




# RESEARCH MANAGEMENT AS A SUSTAINABLE CAREER PATH: PERSPECTIVES OF PRACTISING PROFESSIONALS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

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**What is new?** Research management/administration is not recognized as a profession in many countries. In spite of this, many research managers and administrators (RMAs) choose this career and are willing to stay in it for a long term. This paper uses global survey data to highlight factors that RMAs use to make these long-term decisions.

**What was the approach?** Three global surveys (Research Administrators As A Profession, RAAAP) were analysed for the question – Why have you stayed in the profession? Data for responses to various choices within this primary question such as if they

	enjoyed this career, if they liked spending time with researchers and academics, if it was due to job security or good salary and whether it was the work itself, were analysed. Additionally, a few India-based RMAs were interviewed regarding their perspectives of this career through a qualitative research approach.
What is the academic impact?	Findings from this paper will help research policy makers establish a professional path for this workforce at a national level. Additionally, institutional leaders can formulate ways to retain and strengthen this workforce in their research organizations.
What is the wider impact?	The survey results provide motivation and encouragement to new RMAs and may help those deciding to take research management/administration as a career.
Keywords	Research Management, Research Management Careers, Research Managers and Administrators

## INTRODUCTION

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Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) are professionals who have dedicated themselves to supporting researchers and institutions by strengthening research operations (Reardon, 2021; Shelley, 2010). RMAs perform diverse roles such as pre-award grant processes including – seeking research funding opportunities for researchers, supporting them to develop competitive applications as per funder guidelines, conducting capacity-building workshops for young researchers, and completing regulatory compliance monitoring and management. RMAs also complete post-award grants management including – data, finance, legal and research impact management. The portfolio of research managers and administrators is very broad and often they do more than is summarised on their job contracts (Andersen, Toom, Poli, & Miller, 2017). Additionally, RMAs are vital to the scientific ecosystem as they work with institutional leaders and research funders and policy makers. RMAs themselves have been indicated as a community of practitioners, but research management is yet to attain its recognition as a profession (Kerridge, 2023).

Research support offices led by RMAs share the administrative duties of researchers, thereby helping researchers gain time to focus on technical aspects of running research projects. Additional specialised roles in ethics, innovation, quality assurance, intellectual property and law are led by research managers.

Most institutions and universities in the global north, such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom have dedicated offices for research development or grants management, led by senior RMAs (Nature, 2021). There is also a long culture of research managers being employed at several European universities for management of institutional goals. To anchor research management and administration as a career in the above regions, associations were formed that could work towards upskilling of

the RMAs in these regions. For example, in the USA, the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health were established in 1950 and 1930 respectively, leading to post-1950s increased federal funding in research and inter-university collaborations. Subsequently, the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) was founded in 1959 and continues to offer webinars, workshops and learning resources for RMA. Similarly, the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) in the UK, began its journey in 1986 as erstwhile *RAGnet* with 29 research administrators and now includes over 3,000 members across the UK under the re-christened ARMA. ARMA provides certificate courses in research management at various levels. Research management (RM) associations have also been established in Canada (CARA), Australia (ARMS), Japan (RMAN-J) and European Union (EARMA and other associations). Many of these provide certifications and skill building courses to their RMA.

The European Commission is running two projects under its HORIZON-WIDERA-2021\_ERA-01 call, the RM Roadmap and CARDEA from 2022. Both programs aim to strengthen the research management component. CARDEA's focus is on human resources and RM Roadmap complements with strengthening networks. These programs arose from policy level integrations such as the European Research Area or ERA, Action 17, which focuses on strengthening the capacity of Europe's public research organizations. The European Council adopted the ERA policy agenda in 2021, and Action 17 is one of its 20 action points. The goal of Action 17 is to address the uneven distribution of RMA communities across European institutions, the need to train and capacity build the RMA community and to address the lack of recognition of the research management and administration profession.

