Research Offices of the Future

Insights from a Research Professional News survey into the evolving landscape for research services around the world

- **Evolving priorities and change drivers**
- **Research Assessment Exercises**
- **Identifying impact**
- **AI in focus**
- **Research office challenges**
- **Winning funding**
- **Threats to integrity**
- **Library collaboration**

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Introduction

This report into the challenges, opportunities and future direction for research offices and research services teams presents the findings of two international surveys carried out by Research Professional News in 2023. One was conducted on research office staff and those performing other academic research services roles; the second was targeted at researchers at universities and institutes.

Each survey received more than 800 responses, resulting in a comprehensive snapshot of the experiences and perceptions of research support teams around the world, and giving an insight into the quality and effectiveness of research support and enablement systems.

The purpose of this report is to provide a detailed overview of the current state of the vital services that support research, and to identify areas where improvement is needed.

The findings of the two surveys are presented side by side, and are intended to be of interest to a wide range of stakeholders, including research services staff, researchers, university leaders and funding agencies. While we recognise that different institutions structure their research services teams differently, we have used the term 'research offices' throughout to refer to the main support structures for research within universities.

The report is intended to contribute to the ongoing discussion about how to improve the quality and effectiveness of research support services around the world.

Key findings

- Research offices are focused on obtaining more funding, demonstrating research impact and improving research quality. The main barriers to this include ensuring effective engagement between researchers and the research office, understanding why bids have not been successful, and maintaining the integrity of research outputs.

- Cost pressures, demonstrating research impact, and research assessment exercises (RAEs) are the main change drivers for research offices, but it varies by region. Traditional publications are still the most common way to measure research impact, but societal benefit and equity, diversity, and inclusion are becoming more important.

- Artificial intelligence is not yet a major concern for many research offices, but they see it as having the potential to help with compiling information for grant applications and analysing unsuccessful grant bids.

Overview of participants

The two surveys were conducted between July and September 2023. The survey of research office and related staff received 815 responses. Not all respondents completed all questions, and the results have been rounded to the nearest one decimal place. The geographical breakdown of respondents is shown in figure 1.

Staff who responded represented a range of roles and seniority levels, including those stating that they work in research development leadership roles (12.8 per cent), directors of research services (10.2 per cent) and research development officers (8.9 per cent). Other respondents included vice-provosts and pro-vice-chancellors for research, and research compliance/ethics officers.

There was a similar geographical breakdown among the 885 researcher respondents. Again, not all respondents completed all questions, and results are rounded to one decimal place.

Researcher respondents were dominated by those identifying as tenured professors or faculty staff (37.2 per cent) or senior faculty and department heads (17.5 per cent). Respondents also included tenure track researchers (8.8 per cent), PhD candidates (6.3 per cent), research assistants (5.4 per cent) and several other roles.

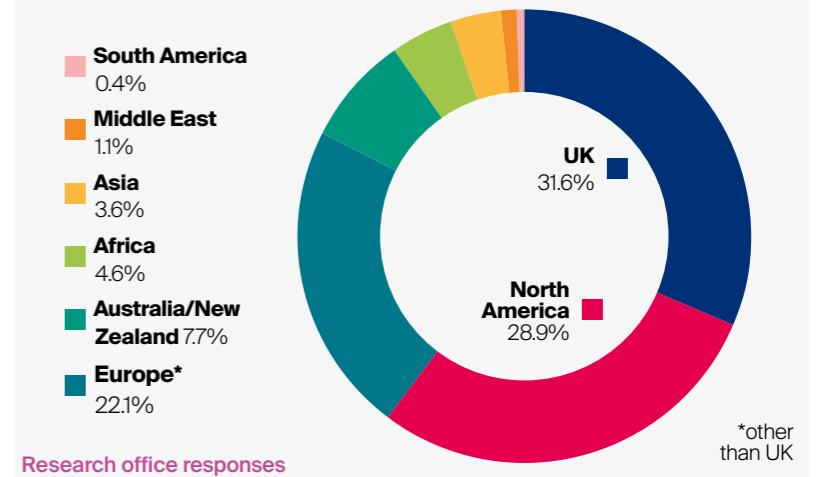**Fig 1** Geographical breakdown of university research office respondents

- **South America** 0.4%
- **Middle East** 1.1%
- **Asia** 3.6%
- **Africa** 4.6%
- **Australia/New Zealand** 7.7%
- **Europe*** 22.1%
- **UK** 31.6%
- **North America** 28.9%

Research office responses

*other than UK

Fig 2 Geographical breakdown of university researcher respondents

- **South America** 0.1%
- **Africa** 1.2%
- **UK** 1.5%
- **Asia** 1.5%
- **Middle East** 1.7%
- **Australia/New Zealand** 13.4%
- **Europe*** 49.9%
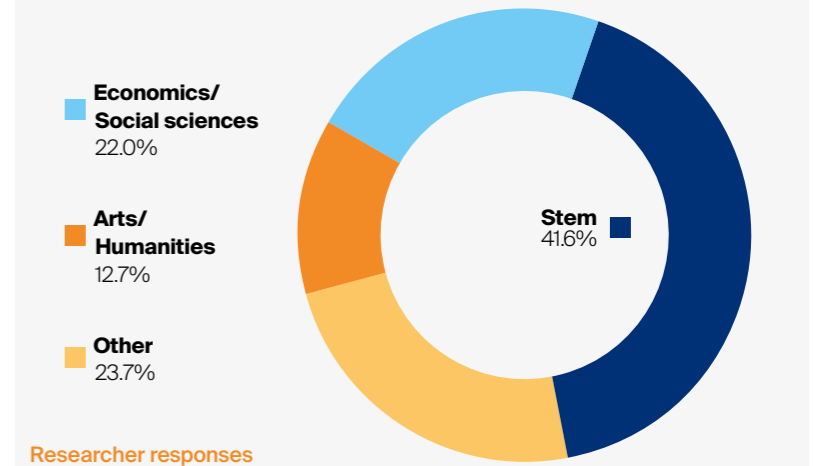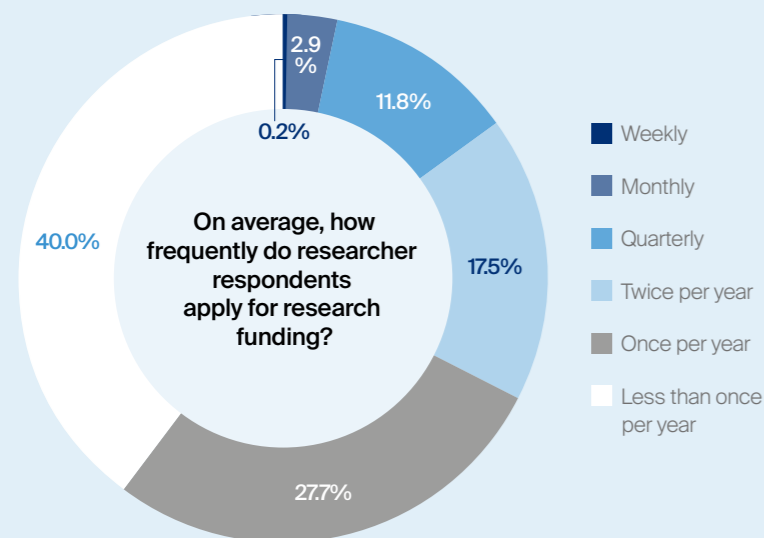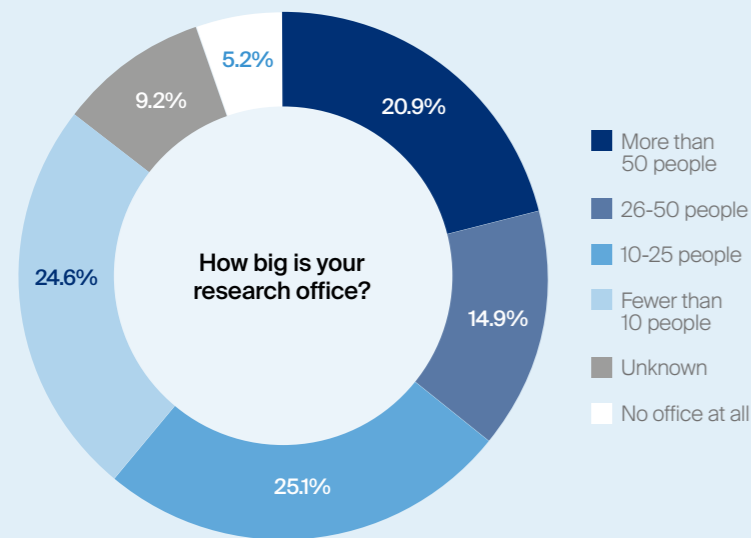- **North America** 30.6%

