

CHARTING THE COURSE: NAVIGATING THE EVOLVING FIELD OF RESEARCH MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION RESEARCH

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As we navigate the increasingly complex landscape of global research and innovation, the role of Research Management and Administration (RMA) professionals has become more critical than ever for enabling research excellence and ensuring the effective delivery of impactful research outcomes. Thus, this role has become not just increasingly visible but also to some extent even acknowledged by leading stakeholders (e.g. policy makers such as the European Commission).

RMA professionals are the individuals and teams who, behind the scenes, enable and enhance the entire research lifecycle, from grant applications to impact realization and everything in between, including science diplomacy, science communication, and research strategy development (Agostinho et al., 2020).

It is therefore both timely and essential to reflect on the status of research on RMA (RoRMA) itself – the scientific field dedicated to understanding, analysing, and improving the practices and policies that underpin this vital profession, and figure out what this research may do for the recognition of the profession and for every single RMA professional. Do we really need RoRMA? Do we understand its added value in conducting research for the future of the profession? Are we prepared to conduct or commit to this research?

This editorial aims to provide an overview of RMA as a scientific domain, tracing its historical roots, examining current academic outlets, and exploring the dynamics of

publication within this burgeoning field. Furthermore, we will delve into the dominant research topics, identify emerging trends, and, crucially, suggest avenues for future inquiry to ensure RoRMA generates knowledge that directly contributes to enhancing the effectiveness and impact of the global research enterprise and strengthens the professional practices that underpin it.

In this spirit, this editorial also serves as a call to action, encouraging researchers presenting at events such as the upcoming International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) congress in partnership with European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA) to consider developing their work for publication in *JoRMA*, thereby contributing to the growing body of rigorous RMA scholarship. We also emphasize the need for the field to embrace more rigorous and interdisciplinary research methodologies to further strengthen its impact and recognition. Finally, we invite researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to actively engage with the vibrant RoRMA initiative at EARMA to collectively advance this essential field.

RMA AS A SCIENTIFIC FIELD: DEFINING ITS BOUNDARIES AND PURPOSE

RoRMA, as a distinct scientific field, is relatively young but rapidly evolving and increasingly visible. It can be defined as an interdisciplinary area of study focused on the systematic examination of the practices, processes, policies, and organizational structures that support and enable research activities across diverse sectors. It draws upon insights from management, public administration, organizational theory, science and technology studies, higher education management, and policy analysis to understand how research is conceived, funded, conducted, managed, and utilized.

The core of RoRMA is multifaceted. Among other purposes, it seeks to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of research operations, promote ethical and responsible research conduct, maximize the impact of research, develop the RMA profession, and inform research policy and funding decisions. This includes, for example: identifying best practices and innovative approaches to improve research processes across the lifecycle; examining ethical frameworks and research integrity policies, and fostering a culture of responsible research; investigating strategies for knowledge mobilization, technology transfer, and societal engagement to ensure research benefits society; providing evidence-based insights to inform professional development, training, and career pathways for RMA professionals; and generating data and analysis to shape effective research policies at institutional, national, and international levels.

HISTORICAL ROOTS: FROM REACTIVE ADMINISTRATION TO PROACTIVE MANAGEMENT

The genesis of RoRMA is intertwined with the dramatic expansion of research activities, particularly in the post-World War II era (Bush, 2020). Initially, RMA practices emerged largely from reactive administrative necessities within universities and research institutions. Early efforts focused on operational efficiency, primarily concerning

financial administration, human resources, and basic infrastructure support for researchers. However, as research funding grew, competition intensified, and societal expectations for research impact increased, the need for a more strategic and proactive approach to research management became apparent (Santos et al., 2024). The professionalization of RMA roles emerged alongside a growing recognition of the field's complexity and the need for specialized knowledge and skills (Virágh et al., 2020).

The historical trajectory of RoRMA mirrors this evolution. Early publications tended to be RMA practitioner-focused, sharing experiences, best or just own practices, personal more than professional insights and practical tips (e.g. Langley, 2012). Over time, a more scholarly approach has emerged by some scholars, which was marked by the adoption of rigorous research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and engagement with broader academic disciplines (e.g. Lintz, 2008). This shift reflected a growing understanding of RMA as not just a technical function, but as a complex organizational and societal phenomenon worthy of systematic investigation. However, this shift has faced a number of challenges, including difficulties in engaging with such frameworks, and a perceived distance between these theoretical lenses and the field of practice with its recurrent demands and urgencies. This distance is obviously a false problem, or simply the false reason that some of us have given ourselves for not engaging with more structured methodologies that have the potential to help the profession improve itself and its practitioners.

ACADEMIC OUTLETS AND PUBLICATION DYNAMICS: *JoRMA* AND BEYOND

The landscape of academic outlets for RoRMA is still developing, but it is becoming increasingly robust. *JoRMA*, as a dedicated journal in this domain since 2021, plays a crucial role in consolidating and disseminating scholarly work on RMA. Its existence signals the field's increasing maturity and the need for specialized platforms for knowledge exchange.

