

ARMA Research Office Survey – 2020

Annex: The impact of COVID-19 on UK Research Offices



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ARMA Research Office Survey – The impact of COVID-19 on UK Research Offices

Report commissioned by:

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The Impact of COVID-19 on UK Research Offices

Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a short survey run by Research Consulting for ARMA on the topic of COVID-19. This work supplements the main ARMA Research Office Survey report and is intended to update its findings in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. 24 responses were received to the additional survey. The following sections summarise the perceived changes in demand for services, the opportunities arising, and the support needed from ARMA within the context of COVID-19. We hope that this Annex will be a useful resource to research managers navigating the uncertain times ahead.

Context

The UK's higher education system faces unprecedented challenges as a result of the recent coronavirus outbreak. In recent months, the university environment changed rapidly. Teaching and learning shifted almost immediately online, and campuses soon emptied. Research managers also adapted promptly and effectively. Working from home became the norm, with online meetings and events quickly replacing face-to-face interactions. At the same time, the rate of research in fields relevant to the COVID-19 response, such as epidemiology and public health, increased dramatically, thus increasing pressure on research offices to keep up. As outlined in our main report, research managers have been grappling for many years with a growing regulatory burden and political instability associated with the UK's departure from the European Union. Longstanding concerns over funding and the sustainability of research within UK higher education institutions have now moved centre stage. Over the coming months, research offices will need to adapt to rapidly evolving circumstances and respond dynamically to growing levels of uncertainty.

Rationale for the survey

In June 2020, we circulated an additional survey across the 54 institutions participating in our original benchmarking exercise. The aim of this survey was to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on research offices across the UK. In particular, the survey aimed to highlight the challenges faced by staff across the research management profession and to shed light on opportunities arising to improve current ways of working in a post-pandemic context.

Survey methodology and questions

The additional survey comprised 6 questions. Each question was designed to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across the 19 research office functions defined in the original exercise. Questions in the additional survey asked respondents to consider the following topics:

- estimated changes in levels of demand for, and ability to deliver, services;
- current challenges facing the research management profession;
- opportunities arising from, or any positive impact of, the pandemic; and
- desired support from membership bodies such as ARMA going forward.

Sample size and composition vs. the original exercise

As with the original exercise, respondents were encouraged to submit one response per institution. We received a total of 24 responses to this survey representing 44% of the original sample of 54 HEIs.

The additional survey captures the views of research office staff across all income groups identified in the original exercise (A to E). For consistency, institutions maintain their original income groups from the original exercise. Income groupings are therefore categorised using research grants and contracts income as reported by HESA in 2017/18.

Table 1 below shows the proportion of original respondents that are represented in this survey by income group.

Table 1. Respondents by exercise and income group.

Income group	No. responses to original survey	No. responses to additional survey	% income group represented in additional survey
A	8	4	50%
B	12	5	42%
C	13	4	31%
D	8	5	63%
E	13	6	46%

