

research management debate simon kerridge

A marriage made between heaven and hell...

In theory the main function of a research manager and administrator is to support researchers; but this may not mean the same thing to both parties.

Researchers and research managers may work in research institutes, funders and government, but most are found within universities. Just as there are many types of researchers, from fairly junior research assistants to very senior (some recalcitrant) professors, research managers and administrators range from clerical and administrative grades to senior positions.

All university staff should be there to support the mission, goals and strategic aims of their institution. 'Internationally excellent' and 'world leading' research is a part of most universities' strategic aims. These high aims often translate into fairly coarse targets for the academic researcher on the ground.

We need only consider one dimension, research income, to illustrate how problems can develop.

Researchers often say they have too much administrative work, and then complain about the large number of administrators in the university. The problem of course is that they do have too much administrative work to do because there are not enough administrators in the university—or at least not enough doing the right things.

When a researcher develops a funding proposal they invariably have to go through some university process or processes before the proposal may be submitted. The research office will have developed these to: comply with external requirements and obligations; meet internal governance and reporting issues; and support research staff in making the best possible bid. It should be noted that national regulations are often there only as a direct consequence of previous research misconduct; research

managers play a key role in protecting researchers, and the institution, from sanctions.

A good working relationship between researchers and research managers, and sufficient time to ensure that the support provided adds value, can enhance a proposal's chances of success while reducing the load on the researcher in developing it. The other end of the spectrum is a poorly structured or incomplete proposal arriving at the research office just before the funder's deadline (or even afterwards with instructions to try and

sort it out!). This is often the result of similar bad practice earlier in the process: inadequate planning and poor communication by the researcher may not leave sufficient time for academic quality checks and departmental authorisation.

Things can get complicated, so communication, sensitivity and flexibility in research support are vital. For example, some universities are developing plans for focusing research support into strategic areas. This does not mean that research in other areas will not be supported. But it could mean that a proposal from outside those areas might receive little central support or have support gazumped by a proposal from a priority area.

I have concentrated on researchers and the central research office, but similar tensions exist between researchers and the research managers or administrators working within academic departments.

Unfortunately there is insufficient room to pay full justice to all the points raised in the thoughtful, provocative (and I suspect sometimes purposefully misconstruing) article, opposite, from the eminent researcher, David Colquhoun. But I would strongly argue that research managers (or administrators) have, for more than 20 years, shown that they do understand 'scientific' research. It is perhaps insightful to hear that direct research administration for an individual researcher is a good thing, whereas centralised research management, which might benefit others more, is dismissed as positively inappropriate! I agree that inappropriate management is unproductive, but good research managers use appropriate means to enable researchers to get on with what they do best—research rather than administration. We both have the same objective: for researchers in our institutions to undertake high quality research.

So, researchers and research managers or administrators need time to achieve better communication, mutual respect and understanding.

To quote author Douglas Adams, "It is difficult to be sat on all day, every day, by some other creature, without forming an opinion on them. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to sit all day, every day, on top of another creature and not have the slightest thought about them whatsoever." The reader may have an opinion about which of these is the researcher.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

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