

D2.2.2.2

Research support in ERUA

Part 2 – Challenges, Good Practices, and
Potentials for Mutualisation

31 March 2023

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List of abbreviations

EUI	European Universities Initiative
NBU	New Bulgarian University (Нов български университет)
RUC	Roskilde University (Roskilde Universitet)
UAegean	University of the Aegean (Πανεπιστήμιο Αιγαίου)
UKON	University of Konstanz (Universität Konstanz)
Paris8	Paris 8 University Vincennes-Saint-Denis (Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis)

Executive summary

This report presents the second part of a two-part study that examines research support structures at the five partner universities of the European Reform University Alliance (ERUA). While the focus of the first part was on mapping current structures and practices of research support, the second part of the study explores good practices, challenges, and potential for mutualisation ('creating shared structures') in research support across the five partner universities. We recommend reading both reports consecutively to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research support structures in place, along with the potential for mutualisation aimed at enhancing research support. Together, the two parts of the study seek to encourage discussions on how research support can be improved.

This report will be of interest to staff and management involved in research support activities to understand the current state of research support at peer institutions. Additionally, it also tends to inform those who actively participate in committees and institutional organs responsible for organizing their respective universities. Lastly, this report may also pique the interest of research staff who frequently collaborate with various research support services.

The study used an exploratory mixed-method approach, including a literature analysis, data from the 'Research Administration as a Profession' survey from 2019, and drawing on a survey answered by research support staff across the alliance and, finally, a follow-up focus group.

This report assesses good practices and challenges in research support as experienced by research support staff in the partner universities of ERUA (NBU, Paris8, RUC, UAegean, UKON). Our findings highlight the importance of personal contact and good relationships with research staff as examples of good practices, with social and communication skills being essential. However, the study also reveals challenges such as the lack of clarity in work portfolio and task division as well as high levels of stress and workload.

Furthermore, we discuss in the report how research support staff can help to foster conditions to conduct research that aligns with the core values of the alliance, focusing on societal impact and interdisciplinary collaboration. Our investigation found that the professional identity of research support staff is aligned with the alliance's values of promoting interdisciplinarity and societal impact. However, our survey results also show that research support staff face some obstacles to engaging research staff in aspects of their work. In the context of the current

academic structures, research staff are often not rewarded for engaging in impact activities or interdisciplinary collaboration.

Based on the exploration of the current research support structures in place, which we mapped in the first report of the study, and the discussion on good practices and challenges, we examine potentials for mutualisation and pooling of resources in research support across the partner universities. We argue that mutualisation should primarily be implemented for tasks that do not require physical proximity to research staff. Examples of such initiatives could include monitoring of funding or ‘match making’ between researchers within the alliance. Furthermore, we highlight the potential of knowledge and experience sharing between the partner universities, tapping into the broader notion of capacity building across institutions.

The report also calls for awareness of institutional layout differences and contextual differences of the partner universities, which could prove challenging when designing and implementing mutual initiatives. Furthermore, we emphasise that while creating joint transnational initiatives may aim for benefits in terms of simplifying work, there is a risk of creating additional or parallel structures. This can lead to a heavier workload for research support staff which in turn could be counterproductive to the initial goal.

In conclusion, our study recommends that mutualisation initiatives be implemented with careful consideration of potential drawbacks and benefits. Finally, we want to encourage further research involving additional stakeholders to explore more specific recommendations for the alliance as a whole and individual partner universities.

1. Introduction

This report is the second part of a two-part study that assesses research support structures at the five partner universities of the European Reform University Alliance (ERUA)¹. As a continuation of our analysis of the current layout of support structures in the first report, we address in this part the good practices and challenges encountered by the people working with research support. We also critically examine the potential for various forms of mutualisation² against the backdrop of the overarching goals of not only the alliance, but also European higher education and research aims more generally.

The report is targeted at various audiences at the partner universities: We address both those working in research support units as well as the management and leadership of these units. We aim to inspire examination of their respective structures to identify good practices as well as potential challenges in their work. Likewise, we target research staff who participate in committees and institutional organs which are involved in organising their respective universities. Finally, the report is of potential interest to research staff who frequently interact with research support.

The first report presented the notion of ‘research support’ and situated the issue within the context of changes in the higher education sector. It should be noted that research support in the current research landscape encompasses a broad remit of tasks, which varies greatly depending on the institutional and cultural context of individual universities and research organisations. In this report, we use the term ‘research support staff’ as a more neutral term reflecting our explorative approach to defining and understanding the scope and nature of their work.³ For a detailed outline of ‘What is research support’ and the contextualisation, please refer to the discussion in the first report.

¹ We refer to these simply as *partner universities* throughout the report.

² Mutualisation broadly refers to collaboration and pooling of resources. We elaborate on the meaning of this term later in section **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.**

³ Exception will be made when referring to the RAAAP survey, where the designations ‘research administrators’ and ‘research managers’ are used. Likewise, in the survey distributed to the research support staff at the partner universities (see Methodology section) we used the terms ‘research administration’ and ‘research management’ to draw on familiar terminology.

2. Background

In the initial ERUA proposal, the overarching goal relating to research support was to increase coordination and collaboration between partner universities, particularly between those units working with funding from external sources within Europe, e.g., Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe. It was specified that ERUA would establish ‘common coordinated research support services’ to organise collaboration between research support units and, more specifically, target joint submissions to European funding programmes. Subsequently, extensive pooling of resources and mutual approaches to funding and support constitute long-term goals of the alliance. We examine opportunities of these mutual initiatives and to which extent they help to achieve the overall strategic goals addressed by the alliance. We seek to critically examine not only how to implement such ‘mutualisation’ of the partner universities in research support but also to ask the fundamental question of whether this is fruitful for the partner universities in ERUA.

2.1. European Universities Initiative – harmonisation and the attempt to create European institutions

ERUA is part of the European Commission’s ‘European Universities Initiative’ (EUI), which constitutes the most recent expression of the aim of convergence and compatibility to increase European attractiveness and competitiveness in higher education. The Bologna process paved the way for an ambitious programme to significantly accelerate – deepen and widen – transnational collaboration between higher education institutions. Various described as either a game-changer, or the canary in the coalmine, the EUI builds on the achievements of over two decades of European collaboration in higher education and research towards the establishment of the European (Higher) Education and Research Areas (EEA & ERA). While implementation and capacity across the European region remain uneven, the EUI presents a significant leap in terms of ambition: from mutual recognition and exchange to mutualisation and ultimately the creation of ‘European institutions’ (cf. also the aim of establishing shared infrastructures, a legal statute, European degree, etc.). The EUI, therefore, emphasises the importance of a shared long-term strategic vision for collaboration at alliance level. Thus, the alliance is situated in a European context, where ambitious efforts of mutualisation are fundamental strategic goals.