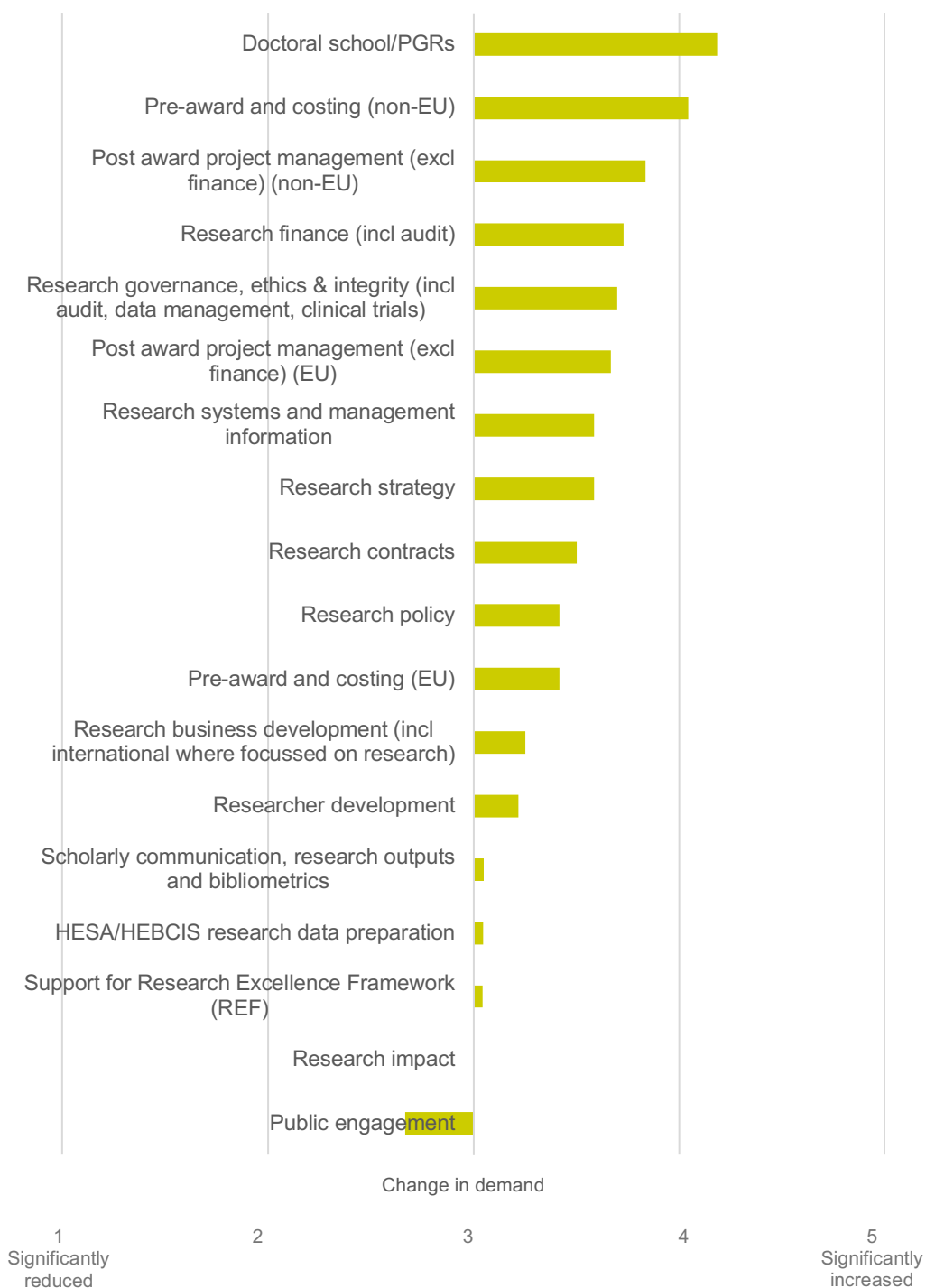
Demand for services and ability to deliver

Virtually all services have seen increased demand

The survey asked institutions to consider the recent level of demand for support across research office functions, in comparison to demand under normal circumstances. Demand was ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being significantly reduced and 5 being significantly increased. Figure 1 below shows that demand for services across most functions has increased since the original exercise was conducted.

The most significant increases in demand for services were reported in areas supporting doctoral students and PGRs, and pre-award costing (non-EU). Both functions were scored on average above 4 by respondents. There does not appear to be any direct correlation between the level of an institution's research income and the reported demand for services.

Figure 1. Average level of demand for services



Researcher training and development saw the most significant increase in demand

As noted above, demand for services relating to doctoral schools and post-graduate researchers (PGRs), was scored on average above 4 by respondents. Activities in this function relate to the training and development of researchers. A few respondents suggested that availability of researchers has increased since working from home became the norm.

"With researchers working from home, they are taking the opportunity to write bids and are also thinking more about continuing professional development needs." (Group C)

Research offices appear to have responded positively to this change. Some respondents noted that the ability to deliver training and support services online has been a key enabler of researcher development, as both staff and researchers are more accessible. Some respondents expect this new way of working to continue in the future.

Increasing demand for support occurs at an individual project level

Activities supporting individual projects also saw considerable increases in demand for services. These functions include pre-award and costing, post-award project management, research finance, and research governance, ethics, and integrity. Several comments from respondents suggested that an increase in bidding activity, particularly in the initial period of lockdown, contributed significantly to demand in these areas.

"If blended approaches to teaching continue this could lead to an increased freeing up of academic workload to attend to research. We have been busier than ever supporting bids." (Group E)

Similarly, at the individual project level, changes in personal circumstances have meant that requests for extensions to ongoing projects have placed additional burdens on research office staff.

"As a research office, we are busier than ever in supporting researchers and dealing with funding uncertainties." (Group E)

"The need to support extensions requests for funded research projects has been a huge implication of COVID-19." (Group E)

Changing considerations around research ethics are driving demand

57% of respondents highlighted an increase in demand relating to research ethics. Some institutions for example have been under pressure to rapidly overhaul research ethics guidelines.

"Time has been invested in research ethics... this has been identified as a significant and critical institutional priority." (Group E)

External reporting obligations have become less of a priority

Our survey also asked respondents to consider their level of ability to deliver services within the context of the coronavirus outbreak. Generally, the perceived ability to deliver services across all research office functions surveyed has been unchanged by current circumstances.

