The Association of Commonwealth Universities

Support for research management and governance in Malaysia:

Report from a two-day workshop

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March 2016

Published by
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1. Introduction

In 2015, the Malaysian government launched the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education 2015-2025, outlining a comprehensive transformation programme for its higher education system. The blueprint aims to improve outcomes in terms of access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency.

The Universitas 21 Ranking of National Higher Education Systems 2014[1] placed Malaysia's higher education system 28th out of the 50 countries it assessed. In view of Malaysia's significant investments in higher education and research – Malaysia tops the list in terms of resources invested, but is in the bottom ten in terms of outputs – the Malaysian government believes there is opportunity to further improve the returns on these investments.

As part of this process, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education and the University of Malaya conducted a workshop and mapping exercise to review the current research management and governance framework, and identify needs and areas for improvement. Following this, experts from the UK were invited to a further workshop in Malaysia to share their experiences of best practice in research management and governance.

This activity was supported by a small project to support research governance and management in Malaysia, funded by the British Council and the Malaysian Industry-Government Group for High Technology (MIGHT) through the Newton-Ungku Omar Fund. The ACU, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, and University of Malaya were appointed to deliver the project activities from November 2015 until the end of March 2016.

The project, which also included a week-long study tour in the UK, aimed to review the current Malaysian framework for research management and governance, identify needs and areas for improvement, explore best practice in the UK, and develop recommendations for improvement.

This paper summarises the outcomes and lessons learned from the two-day project workshop, which took place from 2-3 February 2016 at the University of Malaya.

1.1 Workshop structure and participants

The workshop was attended by 30 delegates from public and private universities in Malaysia, as well as representatives from the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education and the British Council (see Appendix 1 for a full list of attendees). Participants were generally at senior levels within their institutions, and were highly engaged throughout. We were also fortunate to be joined by staff with a policymaking brief within the Ministry of Higher Education, which added a further dimension and relevance to the discussions.

Focusing on the role of governance, infrastructure, and individuals in research management, the workshop was built around four key themes: locating research management within the institution, designing research management systems, research management and institutional performance, and developing research managers.

The workshop was presented by Dr John Kirkland, Deputy Secretary General of the ACU and former Director of Research Services at Brunel University; Silke Blohm, Director of Research and Enterprise at SOAS University of London, UK; and Dr Antony Weir, Head of Research and Legal Services at Heriot Watt University, UK. In addition, three Malaysian institutions presented case studies describing aspects of their current operation – the University of Technology Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, and the University of Malaya. This reflected the workshop's desire to facilitate interactive discussions between Malaysian participants, rather than being primarily an opportunity for delegates to hear about UK and international practice. A full programme can be found in Appendix 3.

The ACU were pleased to have the opportunity to present in such an environment, and extend their thanks to the University of Malaya and the British Council for their help and support in making the event possible.

[1] The Universitas 21 Ranking assesses higher education systems in 50 countries based on resources, environment, connectivity, and output.

2. Research management in Malaysian universities

The workshop confirmed that clear research management structures existed within most participating institutions. However, these were at differing stages of development and had varying short-term objectives, largely reflecting the ambitions and research intensity of their institutions. Several universities regarded the development of research management as an important element in the drive to improve their place in international ranking tables. Among the newer, less research intensive universities, research management was seen as important to establishing a research culture and incentivising staff to undertake research.

A typical structure involved functions being clustered in research management centres (RMC), with directors seconded from academic positions. A report from the previous workshop for Malaysian practitioners stated that: 'In Malaysia, there are no posts known as research managers. Academics are seconded from their position as lecturers to head the various sections under research portfolios, both at institutional as well as national or ministerial levels'.

This model represents a significant difference between Malaysian systems and those in the UK. The advantages and disadvantages of having a system which relies largely on academics – primarily on secondment – formed a significant element in the workshop's discussions.

One obvious advantage of the Malaysian model is the closeness of RMCs to academic departments and university research strategies. Academic staff may also be perceived by their colleagues as having more credibility and legitimacy. This is important since academics may be wary of new research management systems, viewing them as an obstacle, rather than an aid, to the research process. Academic staff may also be perceived as having a greater understanding of the research process itself, which some participants felt would make them more effective in the role. Some practitioners felt that administrative or support staff might be more interested in 'keeping their workflow easy to manage', or might not have the detailed knowledge required.