The comparison is quite stark in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). These also make up most of the global south and include countries that are densely populated, have the highest disease burdens but are not the recipient of major international research funding (Franzen, Chandler, & Lang, 2017). Not many structured associations or RMA networks are known from Asia, Africa and Latin America. SARIMA or the South African Research and Innovation Management Association and WARIMA, West African Research and Innovation Management Association are the formal associations that provide professional courses to RMA in the South African Development Community (SADC region) and other African countries.

A few more developing economies in the global south have developed formal or informal RM networks. For instance, MyRMA is the Malaysian Research Management Association, which started as a funded project and more recently, the Brazilian Research Administration Association, which was founded in 2015 to connect the RMA from Brazilian universities and institutes. In India, The Indian Research Management Initiative (IRMI) was established as a pilot endeavour in 2018 under the aegis of DBT/Wellcome Trust India Alliance, an independent funding organization. The need for IRMI or an association that augments research management in India arose from researchers and institutions being funded by the India Alliance who wanted efficient management of

their grants to foster a better research eco-system (Ayyar & Jameel, 2019). Although IRMI has been successful in building a network of RMAs, it has not yet initiated RM training or certification to train new RMAs in India. In 2019 there were 27 IRMI members which has since grown to 99 in 2023. The number of institutions that have registered as host institutions under the IRMI network has also expanded ("India Research Management Initiative").

RMAs face challenges in India and Africa. Foremost being: the contractual nature of employment; the lack of standard designation or salary system; the lack of accredited courses and training in research management; and absence of policies such as ERA-17 mentioned above, to recognize research management and administration as a profession. In many cases, hiring an RMA is taken in a manner of a pilot experiment with no clear strategy on the future of the appointee or the position (Wellcome, 2017a; Wellcome 2017b). While IRMI is striving to create a cohesive network of research managers in India, sustaining this profession will need centralised policies at the national front and their implementation at institution level.

Few recent initiatives by the Government of India, such as guidelines for the creation of research development cells within universities to foster the research ecosystem by the University Grants Commission (UGC), India's apex governing body for universities (University Grants Commission, 2022) and the Anusandhan National Research Foundation Bill (NRF) (Indian Government, 2021) that seek to promote peer-reviewed funded research programs at universities, hold the promise for creation of research development offices across institutions and universities and for the hiring of RMAs. However, these will need to be articulated as a consequence of these policies, implemented and assessed over time to determine their true impact on the research ecosystem.

Many countries in Asia and Africa are also in similar stages of evolution of RM profession, as in India (Wellcome, 2017a; Wellcome 2017b; Akindele & Kerridge, 2019). It is important for governments and institutions to look critically at this component of the scientific ecosystem. Additionally, examining what aspects of this profession helps an RMA to stay in this career longer would support institutional decisions to strengthen RM as a career path.

In this article, the authors have used findings from three Research Administration As a Profession (RAAAP) global surveys (Kerridge, 2023) as well as findings from interviews of a few research managers in India that they conducted, to understand the factors chosen by RMAs to stay in this career. It is important to understand factors leading to sustainability of the RMA career. Most of the LMIC institutions are at initial stages of identifying a need for research management and administration to augment an enabling research environment, as indicated from the newly established and emerging research management associations in these regions. Hence analysis of data from the surveys on factors that help research managers make long-term commitments to this profession will help research organizations to create environments conducive to this workforce. Also, the challenges mentioned by the survey participants will allow

institutional leadership to create positions for RMAs with due consideration of these aspects.

We found that, irrespective of region, RMAs are interested in the career as they like being around academicians and also feel the work itself is enjoyable.