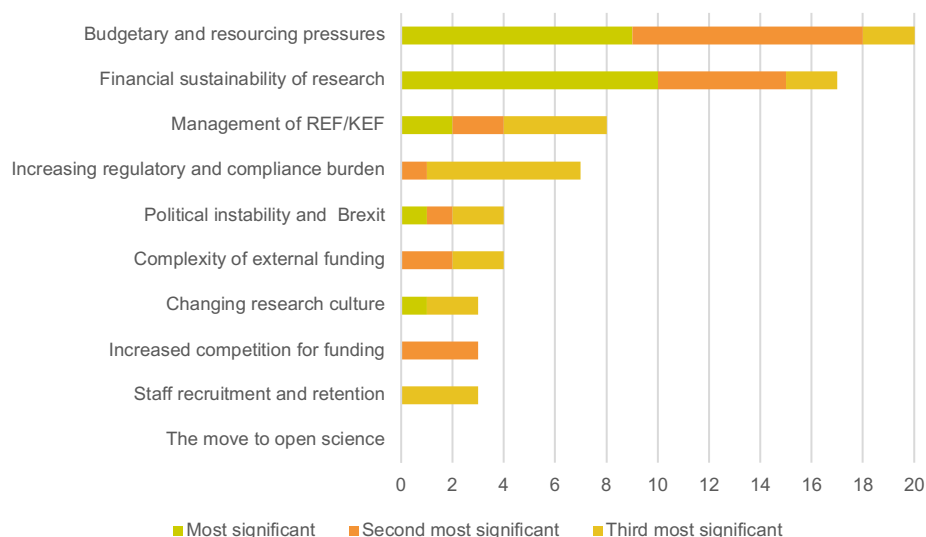
It should be noted however, that external reporting obligations have become less of a priority for staff in recent months. The delay of the **REF submission deadline**, which was referenced by some respondents, has contributed to this reprioritisation seen across institutions.

Challenges facing the research management profession

Identifying challenges facing the research management profession

The COVID-19 mini-survey presented respondents with the top ten challenges for the research management profession that were identified by research managers in the original exercise. The original results, which are discussed in Section 6.3 of the main report, have since changed. Figure 2 below shows the updated ranking of challenges. The financial sustainability of research and budgetary and resourcing pressures have overtaken regulatory and compliance burdens as the top two challenges.

Figure 2. Challenges facing the research management profession (June 2020)



Financial sustainability and budgetary pressures

At the time of the additional survey, the financial sustainability of research was ranked by over 40% of respondents as the most significant challenge facing research offices. All institutions across groups A to D highlighted financial sustainability of research as the most significant challenge facing the research management profession, while just one institution from Group E ranked this issue

as the most significant concern. The wider issue of fundamental underinvestment in research at a government level was highlighted as one of the key drivers for this.

“The pandemic has revealed the damaging effects of years of chronic under-investment in science infrastructure, both human and physical.” (Group C)

Budgetary and resourcing pressures were also highly ranked, with 38% of respondents considering it as the most significant challenge facing the research management profession.

“Budget cuts are already affecting our core business and we are faced with very worrying restrictions being placed on funds available for research.” (Group E)

Support for REF remains a priority area for staff

Respondents across all income groups noted that, while REF activity has temporarily paused, it has remained a priority area for staff. In particular, the level of work associated with a future REF submission was highlighted in conjunction with concerns around budget cuts.

“As with many HEIs, there is significant pressure to cut budgets, while at the same time ensure our REF submission is as good as it can be.” (Group E)

Opportunities arising

Emerging opportunities in the research management profession

The survey asked respondents to identify opportunities or positive impacts arising from the pandemic. Respondents were asked to consider both researchers and research managers in their answers. Opportunities were captured in the form of open text responses. These responses were grouped in terms of frequency. This is illustrated in Figure 3. below.

Figure 3. Opportunities arising



Flexibility in working arrangements has led to positive outcomes for both staff and researchers

The most cited positive outcome of the pandemic was the increased flexibility in working arrangements: responses generally referred to work-from-home arrangements and the broad shift to online working. In addition, we noted improvements in online support provided to researchers, which have been reported by respondents. Despite the immediate need to make these changes, research office staff highlighted that the transition was relatively efficient. Partly as a result of increased flexibility and the shift to work-from-home, some respondents also mentioned an improvement in their work-life balance.