Beyond *JoRMA*, research on RMA is also published in a range of other academic outlets, reflecting its interdisciplinary nature. Specialized RMA journals include the *Journal of Research Administration* (JRA, by the Society of Research Administrators International, USA), *Research Management Review* (RMR, by the National Council of University Research Administrators, USA), and the *Journal of Research Management and Governance* (JRMG, by the University of Malaysia). Given the strong management and administrative components of RMA, publications appear in broader management journals, especially those with a focus on higher education, innovation management, or public sector management (e.g. *Higher Education Policy*, *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*). Outlets in science and technology studies and research policy provide platforms for research exploring the broader societal context of research, including policy implications, ethical considerations, and the social dynamics of science (e.g. *Research Policy*, *Science, Technology & Human Values*). Finally, mention should be made to key books such as the recent *Emerald Handbook of Research Management*

and Administration Around the World, aimed at providing a cross-regional and cross-cultural account of the professionals who actively engage in RMA (Kerridge et al., 2023).

Being scattered across various disciplinary outlets, RoRMA faces potential fragmentation and challenges in consolidating knowledge. *JoRMA* plays a vital role in addressing this by providing a central hub. The number of publications in RMA-related areas is demonstrably increasing, reflecting the field's expansion and growing academic interest. A significant portion of RoRMA remains practice-oriented, focusing on case studies, best practices, and action research to address practical challenges.

Nevertheless, there is a noticeable trend towards employing more rigorous research methodologies, including quantitative analysis, large-scale surveys, and mixed-methods approaches, enhancing the field's scientific credibility. Research is increasingly addressing RMA issues from a global perspective, recognizing the diverse contexts of research systems and the need for international collaboration.

RESEARCHED TOPICS AND TRENDS: CHARTING THE INTELLECTUAL TERRITORY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ADVANCING RMA RESEARCH

The range of topics explored in RMA research is broad, reflecting the diverse responsibilities and challenges faced by RMA professionals. A survey of topics published in *JoRMA*, *JRA*, *JRMG* and *RMR* in the last seven years reveals that over 50% are focused on the following areas of investigation (Figure 1): funding acquisition and grant management; research ethics and integrity; research project and program management; research development; technology transfer and knowledge mobilization; research impact assessment and evaluation; research policy and governance; the RMA profession/professionals; data management in research; and equity, diversity, and inclusion.

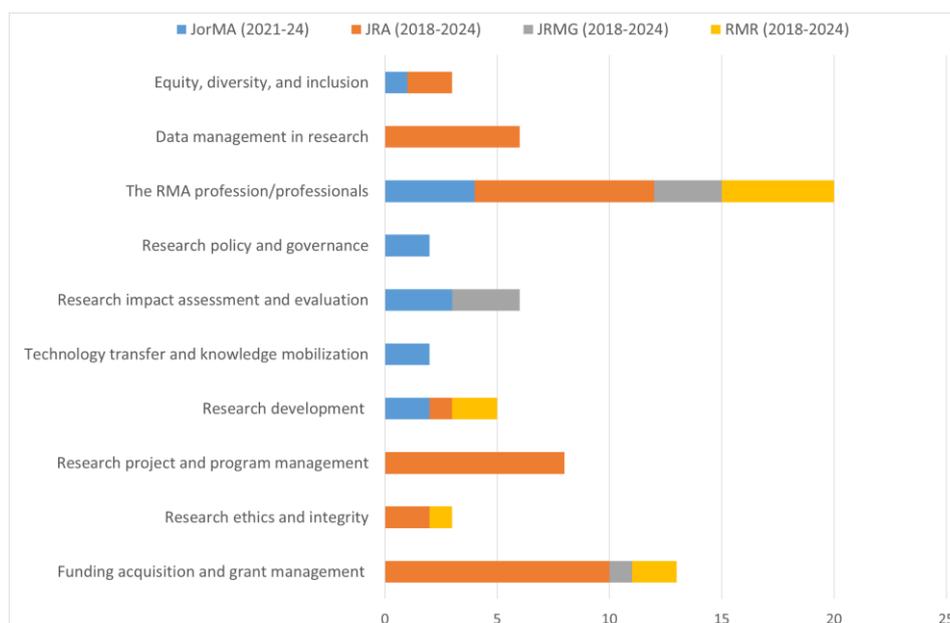


Figure 1. Key topics of *JoRMA*, *JRA*, *JRMG* and *RMR* papers between 2018 and 2024.

In Figure 1 it can be observed that in the surveyed period, the most researched topics focused on the RMA profession/professionals, funding acquisition and grant management, and research project and program management. This reflects concerns of the practitioners-researchers with the recognition of the profession itself, in the context of its worldwide consolidation, and with major pre-award and post-award RMA functions.