## METHODOLOGY

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In 2016 the first RAAAP global survey was conducted. The survey was funded by NCURA. The survey included questions on role of the RMA, demographics and skills and competencies. 2,691 responses were obtained on this survey (Kerridge & Scott, 2017; *RAAAP Outputs / INORMS*, 2023). In 2019 the second RAAAP survey was conducted, which was endorsed by the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) that includes all the major RMA associations across the world. Along with questions on the role and demographics in all RAAAP surveys, a section on research impact support was added. 4,324 responses were recorded in this survey (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, Kiel, Shambrook, & Wakefield, 2023). In 2022 the third iteration of the survey was conducted, again endorsed by INORMS. Data on routes to RMA profession was captured in a section on 'How I Became An RMA' in addition to questions on role and demographics. 5,076 responses were captured in this survey from 66 countries (Fischer, Kerridge, Oliveira, & Dutta, 2023; Kerridge et al., 2023).

All three RAAAP surveys had a section on 'why have you stayed in the profession?' The section included several response options such as: 'it pays well', 'the work is never boring or monotonous', 'I see the opportunity for advancement', 'job security', 'I enjoy the profession, it's fun', 'I like working with faculty/academics', 'I like the challenging work' etc. Each option could be rated via a Likert scale with a 1-5 rating. 1 being 'not important/relevant' to 5 being 'really important/relevant'. Analysis of responses to this question from all the three surveys are presented below.

Two main data sources were used for this study. The first was a set of the three Research Administration As A Profession (RAAAP) surveys conducted in 2016, 2019 and 2022 across the world, as explained above. The surveys were rolled out by respective research management associations in Canada, USA, UK, Oceania region, Asia, Central and Latin America, Africa and Europe. Although region-wise, rest of the world was the largest (consisting of responses from Asia, Africa and Latin America), the number of responses were the lowest and hence they were clubbed together to obtain meaningful data for inference as 'Rest of The World'. Similarly, responses from New Zealand and countries in the Oceania region were fewer than for example from Australia. Hence, to obtain meaningful sample for analysis purposes, data from 'Oceania' region consists of responses from RMAs in Australia and New Zealand. Responses were grouped into '*AnalysisRegionofEmployment*', under USA, Europe (excluding UK), UK, Oceania, Canada and Rest of World for all other regions, based on the question '*CountryOfEmployment*' from the three RAAAP surveys. The Likert scale values for specific options were considered on the Y axis.

A consolidated Excel spreadsheet of anonymised data from the three RAAAP surveys is on the open access database Figshare titled 'RAAAP 123 main datasets' (Kerridge & Fischer, 2023). The spreadsheet was used to obtain pivot charts for the data indicated below.

Secondly, qualitative interviews were conducted with six members of IRMI who were known to the first author only. Two other authors were also present at the interviews as observers and asked the respondents questions/probes where necessary. The six RMAs had four to 15 years of experience in this profession in India. All six were from a research background; five were trained in basic science and one in public health research. All those from a basic science background had a PhD as their highest qualifying degree and the person from public health research was a postgraduate. These RMAs work at government and non-government research organizations. They were chosen because they all fell within the RM profession, based on their designations and responsibilities.

The qualitative interviews were analysed inductively. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis and the data was coded manually. Three authors reviewed the transcripts independently to identify codes, which were finalised following a discussion between them. Individual interviews were conducted online after signed consent was received from all (both for RAAAP surveys and the qualitative research).

**Limitations of the data.** All questions on the RAAAP survey were optional. Hence only data where there was a response was considered for analysis. Participants for the qualitative interviews were selected within the known RMA network of the authors and were from India only.

**Data (software) availability.** RAAAP-123 Main Datasets are available from open access database on Figshare ([https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/RAAAP-123\\_Main\\_Datasets/23309621](https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/RAAAP-123_Main_Datasets/23309621)). Anonymized qualitative data is also available on request to the corresponding author.

## FINDINGS: MOTIVATING FACTORS FOR RMAs ACROSS THE WORLD TO STAY IN THIS PROFESSION

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Data from global surveys indicate that research managers and administrators across the world, choose similar reasons when deciding to stay in this profession. This paper presents the most motivating factors in order.

