

Supporting Academic Research

Understanding the challenges



Findings from a 2019 study of researchers and members of the Research Office in the UK, US and Australia.



Background

Research in higher education is constantly under pressure to adapt to a changing landscape of funding opportunities, new and more robust compliance rules, and efforts to make research more accessible, while demonstrating its reach.

At the same time, technological changes and advances also make the future of research more exciting, allowing collaboration across different disciplines and institutions, increasing opportunities to share data, and supporting researchers with tools that facilitate the research process and enable greater research impact.

Project

Alterline, an independent research agency, was commissioned by Ex Libris to assess the experience of researchers and senior members of university research offices in conducting, and supporting the production of, research at institutions of higher education.

This paper includes the findings from a survey of 300 researchers and interviews with nine senior members of research offices in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Key Findings

Not enough time and too much stress

While researchers feel well supported by the Research Office and the Library, they feel time poor and stressed

Finding funding is a growing challenge

In spite of the support available, researchers find sourcing funding and applying for grants the most difficult part of their roles

It is unclear how to measure impact

Research impact is increasingly important, but it's not clear how to meaningfully measure it

Streamlining would improve effectiveness

In order to support their roles, researchers and those in the Research Office want more streamlined systems

Management systems should be user-friendly

Researchers say it is important that research management systems are easy to use, aid collaboration, and save time

Researcher profiles are often incomplete

There are significant challenges in showcasing researcher profiles and keeping them current

The library can play a greater role

There is an opportunity for greater collaboration between the research office and the library in supporting researchers



While researchers feel well supported by the Research Office and the Library, they feel time poor and stressed

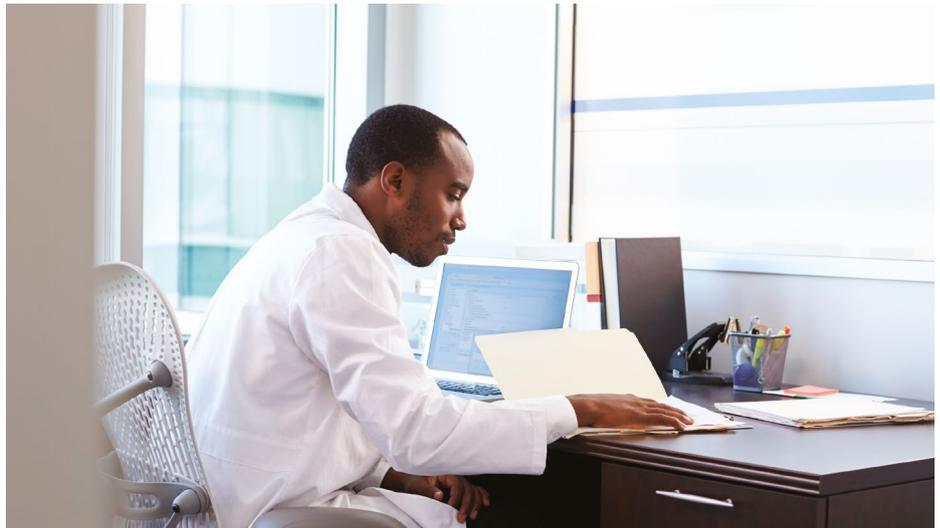
Researchers said they are time-poor and stressed in their roles, despite feeling supported by both the research office (81%) and the library (80%) at their institution.

Both the research office and the library play key roles in a range of researchers' tasks. Around half of academic researchers are supported by others in making deposits to institutional repositories, managing article processing charges, applying for grants, and finding relevant funding opportunities. It is also clear that research assistants play a vital role in supporting many scholars across universities.