On the other hand, academic leadership of the research management function brings with it an opportunity cost. Senior academics working in research management may be doing so at the expense of their regular research work. This could be particularly problematic for those in fast-moving disciplines, who might find it difficult to catch up following a secondment. The rotating model might also cause issues when it comes to establishing continuity in workflows and processes. Secondments were common not only at senior level but also for lower-level research management work, which was often undertaken by more junior staff who had been hired or seconded to specific projects.

At the heart of the debate was the need for clear agreement on the skills required for managing research. A large part of the workshop was devoted to identifying these, in view of the detailed range of responsibilities that RMCs undertake. These include, variously, pre-award services (i.e. application development), contract management, financial and project management of grants, research data management, publications, and ethical aspects of research.

In the final session, participants sought to group the required skills under three headings: **knowledge of the research environment**, **professional skills**, and **personal skills**. The first set of skills was considered necessary for estimating realistic timescales and costing, helping to improve the quality of applications, understanding the likely intellectual property implications of results, and the relative importance of publication. Professional skills were considered important in areas such as the legal, financial and accounting aspects of research, as well as marketing and human resources. Personal skills (known also as 'soft skills') might include those of influencing, negotiating, presenting, and confidence-building. These were considered necessary not only in relationships with external clients, but also in managing internal relationships.

In considering internal relations, delegates were invited to give specific examples of approaches designed to promote close working between the research management office and academic staff. Examples cited included the promotion of workshops that could be attended by both sets of staff – thus creating a common working environment. It was considered important to place information online in an accessible manner, which could be seen to save academic time. The delegation of key functions was mentioned, particularly in the case of larger institutions and research centres. It was also thought important to customise approaches to different groups, recognising that some might be more resistant to change than others.

2.1 The role of the research management office – views and suggestions

From these discussions, participants were invited to suggest areas in which the research management office should and should not be involved. Some of the ideas discussed are listed below, although it should be emphasised that these were from individuals and do not necessarily reflect consensus among the group as a whole.

Thoughts on activities in which the research management office <u>should</u> be involved:

- Grant management and monitoring
- Point of reference/one-stop centre for all research activities, for both internal and external clients
- Providing researchers with training in research management
- To facilitate, not dictate
- Data management
- Financial management
- Industry engagement
- Higher degree research (HDR) engagement

Thoughts on activities in which the research management office should <u>not</u> be involved:

- The search for new research grants
- Proposal writing
- Commercialisation
- Publications
- Controlling research agreements
- Dictating
- Policing research
- Creating research policies
- The micromanagement of projects

Thoughts on what participants would like from a research management system:

- 'An intelligent, integrated, and comprehensive system that smoothly facilitates the research process – with an emphasis on the word *intelligent'*
- A system that is capable of managing, facilitating, and assisting with the future direction of research
- A system that is user friendly, fully integrated, and capable of managing different requirements from different stakeholders
- 'An integrated and sustainable research ecosystem that drives research excellence through effective and efficient research management and ethical governance'

Thoughts on the key 'customers' of a research management office:

- Management and managers
- Researchers

3. Towards an externally focused approach

A major difference between Malaysian and UK research management offices is that the former are more focused on the distribution of internal research funds, whereas the latter focus more on generating and managing funds from external sources. In relation to this, participants noted the results of a survey of Malaysian academics, which suggested that research management officers in Malaysia were valued slightly more for their management, as opposed to their proactive, functions.

Such differences reflect wider variations between the two systems. In the UK, the growth of research management activity was closely linked to the move towards a more competitive, project-based system of funding research in the 1980s and 1990s. Given the desire of the Malaysian authorities to introduce a more competitive basis for research allocation in future, it is likely that generation of external funding will become more significant. This need not detract from the internal function, however, which brings with it the advantage of closer synergy between the research office and wider institutional research strategies – something which is sometimes lacking in UK institutions.

As Malaysia moves towards a more competitive, project-based funding system, one aspect of externally focused work which could require further development is that of costing and pricing research projects. In this context, the workshop explored the UK's system of full economic costing and the systems adopted by UK universities to manage this. It was recommended that, even where full costs are unlikely to be recovered, these should still be calculated.

Considering that most Malaysian institutions seem relatively unfamiliar with the specifics of international research funding, this seems an obvious area for future training and development. Such training could cover proposal development and familiarisation with the specific rules and regulations of international funding organisations. Perhaps most importantly, however, training could also explore how to identify suitable funding calls and funding bodies, as well as how to build a track record with such organisations. A useful route into the international funding landscape might be to seek international partners with an established track record and start as a subcontractor within a consortium. This could be an excellent opportunity to build a reputation with funders, while leaving most of the more complex application and grant management to the lead organisation.

