

# The professional research support in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

A Danish approach to professionalisation – and some future trends in the research support profession

## ABSTRACT

As an example of a small but very active research country, Denmark has experienced a development of the profession of research management and fundraising in the last few years. The development from one-man-armies to large units within research management has been fast and the building of a professional identity is dashing along.

The globalized environment for research is becoming increasingly competitive and there is significant political influence on the scope and scale of funding programmes. This along with the ever more complicated and varied administrative procedures and demands for compliance both with pre-award and post-award activities has led to a growing demand for a professional approach in those areas. How is the professionalisation coming along, and what are the focus areas in the building of a new profession?

The focal points in the development of a professional research support are pointed out – and an overview and extrapolation of tendencies are sought. Where is the profession heading in Denmark? Five key trends and challenges are elaborated on;

- The fact that the research management profession is in a state of GROWTH, at both the CENTRAL and decentralised level.
- Employees that are working across many professional boundaries bridging the gap between different researchers and professions and INTEGRATING disciplines throughout the entire value chain.
- A profession that is only incipient regarding a formalised TRAINING but where there still are very high demands and expectations to their professional act.
- IT is playing an increasing role in communication, in knowledge-sharing and in different software applications to which critical decision-making is vital.

## RESEARCH SUPPORT

Research management and administration does not begin on the first day of the contract – it takes its beginning at a much earlier stage. The idea stage of the project life-cycle can be very long and a good project and project administration takes its beginning already at this early stage ensuring that all relevant 'building blocks' are present and that major obstacles are avoided. A professional research support has an overview of the entire project life-cycle and is able to relate to all the given issues as well as to involved professions, management levels and partners.

## INTEGRATION

One of the challenges in research management is the interaction between pre- and post-award ensuring an optimal and seamless project life-cycle. It is time consuming for the researchers to address several different offices and people, and the ultimate dream is of course only to have to deal with one person who is able to guide you through the entire process from pre- to post-award. The key to solving this problem lies in fostering a close professional relationship and dialogue between the researcher and the individual members of the research management team. The research manager has to be the one bridging the gap between pre- and post-award, between researcher and research funders, as well as between the different professions involved in research management. This requires very skilled employees that are able to address all the many sides of an task.

## GROWTH

The globalized environment for research is becoming increasingly competitive and there is significant political influence on the scope and scale of funding programmes. This along with the increasingly complicated and varied administrative procedures and demands for documentation both within the non-scientific parts of the grants and contracts pre-award and post-award have led to a growing demand for a professional approach in these areas. A significant trend in Denmark is the increasing number of academics working within research support, management and administration. The evolution of professional fundraisers within research support in Denmark from one-man-armies to larger units has been rather fast, and the upcoming challenges lie within professionalisation of the offices and the integration of its services into research proposals leading to world-class research. As an example the number of active members in the Danish Association of Research Managers and Administrators – DARMA - has gone from 28 to 130 (Jan. 2010) within the last years.

## CENTRALIZATION

Critical mass is needed not only for research but also for services offered by Research Support Offices when securing national on-the-edge capacities. To ensure this the trend has been to centralise research management in offices supporting entire institutions. All 8 Danish universities have Research Support Offices, but so far none of them have managed to embrace all parts of the project life-cycle and value chain. The tendency of centralization has its antithesis in the corresponding decentralisation of research support from faculties and institutes. To ensure an optimal use of resources and to avoid overlap good communication and a matching of expectations of all involved professions and management levels are essential.

## IT-TOOLS

The use of advanced IT software for funding databases, funding applications and project management modules take up a growing part of modern research management and there are no indications that this will change in the future. A short reaction time necessitates effective IT tools and is a must for good communication and efficient knowledge-sharing. But at the same time a professionalisation in research management demands a structured and critical approach to all the relevant IT tools – and a critical eye to the features that optimise and enhance the processes and to those that just increase the workload. Separate IT functions are being built to manage the information flow at many levels. However, it is important to be specific and mindful of the actual needs and to continuously relate AND respond to the changing circumstances.

## FACILITATION

The development of professional research support towards a role as facilitators involves commitment at the individual level between the research support officer and the researcher. But it also requires the inclusion of strategic and tactic elements in the initial project life-cycle. By including early strategic considerations the outcome of a given project is optimised by getting the right people together at the right place and time and at the same time ensuring political and public focus on the area. This will increase the chances of putting together a high-quality project that has a good chance of receiving the adequate funding at the given time.

## TRAINING

Building a profession requires formalised training. Such training is not available at the national level in Denmark at the moment. In November 2009 the Danish Association of Research Managers and Administrators ran its first official introduction course with 25 participants, and in May 2010 a workshop on strategic issues in research administration and management will run – otherwise the training for research managers is sporadic and consists mostly of hands-on practise. There are courses in project management and administration on the level of project management and a few of these are targeted research managers, but mostly their content relates to the construction or IT sector. To achieve an upgrade in the training and education of staff, Denmark - being a small country - has to obtain a lot of the required training – formal as well as informal – through international networks, where site visits and conferences form an essential part.



## RESUME

The tendencies in the development of professional research support in Denmark are not unequivocal – but there is a movement towards more people getting involved in the area and there is focus on their formal training where their competences as facilitators and their ability to act as a knowledge hub for the many relevant pieces of information and stakeholders is a must. IT-tools play an increasing role as is the case for many professions. Thus the desirable development of our profession is towards the role as research facilitators also on the strategic levels bridging the gap between people and professions.