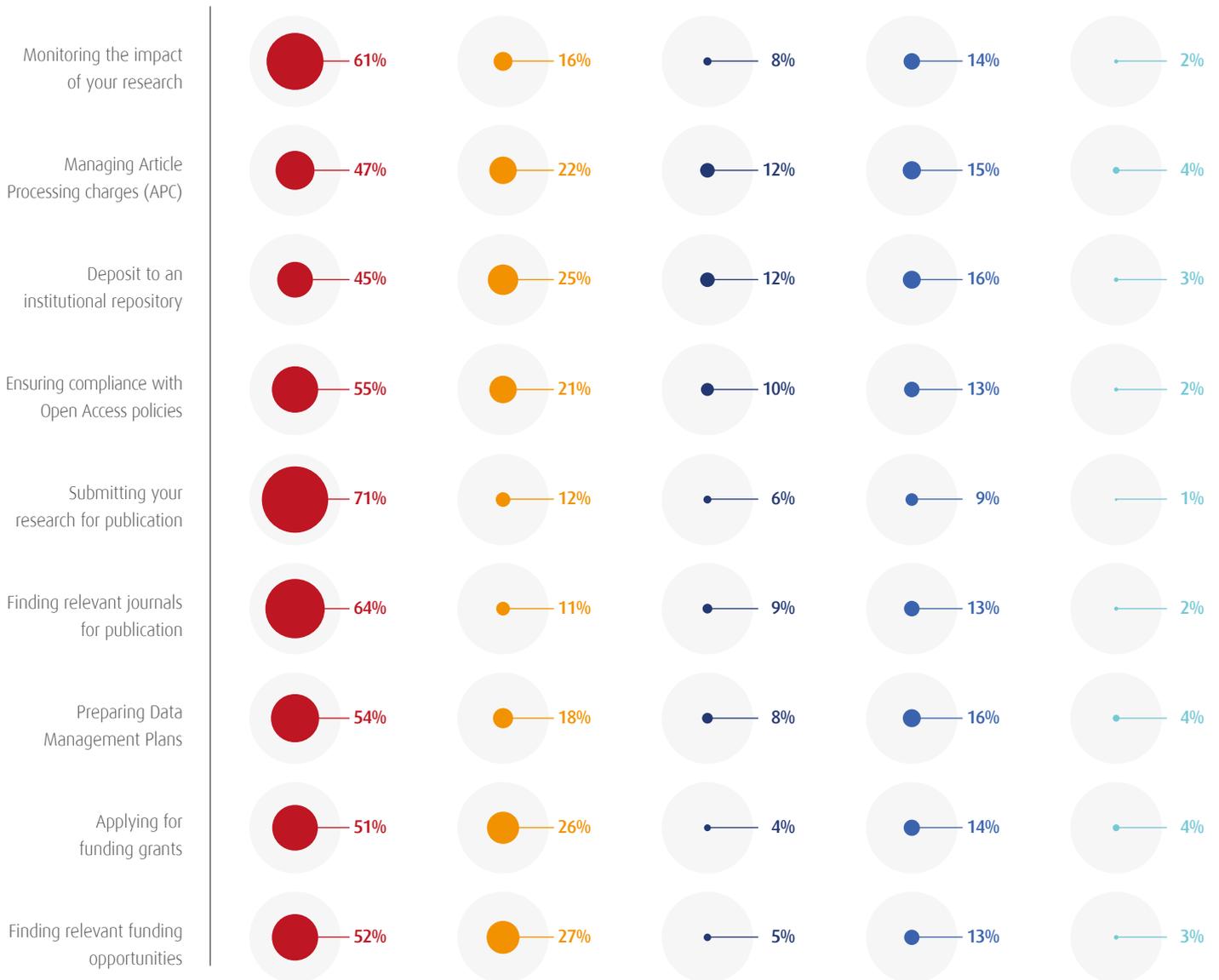
Nonetheless, scholars are still undertaking many of the tasks at various stages of the research process alone. This suggests a key opportunity for other stakeholders to enhance their support during the research lifecycle.

“Lack of motivation, since I am a little burnt out and do not see the benefit of continuous research, just for the sake of surviving in academia.”

Faculty staff, US, Natural sciences



▾ Do you conduct these activities yourself, with the help of someone else, or does someone else at your institution do this on your behalf? Who helps you with these tasks?



Base:

All respondents (300)

● I do this myself

● Research office

● Library

● Research assistant

● Other

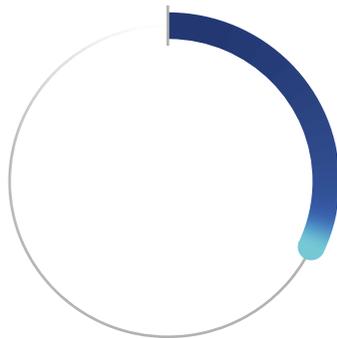
Despite the support available, researchers find sourcing funds and applying for grants the most difficult of their roles

Researchers said that their main source of pressure was finding funding and applying for it. For some, this was the task with which they were most dissatisfied.

