




RMAs IN MOTION: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE OF MOVING TO A NEW COUNTRY AS A RESEARCH MANAGER

Nick Ollivere*	Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands  0000-0002-7866-710X	n.j.ollivere@bb.leidenuniv.nl
Anja Hegen	Trond Mohn Foundation, Bergen, Norway  0000-0002-2178-8912	ah@mohnfoundation.no
Angela Noble	Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands  0009-0009-0874-3726	a.noble@bb.leidenuniv.nl

* Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

What is new?	More and more Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) are moving country to pursue their career, but often find themselves unprepared for what they encounter in a new environment. This paper explores for the first time some of the issues encountered when RMAs move country, and attempts to offer some recommendations for universities, as well as professional organisations, to help them overcome any difficulties.
What was the approach?	Before and after a paper given at the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA) 2021 conference a survey was run gathering opinions and experiences of RMAs.
What is the academic impact?	This paper presents the first insights into the issue of international mobility amongst RMAs, and opens the way for research into this issue.
What is the wider impact?	These findings will help encourage universities and member associations to help support RMAs further in their career moves. It will also help RMAs prepare further for such a move.
Keywords	RMA Mobility; professionalisation; support

INTRODUCTION

For many and various reasons, research managers and administrators may find themselves seeking work in a new country. Although some of the funding opportunities (e.g. from the European Commission) stay the same, a lot else changes when they start to work for a new university in a new country. They will have to deal not just with a different job, but a different university and office culture, not to mention the culture and customs of the new country. Added to this are the difficulties of potentially learning a new language, or at the very least new terms and concepts. Academia is said to be international (Geuna, 2015), but does the same apply for research administration? Although highly valuable as international experience, can such a radical change set them back in their career, or are there only benefits? In this paper the authors set out to address some of these issues, and provide the results of a survey on the topic taken at the 2021 EARMA conference.

Based on the authors' combined 51 years of experience in the profession, up to approximately 10 years ago, it had not been very common for research administrators to move far beyond their own region, let alone country. It was not a career, unlike academia itself, that required a great deal of mobility. However, based on their personal experiences, as there is no research yet in this area, it is becoming more and more common for research administrators to be more mobile. They could be seeking better career opportunities, have a desire for travel, be following partners, have a family obligation to move, or any number of other reasons.

This mobility brings with it a number of challenges. The work processes, procedures, policies and behaviour in one country and its universities can be radically different from another, and there are no clear and obvious ways to learn what these differences are. There is often no handy guide to differing university cultures and how to navigate them, especially as an administrator. They are expected to learn without guidance, and on the job, with the potential that this will set them back in their development.

This raises the issue of what and how universities and research support offices should and could do to attract international staff, and how they might manage their integration when they arrive.

METHODOLOGY

An anonymous survey was designed and conducted for a presentation (Ollivere, Noble, Hegen & Hansen, 2021) at the 2021 EARMA conference. The survey also stayed open after the conference to inform this publication, and was available in total from April 19 2021 until October 21 2021. It was accessible to anyone with a link, and was widely distributed within the authors' universities and personal networks. The survey aimed to capture the proportion and experiences of people who had moved country, their reasons for doing so, and the range of difficulties they faced. The questions (expanded on below in detail with the responses) are available online as part of the dataset (Ollivere et al. 2023). In addition to multiple choice questions participants were also

given the opportunity to expand freely on their experiences or thoughts. This information is presented below as “vignettes”. Admittedly, there may be some selective bias in the responses, as those who attended the session or who were engaged in responding to the survey may have already been interested in moving country, or have done so already. It was also limited in responses, giving potentially only a small, non-representative sample. Through this survey the hope was to gauge a sense within the profession of the amount of people who have already moved country, and their reasons, reflections and experiences in doing so. In total 78 responses (Ollivere et al. 2023) were received in this survey, from a range of participants.

