

STSM Report

COST action TN1302: The Voice of Research Administrators – Building a Network of Administrative Excellence (BESTPRAC)

Research administration in a multifaceted, transnational funding landscape: Towards best practices for research support officers

Grantee	Wannes Ribbens < wannes.ribbens@kuleuven.be >
Title	Research administration in a multifaceted, transnational funding landscape: Towards best practices for research support officers
Host	The Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of the University of Oxford (contact: Gill Wells < gill.wells@admin.ox.ac.uk >) The Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of the University of Cambridge (contact: Renata Schaeffer < renata.schaeffer@admin.cam.ac.uk >)
Home	Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Visit	From March 28, 2017 – March 31, 2017



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE



SUMMARY

With an increasingly complex funding landscape, networking and knowledge exchange are key to an efficient and up-to-date research administration. This STSM instigated a knowledge exchange between KU Leuven, the University of Oxford, and the University of Cambridge on three topics: 1) the management of central and decentral research support; 2) the facilitation of communication between administrative, financial and legal services; and 3) information and support to researchers in the application phase. These challenges are faced by many Higher Education Institutions, and by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in particular because of its structure with regional campuses spread across 11 cities in Flanders.

PURPOSE OF THE STSM

The Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven), the largest university in Belgium in terms of research funding and expenditure, relies on its research administration to inform, stimulate and support its researchers in both the pre-award and post-award phase of a grant application. Similar to research administration offices at other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the Research Coordination Office at KU Leuven is confronted with an increasingly **complex and multifaceted (transnational) funding landscape**.

A particular challenge for KU Leuven is to come to grips with the newly defined structure of the organization (KU Leuven, 2017). Research administration at KU Leuven has always been organized rather centrally. However, two tendencies have disrupted this organizational model. First, in 2013, several research groups and educational programs from university colleges all over Flanders were incorporated in KU Leuven. This created a situation in which KU Leuven research is now spread over regional campuses across 11 cities in Flanders. In addition, due to the increased emphasis on acquiring external funding, several departments and faculties have invested in additional research and administrative support for researchers, resulting in decentral organized initiatives. Consequently, research administration is becoming richer and stronger on the one hand, but more complex and fragmented on the other hand.

The increased complexity of the funding landscape and of the combination of central and decentral research support was for the purpose of this STSM translated in three interrelated areas of expertise that are becoming increasingly important within research administration of HEIs (see also BESTPRAC, 2014; Misa & Yost, 2016). More specifically, **this STSM addressed the clear need for knowledge exchange** on:

- 1) The central support for decentral regional campuses and research units.
- 2) The communication between administrative, financial, and legal services.
- 3) Strategies to inform and support researchers.

The University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge were particularly interesting partners for exchanging experiences because of three reasons.

- The University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge have a longstanding tradition of decentral research support. Research support – although to a varying extent - is present at the level of the department, the division or school and the university. Therefore, these universities

present an ideal study ground for understanding successful practices as regards communication with decentral research initiatives.

- The University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge are amongst Europe's leading universities in attracting external funding, thereby making their research services interesting cases to study.
- The University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge are faced with similar challenges in terms of attracting external funding, and managing research support and research administration.

As an early stage career administrator who is responsible for the coordination of research support at the KU Leuven regional campuses, I take the aforementioned topics to heart. Engaging in a two-way knowledge exchange with research administrators of reputable universities is crucial for developing the key competences I need in my daily work activities.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSM

University of Oxford	
Day 1	
08:30-09:00	Introduction to the University of Oxford by Gill Wells – Head of the European team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction to the University of Oxford
09:00-10:00	University Administration Offices Conference <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opening welcome and plenary by the Registrar, Professor Ewan McKendrick, on the University's current and future challenges and opportunities
10:10-11:15	St. Anne's College tour with Katie Price - Deputy Head of the European Team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General introduction to the University of Oxford and its research support services
11:30-13:00	Gavin Bird – Senior European Advisor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inner workings of European Team - Tools: database, X5, Go Pro - Information and support to researchers
14:00-16:00	Meeting on the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meeting of various members of research support staff to prepare for calls of the GCRF <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Gill Wells - Head of the European Team o Sharron Pleydell-Pearce – Senior Divisional Research Facilitator (Social Sciences Division) o Elizabeth Beckett – Assistant Registrar (Research Services) o Klajdia Bullari – Operations Manager (Research Services) o Grace Remmington – GCRF project officer (Research Services) o Emily Graham – Research Funding Manager (Humanities, Social Sciences and GLAM team)
16:00-16:30	Sharron Pleydell-Pearce - Senior Divisional Research Facilitator (Social Sciences Division) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multi- and interdisciplinary collaboration within the university
Day 2	
10:00-11:30	Katie Price – Deputy Head of the European Team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Central vs decentral research support - Administration – team work flow - Information and support to researchers
12:00-12:30	Gaelle Jolly - Senior Information & Communications Officer (Research Services) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information dissemination by Research Services - Website - Newsletter
13:00-14:30	Kelly Ryan – Research Facilitator Computer Sciences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information flow between levels of research support - Information and support to researchers
15:00-16:00	Julie Matthews – Research Funding Manager (Medical Sciences Team) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Oxford overseas campuses - Administration and information flow between levels of research support
16:30-17:00	Closing of STSM at University of Oxford