Discussions also showed a desire and need to move from an approach that is mainly driven by internal funding towards a more outward facing model. It was widely felt that attracting external funding would also have a clear impact on an institution's reputation and visibility, as well as the more obvious financial gains.

4. Networking and professionalisation

The final session of the workshop included a discussion on whether or not research management should be regarded as a profession in its own right. For the purposes of the discussion, a profession was defined as:

- A vocation founded upon specialised educational training, the purpose of which is to supply disinterested objective counsel and service to others

which has:

- A professional association, cognitive base, institutionalised training, licensing, work autonomy, colleague control, and a code of ethics

The idea of research management as a profession excited some interest and linked to earlier discussions about from where research managers should be drawn. Research offices in the UK typically employ research managers and officers with a wide range of backgrounds to complement each other's skills. While around half of research management staff in the UK have an academic background, hardly any continue their academic career when taking on a role in research management. Increasingly, research management is seen as a profession in itself, as reflected by the growing number of professional development courses − as well as dedicated degree programmes − across the globe.

Professional research management associations play an important role in this context, and exist at both national and international levels. In the UK, the largest such organisation is the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA), which provides professional development opportunities and training for all staff working in research management. ARMA has developed a professional development framework which describes the activities, knowledge, skills, and behaviours required across the full range of research management and administration roles. A summary of this was presented at the workshop.

Figure 1. ARMA's Professional Development Framework – the main themes

The development of new networks, or increased participation in existing ones, should be an important element in any future strategy to develop Malaysian research management. The role of professional associations such as ARMA extends beyond training, to the wider development and sharing of best practice, and to representing the profession (and its collective expertise) to government, university leaders, and funding bodies.

Considering the well-established research management structures in many Malaysian institutions, it would seem pertinent for colleagues to engage further in establishing their own networking structures – something that this workshop sought to facilitate – as well as engaging with international networks through the biannual International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) conference and professional research management organisations (Appendix 2).

An excellent way to gain more knowledge about international funding opportunities, as well as specific aspects of the grant management lifecycle and best practice at an international level, would be secondments for individual staff members into other (international) research offices. Such secondments are common practice within the sector and are often facilitated by professional research management organisations, as well as through institutional partnerships or personal networks. Depending on the desired goals, secondment periods of one to four weeks are considered ideal.

5. Future areas of focus

In addition to the recommendations described above, the workshop identified a number of specific issues for attention in future stages of the project, particularly during the forthcoming study tour in the UK. These included the following:

- **Research funds** – Malaysian universities currently work largely with internal funds, while external funds form a smaller part of their research management activities. Participants expressed a desire to develop external funds portfolios
- Identifying **funding opportunities** and wider **university marketing**
- **Proposal writing and development** – participants were keen to develop strategies and identify why proposals fail. They were also interested in understanding the funders' perspective – i.e. their expectations of proposals and the extent of university autonomy
- **Assessment of research proposals** (e.g. peer review) – both internal and external
- **Demand management** – e.g. caps on the number of poor quality proposals that can be submitted and the implications for individuals and universities
- **Costing and pricing** research activities – including budget flexibility and virement (the process of transferring items from one financial account to another)
- Staff **transfers** and research equipment
- **Consultancies** – definitions and approaches
- How international **academic collaborations** are formed
- **Data management** – information and data on research, as well as management of datasets
- **Monitoring of research progress** – how do you know when/if work has started? Do you wait until the end of the project to find out? Are researchers actually doing the work?
- **Industry linkages** and the role of the research management centre – including **knowledge transfer partnerships**
- Identifying **tangible research outcomes**, including penalties for not achieving outcomes
- How universities **measure impact** and prepare impact reports
- Collecting information on researchers' **publications** – including the possibility of automated processes