Researcher responses

*other than UK
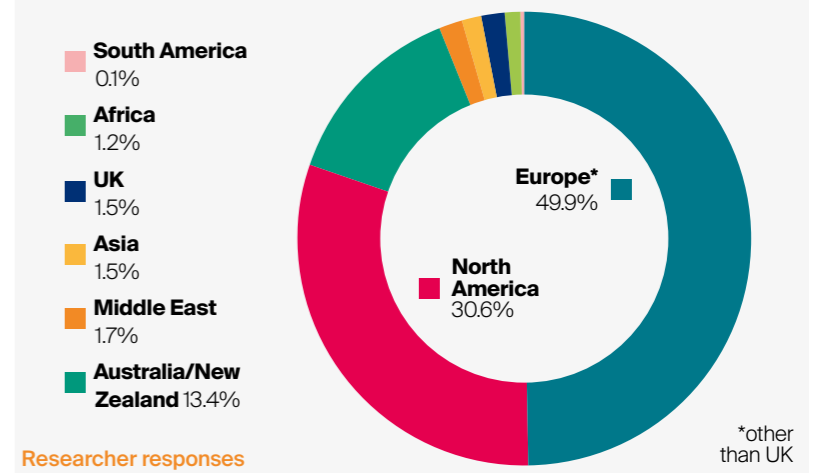
Fig 3 Researcher respondents by discipline in which they predominately work

- **Economics/ Social sciences** 22.0%
- **Arts/ Humanities** 12.7%
- **Other** 23.7%
- **Stem** 41.6%

Researcher responses

How satisfied are researchers with the level of support provided by the research office during the entire research lifecycle?

- Very satisfied — 5.7%
- Satisfied — 32.3%
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied — 32.6%
- Dissatisfied — 17.6%
- Very dissatisfied — 11.9%

How big is your research office?

- More than 50 people — 20.9%
- 26-50 people — 14.9%
- 10-25 people — 25.1%
- Fewer than 10 people — 24.6%
- Unknown — 9.2%
- No office at all — 5.2%

On average, how frequently do researcher respondents apply for research funding?

- Weekly — 2.9%
- Monthly — 11.8%
- Quarterly — 17.5%
- Twice per year — 27.7%
- Once per year — 40.0%
- Less than once per year — 0.2%

Evolving priorities

We asked respondents to identify their top three priorities with regard to academic research in the next 12 months. Among research office respondents (figure 4), the most important areas were obtaining more funding to increase the volume of research (73.9 per cent), demonstrating research impact (45.9 per cent) and improving research quality (43.6 per cent).

Asked to consider priorities over a longer period of five years, research office staff were marginally less likely to mention obtaining increasing amounts of funding (71.4 per cent) and more likely to mention demonstrating research impact (57.6 per cent) and improving research quality (51.3 per cent—see figure 5).

While research office respondents were likely to focus on financing research and demonstrating impact when listing priorities, our survey of researchers suggests this is not necessarily something with which the researchers they work with would agree.

Asked to identify what they expected their research office to do to support their work, researchers were most likely to mention the facilitation of access to funding opportunities (73.2 per cent) and support with research proposals and bids (70.2 per cent). However, only 18.0 per cent expected assistance with measuring and reporting impact, which was the lowest-scoring option in the survey (see figure 6).

When stating the areas in which they were most likely to ask their research office for help, researchers were most likely to mention assistance with finding funding opportunities (25.7 per cent). This was followed by applying for funding grants (20.1 per cent), managing article processing charges (16.0 per cent) and preparing data management plans (11.9 per cent).

Researchers were least likely to ask research offices for help with finding relevant journals for publication and submitting an article for publication (both mentioned by just 2.5 per cent of respondents) and monitoring the impact of research (8.7 per cent).

When asked how satisfied they were with the support offered by research offices during the entire research lifecycle, more than a third of researchers (38 per cent) said they were either satisfied or very satisfied. Just under a third (29.5 per cent) said they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, with the rest not expressing an opinion either way.

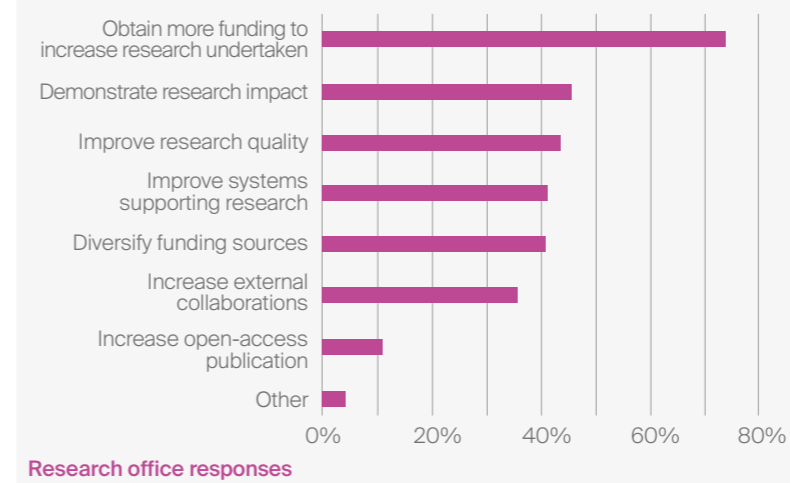**Fig 4** What are your institution's three main priorities with regards to academic research for the next year?