3. Scope and methodology

3.1. Research questions

In this report, we address the following overarching questions:

- 1) Which good practices and challenges are experienced by research support staff in their work?
- 2) How can research support help to foster interdisciplinarity and societal impact?
- 3) What potentials and challenges does mutualisation between partner universities entail?

3.2. Limitation/focus

In this report, we limit our focus to the point of view of the research support staff. As such, it is central to the findings of this report that they are based on the perspective of the research support staff. However, we encourage further examination into how research staff assess support systems. This perspective has largely been overlooked by the existing literature, although the research staff are the primary users of the support offered. Moreover, in the literature, it is implied that the relationship between research support and research staff might give rise to tensions, specifically when the tasks of the research support staff cross into those that were traditionally carried out by academics themselves (Shelley, 2010, p. 60; Whitchurch, 2008). The relationship between research staff and research support staff becomes even more relevant to study considering these tensions and conflicts.

3.3. Methodology

This section briefly outlines the methodological approach used in the study, highlighting the study's explicit exploratory nature. Besides a literature analysis, we draw partly on the Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP) survey from 2019. To obtain input from research support staff at the partner universities, an online survey was conducted after mapping the research support structures and services through university websites and directories, as well as some personal communication. To complement our analysis of survey responses, we conducted a focus group discussion.

We include 39 full and 41 partial survey responses. Additionally, in the focus group, four research support staff from two partner universities participated. Further information on the methodology, including the survey design, qualitative coding process, and response rates, can be found in the appendix.

4. Analysis and discussion

The following analysis and discussion are largely structured based on the research questions presented in chapter 3. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the findings and discussions outlined in the next sections, we recommend reading the first report of the study, which not only situates the issue of research support in the larger context of changes in the higher education sector but also provides an overview of the current structures of research support at the five partner universities.

4.1. Which good practices and challenges are experienced by research support workers in their work?

Executive summary

This chapter focuses on good practices and challenges experienced by research support staff at the partner universities. The broader aim of the chapter is to initiate conversations on organisational learning among the partner universities by highlighting the difficulties and effective methods faced by those who provide research support. Good practices highlighted in the chapter include the importance of personal contact and communication in building trust and relationships with research staff and the adoption of a service-oriented mindset. The lack of clear divisions of responsibilities was identified as a significant challenge. Additionally, research support staff experiences a high level of stress and extensive workload, which can impede the provision of effective research support and generally contribute negatively to mental well-being. To address this, the chapter emphasises the importance of establishing effective organisational processes and clear boundaries of responsibility. Future research should focus on the perspectives of research staff and their experiences with research support to gain additional insights into how structures and practices can be improved.

4.1.1. Good practices

Drawing on the responses to our survey and insights from the focus group, we lay out good practices that can provide guidance on where to apply efforts to enhance the capabilities of research support. The following presentation does not claim to address all dimensions but aims to provide a starting point for discussions among practitioners in the field of research support, but also among university management and, finally, also among research staff, as they are the essential partners in these activities. Regarding this point, we would also like to refer to the activities of Re:ERUA.⁴

Strong relationship between research staff and research support staff

Collaboration between people, based on personal relationships, is central to the function of any organisation (Irving et al., 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that building strong relationships between research staff and research support based on trust and mutual respect is considered essential in research support settings. The focus group underscored the value of personal contact with research staff, stressing that physical proximity is a chance for serendipitous encounters that facilitate interactions. This insight echoes the findings of a study by Rytberg & Geschwind (2021, p. 54), which point out a persistent need for local capacity, meaning decentralised support structures located at different faculties and departments to ensure closeness to the research staff. As such, at the very general level, we can point to the strong relationships between research staff and research support staff as a good practice at ERUA partners.

Kick-off meetings for research projects that include both research staff and research support staff, in-person meetings as well as dealing with requests in a timely manner were presented in the survey as examples of effective practices to foster positive relationships between research staff and research support. Our analysis provides initial evidence from the perspective of the research support staff, but we also encourage future studies to explore academics' views on what constitutes effective relationship building with research support, which could further inform the development of good practices. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Paris8 has initiated a participatory project aimed at gaining a better understanding of the needs of research staff

⁴ Re:ERUA is a parallel project to ERUA, which aims to set up an engagement strategy for research and innovation for the alliance. For more info, see <https://erua-eui.eu/re-erua/>

and the pressing issues they face through a survey among its researchers and doctoral students.

In our survey, we asked respondents to express their agreement with statements related to how they perceive their relationship with research staff. Figure 1 shows the share of respondents that agreed or agreed strongly with these statements. As shown, 61.9 % of respondents stated that they agreed or agreed strongly that *'research staff and research administrators often have different views of things'*, and 45.0 % agreed or agreed strongly that *'the demands of research staff seeking support and the structural demands of the current research environment are often conflicting'*. Likewise, 45.2 % agreed or agreed strongly that *'it can be hard to engage research staff in the issues that are important in my work'*, and 27.9 % agreed or agreed strongly that *'it can feel as though my work is often invisible to the research staff'*.

In total, this paints a picture that the respondents feel as though there is some level of conflict between, on the one hand, the views and needs of research staff and, on the other hand, the structural surroundings. Likewise, a large share feels that it can be challenging to engage research staff on important issues related to their work. However, it is important to mention that the majority of respondents (81.0 %) feel that their work *is* being appreciated by the research staff.