Figure 1 shows that, across the regions, 60 – 70% of respondents ranked 'I enjoy the profession, it's fun' at 4 and 5 (important or relevant /highly important or highly relevant) as reasons to stay in the RMA profession. R-1, R-2 and R-3 denote RAAAP-1, 2 and 3 survey results respectively. Comparing regionally, it appears that 70% of RMAs in Canada, Europe, Rest of the World and the USA chose 4 or 5 ratings, whereas around 60% of those in Oceania and UK rated 4 and 5. Percentages have been rounded off to the nearest 10%. (Data is available on figshare and actual pivots can be shared by

corresponding author.) There is also an increasing trend in choosing 4 and 5 over the years in individual regions.

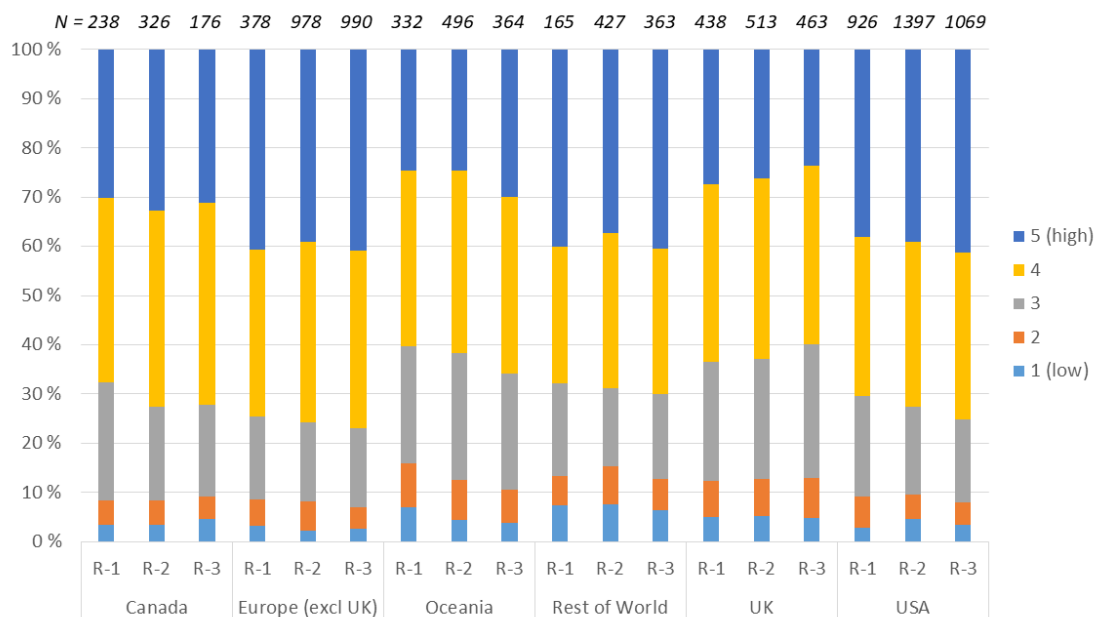


Figure 1: 'I enjoy the profession, it's fun'

Additionally, we conducted qualitative interviews with six Indian Research Management Initiative (IRMI) members. As mentioned before, there is an absence of well laid out career paths for RMAs in India since the profession itself is evolving.

When asked about the profession, all six mentioned that the role of an RMA provided them with the opportunity to do and learn new tasks and multitask. One RMA mentioned the opportunity to take up challenging and leadership roles as their reason to stay in this profession, while three others felt that they were adding value to their organization in terms of improving funding and developing operational processes. Two found liaising with partners and collaborators interesting, while two others liked interacting with researchers and academics. One was interested in implementing and managing projects and found ample opportunities to fulfil this desire as an RMA.