Research office responses

Fig 5 What are your institution's three main priorities with regards to academic research for the next five years?

Research office responses
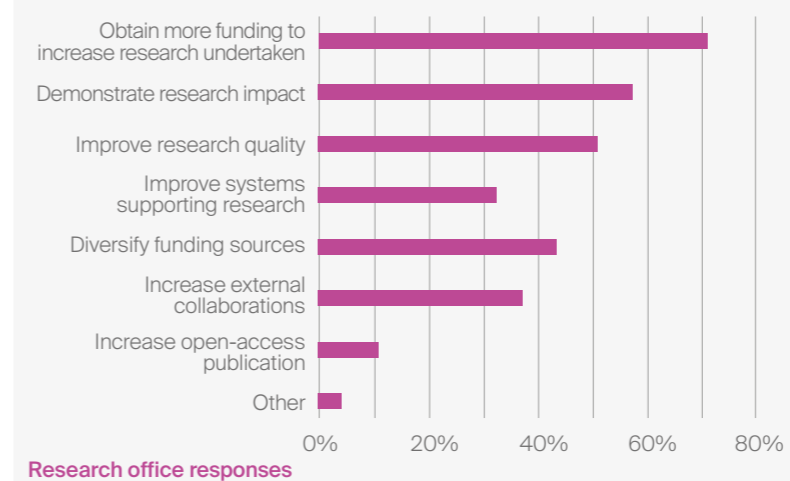

Fig 6 What do you expect the research office to do to support your role as a researcher?

Researcher responses

"Students and teaching are seen as far more important than research at the present time…researchers are frustrated with the workload model and lack of administrative support for both teaching and research activities."

Member of a research office team, UK

Change drivers

In addition to identifying where research offices believe their priorities lie, our survey also sought to lift the lid on the factors that research office staff felt would drive change in their institutions' research operations over the next five years.

There were similarities with the priority areas, with cost pressures (56.4 per cent) and demonstrating research impact (48.3 per cent) the two change drivers most referenced.

Research assessment exercises were the next most frequently mentioned potential drivers of change (mentioned by 42.6 per cent of those surveyed), while domestic politics (34.8 per cent) and external rankings (33.3 per cent) also scored highly.

Assessment exercises

Among those research office respondents whose work involves preparing for research assessment exercises, almost a quarter (24.0 per cent) felt that resourcing within their teams presented their biggest challenge to this (see figure 8).

Other obstacles to RAE preparations included the gathering of information from researchers (cited as the biggest challenge by 22.1 per cent), understanding or anticipating changes in the assessment criteria (19.5 per cent) and demonstrating impact (18.5 per cent).

Across all domains, just over 40 per cent of respondents mentioned research assessment exercises as one of the biggest change drivers. However, among those in the UK—where a national Research Excellence Framework exercise is conducted approximately every seven years—this figure jumps to 71.4 per cent (see figure 9). In North America, where no such framework exists in the most populous nation (the US), just 22.2 per cent believe research assessment exercises will be a key driver of change.

In Europe, where many countries have some form of research assessment exercise (including France and the Netherlands), more than a third of respondents mentioned them as change drivers. However, while Australia and New Zealand both have national research assessment programmes, just 22.9 per cent of respondents in these territories said they were drivers of change, although the response rate for this question from the two nations was relatively small.

Fig 7 What do you think will be the three biggest drivers of change in your institution's research operations over the next five years?
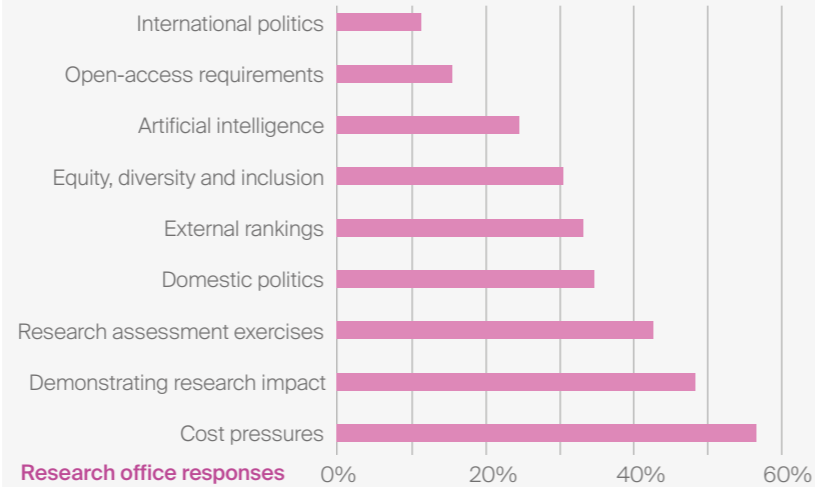