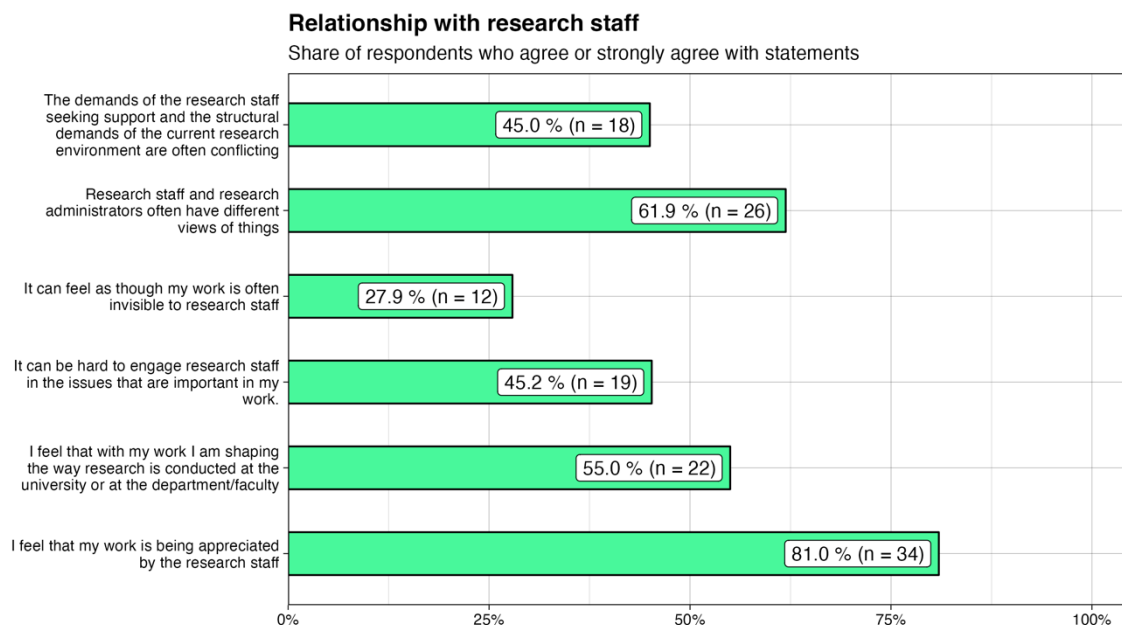


Figure 1

The responses to the open-ended questions in our survey also emphasised that research support activities should adopt a service-oriented approach focused on ‘making things possible’ rather than merely following procedures. This approach plays into cultivating a proactive mindset and the self-identity of the profession as ‘problem-solvers’ (Reardon, 2021) and a ‘helping profession’ (Acker et al., 2019), which was also stressed in the focus group. In line with this notion, our survey results reveal that the respondents see relieving research staff of the administrative burden as the most significant factor for effective research support.

Another factor for effective research support which was seen as important in the survey responses is awareness and understanding of the needs of the research staff, which encompasses on the side of the research support staff the effort to get a basic familiarity with the norms and values of the scientific discipline and the academic working environment.

However, it is not only the research support staff that should be mindful of the research staff’s requirements. Also, the research staff must understand the role of the research support staff. The following quote from the survey summarises this: *‘Good communication between administration and research. Everyone should be aware of their responsibilities, obligations, and limits.’*⁵ Thus, developing a shared understanding of roles, tasks, and responsibilities is a fundamental prerequisite for effective partnerships between research staff and research support staff, pointing to the next theme that arose from our survey results. The need for a clear division of tasks and responsibilities was a reoccurring theme, which we elaborate in the following section.

Clarity and transparency in tasks, responsibilities, and procedures

As an emerging profession, but also due to institutional differences, the roles and responsibilities of research support are often not clearly defined. Also, in our mapping of support structures at the partner universities (see section 6.2 in the first report of the study) and in our focus group discussion, we experienced the blurriness of what exactly research support encompasses. In daily work life, this functional complexity can lead to contested legitimacy and power and, consequently, to tensions, particularly between research support staff and research staff concerning responsibilities and procedures (Shelley, 2010). Against this backdrop, the topic of

⁵ Response to the open-ended question: *‘What are in your experience the most important factors that enable good research management and administration?’*

clarity and transparency in tasks, responsibilities, and procedures was mentioned prominently in the survey responses as an essential factor to ensure effective research support, whereby two strands of action can be distinguished.

Firstly, it was stressed in the focus group that a clear mandate from the university leadership is crucial in providing legitimacy and direction for the research support activities. It is the responsibility of university management to facilitate a conversation about what research support should encompass and to establish clear criteria for assessing the effectiveness and success of research support efforts, thus providing legitimacy and direction for support activities. The ambiguity of the tasks and the complex work portfolio will be further addressed in the challenges.

Secondly, a clear division of assignments and obligations, as well as a simultaneous awareness of shared work spheres with research staff, are seen as essential for an effective support environment, according to our survey responses. The tension with the research staff was also discussed in the focus group, whereby there was a sense of feeling of being misunderstood and not being able to meet the expectations of the research staff. 'Speaking the same language' was seen as an important basis for fruitful collaboration. In line with this, communication skills were seen as the most important skill for research support staff, according to our survey results. Thereby, translation skills in a broader sense to decode grant calls for research staff (and reverse) were mentioned repeatedly in the survey responses.

Furthermore, one response in the survey described '*specified job descriptions and specifications*' as good practice in the research support environment. This statement ties into the observation by Dunleavy et al. (2019, p. 113) that job specifications frequently miss listing the skills that are actually important in the daily work life of those in the roles of research support staff.

Work process & structure

In addition to relationship building and communication, the establishment and transparency of work processes were stated as vital conditions for an effective support environment in the survey results and focus group discussion. For example, one participant highlighted the importance of work processes in the focus group:

'I think the communication is important but also the process. It helps the administrative [staff] a lot to make a good follow up, to know that there is a to do list to do; to don't forget anything, to define the limit of each job, of each task of

the different offices. I think it is very important to have process. It's good to communicate, but sometimes there are misunderstandings because there is no process.'

In the survey, participants identified further examples of good practices for structuring and organising support activities from their experiences. For instance, having the same support staff conduct pre-award and post-award tasks was suggested to improve the quality. However, a focus group participant also stressed that specific skills and competences might be needed in different stages of the research life cycle – for example, pre-award research support often requires legal expertise. Accordingly, one should be mindful of which expertise is needed at each stage of the project and design and strengthen collaboration.

Additionally, having *'applications reviewed by peers at a formal institutional set-up'* was mentioned as an example of good practice. However, the respondent that proposed this did not specify how such a process should be designed more concretely. To elaborate on this practice, we could imagine a formal process of multiple staff reviewing the same application to pool experience and competences to enhance the quality.

With these recommendations for good practices, we do not intend to provide a 'one-size-fits-all' model for organising and structuring work processes in research support. We are aware that the organisational and institutional structures of the universities might hinder more profound changes in the support structures and services as well as that, in some cases, customised support is desirable (as also mentioned in survey responses), which in turn cannot be captured in process guidelines. Nevertheless, our results also suggest the need for more transparency in the workflow. This is not only a question of how work processes are presented to the outside world but ultimately should also steer discussions on how to organise and structure the wide-ranging palette of support tasks most efficiently and effectively, ideally underpinned by insights from research staff and their needs regarding support activities.

Collaboration, pooling resources and leveraging synergies

Collaboration, pooling resources and leveraging synergies among research support units (e.g., support located at the central level and the department level), but also between different departments and universities or institutions, was another topic that emerged from the survey

responses as good practice. For example, the following survey response⁶ emphasises the benefit of collaboration between different research institutions to build capacity among employees:

*'Towards Horizon Europe is a course designed in collaboration with our [regional EU-office] and its membership. By pooling resources, we have successfully built the capacity of our researchers to engage with Horizon Europe and develop their Horizon Europe proposals based on the experience of [several universities and regions]'*⁷

The issue of collaboration and communication between units and departments was a topic that appeared throughout the responses in the survey, suggesting a need to increase time and opportunities for collaboration and communication.

In the focus group, the possibility of ERUA and Re:ERUA to act as a network for research support as an open space for collaboration and thereby give impetus to collaborative research and new funding opportunities was highlighted. The conclusion from the focus group suggests that the knowledge held by actors in the alliance should be seen (and exploited more fully) as a strategic resource by transforming it into shared knowledge circulated in the network.