Senior members of research offices often said that developing sustainable funding was an important priority for them. However, they recognized the challenges in a market in which funding is increasingly harder to find and bids are getting more complex, often bringing together multiple disciplines. At the same time, they observed deadlines for submitting applications were often getting shorter as well.

“We’re now dealing with bigger grants, and that leads to enhanced partnerships, usually, which then leads to complexity of contracts... particularly a problem with the GCRF awards, because that involves international contacts and has set up all sorts of new challenges in terms of due diligence.”

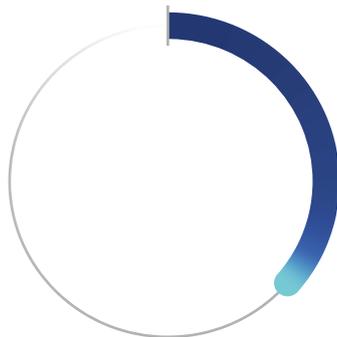
Vice-Provost (Research), UK



Only 32% of researchers said it was easy to find relevant funding opportunities



Senior research office members referenced increased competition for fewer funding opportunities, which could contribute to a reluctance to invest in staff before grants are confirmed. This, in turn, could result in a lack of needed research support staff once funding is available, creating a strain on researchers at this early stage of the process.



35%



65%

Only 35% of researchers said it was easy to apply for funding

“The support staff around managing the grant activity once its awarded tends to lag behind the activity in other areas. For example, there are more staff to support big bids coming in, then until you recruit [post-award support staff] there is a gap.... but the award comes in whether you’ve got the staff to support it or not.”

Director (Research Office), UK

Research impact is increasingly important, but it's not clear how to meaningfully measure it

“It’s becoming more and more important and critical, as the accountability and administrative burden increases on institutions, not only that we can do our job, but that we can evidence that we’re doing our job, and that we can evidence impact arising from that.”

Director (Research Office), UK

Senior members of research offices said that demonstrating the impact of research outputs is becoming more important for obtaining funding. Eighty-six percent of researchers said that they had at some point been required by potential funders to provide this information.

Yet, both researchers and senior research office members question exactly what it means to demonstrate impact, and how it could be measured within and outside academia. Currently, the metrics used operate as proxies, such as the number of citations of published research. However, some senior research office staff question how effectively these statistics reflect the actual impact research is having on the larger society.

This leads to an environment where it is difficult to show the comprehensive value and impact of specific research, especially when trying to compare it to other researchers’ work. This is causing some frustration amongst researchers regarding the need to use and reconcile several different measures of impact.

Do you need to demonstrate the impact of your research to funding partners?

35% - Yes always



51% - Yes, some of the time



14% - No



Base:

All respondents (300)

In order to support their roles, researchers and those in the research office want more streamlined systems

Over a third of researchers said their institution is using four or more research management systems throughout the research lifecycle. Senior members of research offices recognized that their use of research management systems could be “chaotic” at times, with the need to collate key information from several different systems. Moreover, they noted poor user experience in particular as an example of the negative impact of current management systems.

Thinking about the different management systems, how many different systems do you use to conduct tasks throughout the research lifecycle?

“I also have a separate web-based thing for humans and a separate web-based thing for animals and a separate web-based thing for export control, so we’re trying to get all that straight.”

Assistant Vice-Provost (Research Office), Australia



Base:
All respondents (292)

