247

An Emerging Profession for Doctorate Degree Holders as Research Managers and Administrators (DRMAs)

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The globalization of research enterprise has resulted in the development of the "specialist occupational group" (Allen-Collinson 2006), which includes those who support academic research as managers and administrators (RMAs). This paper provides an exploratory account of the doctorate degree holders as RMAs (DRMAs) who utilize their specialized knowledge and skills to assist researchers and scientists. This paper asks the following questions: What characterizes DRMAs? What are the main pillars of their professional identity? What regional differences there might be among DRMAs? What are the implications for mobilities among advanced degree holders? We generate working hypotheses based on the dataset of the Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP) project as well as a qualitative case study. By combining a large-scale quantitative study with case-specific observations, the paper aims to shed light into this emerging profession and provide new insights into our understanding of DRMAs as blended professionals.

Full paper

Background

The globalization of research enterprise has resulted in the

development of the "specialist occupational group" (Allen-Collinson 2006), which includes those who support academic research as managers and administrators (RMAs). RMAs possess a rich blend of credentials and skills, gained from their cross-sectional experiences as blended professionals (Whitchurch, 2008; Middlehurst, 2010). Further, the unique domain that these professionals operate in has been identified as "the third space" (Whitchurch 2008, 2012), denoting the hybrid nature of their knowledge and expertise that reside between academic and administrative spheres. While these definitions have drawn attention among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike in recent years (Poli et al, 2016; Kurt-Dickson et al., 2018), few studies have focused on those with the doctoral and scientific trainings who serve as RMAs. This paper focuses on RMAs who are doctorate degree holders who utilize their specialized knowledge and skills to assist researchers and scientists (DRMAs hereinafter) and asks the following questions: What characterizes DRMAs? What are the main pillars of their professional identity? What regional differences there might be among DRMAs? What are the implications for mobilities among advanced degree holders?

Data Sources

This paper utilizes the Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP) project (Kerridge & Scott, 2016a) as well as a case study of DRMAs working at the Swiss federal institutions (Yang-Yoshihara 2018). We focus on the 709 RAAAP respondents who held doctoral and equivalent degrees and utilize the 46 interviews conducted intermittently between 2015 and 2018 with 39 individuals, which revealed that a large proportion of RMAs working at the federal institutes posses doctoral degrees and research experiences. The study provided an empirical testing ground for the insights generated by the RAAAP survey.
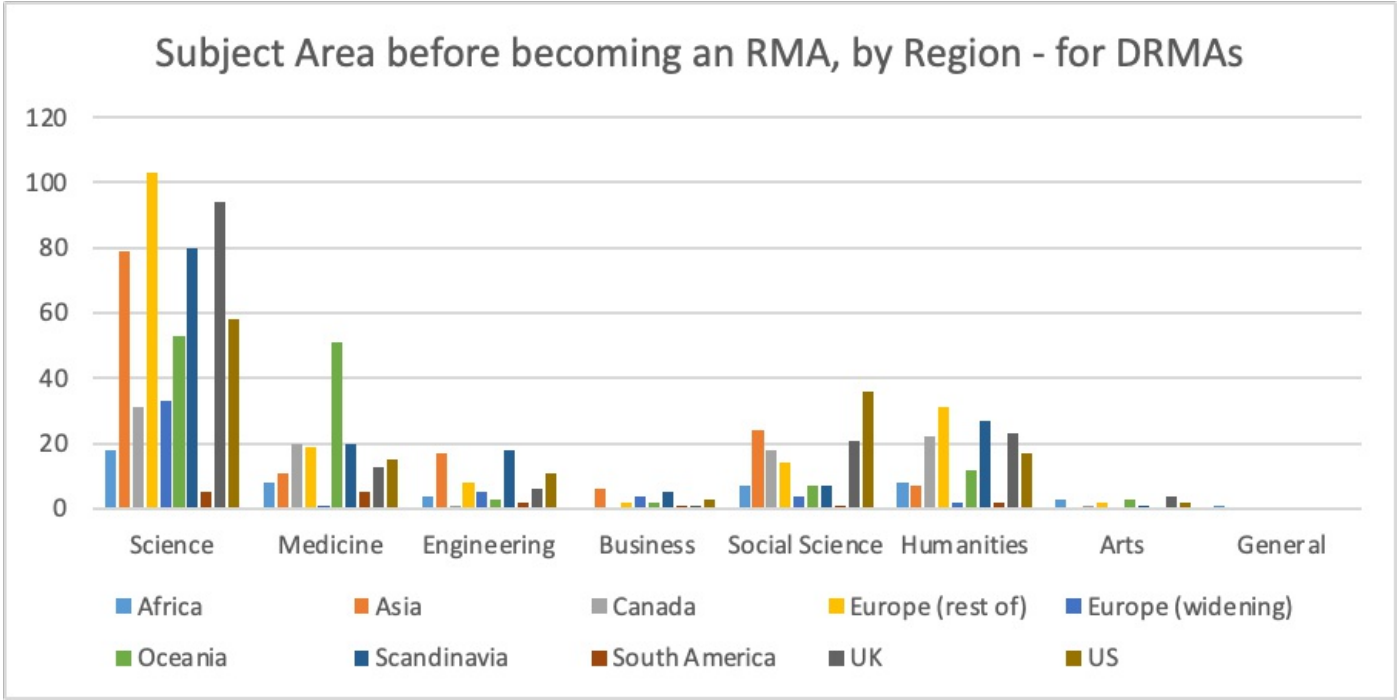
Findings