SURVEY RESULTS

Out of those we asked, 44 (56%) were working or had already worked in a country outside their home country (participants were left to define this themselves), shown in Figure 1. This was a much larger proportion than had been anticipated, and showed the great level of mobility already within the profession.

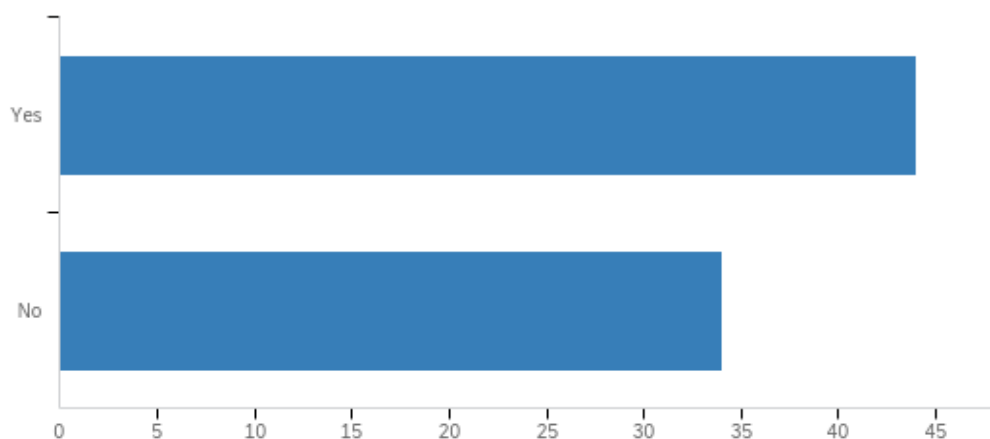


Figure 1: Do you work now, or have you ever, worked in a different country from your home country (as an RMA)?

Of those who had answered “No” to the above question (34, or 44%), a further question asked if they would consider moving to another country for their career (Figure 2).

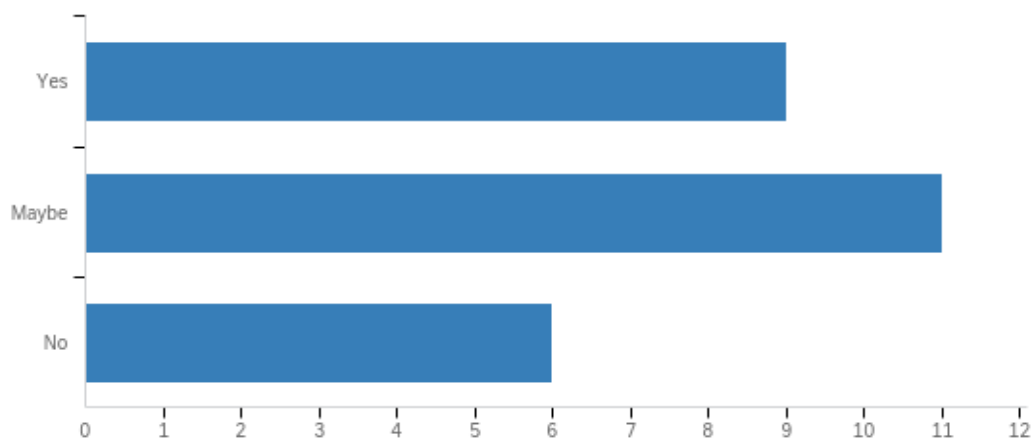


Figure 2: Would you consider moving to a new country for your career?

RMA's in Motion

The responses "Yes" and "Maybe" totalled 20 (out of 26, 77%), a clear majority over the six who would not consider it. These first two responses thus confirmed that many RMA's have already moved country, or would be willing to do so. However, to delve more deeply into the reasoning for such a move another question asked those who had moved country how they came to work there (Figure 3). There were 41 responses to all of the following questions (except that on the difficulty of learning a new language).