*"I enjoy building initiatives...Conceptualizing something, putting something in place where there isn't much, making new friendships, partnerships along the way and learning along the way" – Participant 2*

*"It's exciting. Every day you get to learn something new. You don't have to come to the office thinking that you have a set timetable. (At times this is the real challenge as well.)" – Participant 3*

Figure 2 depicts that, on average, 70% of responders chose 4 and 5 (really important/relevant) for the option of staying in this profession because they liked working with faculty or in academia. For this question the total number of responses for all three surveys received from Canada was 733, from Europe (excluding UK) it was

2,337, from Oceania 1,189, 958 people responded from the Rest of the World, 1,420 responded from UK and 3,382 from the USA.

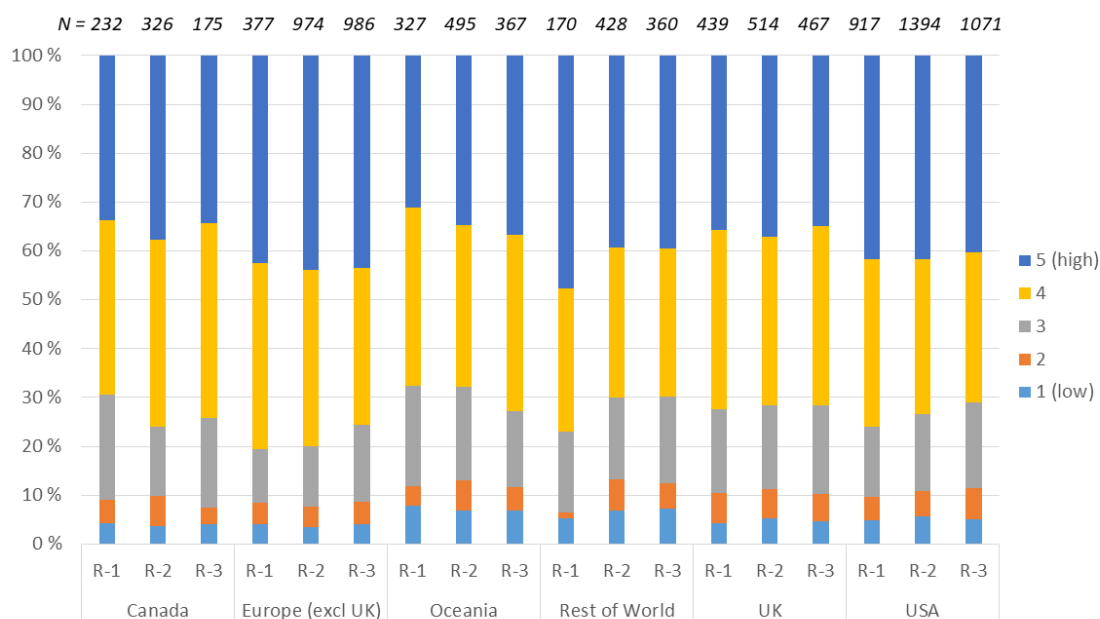


Figure 2: 'I like working with faculty/academics'

On a similar note, during our interviews with IRMI members, respect and acknowledgement for their support from colleagues at their research organizations were highlighted as reasons for choosing to stay on in this profession. The respondents listed validation for their work from colleagues and supervisors, colleagues asking for their guidance, and reflecting their trust, as primary factors that motivated them to visualise their role of RMA as a long-term career.

*“Just acknowledging that whatever I've done is good, knowing that I've worked hard for something, my supervisor coming and just saying that to me has helped me a lot” – Participant 3*

*“I think the acceptance is really crucial... But to me, the biggest extrinsic motivation is when someone trusts me, when someone respects what I bring to the table” – Participant 2*

Figure 3 shows that on average 40-58% of responders from Canada (n=723) and 37-53% in Oceania (n=1,194) opted 'high' (4 and 5) for good pay as a reason for staying on in this profession. Around 41-46% in USA (n=3,369) and 40-45% UK (n=1,408) opted high as well. Whereas 38-48% responders in Europe (excluding UK) (n=2,305) and 41-49% in Rest of the World (n=942) chose 1 and 2 for not important or relevant. The reason for choosing 1 and 2 (less relevant), could be that in these regions there may not be a structure to the profession in terms of permanent employment and standard salaries, unlike in Canada, Oceania, USA and UK, where research management is a defined profession. Hence, salaries may not be the only reasons for choosing this career in these regions. Figure 3 also indicates that within each region there appears to



be changes in the three surveys that took place in 2016, 2019 and 2022. For instance, in Canada, the RMA response has shifted from 40% to 58% over the six years in terms of opting 4 and 5. Similarly, 37% RMAs in Oceania region rated the question highly (4 and 5) in the first survey in 2016 which rose to 53% in the third survey in 2022.