Investing in Professional Development and Training

Against the backdrop of a complex work portfolio which requires staff to absorb 'specialist knowledge' in many subfields, the demand to invest in professional development and training emerged as another issue from the survey respondents. This recommendation is directed to leaders of support units and university management to recognise the value of investing in employee skill development to build up and maintain a research support team with high and up-to-date expertise. This section also aligns with the 17th action of the European Research Area Policy Agenda for the period 2022-2024, which emphasises improving training and skills development of research support.

⁶ Response to the open-ended question: 'Can you share examples of good practices in research management and administration that have proven to be particularly successful or effective, either from your own work or from others that you have observed? (e.g., good or effective ways to structure work processes, successful initiatives, effective strategies, fruitful collaboration efforts)'

⁷ The text in the square brackets indicates that the parts of quote has been anonymised

In our survey, we asked which skills and competences were important in the work of research support and which skills and competences might be lacking currently. As mentioned earlier, communication skills are seen as essential in the research support work, together with a range of other so-called ‘soft skills’: *‘flexibility’*, *‘time management’*, *‘problem solving’*. But also, more tangible and technical abilities, such as expertise in budgeting and accounting, as well as know-how and experience in international grant management and regulatory expertise, were prominently stated as important and currently lacking in the survey responses.

One response in the survey points to sharing good practices among colleagues (within and across institutions) as an important factor in enhancing the work of research support, which also feeds into the previous theme of collaboration, pooling resources and leveraging synergies.

As we covered in section 5.3 in the first report of this study, training and establishing formal competences is an integral part of processes of professionalisation, such as the one research support is arguably engaging in currently. Therefore, it is not surprising that various actors involved with research support, such as INORMS, EARMA as well as the national communities of research support staff, have taken an interest in training activities, be it by offering formalised training opportunities or by generating knowledge about the training currently offered. For example, EARMA offers training targeted at both operational and managerial staff in research support, including a formalised ‘certificate in research management’. Likewise, the European label ‘Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R)’ was highlighted in the survey responses. The label publicly recognises research organisations that have aligned their human resource policies with the principles of the Charter & Code for Researchers⁸.

In our survey, 59.1 % agreed or agreed strongly that at their unit, *‘participation in further training and development opportunities is encouraged’* (see Figure 2), which indicates that for many individuals working in research support, there is awareness of various training and development programmes and that they can possibly be beneficial for research support staff.

⁸ The Code of Conduct for the recruitment of researchers contains general principles and requirements for employers and funders. It complements the European Charter for Researchers and demonstrates a commitment to provide responsible practices and fair conditions to researchers. The aim is to contribute to the advancement of the European Research Area (European Commission, n.d.).

However, it is worth mentioning that the question of how to engage with training activities should also be seen in light of the need for local expertise and the institutional differences between universities. In this regard, one focus group participant suggested that ERUA partner universities implement internal training addressing both research staff and research support staff, which would additionally help in establishing personal relations. Likewise, another participant mentioned their experience with a prestigious training programme, which initially seemed interesting; however, *'in the real life, it was not very useful, because the most important is your experience at work'*. They emphasise that although training is important, *'it's really complicated to find really good training that is adapted to our needs'*.

4.1.2. Challenges

In this part, we assess the challenges experienced by research support staff in ERUA partner universities in their daily work. Similar to the previous section, we do not claim to account for all experiences of challenges, but rather, we provide an initial analysis which can provide the basis for critical examination of the organisation of research support in each partner university.

Time constraints and work pressure

A theme that emerged as a significant challenge in both the responses to the survey and the focus group was the high level of workload and lack of resources experienced by the research support staff.

In the survey, we asked respondents what they consider the biggest challenge in their work. Here, the issue of coping with a high workload in a time-sensitive environment was by far the most frequently perceived challenge. Out of 34 responses to this question, 15 addressed too high workload and lack of time. Examples of how respondents described this include *'too much work and too little time'*, *'work overload'*, *'a lot of requests and emails and not enough time to adequately answer to all of them'*, as well as *'not enough time for the amount of work, strict deadlines'*. In total, they paint a picture that time constraints and work pressure are perceived as very significant challenges in the work of research support across ERUA.

Likewise, as **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.** shows, 51.1 % of respondents said that they agreed or agreed strongly that they find their job stressful, and 64.4 % said that they often felt overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to do. Due to the explanatory nature of our analysis, we did not employ an extensive, robust measure of stress and work pressure since it

would entail that the survey would be substantively more time-consuming to fill out. Consequently, we cannot determine whether these numbers are high compared with other professional groups. However, we find cause for concern due to the significant proportion of research support staff reporting perceived stress. These findings were also reflected in the focus group discussions, which also offered explanatory factors for the stress experienced by research support staff. In the following section, we elaborate on the issue and discuss how we might face it as an alliance and individually.

