

Research Management in Portugal: A Quest for Professional Identity

Margarida Trindade

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Portugal

Marta Agostinho

Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Research managers at science-intensive institutions appear as a continuously evolving group of professionals whose identity is somewhat fragmented, even to themselves. In Portugal, specialized research manager roles have rapidly emerged over the last years alongside the development of a small but consolidated scientific system. In order to get an inside view of the professional identity associated to research management in Portugal, the authors conducted a semi-structured discussion session with a group of professionals. The session aimed to find operational definitions of research management in a broad sense, identifying competencies and skills required to perform such roles, and discuss perspectives on career development in the current scenario. This article departs from the perceptions collected within the group of professionals to inquire about the future environment of the profession.

INTRODUCTION

The urge to create socio-economic value from scientific knowledge, the general demand for accountability of publicly funded research, and the complexity of research funding and management raise the need for specialized research managers at science-intensive institutions. These professionals facilitate processes of knowledge transfer and

account for a wide span of areas such as project management, technology transfer, communication, and funding opportunities. The profession of research manager/administrator developed in the late 1950s in the U.S. (Roberts et al., 2008), with the creation of professional associations (e.g., the Society of Research Administrators International has over 4,000 members). In

Europe, this profession is recent. Several professional associations in Europe took the initiative to create a framework for the professional development of their members (e.g., European, British associations; (Poli & Toom, 2013). Yet, research managers appear to be a continuously evolving group of professionals whose identity is somewhat fragmented, even to themselves. Traditional definitions of research managers as those who “coordinate the daily operational tasks” for a research project, program, group or department (Bushaway, 2003) seem too restrictive. Instead, research managers have been described as a diverse group of professionals, geared to build research capacity, often with M.Sc. or Ph.D. degrees and willing “to be active in extending their job beyond their given job description” (Poli & Toom, 2013, n.p.; see also Schuetzenmeister, 2010; Witchurch, 2008).

In Portugal, where a small but consolidated scientific system has developed steadily over the last 20 years, specialized research manager roles have also rapidly emerged, often carried out by highly academic qualified staff. This has occurred without the simultaneous development of an adequate career structure. Indeed, in a recent Special Issue on Research Austerity in *Euroscientist* (Coutinho, 2013), a member of the Portuguese Prime Minister’s Scientific Advisory Board highlighted the need for a “career structure for research-supporting personnel in administration or in the management of facilities and laboratories” as one of the key issues in maintaining the high

level of scientific competence acquired by the country (Coutinho, 2013, n.p.).

Professional identity is the starting point for establishing common standards and professional development, which is also strategically important at the institutional level. In order to get an inside view of the professional identity associated with research management in Portugal, we conducted a semi-structured discussion session with a group of Portuguese professionals aimed at finding operational definitions of research management in a broad sense, identifying competencies and skills required to perform such roles and discussing perspectives for career development in the current Portuguese environment.

Professional identity is the starting point to establish common standards and professional development, which is also strategically important at the institutional level.

FINDING COMMON UNDERSTANDING

– THE *FINCAPÉ* FORUM

The *FincaPé* is an informal forum of professionals who meet to discuss best practices and exchange ideas about their professions and ongoing projects. This community is composed of a blend of about 70 professionals spanning the communication, management, research, technology transfer and other related fields, and working in science-intensive institutions. The forum

represents a rich community of predominantly two professional identities: science communicators and managers. The *FincaPé* meetings are held every two months in Lisbon and each session has approximately 20 persons.

To discuss the professional identity of research managers, we held a *FincaPé* session in which 21 professionals participated from 16 institutions in the Lisbon metropolitan area. The majority of the participants (15) worked at public or private university or research centers in the areas of biomedicine, technology, business, or social sciences, and held mid-level managerial positions. In addition, some participants worked for two different private research foundations, a public funding agency, a researcher's professional association, and a science communication association. Among the 21 participants, 62% were female and at least 43% held a Ph.D.

In this session we asked participants to identify the areas in which they believed that they fell within research management in the broad sense; and to identify the competencies relevant for a research manager. Written notes

were collected anonymously and discussed in the group. Then we divided the participants into three groups to discuss topics related to career prospects; these views were later shared with the whole audience.