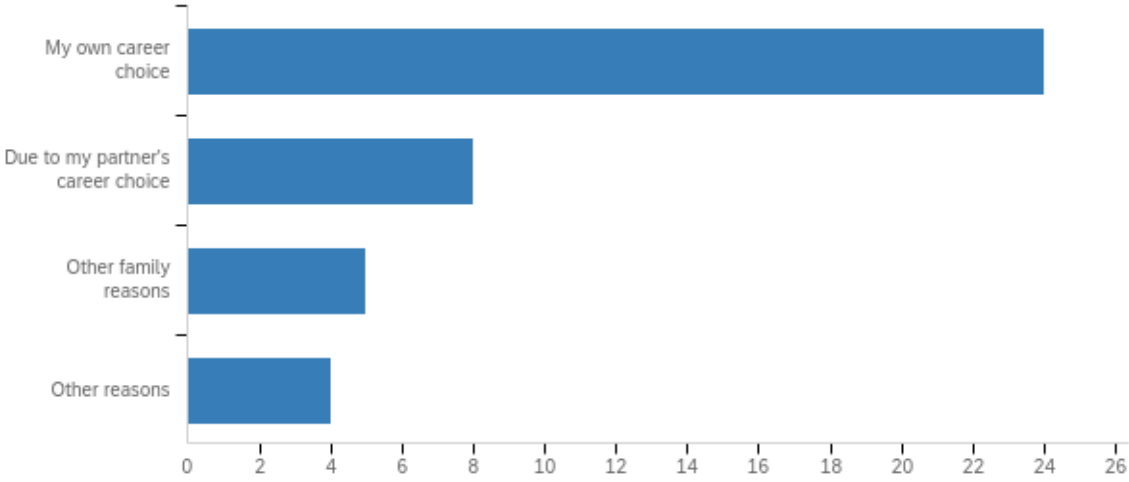


Figure 3: How did you come to work there?

The results again were surprising, with the majority (24, or 59%) having done so for their own career choice. This indicated the increasing professionalisation of RMA's seeking opportunities and experience outside their immediate vicinity, and the chance to develop themselves and their career in other places.

They were also asked how long they had worked in the new country (Figure 4). For this, a majority reported working there for "0-3 years" and "6 years or more" (35 out of the 41 responses), with relatively few in the in-between period of "3-6 years". It can be tentatively speculated that this might suggest that RMA's either stay for a short period, or a very long one, with only a few in that transition period between. Alternatively, the 0-3 cohort could reflect an increased mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased remote working possibilities.

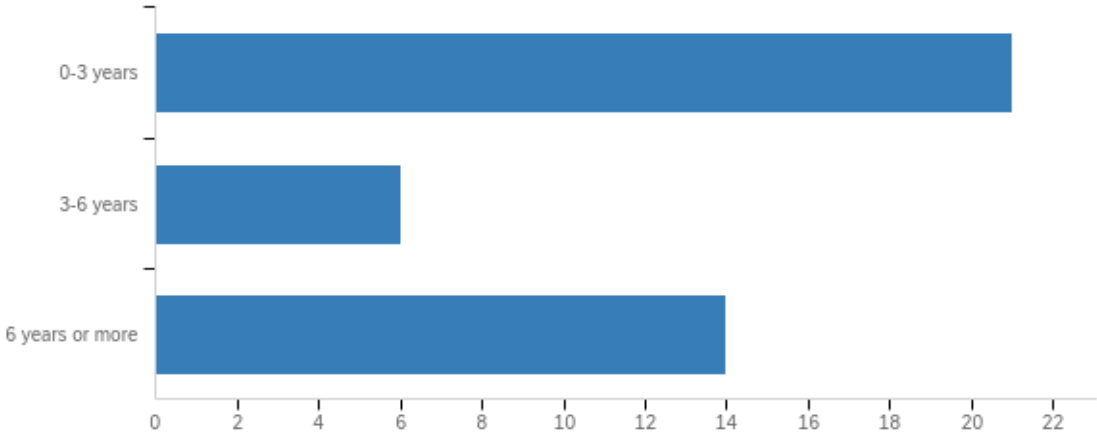


Figure 4: How long have you been working (or did you work) there?

