

Careers Beyond Academia: Research Administration Officer (RAO)

What is a RAO and why is it important? In this article, Lia Zambetti interviews two RAOs, Dr Andrew Black from the University of Sydney and Dr Sharrada Subramanian from the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology in Singapore, who talk about their work experience and discuss their roles as a RAO.

Many large academic institutions have Research Administration Officers (RAOs). The precise job description of a RAO is difficult to pinpoint. Their titles may vary from “scientific manager” to “project officer in XXX” or other formulae, but they all have one thing in common: their role is to *support research and researchers* in the broadest possible sense. They are an important, if under-recognised, asset for researchers – many of whom do not even know that RAOs exist or where to find them. In large institution, the RAO office is usually introduced during induction/staff orientation but, if that does not happen, your head of department/faculty should be able to tell you how to contact the RAO office. Failing that, RAOs that are embedded in the institute/department may share office space with researchers – sometimes just having a look around pays off!

RAOs can help researchers prepare and submit their grants, and provide advice on intellectual property/commercialisation/ethics queries. Many researchers think, mistakenly, that RAOs are only “clerks” and, as such, are not qualified enough to advise researchers but this is really not the case. For a start, many RAOs have at least some research background (as is the case for Andrew Black and Sharrada Subramanian, further down in the article). Others are lawyers, NGO professionals who have managed large projects in challenging environments for years, finance experts...and in general, they know the ins and outs of their local funding landscape better than individual researchers. As a part of their job, they will keep scrupulously up to date with any funding change; this can be done monitoring regularly the funding guidelines, attending session by funding bodies on any change in structure/regulation, or liaising directly with funding bodies for any query. Those who are ex-researchers and can also advise on grant content (as opposed to compliance/structure advice only, which is still very valuable) can keep abreast of the literature in their field as a scientist would do – as university staff, they usually have access to the same library facilities/subscriptions as researchers do. Often, as mentioned later, they are even involved in the general management/strategic direction of large institutions. They may be located at a central level, in a dedicated office that caters to the needs of a whole University, or they may be embedded in individual faculties. In very large institutions, such as teaching and research universities with thousands of postgraduate researchers in multiple fields, you may find RAOs in both locations.

We have interviewed two RAOs, **Dr. Andrew Black** from the University of Sydney and **Dr. Sharrada Subramanian** from the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology in Singapore, to talk about their work experience. You can find their interviews below.

Interview with Dr Andrew Black, University of Sydney

Andrew Black, director of the researcher development and collaboration team at the University of Sydney, Australia, says: “I describe my role as supporting and enabling the development of research strategy at all levels; it is a mixture of things that are traditionally academically-led and others that belong more to the administrative sphere. On one side, it’s to assist individuals to develop their career at whatever stage they are at; then there’s the work with heads of school and deans all the way up to institutional strategy....and having a PhD, as well as leading a team where people have academic understanding and empathy, does help.

I had significant involvement in writing the [current] research strategy for the University of Sydney [<https://sydney.edu.au/about-us/vision-and-values/strategy.html>], due to a quirk of timing, but this reflects what can be the stability and value of administrative roles. This stability is especially relevant as many of the strategic aspects in a large institution take a long time to develop so one of the benefits of the position is having the long game -the long *view*-of things. Two other benefits of my role are, one, having a whole-of-university view: there is real value and power in being able to connect people for advice, collaboration or mentoring. The other point is what you learn from the sheer volume of activity; unlike a researcher who writes particular kinds of grants maybe once a year, or a strategy document maybe once every few years, we see these *all the time*. We read hundreds of grants across all disciplines, talk to hundreds of people, see all the problems and the issues across the University. I think this enables us to have a different level of understanding and richness of ideas – if you read hundreds of grants, you will see immediately which ones work and which don’t.



Dr Andrew Black (L), Director of the Researcher Development and collaboration team, University of Sydney, in conversation with Prof Daniela Traini (R), ARC Future Fellow, Respiratory Technology Group at the Woolcock Institute of Medical Research, Discipline of Pharmacology, School of Medical Sciences at University of Sydney

Interview with Sharrada Subramanian, IMCB, A*STAR, Singapore

We also interviewed Dr Sharrada Subramanian, the Scientific Manager at the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology (IMCB). IMCB is a research institute under the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR) (<https://www.a-star.edu.sg>). In her words: “I liaise daily with researchers, business teams, lawyers and intellectual property managers from A*STAR and beyond. My main roles include managing and negotiating academic and industrial

research agreements with companies, universities and hospitals. I try to meet the needs of industry partners by matching them with the best talents and expertise at IMCB. I also support IMCB scientists in polishing their grant applications and help them identify the translational potential of their research – this will make their applications more competitive. I like the wide variety of my tasks, and I appreciate the opportunity to put my scientific training, interpersonal and management skills to good use.

Coming from a scientific background, one of my challenges when I first took on this job was to get to grip and negotiate the legal/contractual terms and intellectual property matters for IMCB collaborations. It took me a while to be able to think from a more commercial perspective and with a foresight. Things got a little easier with time as I gained more experience. Overall, however, the job has met my expectations: not only am I able to stay close to the latest developments in science, but I am also able to drive meaningful collaborations between my institute and external companies and I find this gratifying seeing how developments at the bench have the potential to change and improve human healthcare in the future.

Conclusion:

The ones presented above are just two examples from very different environments; the job scope of a RAO can cover all this and more but it will always aim to support research and researchers. It may also be an interesting career opportunity for researchers that want to jump the fence while not, actually, *really* leaving academia – you will still see research every day, especially during grant season, you just won't be doing it yourself!

-Article contributed by

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