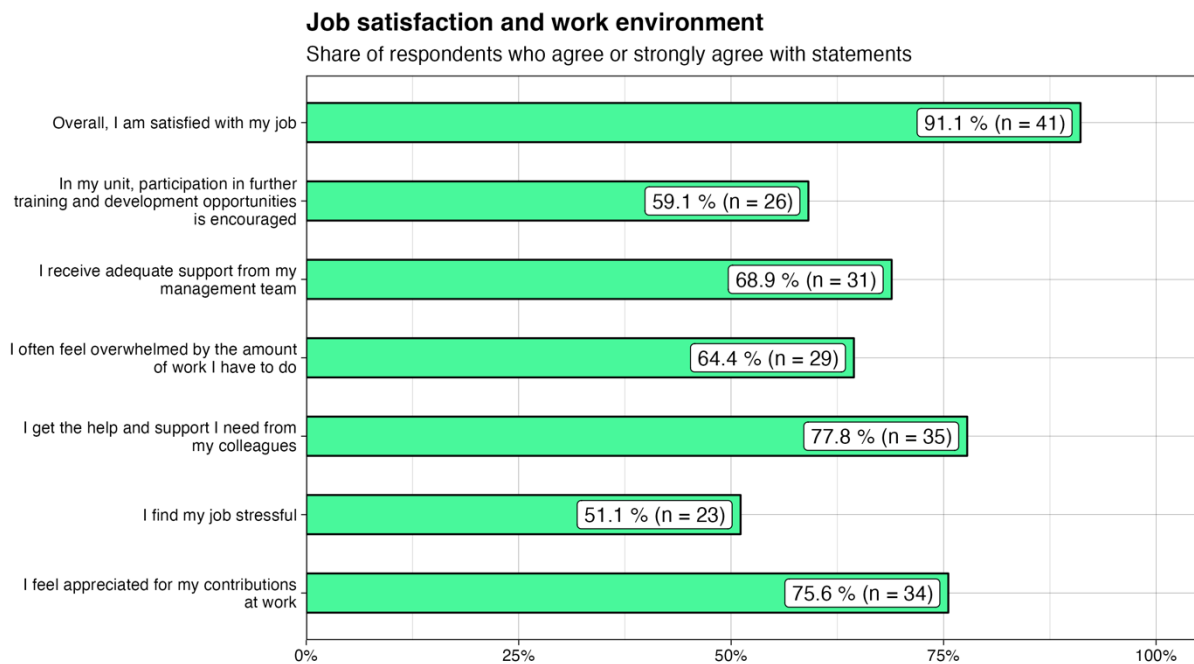


Figure 2

In the focus group, all respondents cited stress-related factors and the lack of colleagues to support them as significant challenges. One participant phrased it as such: *‘That’s the main problem, the lack of staff’*. In the discussion, participants expressed the stressful nature of their work as such: *‘when you open one door, you have ten doors who [which] are behind you [...] it’s always when you discover something, there is plenty of other action to do’, ‘sometimes there is an endless list of tasks to do because everything is very new, and we need to create something that does not exist’ and ‘the unpredictability and insecurity and the need to create new ways that actually gives us the feeling that we are overwhelmed by what we have to do’*.

As such, the perceived stress and overwhelming amount of work seem to tie into general challenges faced by the emerging profession of research support. They experience that the

portfolios related to their roles are not sufficiently precise, which can lead to the experience of 'endless work'. We elaborate on this in the next section.

We know from the literature that the challenges experienced by the survey respondents and focus group participants are significant sources of stress in work that might lead to physical and psychological ill health on an individual level. However, these types of challenges also run the risk of influencing the workplace as a whole in a negative way by, for example, increasing absenteeism and reducing job satisfaction and quality of work (Michie, 2002, p. 68). Additionally, it should be noted that the composition of respondents in the survey is somewhat skewed. Thus, the results might be an expression of differences at the level of each unit or university. However, this is difficult to explore due to the low number of respondents; likewise, we did not cover all universities in the focus group. Nevertheless, we call for the management level at these units at each ERUA university to follow up by critically considering questions of stress and overwhelming workload on the staff.

We do not offer a clear-cut solution since this would entail a more careful inspection of these challenges at the level of each unit. As such, it is essential to emphasise that we do not imply that the best solution is to simply employ more people in research support: We ought to also consider this matter in light of the 'economic eco-system' of each university. Accordingly, we should be aware that an increased number of employees in research support would most often come at the cost of resources used on research and teaching (Williamson et al., 2018), which constitutes the core service of the university. However, research support could also be considered an investment that could potentially yield more resources to these specific activities, for example, if they successfully obtain more external funds.

Thus, management at the units should carefully reconsider which *tasks* fall within the portfolio of research support. Additionally, more insights are needed into what precisely is the reason for the perceived overwhelming amount of work.

Finally, in the context of reconsidering the tasks in the research support staff's portfolio, we also urge further exploration into the needs of research staff who use the support offered by these types of units. Asking them about their perception of these services could potentially help in prioritising between tasks and strategic goals of research support.

Unclear tasks in an emerging profession

As we have shown in the section above, stressful and overwhelming conditions of work emerged as an important theme both in the survey and in the discussions in the focus group. The focus group participants connected the perceived high stress level to issues that broadly relate to the novelty in the profession of research support. In this section, we elaborate on the perceived lack of clarity in task division and how it affects research support at ERUA partner universities.

In the previous section, we referred to the focus group participants describing how there is often an endless list of tasks to be carried out. In addition, some felt that working in an emerging profession where the boundaries of tasks are still being negotiated was a source of stress. Likewise, the mapping that we presented in section 6.2 of the first report highlighted the large differences in scope, organisation, size as well as tasks between the universities. Seen in the light of the relative novelty of departments or units dealing with these types of functions in universities (Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2012), this perhaps comes as no surprise: Research support could potentially encompass a vast portfolio of tasks, and individuals working in these units might draw inspiration from other organisations, for example in the context of ERUA, from staff exchange programmes, which broadens the portfolio of potential tasks.

Some strands of literature on research support have focused on the tensions that might occur in the 'third space', i.e., in the space between professional and academic domains (Whitchurch, 2008). Yet, our work suggests that research support should also be aware of the unclear boundaries of portfolios of the profession itself. Additionally, ambiguity and lack of clarity in expectations in work roles have been linked to increased stress (Chang & Hancock, 2003; Michie, 2002) and overwhelming amounts of work, which survey respondents also reported (Kirch, 2008).

This recommendation is addressed primarily to the executive level of research support at the individual partner university: The responsibility of deciding what types of tasks are being carried out falls on managers or leaders. Seeing as such phenomena are related to stress, we urge the partner universities to explore the articulation of their roles to examine whether this might be a challenge locally in each unit. One way to address the issue of ambiguity can potentially be to formulate clear organisational objectives, i.e., a clear strategy and prioritisation of tasks and key focus areas (McCormack & Cotter, 2013, p. 42). Yet, operational research support staff should also be aware of aligning their everyday work towards such goals, which includes prioritising tasks according to their level of importance for these goals. Central to this recommendation lies

the circumstance that research support can and should not cover *all* possible tasks that might fall within this profession – and thus, we argue that a critical assessment of organisation and tasks in relation to general strategic goals is needed. We should not automatically infer that the answer is simply to increase the number of employees.

Although there are national differences, we can generally say that partner universities are all highly politically steered nationally as well as through the EU, both formally through various forms of legislation and policies and through incentives such as funding. As such, the environment that universities navigate in is characterised by a high level of unpredictability and extensive political steering. According to Burton et al. (2006, p. 48), an organisation which operates in a highly unpredictable environment should generally be able to adjust strategically according to unpredictable events. Therefore, when discussing the task clarity of research support staff, we must, on the other hand, also be aware of the institutional and organisational differences that we identified in section **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet**. Therefore, although it is desirable to formulate clear task expectations, organisational objectives and so forth, we should also ensure space for flexibility in the way we organise research support so that it can adapt to the needs of individual researchers and departments as a whole. Specifically, in the partner universities that do not have large units dedicated to research support, we should be careful not to limit flexibility too extensively. As such, we should aim to strike a balance between flexibility and the need to solve task ambiguity. Specifically, it is extremely important for management to address the overall responsibilities of each person in the team.

4.1.3. RQ 1 – concluding remarks

In this part of the report, we have examined which challenges and good practices research support staff at the partner universities experience in their work.

In terms of good practices, personal contact and communication, which help to build trust and good relationships with research staff, is seen as crucial enabler of effective research support. Physical proximity to the research staff can be an effective way to establish such relationships and was emphasized by focus group participants. Related to this, a central observation is that adopting a ‘service orientation’ mindset was seen as a good practice, and relieving research staff of administrative burdens was seen as an essential aspect of this type of work. Accordingly, although a large share of the respondents experienced some level of tension between the fields of research and research support, they generally feel that they are being appreciated by the research staff for their work.