Seeking work in a new country can often be difficult, with different platforms and customs available, and job titles varying not only between countries but sometimes also between universities. It was thus asked how easy it was to find work in the new country (Figure 5). The answer was somewhat balanced, with almost half (20, 49%) finding it "Somewhat easy", followed by "Somewhat difficult", and only small numbers at the extremes.

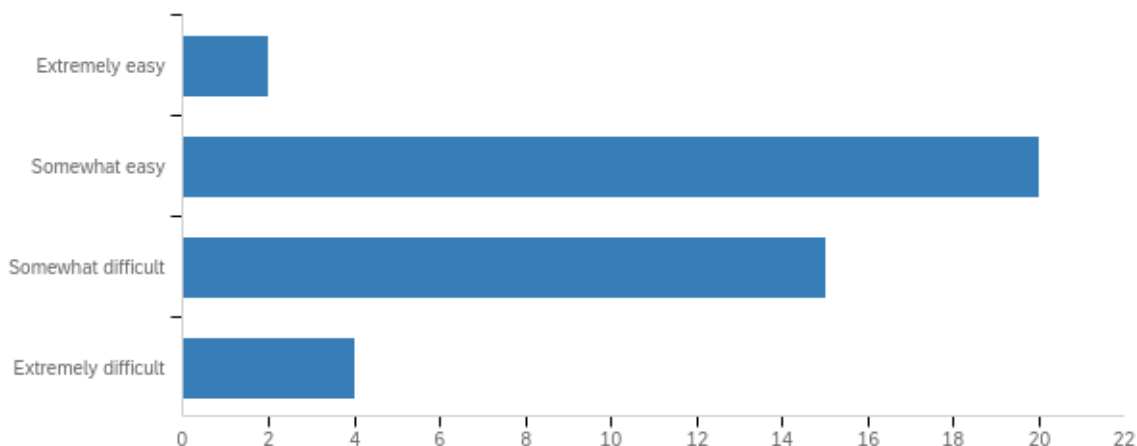


Figure 5: Was it easy to find work as a research administrator in a foreign country?

Even when those who moved country found a role, however, the university culture in a different country can be radically different. Despite, for example, the Bologna process to harmonise higher education institutions, and the Americanisation of many universities in Europe (for example the adoption of assistant/associate professor titles, and teaching in English), much remains different in how each university operates, the customs and habits of its organisation, the structure, positions, and office culture. It was therefore asked of our participants how different they felt was the university culture overall (Figure 6). Only three felt that it was "Not different", with 19 saying it was either "Somewhat different" or "Very different".

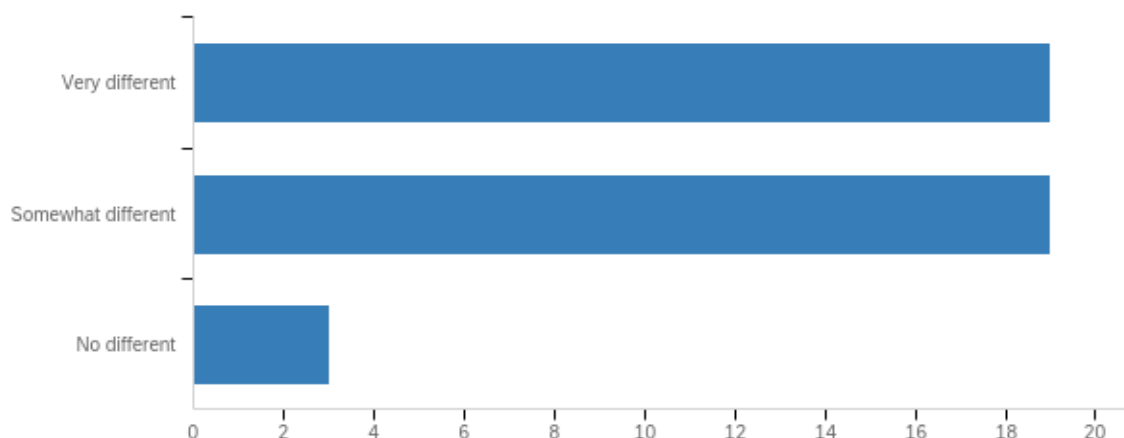


Figure 6: How different was the university culture?

