or those of us working in research administration, we know that we are members of a profession, not just doing a job. We support researchers to help them do the best research. Ironically, there is little research done on research administration. So who better to do it than research administrators? With this in mind, two research administrators applied to the newly developed NCURA Research Program (n.d.) with some very important research questions: “What skills are necessary in research administration to move into leadership positions across the world?” and, “How on earth did we get here?”

Having recently finished a doctorate, I (Simon Kerridge from the University of Kent, not too far from London in the UK, currently in Europe) thought that this would be a piece of cake. So an NCURA colleague Stephanie Scott, from Columbia University in New York, and I together applied for the NCURA Research Program to conduct some actual research.

The proposal application instructions were fairly straightforward, but going through the proposal submission process was not so easy, as we are research administrators, not faculty! We learned a lot of lessons serving as PIs at our respective institutions, as it is always instructive to walk in someone else’s shoes for a while. Maybe the complaints we often hear about “administrative burden” are not so crazy after all.

To answer the above research questions, we outlined a plan to develop a questionnaire and survey the experts (yes, dear readers, we mean you). “administrative burden” are not so crazy after all. The proposal application instructions were fairly straightforward, but going through the proposal submission process was not so easy, as we are research administrators, not faculty! We learned a lot of lessons serving as PIs at our respective institutions, as it is always instructive to walk in someone else’s shoes for a while. Maybe the complaints we often hear about “administrative burden” are not so crazy after all.

To answer the above research questions, we outlined a plan to develop a questionnaire and survey the experts (yes, dear readers, we mean you). This would be distributed by various research administration associations around the world to their members. We already had the UK Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA), and of course NCURA covered between the two of us and intended to bring other associations in, should our proposal be successful.

So we waited on tenterhooks—and WOW—we were funded! Yay! But then it sunk in. We actually needed to do the work! Also, our reviewers had a strong “suggestion” that we should involve the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA). We had, of course, intended to, but now it was a must.

The first few weeks involved lots of e-mails to other associations around the world. Would they be willing to ask their members to do the survey, and might they also be willing to put someone forward for an advisory group? A kick-off meeting had been envisaged to make sure everyone was on the same page, and London was decided upon as being more convenient for the Europeans than New York.

Amazingly, we built up an advisory group (Research Administration As A Profession, 2016), which included representatives from the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), the Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS), the Canadian Association of Research Administrators (CARA), EARMA, and the Society of Research Administrators International (SRAI). Notably, four of the six members were past, current, or president elects of their respective associations, and all had been nominated by their boards. We had three of the advisory groups attend in person, two participated via videoconference, and one apology (but to be fair it was 2:30 am in Australia). One issue with a global project is getting everyone together at the same time, even virtually, although we did manage it once, even though the time zones were: GMT-8, GMT-5, GMT, GMT+1 and GMT+11. The advisory group was crucial; not only did they provide a direct route into their associations for distributing the questionnaire, but they also enabled us to recruit other associations much more easily.

After the kick-off meeting, we firmed up the project plan and shared it with the advisory group for feedback and a sanity check. We developed the questionnaire and went through over 20 iterations and numerous teleconferences before being tested by the advisory group. The questionnaire development was one area where having an advisory group from around the world really helped. With UK and US Co-PIs, we knew about differences in meanings and structures between the two countries, but this advisory group really helped us test out whether our questions had the appropriate meanings in different parts of the world, and even then some things just did not translate. For example, there is a national research assessment in the UK, where universities submit their best research for assessment every six years, resulting in funding for the following six years, but this doesn’t occur in the US.

The final questionnaire contained three components. First, there were questions related to the respondent’s role in research administration, including questions on how and why the respondent entered the field. The second component contained an extensive series of Likert-scale questions related to the hard skills of research administration and the general soft skills used in the respondent’s current role. The last component collected basic demographic information to aid analysis.

Before launching the survey, however, the PIs had to obtain the necessary compliance approvals at their respective institutions. As research administrators, we were used to having to process, coordinate, and monitor all
aspects of research compliance. Having to actually go through the process of obtaining the appropriate approvals was a whole new world that we were not used to. This included areas such as export controls, data security, data management, data sharing, ethics/human subjects’ protection approvals, and conflict of interest. The PIs also had to set up an international subaward agreement from the University of Kent to Columbia University. There was a lot of work involved with even what may seem like a simple survey questionnaire that does not collect any direct human subject identifiers. However, add in the study’s international focus, along with the fact that sponsored projects administration offices don’t normally receive grants, and you have a whole new level of complexity. We were thrilled when the survey was finally launched only four months into the start date of the grant.

When we closed the questionnaire—after numerous reminders to the various associations—we had amassed 2,691 responses, which is a huge number, and plenty enough for some really robust analyses. However, it did also mean that we had a huge job of checking and cleansing all that data, and it would be fair to say that this took us longer than initially planned.

At the time of this writing, the data analysis is just getting underway. This is the really interesting bit and has made the hard slog of all that data cleansing worthwhile. Join us at the NCURA conference this August to hear all about it. Or, if you can’t make it to the conference, look out for the next thrilling instalment of our research journey in a few issues’ time. And if you really can’t wait, check out the RAAP Worldwide website (https://raaapworldwide.wordpress.com) over the coming months.

So what have we learned during the project so far? Doing research is great! It’s great fun, but a whole lot of work, and this is compounded by it being done on top of our day jobs. If you think you know your collaborators before you start, well, you’ll know them a whole lot better by the time you finish. Our top tip: work with people that you get on well with. There are plenty of people out there with the required skills and expertise for any particular piece of research, so pick the team that you want to work with and you know will deliver the goods.

The NCURA Research Program is a wonderful opportunity. It was great being able to experience being a PI, giving us a whole new understanding of the research administration process from the researcher’s perspective. Most importantly, we feel that we are contributing to a new understanding of our profession, and hope that as a result, future studies will take place to expand on our initial research.

References

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