tasks and new challenges* (pp. 53–92). Springer.

Schützenmeiser, F. (2010). *University research management: An exploratory literature review*. Berkeley Institute.

Streitwieser, B., & Ogden, A. C. (Eds.). (2016, March). *International higher education's scholar-practitioners: Bridging research and practice*. Symposium Books Ltd.

Szekeres, J. (2004). The invisible workers. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *26*(1), 7–22.

Trindade, M., & Agostinho, M. (2014). Research management in Portugal: A quest for professional identity. *Research Management Review*, *20*(1), n1.

Veles, N., Carter, M., & Boon, H. (2019). Complex collaboration champions: University third space professionals working together across borders. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, *23*(2), 73–85.

Virágh, E., Zsár, V., & Balazs, Zs. (2020). *Research management and administration: The relevance of special education and training programs* [HETFA Working Paper Series 2020]. ISSN 2062-378X.

Whitchurch, C. (2006). Who do they think they are? The changing identities of professional administrators and managers in UK higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *28*(2), 159–171.

Whitchurch, C. (2008b). *Professional managers in UK higher education: Preparing for complex futures: Final report*. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Whitchurch, C. (2018). Being a higher education professional today: Working in a third space. In C. Bossu & N. Brown (Eds.), *Professional and support staff in higher education* (pp. 11–22). Springer.

Williamson, C., Dyason, K., & Jackson, J. (2020). Scaling up professionalization of research management in Southern Africa. *Journal of Research Administration*, *51*(1), 46–72.