Research office responses

Fig 8 What is your current biggest challenge in preparing for research assessment exercises?
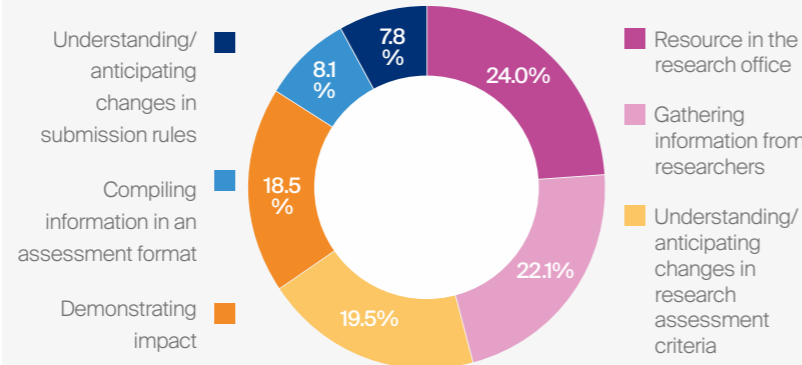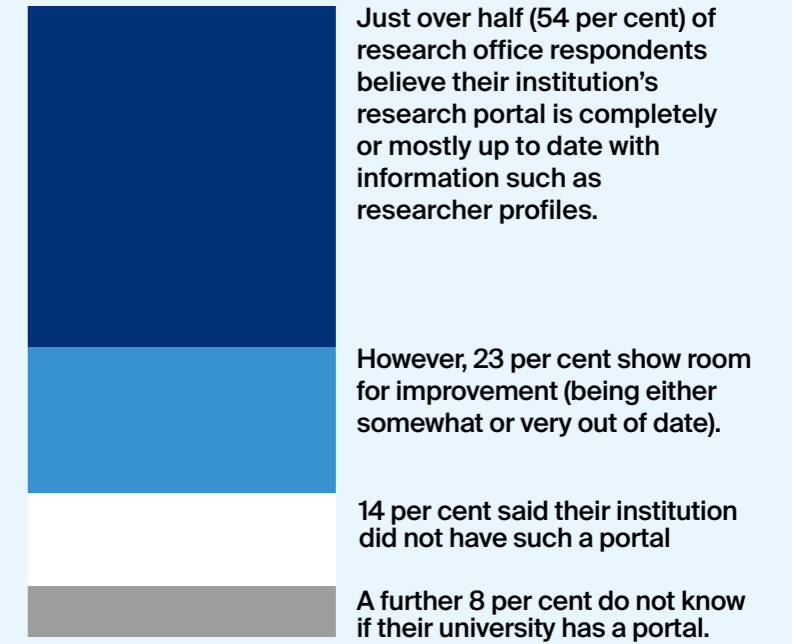

Research office responses

Fig 9 Proportion of research office respondents identifying research assessment exercises as change drivers.

Research office responses

"Research development is an underrated role. We bring a lot to the application but are not seen as a valuable support by many, until they experience first hand the impact we have. From horizon scanning to bringing teams together, writing elements of the bid to championing bids… we have a vital role in the success of research institutions."
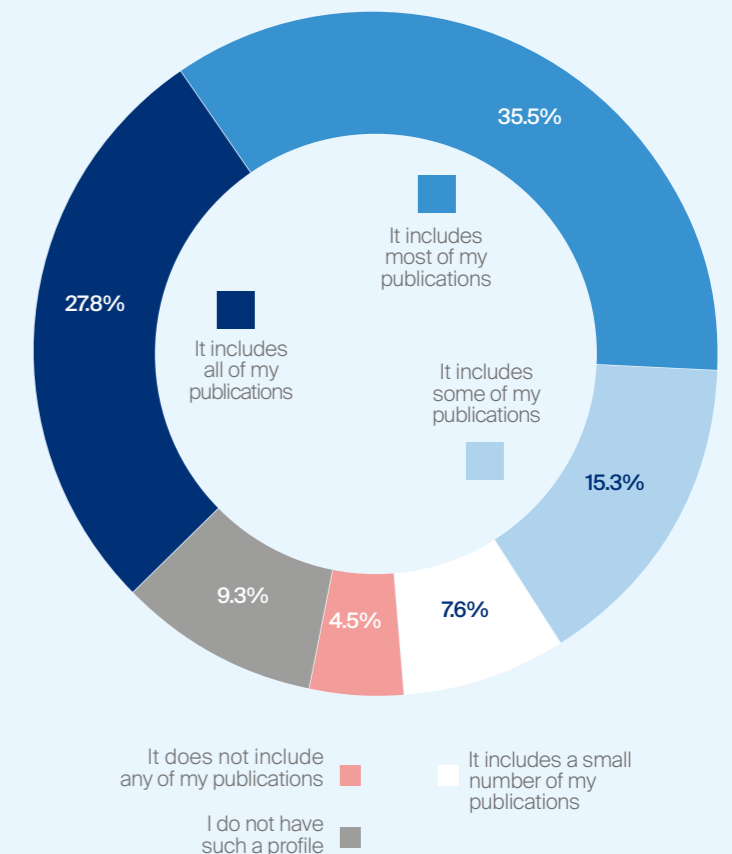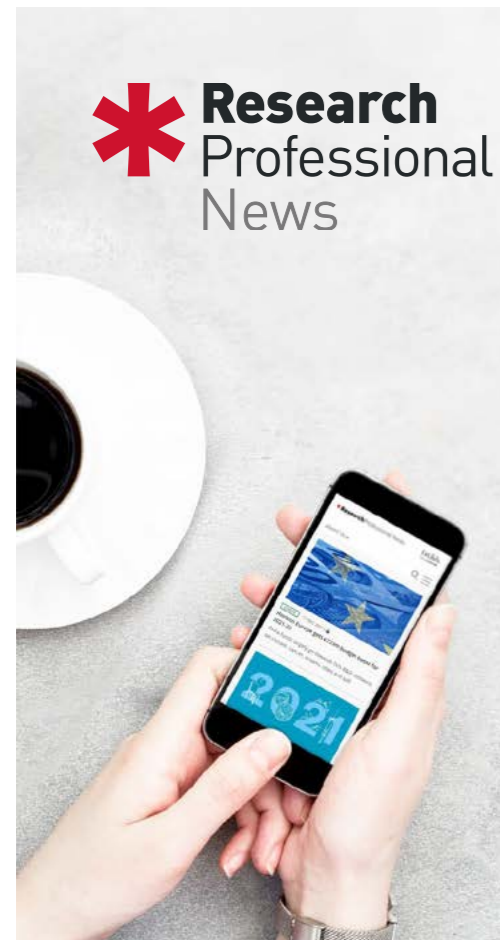
Research development leader, UK

Just over half (54 per cent) of research office respondents believe their institution's research portal is completely or mostly up to date with information such as researcher profiles.

However, 23 per cent show room for improvement (being either somewhat or very out of date).

14 per cent said their institution did not have such a portal

A further 8 per cent do not know if their university has a portal.

This broadly tallies with the perspective of researchers themselves, with 27.4 per cent of those with profiles showing room for improvement, containing at most "some" of their publications. Almost one in 10 (9.3 per cent) said they did not have a profile at all, while 12.1 per cent said it contained either a small number of their publications or none at all. However, a much higher proportion believe their profile is fully up to date than the research office perceive. Some 63.3 per cent said it contained "most" or "all" of their publications.

To what extent is the profile you keep on your university portal / repository complete?

Identifying impact

According to research office staff, traditional publications still reign supreme when it comes to the way in which they measure impact. Almost two-thirds of respondents (63.5 per cent) mentioned publications when asked which three types of impact they most frequently need to measure (see figure 10).

Next in line was the citation impact of published research (mentioned by 49.1 per cent of research office staff), followed by commercialisation activity (40.1 per cent) and societal benefit (38.5 per cent).

Impact on UN Sustainable Development Goals and on equity, diversity and inclusion were next highest, both mentioned by 20.4 per cent of respondents.