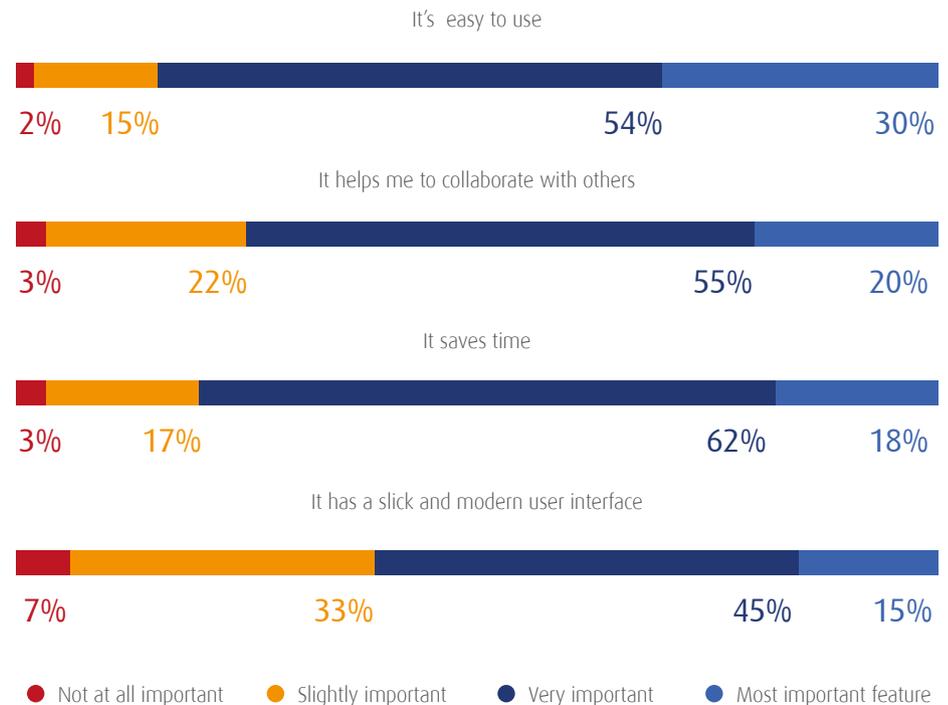
Researchers say it is important that research management systems are easy to use, aid collaboration, and save time

While research system efficiency was noted as a key factor for research office personnel, they also cited the importance of ease-of-use and robust capabilities. This was provided the system ensured that the quality of information and data provided was maintained.

How important are the following aspects of any research management system?

“[Improving systems] is not necessarily about doing things faster – it’s about doing more work and being more robust.”

Vice-Provost (Research Office), US



Base:

All respondents (300)

There are significant challenges in showcasing researcher profiles and keeping them current

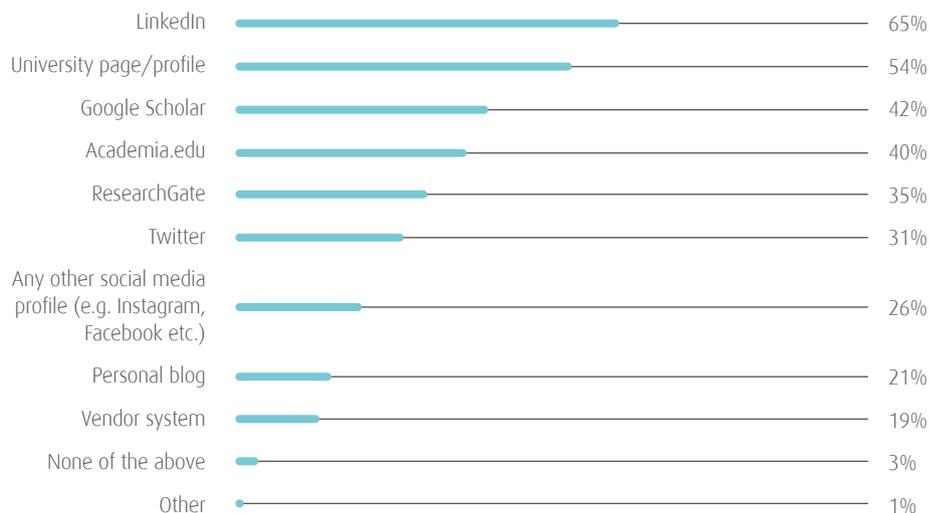
“People just don’t have time to put things together; they’re putting things together for tenure, then for this, then for that, then they’re expected to go and fill this form out online [so we can track their publications].”

Assistant Vice-Provost, US

Senior research office members said that they were involved in using information from researcher profile systems and were responsible for keeping these up to date. However, ultimately, it is the responsibility of the researchers to do so. Some research office personnel stated that it was difficult to encourage researchers to keep such profiles current, because they were often too busy to deal with multiple systems at the same time.