Seeing as the complexity of the work portfolio is increasing for research support, specialist knowledge, e.g., in terms of legal aspects of funding, is needed. Thus, support units and management should be aware of recognising the value of training and development activities to maintain the relevant skills. Over half of the survey respondents experienced that participation in further development and training opportunities is encouraged. In terms of training activities, we should, however, be aware of the quality or added value. Much of the work in research support rests on personal or institutional experience, i.e., tacit knowledge, and the alliance could consider formalising the transfer of insights and tacit knowledge based on experiences between staff. Formalisation could involve the identification, collection and sharing of relevant knowledge.

Generally, the biggest challenge we uncovered was the high level of stress and the extensive workload that research support staff experience. One effect of high workload is less time for engaging in and building relationships with research staff (and other staff members). This can further impede the provision of efficient research support.

This challenge ties into the importance of establishing effective organisational processes: Namely, we showed how a clear division of tasks is not only immensely important, but the lack of such a division also constitutes a challenge for many of the focus group participants and survey respondents. In a profession in which the boundaries of responsibility and tasks are still being contested and negotiated, the lack of clear divisions of responsibilities for staff can lead to a feeling of 'endless work'. Such ambiguity and lack of clarity are known to correlate with high stress levels and should thus be addressed and taken seriously at each unit of the partner universities.

4.2. How can research support help to support the values of ERUA?

Executive summary

In this section, we discuss how research support staff can help foster conditions to conduct research that align with the alliance's core values, focusing on societal impact and interdisciplinary collaboration. We show that generally, research support staff agrees that they help to support research that aligns with the values of ERUA, and point out that, accordingly, the alliance's values are also part of the professional identity and practice of research support staff. In terms of societal impact of research,

based on work conducted within the framework of Re:ERUA, we propose that universities can foster societal impact by offering PR and communication support to research staff. In terms of interdisciplinary collaboration, half of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their work to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. Subsequently, we raise the question of how they feel their work contributes to such research. Finally, we emphasise that the current incentive system in higher education is a substantial barrier to the work that constitutes the subject of this section.

As reform universities, maintaining a critical and experimental edge as well as supporting impact, engagement and dissemination of research is crucial for each partner university of the alliance. Additionally, interdisciplinarity constitutes a foundational ideal for ERUA.

These ideals have manifested broadly in the higher education sector: The need to showcase ‘external’ impact, i.e., the broader economic, social, or political impact of research beyond the academic realm (Penfield et al., 2014; Reale et al., 2018), has also become embedded in various aspects of work in higher education institutions, especially in the acquisition of funding (Bornmann, 2013; Bornmann & Marx, 2014; de Jong & Muhonen, 2021). The most frequent task for research support in ERUA, as we have shown in section 6.5 of the first report in the study **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.**, is to support the project proposal and application process. Seeing as the importance of showcasing and planning societal impact of research has increased, knowledge of how impact is understood in relation to funding opportunities has become an important aspect of research support. Therefore, we find it relevant to briefly explore how we can design research support structures that help to foster research that aligns with these ideals. We focus on societal impact of research as well as fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.

We included questions in our survey that specifically addressed the core values of the alliance. According to our findings (see Figure 3 **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.** **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.**), 73.7 % of the respondents agreed or agreed strongly that their work ‘*contributes to support novel and innovative research*’, 57.9 % agreed or agreed strongly that their work ‘*helps to promote collaboration amongst researchers from different faculties, departments and/or disciplines*’, and 50.0 % agreed or agreed strongly that their work ‘*helps to support the possibility to conduct interdisciplinary research*’. Additionally, we showed in the first

part of the study that 51.3 % of respondents selected *‘increasing interaction with society’* and 46.2 % chose *‘furthering interdisciplinary collaboration’* as one of the five most important factors that determine the success of research support. These results underline that the alliance’s values are also part of the professional identity and practice of research support staff.

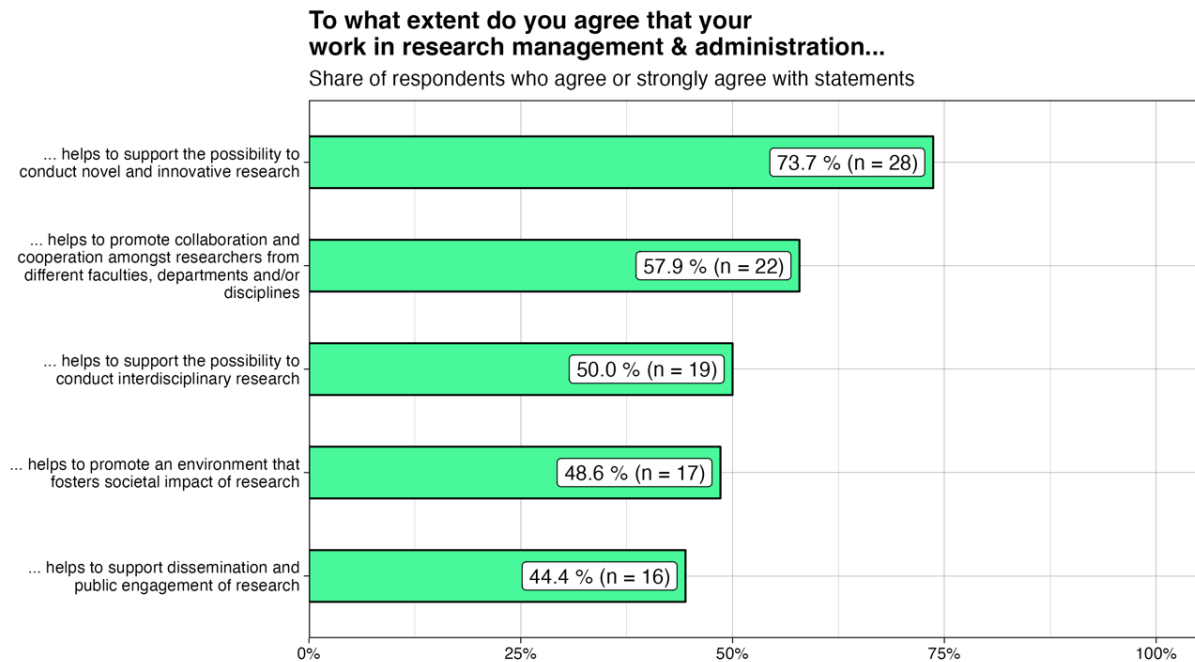


Figure 3

But *how* can research support staff help to foster research that aligns with these values? One answer has been supplied by research in the third work package of Re:ERUA⁹. They argue that societal engagement through dissemination entails the need for professional support. They recommend that universities establish or increase PR and communication support to research staff to support impact (Dupret et al., 2023, pp. 50, 70). Some research staff do not have training in such activities, which might be a hindrance to impact and dissemination – and research support should ideally seek to aid in such matters (Brownell et al., 2013; Llorente et al., 2019).