WHAT IS SCIENCE MANAGEMENT?

When asked to identify the professional areas that should be included in—and excluded from—research management in the broad sense, a great diversity of answers emerged (29 different responses; see Figure 1). Those areas most often cited as falling within the scope of research management included science-related funding, management, communication and support, whereas the most cited areas to be excluded from the scope of research management were those clearly transversal to research and non-research institutions (such as accounts, human resources, information technology). Interestingly, participants revealed mixed feelings about lab management, financial management, technology transfer, and research, which may reflect the backgrounds and personal experiences of the *FincaPé* community itself.

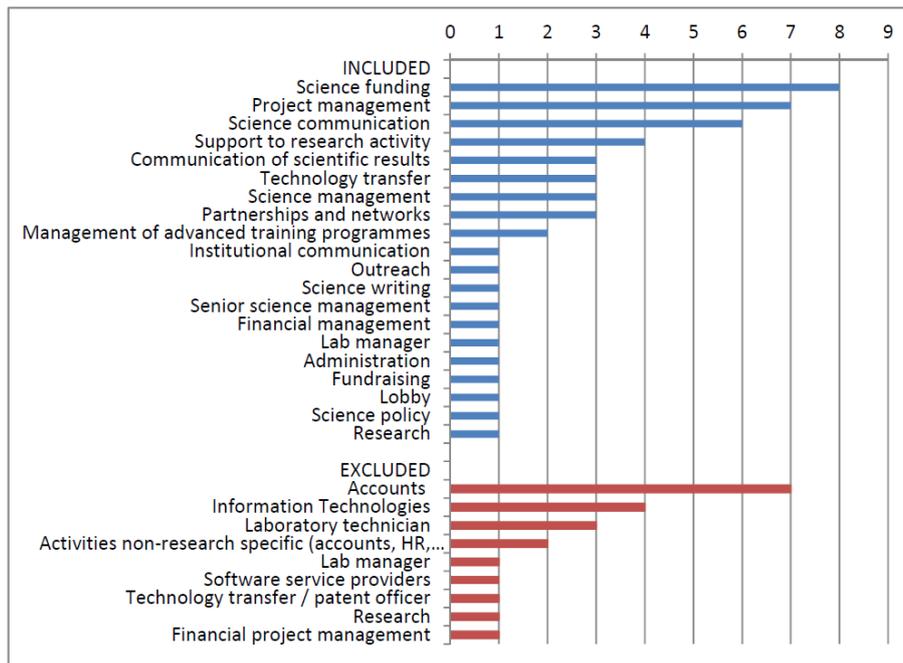


Figure 1. Areas in which participants believed themselves to be included, and excluded, in research management, as well as number of times cited

THE BASIC SKILLS OF A RESEARCH MANAGER

With regard to the competencies or skills that the group considered relevant to carrying out research management functions, the total of 84 answers, depicted in Figure 2, can be grouped into four sub-groups: communication-, management- and research-

related skills; and transferable skills. The first three subgroups correspond to skills that can be acquired through formal education or professional experience (in communication, research or management, respectively), whereas the last subgroup corresponds to skills more related to the individual him/herself.