Respondents were far less likely to measure page views or readership statistics (just 7.7 per cent), social media metrics (8.6 per cent) or mentions in media outlets (11.8 per cent).

Respondents were also asked which three types of impact might most frequently require measuring in five years' time (see figure 10).

In response to this question, research office staff were most likely to say "societal benefit" would need to be measured, with the proportion mentioning this metric jumping from 38.5 per cent currently to 56.2 per cent in the longer term.

The proportion of respondents anticipating an increase in the tracking of impact on equity, diversity and inclusion was also significantly up, as was the proportion mentioning UN Sustainable Development Goals. By contrast, the emphasis on publications, although still high, was reduced.

Researcher respondents also ranked the types of impact they most frequently need to measure today versus what they feel will need to be monitored in five years' time, and—particularly when it comes to future measurement—had strikingly different opinions to research office staff.

The top two current most frequently monitored metrics were still publications and citation impact of published research, but these were far more dominant than in the research office survey, being selected by 87.5 per cent and 81.8 per cent of respondents respectively as being among the three most commonly required.

In five years' time, unlike research office respondents, they felt the most tracked impact metrics would still be citation impact (79.6 per cent) and publications (76.1 per cent). Societal benefit (26.7 per cent) was the third choice, up from 15.6 per cent currently.

However, unlike the research office staff, just 14.1 per cent said they felt equity, diversity and inclusion would be among the most measured aspects of impact.

Research office respondents also identified what type of impact they currently find difficult to measure (see figure 11). Top of the list was societal benefit (mentioned by 69.9 per cent of respondents), despite this being an area they believe will grow in importance. Diversity, equity and inclusion were also deemed difficult to measure, along with impact on UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Fig 10 What forms of impact do you think research offices will need to measure now and in five years' time? (top three selected)
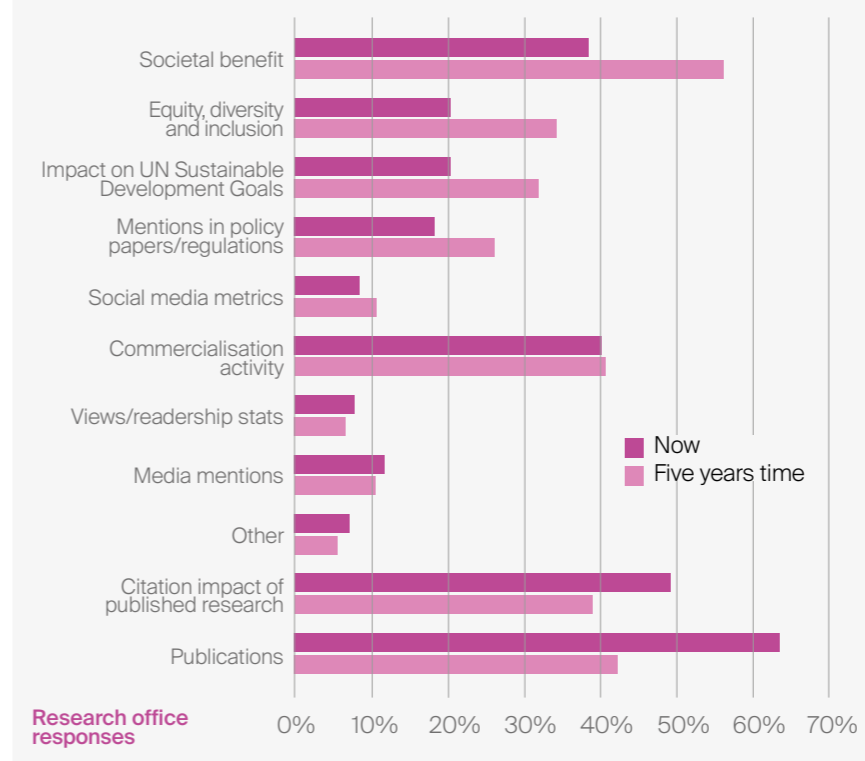
Now
Five years time

Research office responses

Societal benefit		
Equity, diversity and inclusion		
Impact on UN Sustainable Development Goals		
Mentions in policy papers/regulations		
Social media metrics		
Commercialisation activity		
Views/readership stats		
Media mentions		
Other		
Citation impact of published research		
Publications		

Fig 11 Which types of impact do you find it difficult to measure?

Impact found most difficult

1	Societal benefit	69.9%
2	Equity, diversity and inclusion	48.8%
3	Impact on UN Sustainable Development goals	43.6%
4	Mentions in policy papers/regulations	28.4%
5	Commercialisation activity	25.5%

Impact found least difficult

6	Social media metrics	20.4%
7	Media mentions	19.0%
8	Views/readership stats	13.1%
9	Citation impact of published research	10.1%
10	Publications	6.7%
11	Other	5.3%

Research office responses

AI in focus

Much has been made of the impact that the fourth industrial revolution will have on research office activity, particularly the fast-developing world of artificial intelligence. Across all research office respondents, just 24.7 per cent listed AI as one of the three biggest drivers of change they anticipated for their institution's research operations over the next five years, but the proportions varied significantly from region to region.

Among respondents from the UK, just 14.6 per cent considered AI a key driver of change (see figure 12). This is significantly less than North America (where 28.1 per cent listed it), Europe (32.1 per cent) and Australia/New Zealand (35.4 per cent).

We also asked research office respondents what benefits they felt the use of AI might bring to research offices over the course of the next five years (see figure 13). A majority of those who answered said that compiling information for grant applications (mentioned by 57.0 per cent) and the analysis of grant bids that were not successful in order to improve future success (53.1 per cent) could potentially be beneficial AI actions.

Respondents also felt AI could assist with compiling researcher profiles (43.7 per cent), the management of internal databases (39.2 per cent) and internal evaluation of research proposals (32.0 per cent).

Raising concerns

However, participants also had some cautionary words. One respondent, a person in a research development leadership role in the UK, said AI was "interesting…and a much wider concern".

"To what extent it could produce winning grant narratives is debatable for me. So many AI applications will seek to reduce employee headcounts of large employers and automate processes that I do worry whether research offices and [their] staff will be under threat in the medium future—but this is a concern across all industries, not just ours," they said.

Another respondent, from a research office in North America, said: "While AI has tremendous potential to make life easier [for academics], much attention should be paid to soften the impact this will have on lower-level employees. Their routine and repetitive skills will no longer be needed, resulting in increased poverty and homelessness."