University of Cambridge	
Day 1	
09:30-10:45	Meeting with EU-team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction to research support at Cambridge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Renata Schaeffer – Assistant Director Biological Sciences Team – European Policy Manager o Sara Imarisio – European Policy Manager
11:00-12:30	Presentation KU Leuven to and meeting with RO Management Team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation of KU Leuven research policy and research support services - Discussion on Research Support - Research Operations Management Team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Philip Cull - Assistant Director Physical Sciences Team o Jennifer Gilmartin - Assistant Director Humanities & Social Sciences Team o Renata Schaeffer – Assistant Director Biological Sciences Team o Jo Martindale – Assistant Director School of Clinical Medicine Team o Lisa Wears - Assistant Director School of Technology Team
12:30-13:15	Debbie West-Lewis – Training Manager <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training support to Cambridge researchers and administrators
13:15-15:00	Lunch with Renata Schaeffer – Sara Imarisio (European Team) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Research support - Brexit
15:00-16:00	Agnieszka Iwasiewicz-Wabnig – Maxwell Programme Manager and Knowledge Transfer Facilitator at Cavendish Laboratory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workings of the Maxwell centre - Support to innovation – Impact - Interdisciplinary collaboration
Day 2	
10:00-11:15	Katie Parsley – Knowledge and Transfer Facilitator of the Bioscience Impact Team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impact - Administration and information flow between levels of Research Support - Information and support to researchers
12:00-14:00	Funders fair <i>Information dissemination to early stage researchers and postdoctoral fellows</i> Presentation on Brexit by Renata Schaeffer – European Policy Manager <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brexit
14:30-15:30	Rosalyn Gregory – Senior Research Analyst (Research Strategy Office) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Administration and information flow between levels of research support - Information and support to researchers
15:30-16:45	Andrea Salter – School Research Facilitator for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Administration and information flow between levels of research support - Information and support to researchers - Interdisciplinary collaboration
16:45-17:00	Closing of STSM at University of Cambridge

CONTRIBUTION TO THE GOALS OF THE COST TARGETED NETWORK

The main objective of BESTPRAC is “to establish a network for the administrative, finance and legal services in universities, research organizations and related entities supporting researchers involved in the lifecycle of transnational external competition based (in particular European funded) projects in order to exchange experiences and share and develop best practices, encourage knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer and increased efficiency” (BESTPRAC, 2013).

This STSM has contributed to this objective by:

- Liaising between the research support services of KU Leuven, University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge.
- Sharing best practices on supporting researchers, research management, and administration of (inter)national research funding.
- Improving the understanding of key obstacles in communication among research support officers (see purposes) and sharing remediation strategies.
- Improving the effectiveness and quality of the project application process.

This STSM also aligns with the BESTPRAC goal to focus on early stage administrators.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED

The results are structured according to the purposes of the STSM as described above.

a) Knowledge exchange on the central support for decentral campuses and research units

There is always a trade-off between organizing the research support centrally or decentrally (Misa & Yost, 2016). A large part of the visit was devoted to understanding the advantages and disadvantages of central and decentral research support. In many ways these mirror one another and can be summarized as follows:

	+	-
Central Research Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent level of advice across the university • Research support more coherent and less fragmented • Pooled expertise • University-wide overview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance between research support officer and researcher (Trust) • Less knowledge on particularities of a department • Limited thematic expertise • Less detailed information dissemination (e.g. mapping of funding opportunities) • Less clear whom to contact
Decentral Research Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close relationship between research support officer and researcher (trust) • Awareness of particularities of a department 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of advice may differ between departments and research support officers

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic understanding of the field • Targeted information dissemination and support • Single point of contact for all questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less control on whether central information dissemination actually reaches target group(s) • Fragmented research support in case of no communication lines • Day-to-day activities between decentral research support officers may vary greatly • Danger in overlap between services
--	--	---

In terms of managing decentral research support, both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge rely on fixed procedures. Clear criteria have been established as regards which applications are reviewed and approved at departmental or divisional level, and which applications need to pass by the centrally organized Research Services (Oxford) or Research Operations Office (Cambridge). Likewise, responsibilities for supporting grant applications are defined as clearly as possible. This is needed to avoid overlap between research support services.