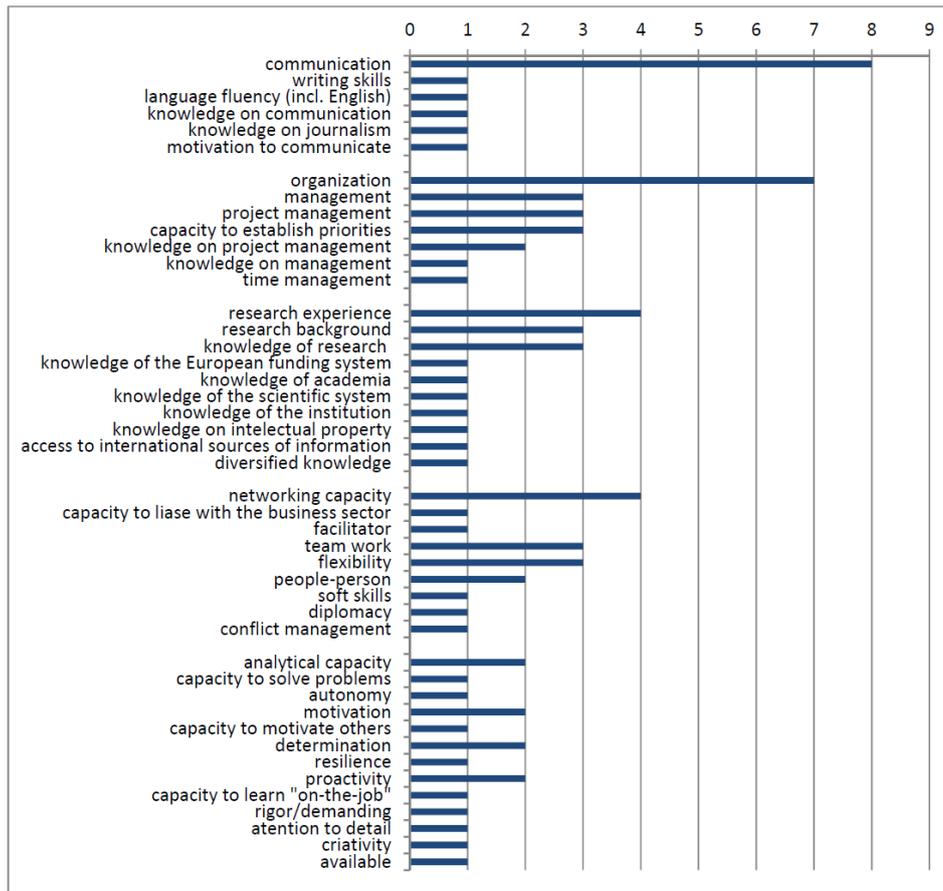


Figure 2. Competencies or skills considered relevant by the group to carrying out research management functions.

The transferable skills seemed to be considered to have a substantial weight in research management roles, and some of them, such as motivation, proactivity, and creativity, suggest professionals are prone/willing to “to be active in extending their role beyond their given job descriptions” (Witchurch, 2008, p. 377) and eager to build capacity within their institution. It is interesting to note that a background in research and knowledge of the scientific system were valued, according to several answers; the overall list suggests an interesting blend of academic skills (e.g., analytical capacity, research experience/background), and skills that are

usually related to non-academic professionals (e.g., writing skills, knowledge of management principles).

HOW ABOUT CAREER DEVELOPMENT?

When questioned about the types of institutions that may hire research management professionals, the group identified academic institutions as the main employers, referring also to R&D companies, governmental agencies, and hospitals. This choice seemed narrow since, for example, service providers such as consultant firms, museums, science centers, NGOs or others were not included.

With regard to career opportunities in Portugal, the group was not optimistic. The group recognized unanimously that research managers should be part of the support structures of research-based institutions, and should be hired under full social benefit work contracts (rather than fellowships, which are extensively used in Portugal). However, the participants also perceived that despite their relevant role in research-related institutions, the number of “real” job opportunities was very low. Their comments suggested that there are at least two major obstacles to career development: a difficulty with “fitting” into traditional career opportunities in academia, which offers a sharp dichotomy between purely academic profiles and purely administrative profiles (the latter for all non-academic professionals); and very few real opportunities to transfer between institutions during mid- and senior career stages. These two barriers were correlated with the need to develop a clearer definition of the research manager position in order to facilitate the effective emergence of the professional career in research management.

Current funding austerity may render job opportunities for research managers even more difficult to attain: it was noted that public Portuguese universities currently have serious restrictions on recruitment, while private institutions may have more hiring flexibility. On the other hand, it was suggested that universities and research centres abroad could provide realistic career opportunities.

Finally, when questioned about the *modus operandi* of research management

professionals, the group highlighted “project-oriented”, “service providing” and “research-action” approaches. This variety of specializations may account for added value in fulfilling specific needs at research-based institutions.