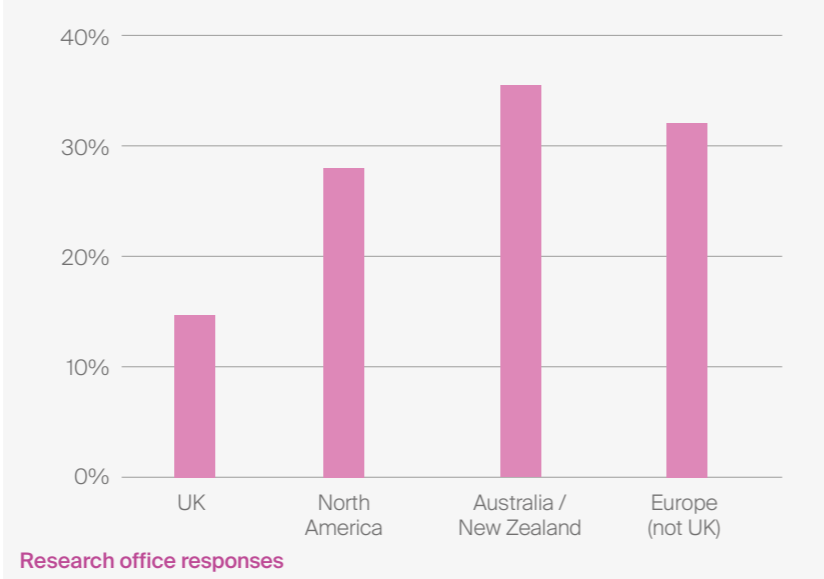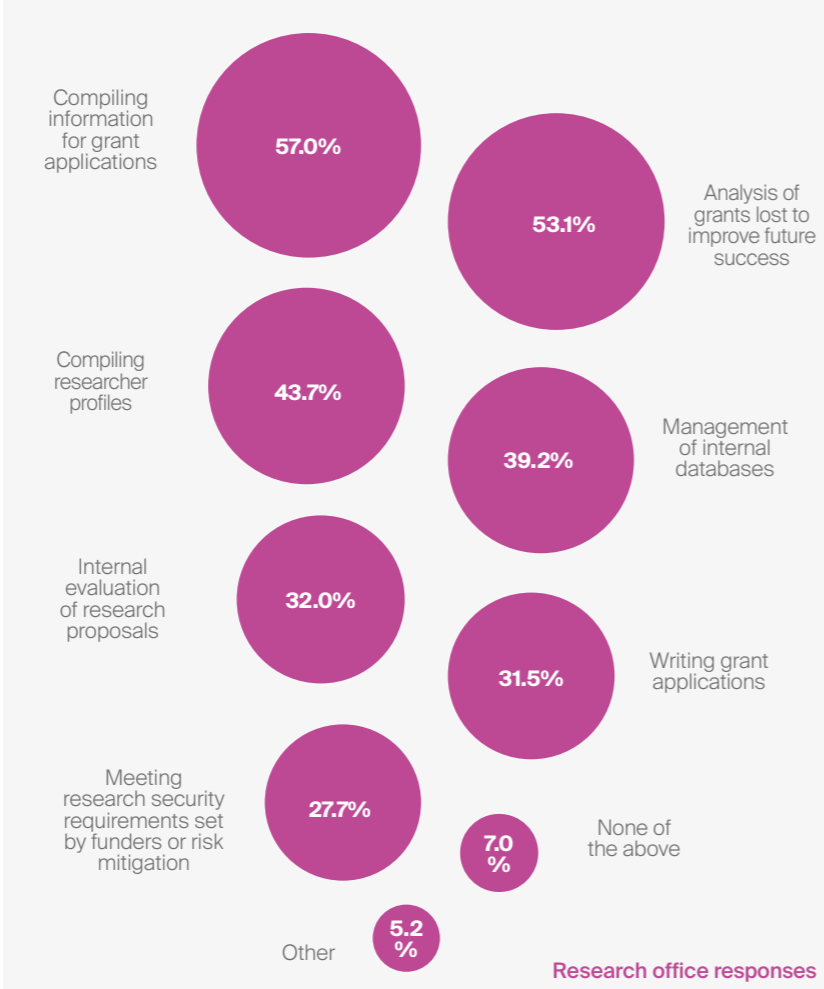**Fig 12** Proportion of research office staff identifying AI as a change driver

Research office responses

Fig 13 What applications of AI do you feel could have the most benefits to the research office within the next five years?

Compiling information for grant applications **57.0%**

Analysis of grants lost to improve future success **53.1%**

Compiling researcher profiles **43.7%**

Management of internal databases **39.2%**

Internal evaluation of research proposals **32.0%**

Writing grant applications **31.5%**

Meeting research security requirements set by funders or risk mitigation **27.7%**

None of the above **7.0%**

Other **5.2%**

Research office responses

Research office challenges

Asked about the three biggest challenges facing their research office, the most cited concern among research office staff was pressure on budgets and resources (mentioned by 57.5 per cent of respondents—see figure 14).

Time pressures were the next most cited (48.1 per cent), followed by staff recruitment and retention (37.7 per cent), successfully bidding for funds (35.4 per cent), and problems with inadequate systems and software (31.9 per cent). These findings are in line with previous reports looking at academic research support produced for Research Professional News's parent company, Clarivate, by the consultancy Alterline. Last year's report found that the top five concerns for research office leaders were limited resources, lack of time, budget restrictions, data and systems silos, and securing funding for research.

At a regional level, budget and resourcing issues were cited most often by respondents in most territories, including Asia (mentioned by 57.1 per cent), Australia and New Zealand (75.6 per cent), Europe (52.3 per cent), the Middle East (71.4 per cent), and North America (61.0 per cent). Among respondents in Africa, both budget concerns and the ease of finding funding opportunities were the joint top concerns among respondents (each mentioned by 55.2 per cent).

In the UK, while 55.1 per cent of respondents cited budgets and resourcing as a challenge,

this was not the most referenced problem. Some 64.9 per cent of those asked said time pressure was the biggest challenge their research office faced.

One UK-based research development officer said that a previous restructure had left morale "very low", while a UK research development leader said morale had been hit by seeing funders opting to support "well-established centres and those with considerable income already". "We have had people join these institutes from ours and tell us they have put mediocre applications in and got funded," the respondent said. "They say it's because of where they are."

Time-stretched

Time pressure and stress were also referenced by respondents across regions, while multiple research office staff expressed concern about bureaucracy in the grant application process. One respondent based in Europe said that their research office comprised "a small number of people, whereas the duties are increasing year after year". A US-based research office member in a leadership role said that "meeting growing federal compliance requirements" was a problem.