Communication has improved both within and outside research offices

The second most highly mentioned opportunity resulting from the current circumstances was an improvement in communication and engagement, particularly with groups external to the university. Respondents noted a broader reach in terms of groups engaged with, stemming specifically from the use of online platforms for meetings and webinars, as particularly beneficial.

“Working online also opens up more opportunities to contact people that you may otherwise not have been able to. It allows for a more diverse audience.” (Group D)
“The ability to support and reach out to global communities has been increased.” (Group E)

New ways of conducting research are emerging

Respondents highlighted that new ways of doing research are emerging in response to conditions imposed by working from home. More collaborative working, particularly for researchers and academics, is highlighted as result of the switch to online work. Researchers are now working more quickly and efficiently in real time with colleagues.

“COVID-19 has created many opportunities for new areas of research.” (Group C)

Areas for potential support from ARMA

Respondents would most like ARMA to foster a sense of community

As part of ARMA’s commitment to supporting personal and professional development of staff across the research management profession, the additional survey asked respondents to consider any areas where ARMA, or other membership organisations, could help. We received 19 open text responses to this question. These suggestions were then categorised and are displayed in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4.
Suggested areas for
ARMA to provide
support



Sharing challenges to create communities of support

Fostering a sense of community appears to be the most valued type of support provided by professional membership organisations such as ARMA. Respondents link this closely to fostering a culture of openness and note several benefits of this. For example, some respondents noted that building open communities would improve efficiency by ensuring that institutions are not working in silos to solve the same problems. Others simply highlighted the value in knowing they are not facing challenges alone.

“Sharing challenges and seeing how everyone else is approaching things has been helpful. It gives us confidence if nothing else!” (Group B)

Community development could be supported through the sharing of good practice or useful resources. Or through more informal interactions. Overall, respondents highly value feeling informed and up to date.

“Keep up a series of on-line interactions and updates... and fun activities like the quiz.” (Group C)

ARMA can publicly reinforce the position that investment in research is essential

A few respondents noted that professional membership bodies such as ARMA should leverage their position in the higher education sector to continue to play an active and valuable role in lobbying government. Specifically, respondents highlight an opportunity for ARMA to encourage long-term investment in research at a national level, arguing that the crisis has exposed deeper issues with funding mechanisms across the sector.

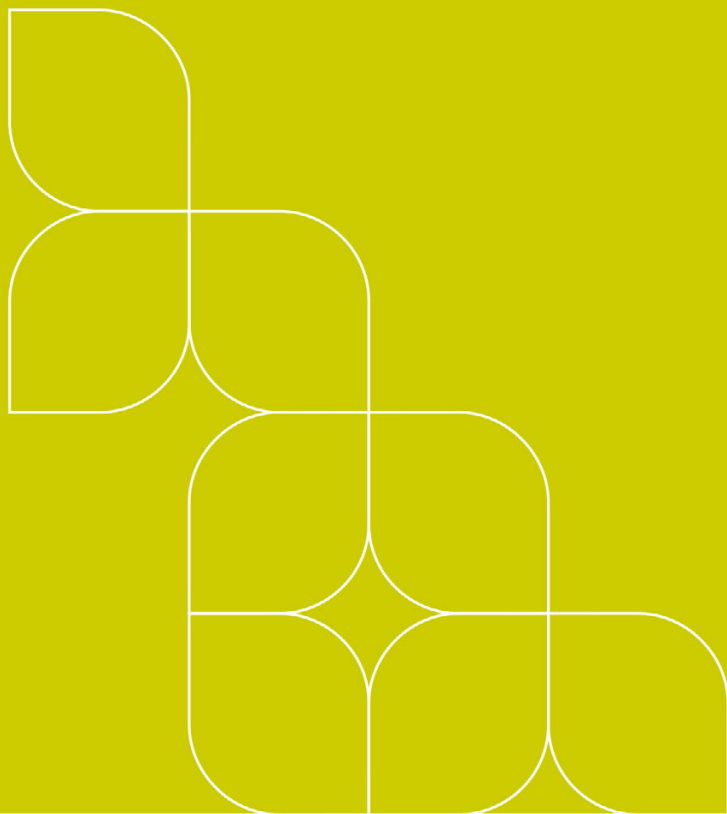
“The current crisis has exposed the reliance on student fee income to cross-subsidise research” (Group C)



Conclusion

Conclusions

Despite the difficulties that research managers will certainly face over the coming months, the current crisis has exposed critical importance of research for society. This poses an opportunity for bodies such as ARMA to play a vital role in the sector, using their well-established position to champion investment in research, and to continue building a resilient community of research professionals. We hope that the findings of this exercise will enable them to prepare for what the future has in store and to contribute to their institutions' long-term success.



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