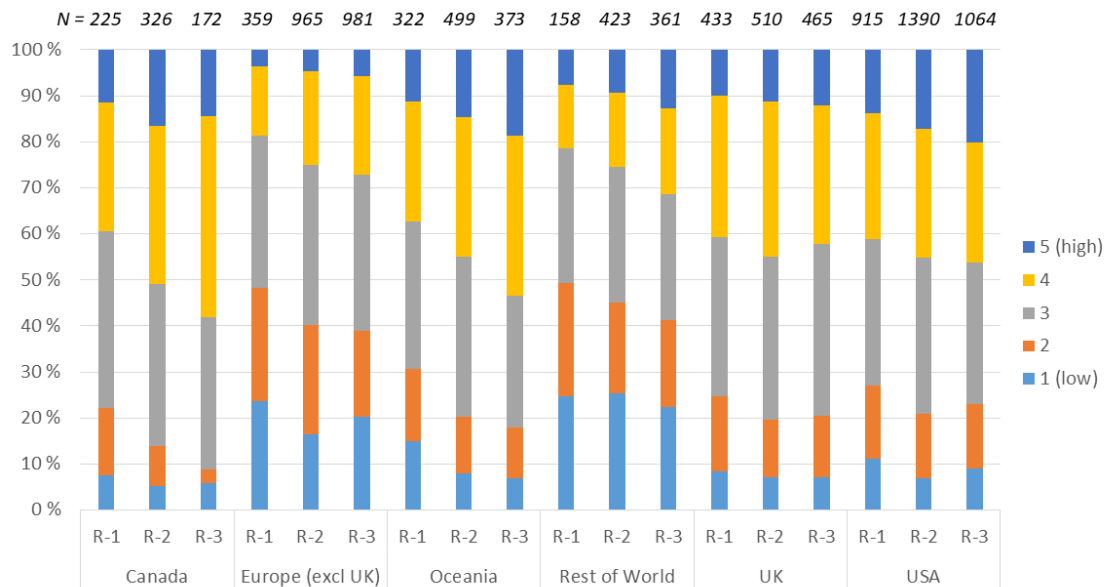


Figure 3: 'It pays well'

Job security was ranked as really important/relevant (4 and 5) by 60% of responders (rounding off to nearest 10%) from Canada (n=733), Oceania (n=1,187), UK (n=1,412) and USA (n=3,364), and 50% of responders (rounding off to nearest 10%) from Europe (excluding UK) (n=2,313) (Figure 4). However, only 30% (n=923) of RMAs from Rest of the World ranked it at 4 and 5. In the Rest of the World region, 38-43% RMAs rated job security low (1 and 2) and 24-26% rated it a medium concern (3) over the six years. Since research management and administration is not a structured or recognized profession in many regions and may not be a secure career yet, perhaps professionals do not choose this primarily for job security reasons.