Of the researchers surveyed, 54% said they have a profile on their institution’s website, while 87% were aware of its use at their place of work – a gap of a third who are not showcasing their profile on the institutional portal (note: the survey didn’t check whether profiles are maintained and up-to-date). This may in part be due to the number of different systems researchers are using to report on their work, with one in five reporting the use of five or more profiles across a range of platforms.

➤ In which of the following places, if any, do you have a profile associated with your academic work?



Base:

All respondents (300)

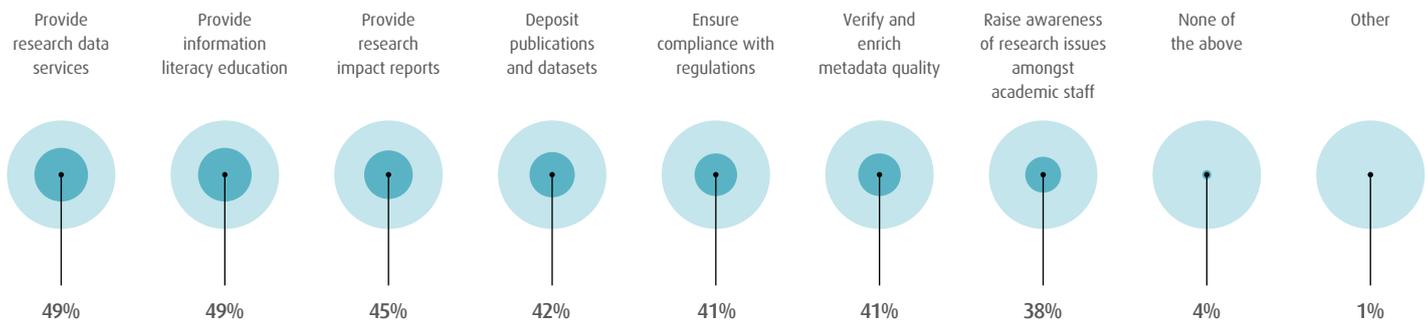
There is an opportunity for greater collaboration between the research office and the library to ensure the library plays a greater role in supporting researchers

Researchers have few clear expectations of support from the library at their institution. However, from the research it is clear they do expect the library to help with a number of different tasks.

When researchers are reaching out for help, libraries are turned to much less frequently than the research office or research assistants. However, libraries are generally expected to play more of a role in managing the publication end of the research lifecycle, such as managing article processing charges, finding relevant journals for publication, deposits to institutional repositories, and ensuring compliance with open access policies. There is still an opportunity for libraries to offer greater support around these areas of expertise.

There is also an opportunity to expand the libraries' areas of support in line with researcher requirements. Around four in ten researchers expected the library to help with depositing publications and datasets and ensure compliance with regulations. However, even more researchers said they expected the library to provide research data services and information literacy education. This suggests a gap in what researchers would like from the library at their institution and what they receive.

Which of the following do you expect the Library to do to support your role as a researcher?



Base:

All respondents (300)

Reflections

In spite of challenges in the sector, those involved in managing and delivering research at higher education institutions are aligned in their goals – to deliver more high-quality research that makes an impact on society. Importantly, it is clear there is a commitment across the sector to continuously improve outputs and systems to ensure that research management tasks can be completed not only more efficiently, but also more comprehensively.

Researchers are feeling under increasing time pressure and stress to manage all the tasks needed to complete research projects. They are reliant on the support of the research office for some parts of the process; however, there are opportunities to offer further support for researchers across a number of areas, including: funding, data management, demonstrating the impact and value of the research, and consolidating the many systems currently used in the research process workflow.

It is clear from the research that both research offices and libraries are supporting academic researchers at their institutions. However, it is also clear that greater collaboration between the departments would benefit and better support researchers and their university's key goals. Ultimately, more efficient and optimized research management would allow researchers to focus on what they enjoy and add their greatest value to academic research.



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The Ex Libris suite of research solutions enables institutions to aggregate, manage, and expose all research output & data, across all disciplines, match scholars with the right funding opportunities, and automate processes to reduce administrative burden on the research office, library, and researchers.