The future of RoRMA is vibrant and challenging, with vast potential for continued growth and impact. To further advance the field, we are expected to explore key areas such as the transformative influence of artificial intelligence and automation on RMA processes, including ethical considerations. Simultaneously, we should expand our research focus beyond traditional academic settings to encompass diverse environments like industry, NGOs, and government agencies. Another crucial aspect of this research involves understanding how RMA professionals contribute to cultivating positive research cultures that foster collaboration, innovation, and ethical conduct. Also, to demonstrate the value of RMA, we have to develop robust metrics and frameworks for assessing the impact of RMA services on research success. Furthermore, embracing cross-national and comparative research would enable us to identify best practices and facilitate international collaboration. Finally, addressing the challenges of precarious RMA careers is essential for creating sustainable and equitable research environments. This list is certainly not exhaustive but can provide a first course of action. By pursuing these research avenues, we can ensure that RMA continues to evolve as a robust and impactful profession, effectively supporting research endeavours in an ever-changing world.

RORMA: THE RESEARCH ON RESEARCH MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION COMMUNITY AT EARMA

The RoRMA initiative within the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA) aims to foster the creation, dissemination, and use of knowledge about RMA. It seeks to establish a community of RMA practitioners-researchers, promote engagement and discussion, develop an accessible repository for RMA knowledge and be a platform for more research on RMA to be conducted.

The RoRMA initiative has the potential to significantly impact the RMA field by creating a knowledge base that supports professional development, facilitates better RMA services, and strengthens the profession as a whole. RMA practitioners can engage with the RoRMA initiative by participating in its activities, contributing to the knowledge repository, and collaborating with others in the community. By actively engaging with this initiative, we can help shape the future of the RMA field and contribute to its advancement. Anyone interested can join the LinkedIn community page at: www.linkedin.com/groups/10001042/.

Building on the 2025 edition of the INORMS congress, *JoRMA* and RoRMA/EARMA are partnering for a special collection of papers developed from the event's abstracts. If you are presenting your research at INORMS 2025 and have indicated in the abstract

submission from your willingness to develop a full paper, do not hesitate to submit it for publication in *JoRMA*. The reviewing process will follow the standard procedure, and you will only need to indicate in the submission notes/cover letter the presentation title the manuscript is based on.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION FOR RMA RESEARCH

The field of RoRMA is at a critical juncture. It has evolved from a nascent area of inquiry to a maturing scientific domain with a growing body of knowledge, dedicated academic outlets like *JoRMA*, and an increasingly sophisticated methodological toolkit. However, significant opportunities remain for further development and impact.

By embracing a more rigorous and interdisciplinary approach, addressing emerging challenges and future trends, and focusing on the crucial questions outlined above, RMA research can play an even more vital role in shaping the future of the global research enterprise.

The RoRMA initiative at EARMA stands as a key platform for this endeavour, and we encourage researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike to contribute to and engage with this dynamic and essential community. Let us collectively chart a course for RMA research that ensures it continues to inform, empower, and elevate the profession it serves, ultimately contributing to a more effective, ethical, and impactful global research ecosystem.

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José Santos is an Assistant Researcher and Senior Research Manager at the Polytechnic University of Bragança, Portugal. His professional journey includes roles as a researcher at institutions such as the University of Coimbra (Portugal), University of Leeds (UK) and Université Pierre et Marie Curie (France), and research manager at the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology. Since 2012, he has been affiliated with the Polytechnic University of Bragança, contributing to both research initiatives and the management of science and technology activities. His professional goal is to advance the understanding and implementation of effective R&D management practices, fostering innovation and sustainable development within academic and research settings.

Susi Poli, MBA and Ed.D in Higher Education Management, is Head of Staff Development and Strategic Projects in the Education Division of the University of Bologna (AFORM-Unibo). She is soon to head the new Centre for Teaching and Learning and its unit for Innovation in Teaching and Organisation. She is an international scholar in higher education research covering a range of topics including staff development, innovative roles, knowledge production and tacit knowledge, professional groups and intercultural issues. After several years working in higher education and research management, she moved to the UK (IOE and UCL) to undertake doctoral research into the roles, identities and careers of professional staff. From this point she began to explore RMA as a primary scopus and several other interrelated issues and themes. Her doctoral supervisor, Celia Whitchurch, inspired her trajectory and research interests with her ongoing original work on blended and third space professionals. Susi has been a member of several international professional associations, e.g. EARMA, NCURA, HUMANE, SRHE, AERA. She is the editor of two books on research management, one entitled 'Research management Europe and beyond' (edited with Jan Andersen and Kristel Toom, Elsevier, 2017) and the other 'The Emerald Handbook of Research Management and Administration Around the World' (with Simon Kerridge and Mariko Yang-Yoshihara, November 2023). She is Co-Chair of the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA) ECDI Thematic Group - Equality, Cultures, Diversity and Inclusion, and EARMA Co-Chair of the Research on Research Management and Administration (RoRMA) Sub-Committee. In AFORM-Unibo, she is the chair of the WG on Peer Support and Preparation for International Contexts - Internationalisation of Professional Staff in Education. She's a UniBO member of the WG on Responsible Use of AI in Education and Research (GLAI).

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