The survey then asked how easy it was to integrate into the new role (Figure 7). Of the 41 responses, 23 (56%) found this "Somewhat easy", and four finding it "Extremely easy".

A smaller number, 13 (32%) found it "Somewhat difficult", with only one participant (2%) finding it "Extremely difficult".

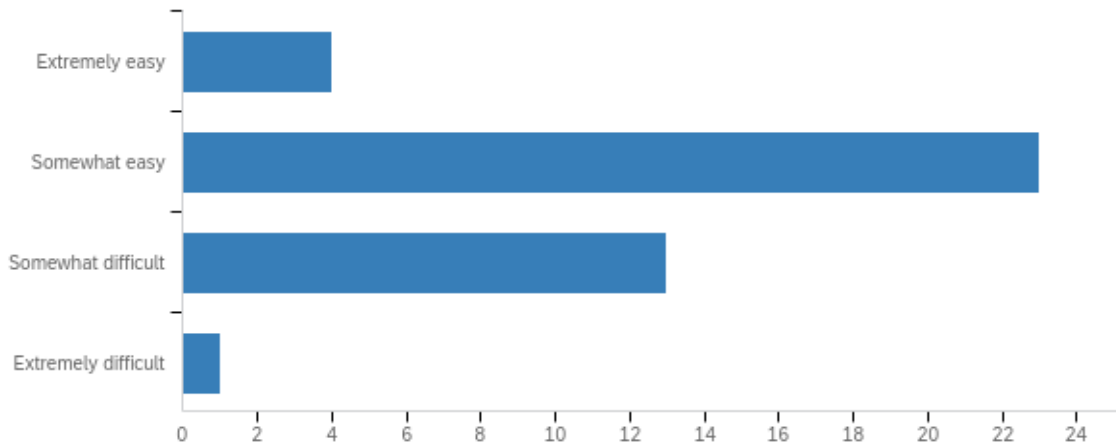


Figure 7: How easy was it to integrate into your role?

This might suggest that cultural differences might only be a minor consideration, with a large proportion of the work remaining consistent between countries. It would be valuable to test this further in future research. However, there are other factors to consider. One particular concern for RMAs moving to a new country, suggested by the authors' own experiences, is having to potentially learn a new language. The European Union (EU) has 24 official languages among its 27 members. Given this large range of languages, we were surprised to see (Figure 8) that the slim majority (17 over 16) said that learning a new language was not necessary, with some also saying it was optional (8).

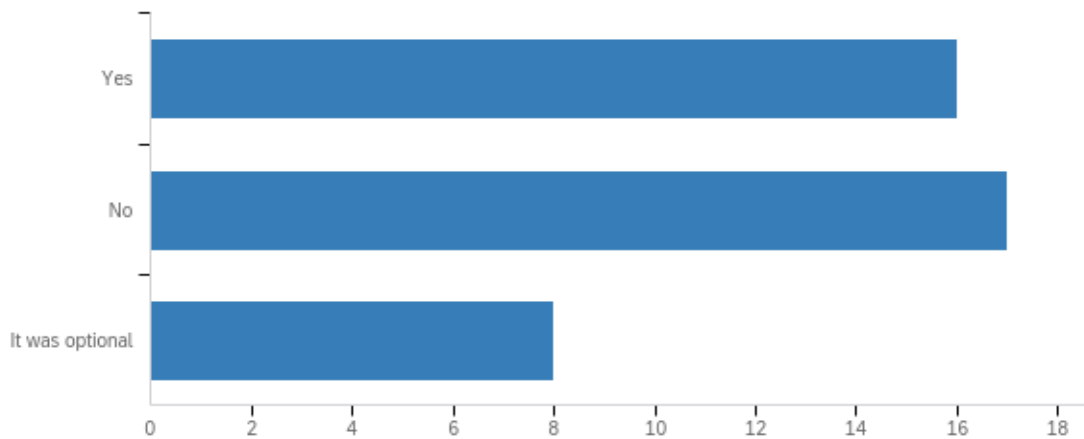


Figure 8: Was learning a new language required?