Our review of the literature reveals that little attention has been paid to the question of how research support can help foster interdisciplinary collaboration. However, seeing as 50.0 % of respondents agreed or agreed strongly that their work helps to promote such research, it is of interest to figure out the concrete practice that led to this. As interdisciplinarity is increasingly

⁹ For more info, see <https://erua-eui.eu/re-erua/>

being valued in higher education institutions, this raises the question of how research support can aid research staff in engaging in these collaborations, and we encourage further examination. Ideas might include assisting in establishing contact with those working outside respective disciplines through communication channels or continuously monitoring interdisciplinary funding opportunities. This relates to the idea of ‘match making’ mentioned in section **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.**

Finally, it is important to underscore that a substantial barrier to the work with impact and interdisciplinarity might be the current environment where research staff are often not incentivized to engage in those activities: Their performance is most often evaluated using measures that relate to the strictly academic aspect of their work, e.g., by measuring the prestige of the journals in which they published. In terms of impact, this might be an extra burden not rewarded in terms of academic advancement. This raises the question of whether increased support is the optimal solution – or if we should contemplate restructuring the rewarding and recognition of research staff who engage in such work.

4.2.1. RQ 2 – concluding remarks

At the heart of ERUA lies the notion that, individually and collectively, we are committed to an experimental approach to the organisation of universities: We thus emphasise our institutions as spaces of creativity, experimentation, and production of change, i.e., impact. Yet, this assumes the erosion of traditional disciplinary thinking: What counts are problems, not disciplines.

In this section, we have sought to shed light on how research support can help to foster a research environment that aligns with these ideals. We found that generally, research support staff identifies with the core values of ERUA in terms of how they feel their work contributes to research environments; namely, approximately half of the survey respondents feel that their work helps to support the possibility of conducting novel, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration and that it helps to promote an environment that fosters societal impact.

However, our analysis does not offer an answer to the question of *how* research support staff feel that their work supports such an environment. We encourage further examination into this: Potentially, such an enquiry could offer helpful insights into how universities can work towards greater impact and a larger degree of interdisciplinarity and various forms of collaboration through research support organisation.

Drawing on Re:ERUA's work, one potential solution for research support to foster impact could be through PR and communication aid. This would be particularly useful for those within the research community lacking training in disseminating and communicating their findings.

However, we propose caution when considering the subject of this section and possible solutions: We should generally be aware of the barriers that contemporary incentive systems put up in terms of fostering research that aligns with the core values of ERUA: Currently, research staff are often not being rewarded and thus incentivised to engage in both impact activities as well as interdisciplinary collaboration. Research staff are most often measured and subsequently rewarded based on their performance in strictly 'academic' measures, e.g., the frequency of which they publish, the prestige of where they publish or the number of citations their publications get.

4.3. Which potentials and challenges does mutualisation between partner universities present?

Executive summary

In this section, we discuss the potentials and challenges related to increased mutualisation in research support within ERUA. Mutualisation and pooling of resources is one of the main goals of the alliance, which also aligns with the overall goals and priorities related to higher education and research in the European Union. The notion of mutualisation encompasses a wide range of potential collaborations, which vary in the degree of formalisation. Examples include shared project application offices as well as informed knowledge-sharing networks. However, we also point to the potential challenges that come with increased mutualisation. Namely, based on previous findings of our analysis which showed that research support staff emphasise physical contact and personal communication, mutualisation should primarily be implemented in relation to tasks that do not involve strong personal engagement with research staff. Additionally, a significant point of discussion is that, based on the findings presented in the first report of the study, differences in the organisational build-up and

national differences may hinder the implementation of mutualisation. Throughout, we point to the importance of designing mutualisation with clear strategic goals in mind. Such goals include meaningful knowledge transfer, synergies, capacity building or cost-saving.

4.3.1. What is meant by mutualisation?

In the initial technical description of the alliance, *mutualisation* was mentioned in relation to this deliverable, and a general goal of the alliance is to create mutual identities as well as ‘mutualise’ services where appropriate. To explore the possibilities of this form of collaboration, we must first specify what we mean: what *is* mutualisation?

When we refer to mutualisation, we refer to the process of creating shared structures in the alliance. The implications of *shared structures* are broad; these might be informal or formal types of collaboration. As such, mutualisation concerning research support could range from informal networks of research support staff to establishing a joint project application office in the alliance.

Before we look more closely into potential mutualisation processes, let us take a step back and examine the organisation of university alliances. In the literature, university alliances are often described as ‘meta-organisations’, organisations where other organisations are members. Despite not being inherently fast-moving entities with joint decisions always effectively embedded in partner universities, these alliances can still play a crucial role as agenda setters and drivers of new practices and organisational learning (Maassen et al., 2022; Stensaker, 2018). In this context, mutualisation should be seen as advancing based on insights from such learning experiences. For organisational learning to be effective, it is crucial that the partner universities share information and can use insights from this collaborative setting to create local value. The success of such learning engagements can enhance the perceived value of the alliance (Gunn & Mintrom, 2013; Stensaker, 2018). With our study, we made a first attempt to evaluate the potential for organisational learning in the field of research support at ERUA based on good practices.

4.3.2. Why do we need mutualisation?

In the technical description of the ERUA project, it is described that the ‘standardisation of processes within the alliance’ should help to ‘simplify work’ through mutualising of support

structures, sharing of good practices, and setting up common standards and guidelines. It is important to be aware of these overarching goals when establishing mutual initiatives: they should help to simplify work and thus, in particular, in the context of this study (see section 4.1.2 **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.**), alleviate the burden on research support staff. Accordingly, we should avoid collaborative measures that would create additional workload for staff – especially given the significant stress and strain on resources they already experience. Creating joint transnational initiatives is prone to the risk of creating additional or parallel structures, which could result in a heavier workload for staff and thus be counterproductive to the initial goal of simplifying work and alleviating the burden on research support staff. Due to certain regulatory processes and structural demands some parallelism to possible mutualisation may be unavoidable. Therefore, briefly formulated, mutualisation should not be pursued for its own sake but only if it brings added value or saves resources or funds in the respective universities.

Mutualisation, as defined in this analysis, is also tied to the broader European research agenda (ERA). The ERA Policy Agenda for 2022-2024 emphasises the need to improve the strategic capacity of Europe’s public research organisations in its 17th action (European Commission, 2022b, p. 19). These actions include formal recognition and training of research managers and building a pan-European organisation for research management. Likewise, the working document for the agenda specified that upskilling, recognition, network building, and capacity building are important areas of action (European Commission, 2022c). More specifically, the focus was on the notion that exchanges could help build capacity in organisations from ‘lower research and innovation intense’ regions. This aspect is especially relevant for our study, as our alliance comprises institutions from countries with varying degrees of research and development intensity¹⁰.