## Sustainable RMA Career Paths

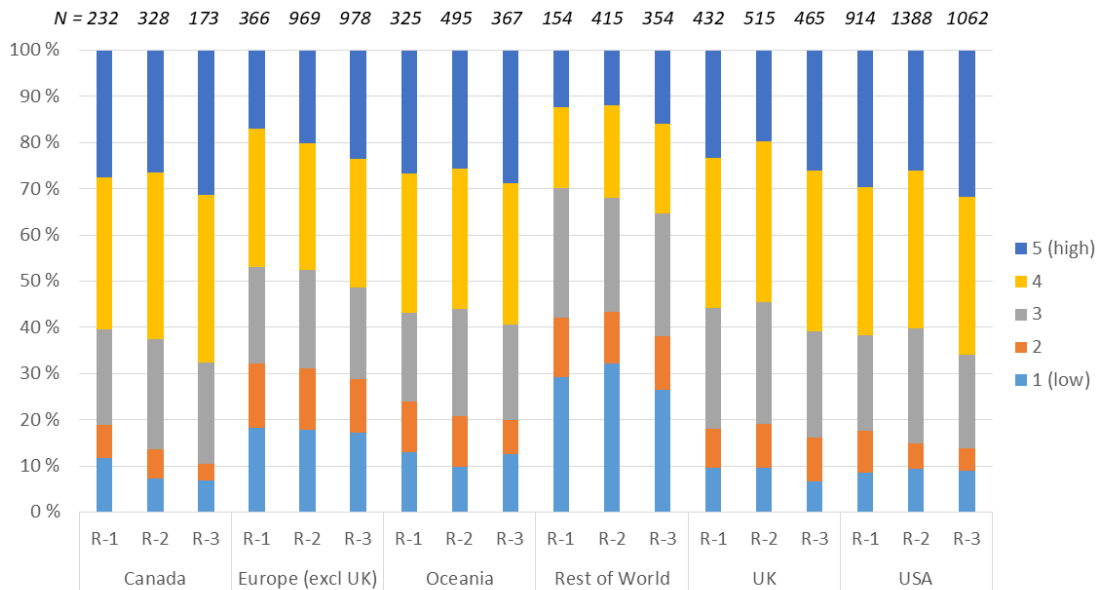


Figure 4: 'Job Security'

Figure 5 shows the data for staying put due to career advancement opportunities. The question was *'Why have you stayed in Research Administration'* and under it, one of the options were *'I see the opportunity for advancement'*. Responders opted on a 1-5 scale, 1 being not important/relevant to 5 being really important/relevant. For Canada, total n=730, Europe (excluding UK) n=2,310, Oceania n=1,191, Rest of the World n=963, UK n=1,405 and USA n=3,370. In 2016, 49% opted 4 and 5 for Rest of the World, whereas in 2022 61% opted for the same ratings. Overall, trends across the globe do not seem to change much in six years.