This may give some hope to those thinking about moving country, but being put off by the language requirements. This question was followed up by asking how difficult it was to learn the new language (Figure 9). Again the results were surprising with a majority (11 out of 16 responses) saying it was "Neither easy nor difficult", "Somewhat easy", or "Extremely easy". Only five participants found it somewhat difficult, and no participants found it "Extremely difficult". It should be noted, however, that the survey made no

differentiation between how many languages a respondent already spoke, or whether they were able to use a common language (e.g. English) in their work. Further research in this area might tease out more subtle results on this.

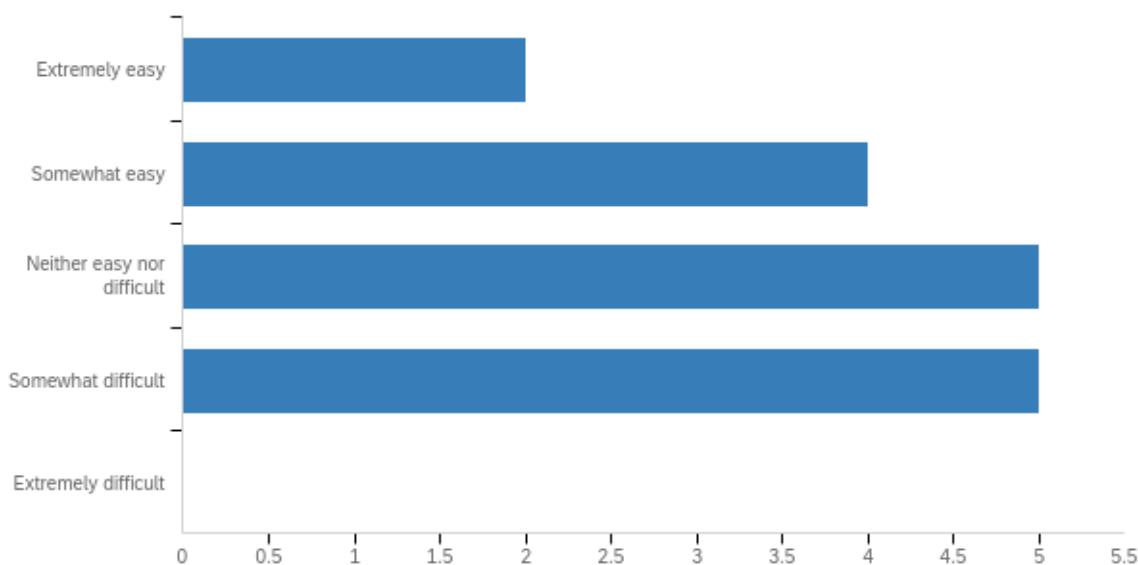


Figure 9: How difficult was learning the new language?

The survey thus provided a valuable base of information that has in some instances confirmed initial assumptions about the state of the profession, but in other cases been surprising. Three key takeaways from the survey are that: a large proportion of RMAs responding to the survey have moved (or are willing to move) country; the reason for moving is mostly for their own career; and that learning a new language is not always necessary. Whilst this therefore confirms the increasing professionalisation of RMAs, via international career mobility, it also suggests that the barriers to moving country are not as great as might be expected. Nonetheless, the survey has revealed that finding a new role, adapting to the role, and understanding the university culture in a new country do still cause difficulties for RMAs. The greater and long-term impact of these difficulties would be an interesting topic for further study, as discussed below.