Meanwhile, a UK-based research development officer said that research office roles "tend to be high pressure", which can have implications for staffing levels.
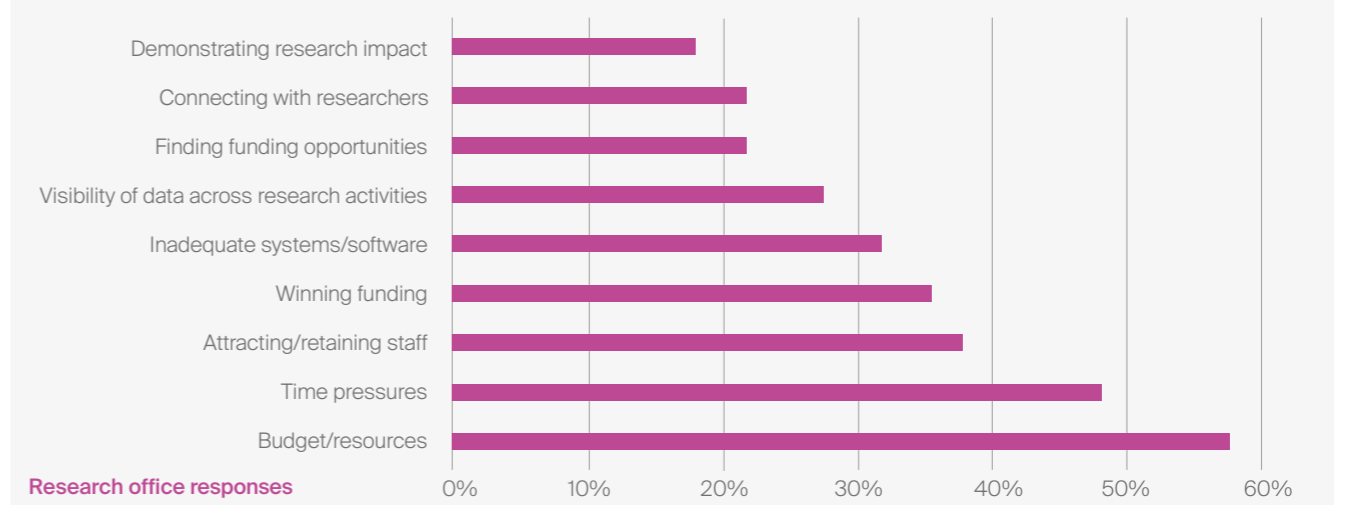
"The workload is high and we've been

dealing with ongoing, long-term staff absence," they said. "Some absences were due to personal issues rather than stress, but still it has put a big strain on the remaining team members."

Another Europe-based research director criticised a "chaotic external funding schedule" and "contradictory requirements between different funding schemes" as a particular concern. And a UK research development leader cited "limited awareness and understanding of the quality threshold needed to win funding and the time it takes to write proposals of this level. A lot of time is wasted on proposals that are never going to win funding."

The size of research office teams was also a concern for many. "Managing pre- and post-award for the whole of the university with a very small team requires a very broad breadth of knowledge and skills to support, manage and monitor activity," said one senior member of a research office in Australia/New Zealand. "Time-poor academics find it difficult to effectively plan, draft and submit the highest quality and competitive proposals with limited support."

Several research office staff complained that their work simply is not given the credit it deserves by senior university management. As one research development officer in the Australia/New Zealand region put it: "The true value that research office brings to the institute is often overlooked."

Fig 14 What are the three main challenges faced by your research office?

- Demonstrating research impact
- Connecting with researchers
- Finding funding opportunities
- Visibility of data across research activities
- Inadequate systems/software
- Winning funding
- Attracting/retaining staff
- Time pressures
- Budget/resources

Research office responses

Winning funding

To delve deeper into the challenges faced by research offices, we asked respondents to the research office survey to identify the three main problems their institution faces when bidding for funds.

The most frequently mentioned issue was ensuring effective engagement between researchers and the research office, with more than half of respondents (52.3 per cent) naming this as a challenge.

Other often-cited barriers to securing funding were the resources available to the research office (mentioned by 48.1 per cent of respondents), understanding why bids had not been successful (45.1 per cent) and the resource available for internal peer review (35.8 per cent).

Research office respondents were least likely to complain about the usability of funding databases, with only 10.6 per cent finding this a challenge.

Threats to integrity

A further challenge for the research community is maintaining the integrity of research outputs. But which threats to integrity do research office staff feel currently pose the biggest risks? The most commonly cited concern among respondents was the pressure to publish, with 63.2 per cent highlighting this as one of the three biggest threats to research strength (see figure 16).

Participants were also concerned about insecure employment practices (38.1 per cent), cultural issues such as bullying (36.6 per cent) and the activities of predatory journals (34.2 per cent).

To combat these threats, research office staff said they were taking a number of precautionary measures (see figure 17). The most cited was the facilitation of training (mentioned by 64.4 per cent of respondents), development of research integrity policies (63.5 per cent) and investigating related complaints (40.8 per cent). Worryingly, more than one in 10 (12.9 per cent) could not identify any steps that their research office was taking to mitigate concerns about research integrity.

Fig 15 What are the three biggest challenges your institution faces in winning research funding?

Research office responses
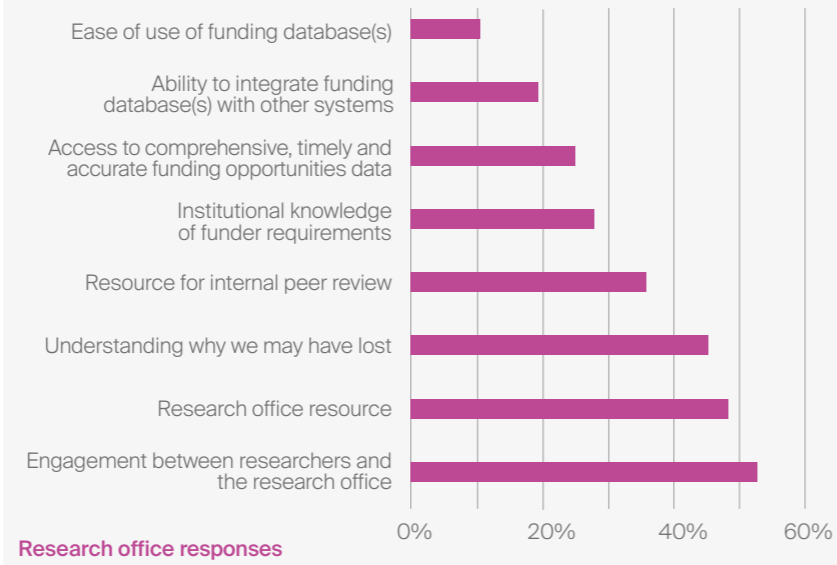
Fig 16 Which of the following do you believe pose the biggest risk to research integrity? (top three selected)

Research office responses

Fig 17 What is your research office doing around research integrity?