The paper presents and discusses several hypotheses surrounding their attributes and motivations.
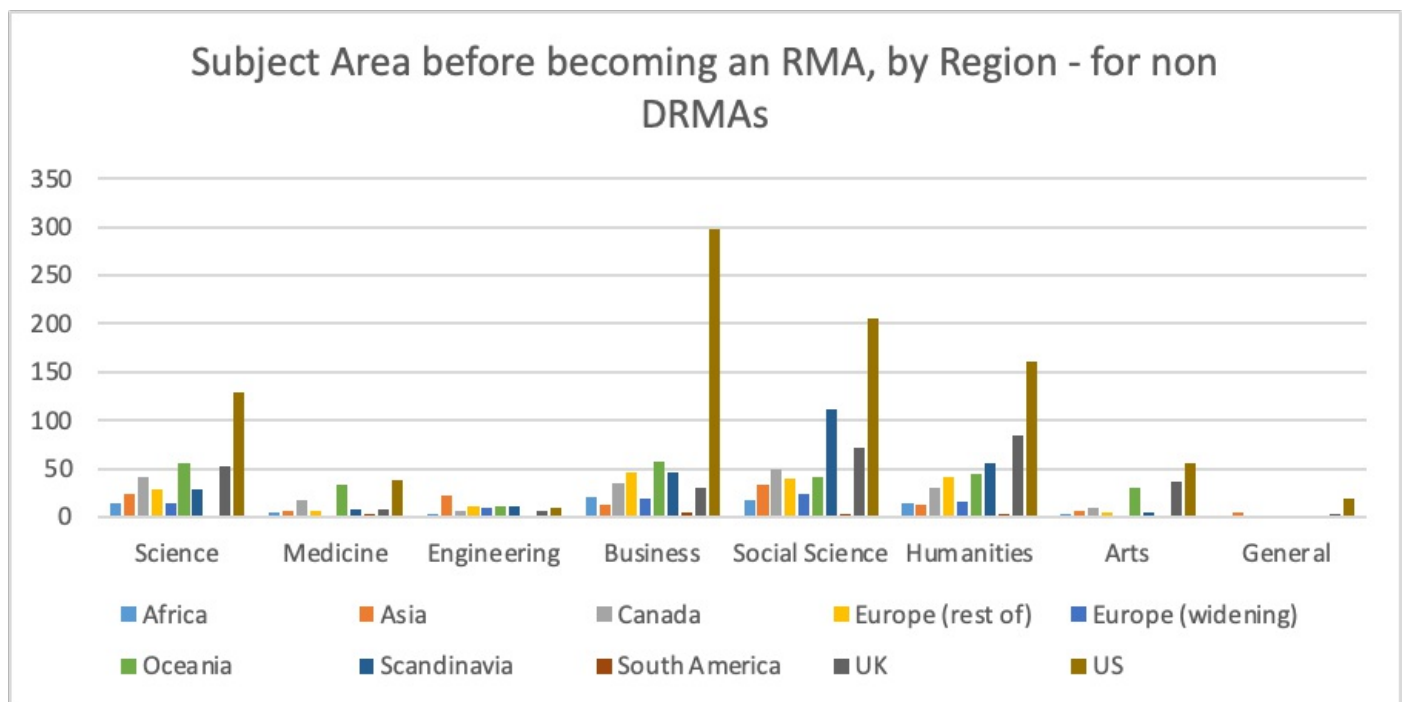
H.1. DRMAs utilize their advanced training as scientists.

The RAAAP indicated that DRMAs have a strong background in science. Table 1 shows that a large proportion of DRMAs in almost all regions have expertise concentrated in the STEM fields. The survey also reveals that many of the doctorate holders have previously been engaged in research.

Table 1:

In contrast, the RMAs with Masters, Bachelors and high school diplomas are concentrated in Business, Social Science and Humanities.

Table 2:

Subject Area before becoming an RMA, by Region - for non DRMAs

Expertise gained through doctoral trainings and research experiences make DRMAs distinct as an occupational group. Grant writing skills, for example, allow them to give specific advice to researchers undertaking scientific endeavors. Their advanced scientific knowledge helps build a trusting relationship with researchers that RMAs support.

H.2. DRMAs are motivated by intellectual activity and non-routine work.

The RAAAP result showed that fewer DRMAs agreed that financial compensation and job security were a major reason for their career choice. Many Swiss DRMAs pointed out that they are satisfied with the challenging projects that require creative solutions. Some even equated the complex and unprecedented nature of research administration as an intellectual exercise.

H.3. DRMAs are motivated by the proximity to the scientific community.

The proximity to intellectual and scientific activity was almost always mentioned during the interviews with the Swiss DRMAs. Many expressed satisfaction from working with the faculty experts and utilizing their academic training to help the research community as a whole.

H.4. DRMAs face a dilemma surrounding their identity.

DRMAs in the Swiss study also expressed ambiguity surrounding their professional identity. All interviewees clearly stated that they "had left science" and most identified themselves as "administrators" or "coordinators," however, some maintained a strong sense of attachment to the scientific community. This confirms the literature that situated RMAs in the third space as belonging neither in the academic nor administrative spheres (Whitchurch 2008, 2012).

Significance

This study's contributions are threefold. First, the paper points to the gap in the literature on research administration and encourages readers to pay attention to the specific subsections within the growing sector. Second, the study combines a large-scale quantitative study and a single qualitative case study, harnessing the strengths of both types of studies with the goal to promote our understanding of DRMAs as an emerging profession both in an international and domestic contexts. Lastly, the study suggests policy implications for nations around the world competing to secure hold of the highly skilled talents. The paper puts forth a hypothesis that highlight the ambivalence that DRMAs deal with as they navigate their identity in "the third space" between the academic and administrative spheres. It calls for specific measures by institutions and governments to help doctorate degree holders design a viable career path harnessing their scientific expertise.

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6

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7

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