In order to manage the different levels of research support and their communication to researchers, there is a clear hierarchical flow for communication at both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge. Information cascades from the central level over the divisional and departmental level to the researchers. The central office mainly communicates to the divisional and departmental teams and disseminates information via targeted lists (e.g. RISN, project managers group). They additionally filter the information and communicate directly with relevant actors and researchers. Most information is also available for consultation on the Intranet webpages.

With research support distributed over central administration, divisions and departments, there is a danger for fragmentation and isolation. Both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge circumvent this problem by uniting research support staff in networks that are used for information dissemination, the exchange of experiences, and for creating a community feel (infra).

b) Knowledge exchange on efficient communication between administrative, financial, and legal services

The administration for research support is organized very differently between KU Leuven and the UK universities. KU Leuven relies on a central Research Coordination Office with its own financial and legal back offices. Communication between research advisors, finance officers, grant managers and legal advisors mainly happens via e-mail and telephone conversations. At the UK universities, on the other hand, each level (central office, divisional support, departmental support) houses – albeit to a variable extent – someone with expertise in research finances, contracts, and support. They contact central offices when needed (e.g. complex cases, second-in-line support). Most support to researchers is given on a department level or divisional level in case of Social Sciences and Humanities. Central Research Services or the Research Operations Office however, needs to approve applications (unless for standard funders under a certain grant amount) and reviews the requested budget. This process is facilitated by an innovative IT costing tool, X5, that allows to track who has approved the budget and whether the application is supported by the department.

Within the EU-team of the University of Oxford, all projects are tracked using the team's database (Microsoft Access). Elements that are included are amongst others checks on the financial budget, status of the application, communication with the researchers (tracked by GoPro application), ... This allows for a swift and clear follow up of all applications throughout the research project life cycle.

A downside of a decentralized structure is that knowledge is fragmented and that research support staff uses various procedures. This is remedied by using a costing tool that monitors the progress of an application (X5) and by gathering research support staff in networks. We describe a few of the networks that are in place either at the University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge.

- Research and Innovation Support Network (RISN)
 - o 6 meetings per year for knowledge exchange between and training of research support staff
 - o SharePoint for knowledge exchange (but not used frequently)
 - o Central services use the network to disseminate information
- Knowledge Transfer Facilitators Network
 - o 6 meetings a year for knowledge exchange and sharing experiences
- University Administration Services conference
 - o Annual 1 day conference for all university administration staff with information sessions, workshops, short tours, ... Sessions targeted at research support staff include amongst others: Communicating innovation, Research Professional, Careers in departmental administration, How to internationalize your department, Preparing for the General Data Protection Regulation, Research data management at the University of Oxford, ...

In addition to sharing experiences and serving as a platform for information dissemination, these networks facilitate the creation of a research support staff community. Face-to-face contact also fosters collaboration and decreases hurdles in communication. Both UK universities have also quite elaborate training programmes for administrative support officers.

The decentral support system however also creates challenges for effective and efficient communication and research support. As indicated in the overview of the disadvantages, research support differs between departments amongst others because of varying financial resources. In addition, functions and job descriptions may organically change over the course of the years. Hence, job titles may be similar, yet the underlying functions may differ significantly. This may hinder an efficient communication flow.

c) Knowledge exchange on strategies to support researchers in acquiring (inter)national funding

With a decentral research support system, the focus is on personal support to the researcher. The researchers are assisted by research facilitators and/or finance officers and funding managers in drafting up the budget for an application (via X5) and in creating the application. The latter may include proofreading of proposals and administrative report. The role of research facilitators may vary between departments but can include:

- Scheme-specific information sessions
- Discussing individual or department's funding opportunities

- Providing examples of successful proposals
- Advising and commenting on draft research proposals
- Organizing mock interviews
- Organizing bids in case of restricted funding by sponsors
- Support to Research Councils' Pathways to impact
- Providing examples of successful proposals

Both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge have a European team that supports researchers in acquiring international funding. Their activities include

- Informing researchers about funding opportunities via the website and communication to divisional teams and departments
- Workshops and training (e.g., mock interviews for ERC applicants)
- Pre-award services
 - o Budget and administration
 - o Approval and submission of the application
- Post-award services
 - o Amendments
 - o Follow-up of financial reporting

The activities of these EU teams do not differ substantially to what it is offered to KU Leuven researchers by the EU team.