Research office responses

Library collaboration

After individual researchers (named by 81.6 per cent of respondents), faculty deans (61.5 per cent), and the provost/vice-chancellor's office (53.8 per cent), libraries (30.7 per cent) are viewed by those in research offices as their next most significant partners in supporting research (see figure 18).

By far the most cited area in which research offices collaborate with their institution's library was open-access compliance, with 61.7 per cent of respondents naming this as an area of collaboration (see figure 19). There was a large drop-off to the next most cited area, which was scholarly communications (34.7 per cent), followed by the creation of bibliometric analysis reports (26.7 per cent) and getting accurate lists of faculty publications (24.5 per cent).

Research offices very rarely collaborated with libraries to source funding opportunities, with just 5.9 per cent mentioning this as an area of cooperation.

Fig 18 Who are the major partners within your institution when it comes to supporting research?
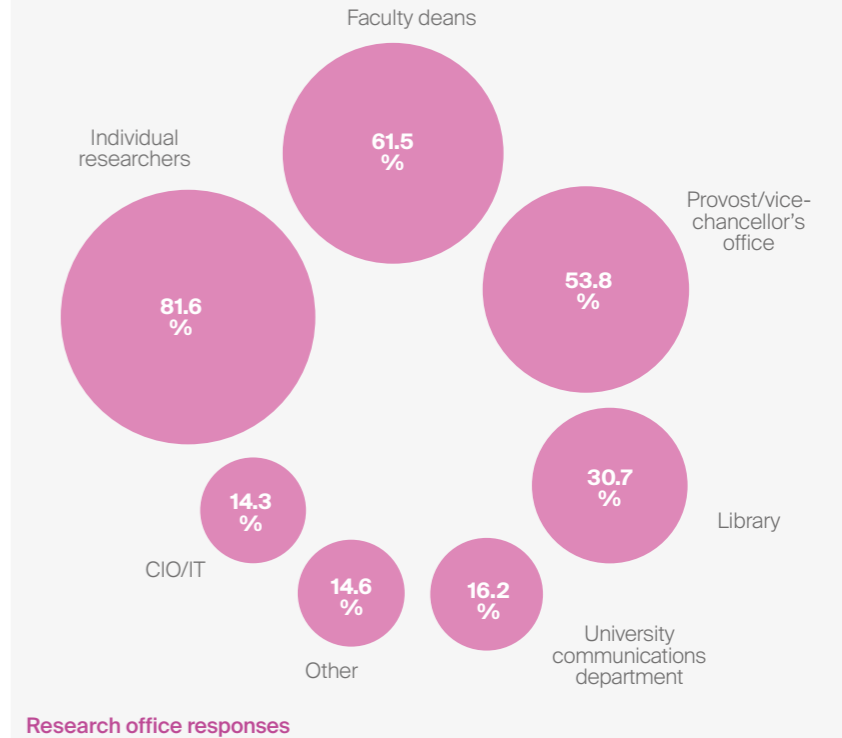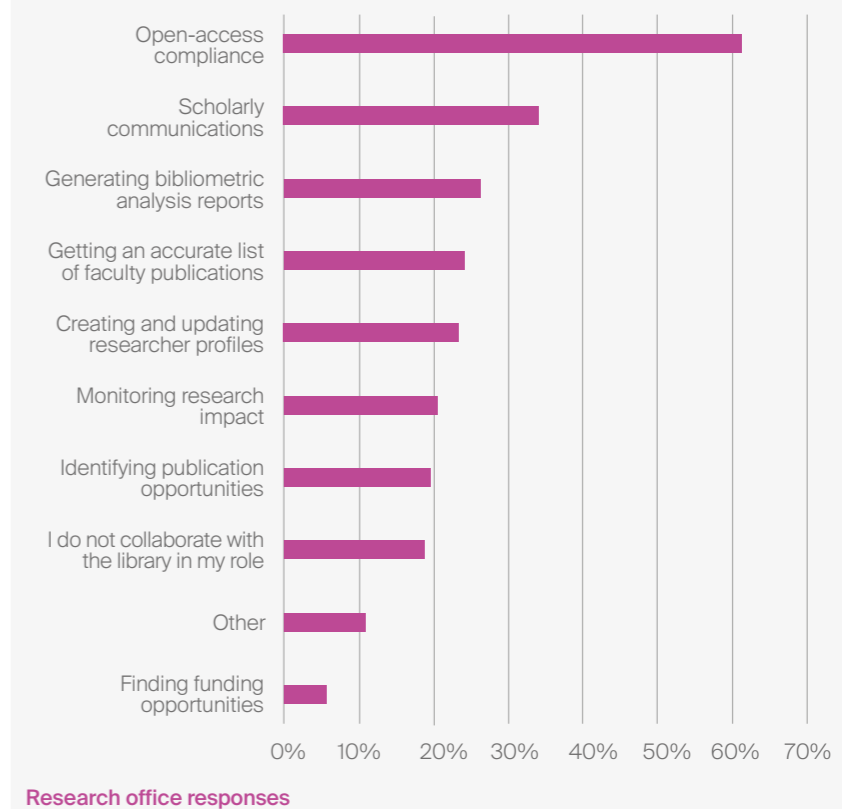

Research office responses

Fig 19 On which activities do you collaborate with the library?

Research office responses

"The pay of academic research personnel should be taken care of to align with the present [cost of living] challenges."

Postdoctoral scholar, North America

Conclusion

This report has provided a snapshot of the current state of research offices and their relationship with researchers, and has identified key priorities, challenges and drivers of change for research office staff.

The report's findings suggest that research offices are facing a number of challenges, including:

- Increasing pressure to obtain funding and demonstrate a wider range of research impacts.
- Fostering effective relationships with academic staff.
- The need to adapt to new technologies and ways of working.
- The need to maintain the integrity of research outputs.

Despite these challenges, the report also highlights the important role that research offices play in supporting researchers and their work.

Researchers were clear that they expected assistance from the research office in areas such as sourcing and accessing funding opportunities, supporting their proposal submissions, and facilitating collaboration both within their own institution and with other institutions.

There does, however, appear to be some mismatch between the services research offices seek to provide and those which are being accessed by researchers, with assistance in demonstrating impact one key example.

Research office responses also suggest that the need to more frequently measure a wider range of research impacts, in particular societal benefit, will drive change in their work over the next five years. But the fact that this changing requirement is not viewed by researchers as representing such a dramatic shift, indicates that—if such measurement is to happen on the scale research offices believe will be necessary—some of the communication challenges between researchers and research office teams will need to be overcome.

The survey provides evidence that, despite such difficulties, and a frequent perception among research office staff of being undervalued, the contribution research offices make to successful research is apparent to many of those they support. Overall, researcher respondents were significantly more likely to express satisfaction with the support they receive from their research office team than they were to express dissatisfaction.

Acknowledgements