RESEARCH OFFICES OF THE FUTURE BY RESEARCH PROFESSIONAL NEWS

Research
Professional
News
Published by
◆ Clarivate™

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This report, published in November 2023 by Research Professional News, summarizes the results of two international surveys conducted on research offices and research services teams. The surveys, one targeting research office staff and the other aimed at researchers in universities and institutes, gathered over 800 responses each. The report provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges, opportunities, and future directions for research support teams globally, offering insights into the quality and effectiveness of research support systems. It serves as a valuable resource for stakeholders such as research services staff, researchers, university leaders, and funding agencies, with the goal of contributing to the ongoing discussion on improving the quality and effectiveness of research support services worldwide.

Key Findings

Research offices prioritize **securing funding, showcasing research impact, and enhancing research quality**. Key challenges involve fostering

Research offices experience change driven by **cost pressures, demonstrating research impact, and research assessment exercises** (RAEs), with variations across regions.

Many research offices recognize the potential of artificial intelligence to **compile information for grant applications and analyzing unsuccessful grant bids**.

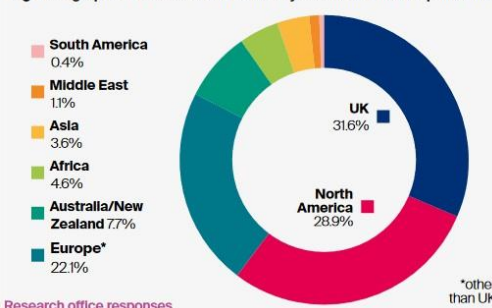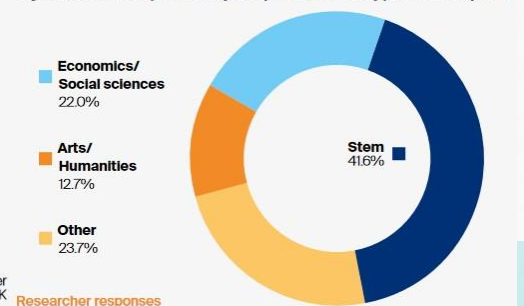Fig 1 Geographical breakdown of university research office respondents
South America 0.4%
Middle East 1.1%
Asia 3.6%
Africa 4.6%
Australia/New Zealand 7.7%
Europe* 22.1%
UK 31.6%
North America 28.9%
*other than UK
Research office responses

Fig 2 Geographical breakdown of university researcher respondents
South America 0.1%
Africa 1.2%
UK 1.5%
Asia 1.5%
Middle East 1.7%
Australia/New Zealand 13.4%
Europe* 49.9%
North America 30.6%
*other than UK
Researcher responses

Fig 3 Researcher respondents by discipline in which they predominately work
Economics/ Social sciences 22.0%
Arts/ Humanities 12.7%
Other 23.7%
Stem 41.6%
Researcher responses

1. **Evolving priorities**

Among research office respondents, the most important areas were obtaining more funding to increase the volume of research (73.9%), demonstrating research impact (45.9%) and improving research quality (43.6%)

2. **Change drivers**

Similarities were observed in the priority areas, with 56.4% citing cost pressures and 48.3% identifying demonstrating research impact as the two most referenced change drivers.

3. **Assessment exercises**

24.0% identified resourcing within their teams as the primary challenge. Other obstacles included gathering information from researchers (22.1%), understanding or anticipating changes in assessment criteria (19.5%), and demonstrating impact (18.5%).

"Research development is an underrated role. We bring a lot to the application but are not seen as a valuable support by many, until they experience first hand the impact we have. From horizon scanning to bringing teams together, writing elements of the bid to championing bids...we have a vital role in the success of research institutions."

-Research development leader, UK

Summarised by:

Iman Hafizah
Research Officer, CRU

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4. AI in focus

Only 24.7% of research office respondents identified artificial intelligence (AI) as a major change driver for their institution's research operations in the next five years. Respondents highlighted potential advantages in compiling information for grant applications (57.0 percent) and analyzing unsuccessful grant bids to enhance future success (53.1 percent)

5. Research office challenges

When asked about the three biggest challenges facing their research office, the most cited concern among research office staff was pressure on budgets and resources (mentioned by 57.5% of respondents. Time pressures were the next most cited (48.1%), followed by staff recruitment and retention (37.7%), successfully bidding for funds (35.4%), and problems with inadequate systems and software (31.9%).

6. Winning funding

In exploring challenges faced by research offices, a survey asked respondents to identify their institution's top three issues when bidding for funds. The most common problem cited was ensuring effective engagement between researchers and the research office, mentioned by 52.3% of respondents. Other frequently mentioned barriers included limited resources for the research office (48.1%), understanding reasons for unsuccessful bids (45.1%), and availability of resources for internal peer review (35.8%). Notably, only 10.6% of respondents found the usability of funding databases to be a significant challenge

7. Threats to integrity

The research community faces challenges in maintaining the integrity of research outputs, with respondents identifying various threats. The primary concern, cited by 63.2%, is the pressure to publish. Other perceived threats include insecure employment practices (38.1%), cultural issues like bullying (36.6%), and the activities of predatory journals (34.2%). To address these concerns, research office staff are implementing precautionary measures, such as facilitating training (64.4%), developing research integrity policies (63.5%), and investigating related complaints (40.8%). However, 12.9% of respondents reported that their research office has not identified any specific steps to address concerns about research integrity.

8. Library collaboration

Libraries are recognized as significant partners in supporting research, following individual researchers, faculty deans, and the provost/vice-chancellor's office, according to 30.7% of respondents. The primary area of collaboration between research offices and libraries is open-access compliance, cited by 61.7% of respondents.

To read the full report

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