Appendix 1: Workshop participants

Position	Institution
Director of Education and Society	British Council Malaysia
Newton Programmes Manager	British Council Malaysia
Deputy Director and Head of Legal and Research Services	Heriot-Watt University, UK
Dean, Research Management Centre	International Islamic University Malaysia
Deputy Director General	Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia
Assistant Director, Special Fund Unit and Promotions Planning for Excellence IPT	Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia
Manager, Data and Financial (Research Management)	Monash University Malaysia Campus
Manager, Grants and Contracts (Research Management)	Monash University Malaysia Campus
Senior Manager, Research Management Centre	Multimedia University, Malaysia
Director, Research and Enterprise	SOAS University of London, UK
Deputy Secretary General	The Association of Commonwealth Universities
Programme Officer	The Association of Commonwealth Universities
Social Research Officer	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Deputy Dean, Research Management and Innovation Centre	Universiti Malaysia Perlis
Director, Research Management Centre	Universiti Putra Malaysia
Director, Research Creativity and Management Office	Universiti Sains Malaysia
Senior Manager, Research Management Centre	Universiti Teknologi Petronas, Malaysia
Head of Research Development, Innovation and Research Management Centre	Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Malaysia
Director, Bureau for Excellence In Research and Teaching	Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia
Deputy Dean (Research Grant Management), Office of Research, Innovation, Commercialisation, and Consultancy	Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia
Director, Research Management and Innovation Centre	Universiti Utara Malaysia
Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research and Innovation	University of Malaya, Malaysia
Associate Vice-Chancellor, Institute of Research Management and Innovation	University of Malaya, Malaysia
Dean, Wellness Research Cluster	University of Malaya, Malaysia
Dean, Frontier Science Research Cluster	University of Malaya, Malaysia
Dean, Equitable Society Research Cluster	University of Malaya, Malaysia
Deputy Dean, Wellness Research Cluster	University of Malaya, Malaysia
Manager, Research Support Office	University of Nottingham in Malaysia
Director, Research Management Centre	University of Technology Malaysia
Deputy Director (Project Management), Research Management Centre	University of Technology Malaysia

Appendix 2: Professional research management associations

- Association of Research Managers and Administrators (UK) (ARMA)
- Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS)
- Austrian Universities' Research Administrators and Managers (AURAM)
- Brazilian Research Administration and Management Association (BRAMA)
- Canadian Association of Research Administrators (CARA)
- Caribbean Research and Innovation Management Association (CabRIMA)
- Danish Association of Research Managers and Administrators (DARMA)
- East African Research and Innovation Management Association (EARIMA)
- European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA)
- Finnish Association of Research Managers and Advisors (Finn-ARMA)
- Icelandic Association of Research Managers and Administrators Ice-ARMA
- International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS)
- Licensing Executives Society International (LESI)
- National Council of University Research Administrators (USA) (NCURA)
- Norwegian Network for Administration and Research Management (NARMA)
- PraxisUnico (PraxisUnico)
- Research Manager and Administrator Network Japan (RMAN-J)
- Society of Research Administrators International (SRA International)
- Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA)
- Swiss Association of Research Managers and Administrators (SARMA)
- West African Research and Innovation Management Association (WARIMA)

Appendix 3: Workshop programme

The workshop was presented by Dr John Kirkland, Deputy Secretary General of the ACU and former Director of Research Services at Brunel University; Silke Blohm, Director of Research and Enterprise at SOAS University of London, UK; and Dr Antony Weir, Head of Research and Legal Services at Heriot Watt University, UK.

Day one: Establishing structures and processes

- **Introductions and aims of workshop, plus the international context**

- **Theme 1: Locating research management within the institution**
  Silke Blohm and John Kirkland
  What we are trying to achieve with research management and examples of research management structures in the UK

- **Case study from a Malaysian institution**

- **Breakout session**
  Discussions around Theme 1, and a chance for delegates to articulate their priorities

- **Theme 2: Designing research management systems**
  Silke Blohm and Antony Weir
  Defining the major categories in research management

- **Case study from a Malaysian institution**
  A delegate presents a case study of their experience of research management

- **Breakout session**
  Discussions around Theme 2

Day two: Monitoring, improvement, and development

- **Theme 2 (continued): Designing research management systems**
  Silke Blohm and Antony Weir

- **Theme 3: Research management and institutional performance**
  Antony Weir

- **Case study from a Malaysian institution**
  A delegate presents a case study of their experience of research management

- **Breakout session**
  Discussions exploring what aspects of institution performance should be measured and how you would measure these – including the identification of appropriate key performance indicators (KPIs)

- **Theme 3 (continued): Research management and institutional performance**
  Antony Weir
  How performance management works in the UK, with brief reference to the UK's Research Excellence Framework

- **Theme 4: Developing research managers**
  John Kirkland
  Finding and developing the right people for the job, considering the existing and desired structures and systems, plus the role of professional research management associations

- **Final session/review**
  Reflections on the workshop, identification of focus areas for the forthcoming study tour, and other follow-on activities – e.g. ACU Measures and the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS)

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