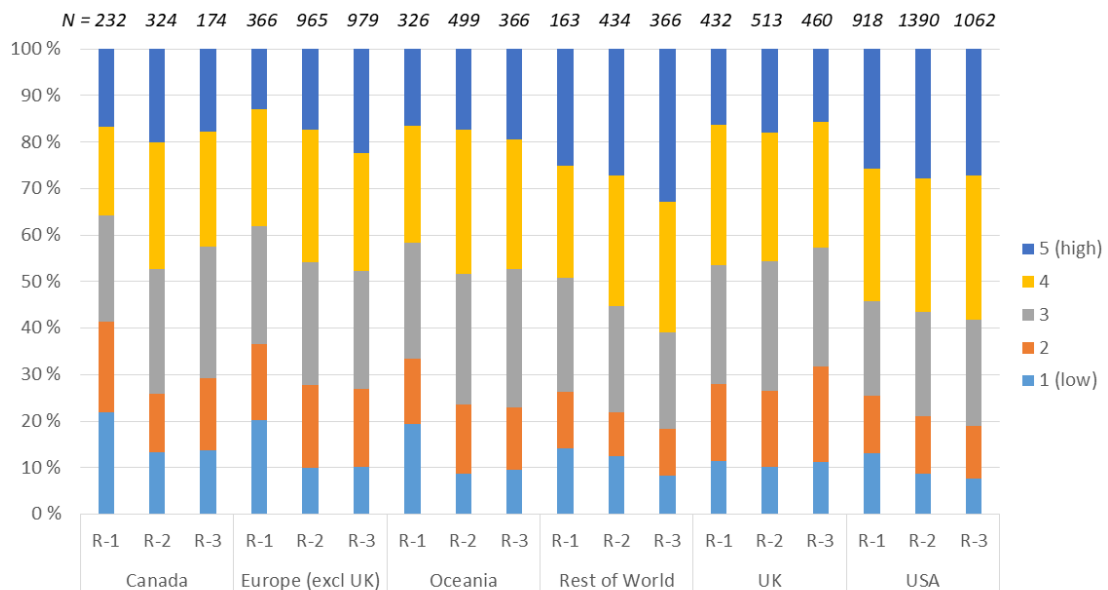


Figure 5: 'I see the opportunity for advancement'

## DISCUSSION

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At the 2023 International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) conference, approximately 550 Research Management and Administration (RMA) practitioners from 50 countries convened in Durban, South Africa, to exchange knowledge and insights (Carter, 2023). Key themes that emerged included inequities in international partnerships between the Global North and South, as well as within the Global North and South, particularly concerning the disbursement of global health funding, research leadership, and research ecosystems. Additionally, the capacities, training, and accreditation of RMAs in certain regions were identified as priority areas.

The conference underscored the growing importance of the RMA sector across 50 countries.

Despite a lot of variations across regions – in the recognition of RM as a profession, establishment of research management associations, and national and institutional policies supporting this sector – RMAs choose and remain in this field for very similar reasons.

Both the global RAAAP surveys and qualitative interviews conducted with Indian RMAs, summarized in this report, highlight the significance of job satisfaction as a central factor in retaining professionals in research management. Both sources also emphasize the importance of collaboration with academics and researchers, as well as validation from colleagues, as key motivators for career choices. For example, Figure 1 highlights the significance of RMAs finding enjoyment in their work. The qualitative interviews in this category reveals that the joy of innovation, the creation of new solutions, and the opportunity to learn new aspects are particularly exciting moments in this profession.

RMAs appear to thrive on innovation, problem-solving, and embracing challenges, which closely align with the principles of research and discovery. Consequently, validation from colleagues in research and academia, as illustrated in Figure 2, serves as a crucial incentive for remaining in this profession.

Interestingly, as shown in Figure 3, while there is an increasing trend in Canada and Oceania to choose this profession for its financial rewards, this trend is not observed in the UK and the USA. This discrepancy may be attributed to an already standardized system of designations and salaries in these regions, prior to 2016 or the first RAAAP survey.

However, a competitive salary may not be a primary factor for RMAs in Europe and other regions to choose this profession. Many countries in these regions are on a similar evolutionary path in recognizing research management and administration as a stable profession, hence are still working towards a standardised system of salaries and designations. Although the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA) provides overall support to RMAs in European countries, many nations have yet to recognize research management as a tenured career in this region. In other parts of the world, most countries lack a structured association for RMAs, like

EARMA. Consequently, academic and research institutions in these regions may not have competitive salaries for RMAs, leading to salary being a less significant factor in career choice.

Furthermore, due to the lack of recognition by policymakers and institutions, research management does not offer the same job security as more traditional professions in these regions. As a result, RMAs in these regions do not prioritize job security as a key reason for remaining in their roles since it is yet to receive acknowledgement as a secure career, as illustrated in Figure 4.


## CONCLUSION

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Research Management Administrators (RMAs) are pivotal in streamlining the research requirements of organizations. They provide invaluable support to researchers by handling the often onerous and tedious administrative tasks essential for the smooth operationalization of research. Therefore, it is crucial for institutions to invest in training, career advancement opportunities, job security, and competitive compensation for RMAs. Additionally, it is imperative to establish systems that recognize and value the contributions of RMAs in strengthening institutional research ecosystems.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

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Sarah Iqbal  0000-0002-4857-4607:  Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing

Arpita Ghosh  0000-0003-0036-4376:  Validation, Writing – review & editing

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