A notable difference between KU Leuven and the UK universities relates to the emphasis on impact. The UK government puts a strong emphasis on the impact of the research it is funding. Researchers for instance need to describe pathways to impact in each proposal for the Research Councils UK. In light of this emphasis on impact, several Research Councils initially funded 'Knowledge Transfer Facilitators' and provided seed money to foster impact. Nowadays, many KTFs are still being funded by the department. This emphasis on impact and innovation results in a variety of initiatives initiated by KTFs, including but not limited to:

- Trainings and events on innovation
- Support to researchers when describing Pathways to Impact
- Setting up close collaborations with the industry
- Encouraging companies to fund basic research
- Coordinating and assisting to the Maxwell centre in which researchers and industry are accommodated in the same building to facilitate innovation.
- Strategic research initiatives and networks that foster interdisciplinary collaboration within the university and with industry
- Setting up structural alliances with companies

WHICH BEST PRACTICES/TOOLS/SYSTEMS WILL BE TRIED TO IMPLEMENTED WITHIN YOUR INSTITUTE?

Given the very different nature of how research support and research administration is being organized between the KU Leuven and the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, there will be no major overhaul at KU Leuven. As discussed above, both the system of central and decentral

support have its advantages and disadvantages. Despite these differences, several best practices used at the UK Universities will certainly be further examined for application at KU Leuven, especially in light of the regional campuses.

- The Research Coordination Office of KU Leuven will re-map its research support staff throughout the university and specifically assess the support that is offered at the regional campuses and within the departments and faculties. In a second stage, research support profiles will be aligned with the identified support staff, after which the central office will examine how the relationship with decentralized initiatives can be optimized. This includes examining best practices for communication with the various research support profiles and the establishment of a research support officers network.
- The EU-team will examine the use of a shared database to follow up on research projects throughout their lifecycle.
- The Research Coordination Office will examine the possibility to create a university-wide network for research administrators. This network will be used for sharing experiences, information dissemination and potentially training purposes.
- Although Flemish funding agencies do not put as much emphasis on impact, the Research Coordination Office will examine how Knowledge Transfer Facilitators foster collaboration between academia and industry. More specifically, we will examine how the innovation potential is facilitated by initiatives such as the Maxwell centre and seed money for mini-projects that aim to prepare researchers to reach out to industry.
- As regards the regional campuses of KU Leuven, the Research Coordination Office will identify a single point of contact for the dissemination of information (in addition to general communication channels such as the website and the newsletter). Likewise, this contact also serves as an antenna to capture information and research needs present at the regional campuses.

FUTURE COLLABORATION WITH HOST INSTITUTIONS

The KU Leuven, University of Oxford, and University of Cambridge already have a good working relationship when it comes to collaborations in network organizations such as the League of European Research Universities (LERU). This STSM however has tightened the relationship with the respective European teams and a continued sharing of knowledge between the institutions is foreseen. In fact, a conference call is already foreseen with Francesca Richards (Divisional Research Impact Officer Social Sciences) and Sharron Pleydell-Pearce (Senior Divisional Research Facilitator Social Sciences) from the University of Oxford, and with Andrea Salter (School Research Facilitator for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences) from the University of Cambridge. I will also catch up with Gill Wells and Renata Schaeffer at the Conference of the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators in Malta (April 24 – 26, 2017).

FORESEEN PUBLICATIONS/ARTICLES/DISSEMINATION TOOL OR DOCUMENTS RESULTING OR TO RESULT FROM THE STSM

- The main results and benefits obtained from the STSM will be presented to the European Team and members of the Research Coordination Office of KU Leuven.
- In the upcoming weeks and months the KU Leuven Research Coordination Office will devise a plan to optimize its communication with research support offices.

OTHER COMMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the research staff of the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge. Their warm welcome and willingness to share experiences were invaluable to the success of the STSM. A special thanks to Gill Wells, Renata Schaeffer and Sara Imarisio for hosting and assisting in organizing my visit.

I conclude by emphasizing the usefulness of the STSM for early stage career administrators. As forwarded in the memorandum of understanding, a network is crucial to exchange experiences and to develop and share best practices. The knowledge exchange in this STSM has certainly enriched my professional experience and will help me to become a better research administrator.

REFERENCES

- BESTPRAC (18-19.03.2014). Summary of the first working group 1 meeting. Retrieved from <http://www.bestprac.eu/working-groups/wg1-administration/documents/>.
- KU Leuven (2017). KU Leuven Association. Retrieved from <https://associatie.kuleuven.be/eng>.
- COST – BESTPRAC (2013). Memorandum of Understanding for the implementation of a European Targeted Network designated as COST Action TN1302: The voice of research administrators – building a network of administrative excellence (BESTPRAC). Retrieved from http://w3.cost.eu/fileadmin/domain_files/TN/Action_TN1302/mou/TN1302-e.pdf
- Misa, T.F., & Yost, J.R. (2016). Research administrators as lead users. In T.F. Misa & J.R. Yost (Eds), *Fastlane: Managing science in the Internet world* (pp. 96 – 117). Baltimore, ML: John Hopkins University Press.