VIGNETTES

In addition to the quantitative aspect to the survey, there was a qualitative aspect which endeavoured to gather personal experiences and stories from the respondents, to flesh out the picture of what it is like to move country as an RMA. The numbers above only give one part of the story, and as individual situations are unique, and every country and indeed university within it presents different opportunities and challenges, some more personal responses might help to complete the picture.

For example, one participant highlighted how it “can take some time” to learn the new ways that things work in a new country and university, with one respondent in particular highlighting that “there were huge differences in work style and respect for colleagues in the new country”. Although an RMA may be prepared for some differences, the lived-reality of working within them can, in many instances, come as a culture-shock. Another

respondent highlighted the differences between moving across Northern Europe to moving from North to South or East to West (or vice versa). The latter two would be a potentially greater change of culture to overcome and deal with. Some advice we received was that "other research administrators and support staff are key in making the transition successful".

Coupled to this challenge, one respondent noted that many universities in a foreign country were "only interested in candidates with experience of the local research environment". This therefore "made the process very challenging". It can make it, in many ways, an impossible cycle to break: if an RMA does not have the experience they cannot get a job, but if they do not have a job they cannot get experience. They must, in many cases, be at the mercy of personal connections, networking, and the willingness of an employer to take a chance on them. Professional organisations, such as EARMA, do thus play an important role in the success of moving country, and their potential to do more is touched upon further below.

Another respondent highlighted the parallel difficulty of returning to their home country after a period abroad: the "cultural aspects of my so-called home country have proven challenging, including learning the correct terminology in my native language as I had never worked there before, not as an RMA or as anything else. Reintegration has been harder than moving out!"

Further questions attempt to discover what people thought the advantages might be of moving to a new country. This again helps to flesh out some of the answers from the quantitative aspect of the survey itself, to give a better picture of what drives RMA's to seek work outside their home country. The predominant emphasis was to gain new professional experiences and challenges, skills, methods, tools, ways of working and habits, potentially leading to better career opportunities in the future, or to transfer them back to one's home country, reiterating again the increasing professionalisation of the RMA career.

Another important reason was that the "RMA profession [is] much more developed and recognised in other countries in relation to mine", as well as that there is "a more international working environment" in some countries. A potential increase in salary is also a very important consideration, along with the potential for better working, living and housing conditions, and more inclusive societies to which the individual might be moving. The fun and challenge of living in a new country, and learning a new culture was not overlooked. One particular respondent highlighted that learning these new social and cultural habits would be helpful in the future in developing collaborative programmes and projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER STUDY

Alongside the presentation (Ollivere, Noble, Hegen & Hansen, 2021) at the 2021 EARMA conference, the authors also hosted roundtables where they raised the question of what could be done to help RMA's thinking about moving to another country, or those who have already moved to one and may be potentially struggling. A subsequent

presentation (Ollivere, Noble, Hansen & Hegen, 2021) was given as an EARMA Digital Event in order to boost survey responses. The discussion naturally devolved into talking about two bodies who could do the most to help: universities themselves, and professional organisations. Collated below are all the recommendations from these sessions, along with the conclusions from the above data, to start the discussion on potential solutions. The focus is from the perspective of the RMA him/herself, and benefits/disadvantages from their point of view. There is more work to be done addressing this issue from the perspective of the university.

Universities are the natural place where most could be done to directly help foreign colleagues they have hired to work in their universities. The first step, however, would be to develop (in combination with the profession, below) specific competences for job postings so that they could be understood internationally. Simply translating a job description into English often is not enough, as many terms are untranslatable, or local to the country in which they're used. Following on from this, universities should offer an onboarding process for new colleagues with mentors and social integration, offering English versions (at least) of the institution's employee handbook.

A university could offer cultural training to national and international staff to promote understanding and empathy, and they could explain the inner workings of the institution that might be grounded in traditions and beliefs that foreigners most likely will not know. It is possible that some of this is offered to academic staff, but the key point is that this is opened up as an offer to all staff. In particular, giving access to temporary housing, relocation support and language classes. Frequently it is only academic staff or students who have a right to these resources, either from the university itself, or their department.