LOOKING AHEAD

We took advantage of a rich community of research management professionals participating in the forum to think about their professional identity in Portugal. The perceptions of these professionals highlighted a substantial diversity of areas of action, sometimes controversial, as well as a wide range of required competencies. Although clearly influenced by the composition of the group, this suggests that the concept of research manager is not completely framed, and reinforces the idea of a loose professional identity. Interestingly, the need for a clearer identity was perceived as crucial for career development.

Studies conducted in other European countries have also identified in the concept of research manager, features such as loose identity, mixed backgrounds, willingness to extend beyond a given job description, and emphasis on the transferable skills (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Witchurch, 2008). These studies have advanced the idea of a *third space* as an emergent territory between academic and non-academic domains, to be colonized primarily by professionals working within the *third space*, and where the above-mentioned features are most prominent. Furthermore, the idea of a *third space* defies the conventional dichotomy prevailing in

academic institutions, of an academic domain and an administrative domain that supports it (Witchurch, 2008a).

A unifying trait of the professionals populating this semi-academic field could be the need and capacity to systematically cross the boundaries between academic and administrative roles, thus defying the existence of such sharp boundaries and, additionally, empowering the system in a multi-level and multi-disciplinary fashion.

We were struck by the match between the perceptions collected during our session with Portuguese professionals and those described in the literature. Does this mean that our community also moves in a *third space*? Are our observations somehow indicative of an emergent trend in the professional identities of research managers in Portugal? We envisage the *third space* as the future environment for the profession, lying as a semi-academic field somewhere between the academic and non-academic domains. A

unifying trait of the professionals populating this semi-academic field could be the need and capacity to systematically cross the boundaries between academic and administrative roles, thus defying the existence of such sharp boundaries and, additionally, empowering the system in a multi-level and multi-disciplinary fashion.

We envisage the *third space* as the future environment for the profession, lying as a semi-academic field somewhere between the academic and non-academic domains.

We believe that looking more attentively to this community is important as it could help science institutions better face challenges ahead and maintain high levels of scientific competence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the *FincaPé* community for its outstanding team work and discussions about research management and communication, and in particular to the participants in the described session.

LITERATURE CITED

Allen-Collinson, J. (2009). Negative 'marking'? University research administrators and contestation of moral exclusion. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(8), 941–954. doi: 10.1080/03075070902755641.

- Bushaway, R. W. (2003). *Managing research*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press. ISBN: 0335208592.
- Coutinho, A. (2013, April 15). Portugal: Science friendly despite relative research immaturity. *Euroscientist*. Online (<http://euroscientist.com/>).
- Poli S., & Toom K. (2013, January 7-8). Exploring the theory. Research management as a new field of investigation. *EARMA Link*, online.
- Roberts T. J., Sanders G., Sharp W., & Wile H. (2008). *NCURA history publication*. Washington, DC: NCURA (<http://www.ncura.edu/>)
- Schuetzenmeister, F. (2010). *University research management: An exploratory literature review*. Berkeley, CA: Institute of European Studies, University of California at Berkeley (<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/77p3j2hr>)
- Witchurch, C. (2008). Shifting identities and blurring boundaries: The emergence of third space professionals in the UK higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4), 377–396. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00387.x.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Margarida Trindade has a Ph.D. in development biology from the University College London. She has dedicated the last six years to research management, first as a Pre-award Funding Coordinator at Instituto de Medicina Molecular and currently at ISCTE-IUL Business School in Lisbon. In 2010, she did an internship at the Rush University Medical Center, Chicago, as a fellow in the NCURA-EARMA International Research Management Fellowship Program.

Marta Agostinho has a Ph.D. in biomedical sciences from the University of Lisbon and did post-graduate work in science communication from The Open University, UK. She has dedicated the last seven years to research management and science communication, acting as director of the Communication and Training Unit at Instituto de Medicina Molecular, and currently as European Project Manager at the Nova Medical School in Lisbon.

In addition, the authors have lectured at several master's and Ph.D. programs on the topics of grant applications and career development, and have acted as expert evaluators for the European Commission. Trindade serves as member of the Marie Curie Actions' Horizon 2020 Advisory Group.