Alongside helping new staff directly, it may be necessary to help existing staff adapt to working with international colleagues. For example, a university could consider English classes for local staff if they feel unsure communicating with foreign colleagues. They could also consider changing written or unwritten rules about the use of specific languages in administrative meetings, meeting notes and briefings.

It may also be important to stress within the university the benefits of hiring international staff. For example, they might bring in new knowledge and skills, especially to countries or universities with less experience of applying for European funding (the focus here being Europe, but RMA skills and competencies can be internationally transferrable as well). They might bring experience of funders, funding strategies, or government policies that could benefit the new institution. Equally, they may bring knowledge of different ways of structuring research processes and offices within a university, or country. International staff might also expand the international profile of the institution to also encompass administrative staff, and communicate and practice this profile at all management levels.

However, it may be difficult to effect any of this change without the driving force of the profession encouraging and instigating development. In the first instance, research

management organisations/networks (such as EARMA itself) could help with providing internationally understood terms and titles for job postings. They could also help to highlight the unique skillsets RMAs have, that enable them to move internationally, and in a broader sense create a strategy for the internationalisation of staff. This might include collecting best practice for how to support staff, but also working with other organisations to advocate for issues around pensions (which are often difficult to transfer from one country to another). EARMA in particular could also use its platforms to provide networking opportunities, and to collect tips and guidance on what to consider when moving country (from people who have moved or are from a given country).

The challenge of moving to a new country is a great one, but the opportunity it offers for the careers of RMAs and the universities they work for are equally as great. If the barriers can be lowered, and more support offered, it will help enable and encourage more RMAs to do the same, and for the profession to flourish. There is more work to be done, further study and research required, to enhance and understand these changes happening in the profession. The authors recognise the limitations and the selective bias in the survey they have implemented and see the need for a much larger and more representative tool. In-depth interviews with select respondents and key people in the profession would also greatly enrich the picture that they have so far of the situation in the field. Understanding the long-term impact of the difficulties of moving country, finding a new role, adapting to the role, and understanding the university culture are complex issues that also offer fascinating avenues for further research. The authors hope that either they themselves, or their colleagues in the profession, may be able to pursue this further in the future.

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BIOGRAPHIES


Nick Ollivere is a Senior Grant Advisor at Leiden University in the Netherlands. He specialises in personal grants for the humanities and social sciences, and the training of young researchers. He has worked for over ten years as a research manager for universities in the UK and the Netherlands. Before that he completed a PhD in Classics at the University of London.

Dr Anja Hegen holds a PhD in Biology and an MBA in Higher Education Management. She has worked as a senior research adviser for excellence based research for more

than 15 years engaging actively in professional organisations like EARMA and NARMA. She has also built considerable experience in academia-industry collaboration through her work as a research adviser, as a reviewer for the European Union and for her MBA thesis. Futures thinking and futures literacy are her current interests and she has completed a specialization with the institute for the future and is an active member of the Urgent Optimist community which promotes equitable futures through active imagination. Anja has recently started a new post as senior adviser at the Trond Mohn Foundation, the largest foundation for research and research related activities in Norway.

Angela Noble has worked in Research Administration since 1998, joining the University of Edinburgh in 1993 as course secretary for the then Computer Science Department, moving into a variety of positions and eventually becoming head of the European Office, managing a team who supported European research proposal submission as well as developing European research strategy for the University. In September 2016 Angela moved to Leiden University in the Netherlands and supports researchers with their proposals for both European and national Dutch funding and is also immersed in European research policy within the University.

CONTRIBUTION INFORMATION

Nick Ollivere  0000-0002-7866-710X.  Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing original draft, Writing review and editing.

Anja Hegen  0000-0002-2178-8912.  Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing original draft.

Angela Noble.  0009-0009-0874-3726  Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing original draft.

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