Thus, the issue of mutualisation also feeds into the broader notion of *capacity building*. Within our alliance, partners have varying degrees of advanced research support structures; as such, the alliance is an opportunity for organisational learning and knowledge transfer. Nonetheless, to create local value, it is crucial to equip staff at all levels with the awareness and skills necessary for successfully navigating and facilitating these international collaborations.

¹⁰ For 2020 research and development expenditure (as % of the GDP) made up 0.85 % for Bulgaria, 1.5 % for Greece, 2.35 % for France, 2.96 % for Denmark, and 3.14 % for Germany (The World Bank, n.d.).

4.3.3. Be aware: Differences in structures, culture, and interests

Against the backdrop of years of successful internationalisation, student and staff mobility, as well as research, education and development projects, the discussion of mutualisation may too easily neglect the territorial dimension of universities. Higher education institutions still operate within highly regulated national and funding systems. In a study by the Directorate-General Joint Research Centre, which mapped existing transnational partnerships among European higher education institutions, obstacles related to funding and administrative and legal issues appeared as the most important ones that hinder the deepening of transnational collaborations (Karvounaraki et al., 2018). As we showed in the first report of the study, there are significant differences in how research support and research functions at each partner university. The pace of change in institutional structures is considerably slower than at the level of current higher education policy talk at European level (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2022; European Commission, 2022a).

Furthermore, socio-cultural boundaries between institutions and countries should be acknowledged in the discussion on mutualisation. English can be considered as the vehicular language in the European higher education context, but staff members at the partner universities come from different linguistic backgrounds. This can result in conflicts over language usage and create disparities among them. Further examples of socio-cultural boundaries might be differences in work culture, hierarchy culture, and workplace etiquette.

Also, physical proximity for carrying out research support tasks should be considered. Our study indicates that establishing strong personal relationships between research support staff and research staff through regular in-person interactions is beneficial in facilitating effective research support (see section **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.**). This echoes the findings by Rytberg & Geschwind (2021), who argue for the ‘persistent need for local capacity’ and point out that centralisation of research support has limits and cannot provide a ‘one-size-fits-all’-model. For example, the share of STEM disciplines varies greatly between the partner universities: UKON and UAegean display a stronger emphasis on natural science than Paris8, RUC and NBU¹¹. These types of disciplines can be expected to require different kinds of support because they include significant technical expertise, such as laboratories, and research teams

¹¹ As part of a deliverable 2.1.1.3 and 2.1.1.3, WP2 has conducted various analyses of Scopus indexed publications in order to identify the weight of research fields at each university. These analyses will be published 1.11.2023.

are usually larger. However, further research is needed to confirm these assumptions. We recommend keeping disciplinary differences in mind – both when designing mutualisation in ERUA and other alliances; but also, when considering opportunities to centralise at the individual institution.

We should consider the above-described differences when finding the appropriate space for mutualisation. We argue that increased mutualisation between the universities of the alliance should be carefully considered in the light of structural and/or organisational differences – both in terms of national or regional policies and norms and the specifics of the university in question.

Furthermore, we also want to draw attention to the somewhat contradictory relationship between *collaboration* and *competition* among the partner universities. While EUI calls for collaborative partnerships, we also observe that competitive schemes in the higher education sector have considerably increased in the last decades. This competition is not limited to attracting students but extends to securing funds and professors (Musselin, 2018). The alliance operates within the space of collaboration and competition and has to strive to find a balance between the two.

Finally, the partner universities are not monolithic organisations but comprise different actors with stakes in the field of research support. As a result, the interests in research support activities may differ and, in some cases, even conflict within one institution. Thus, the process of mutualisation also needs mechanisms for conflict resolution.

4.3.4. What can we mutualise?

Generally, on the one hand, mutualisation initiatives should be considered in relation to the broader context, such as EU priorities. Thus, we can use these priorities to guide us in the direction of fruitful mutualisation schemes that align with their strategic goals.

On the other hand, we should know the limits of mutualisation, namely in terms of structural and institutional differences. Partners in the alliance do not have the same possibilities in terms of resources in a broad sense as well as funding more specifically. As such, although partners can gain important insights from each other through various learning exchanges, we should be aware that not every good practice can be implemented equally at each partner university due to the ongoing scarcity of resources in higher education institutions.

In the initial application of ERUA, coordinated and common applications to European funding opportunities were highlighted as possible mutualisation. Based on the considerations examined

in this analysis and discussion, we adopt a critical approach to this: We should always make sure to be mindful of how we design research projects, and as such, we should not simply collaborate in research projects merely because we are part of the same alliance; we should only do it after careful consideration of the scope of the individual project.

As research support staff stress the importance of personal relations and local knowledge of the structural surroundings of research (see section **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.**, we highlight the need to identify potentials for mutualisation based on identification of aspects of research support where minimal local knowledge is required, and personal contact plays a lesser role. As such, the daily organisations should generally be close to the research staff, but we might think in terms of mutualisation in the aspects of research support that relate to the monitoring of funding and so forth, where less personal contact is needed. Likewise, one task which might be worth considering is ‘match making’ between researchers within the alliance. More specifically, one could imagine that research support staff can draw on their local knowledge to facilitate networking between researchers across universities. It is important to underline that such a task requires an individual assessment of the needs according to e.g., the specific call for funding or specific requirement of research projects: Thus, the staff that facilitates the match making should be aware of not only the subject, but also e.g., the seniority level and related network. Accordingly, this task draws on the tacit knowledge of the local research support staff.

Potential for knowledge sharing as mutualisation

As we have by now established, we generally call for caution when designing mutualisation initiatives in the alliance. However, we have until now primarily discussed the possibilities of mutualisation of services, as this was proposed principally to investigate in the technical description, which constitutes the basis for ERUA. In this final section of this chapter, we round off the discussion with a brief debate of whether ERUA should implement mutualisation that does not address specific services but rather knowledge and experience sharing between members.

One focus group participant said the following:

‘I think the university has a difficulty to see that it [ERUA] adds value because each service is very overworked and they already have the network from their side and in their own countries but I think we have a lot of things to build together

and for example to have a close network to ask questions, very stupid questions sometimes, sometimes we have these questions and we have to contact the European Commission for this. So, it would be very useful to have a mailing list to be in contact. And I think we have a lot of added value to work together in this network and to build it'

The quote illustrates points that we have raised so far: Namely, it shows how the issue of adding value is extremely important when discussing opportunities for mutualisation, seeing as research support staff is already burdened by overwork and too many tasks. However, the participant points to an informal network as an ERUA initiative that could potentially add value to the universities. Likewise, they point to the straightforward goal of such an initiative; the staff at each university should be able to be in contact and ask those questions which are perhaps simple and would otherwise be addressed to the European Commission.

Such a network could be organised in a myriad of ways with varying degrees of formalisation – from a mailing list such as described above to a more formalised network that meets according to a set frequency. However, these types of networks share that they do not mutualise day-to-day services and tasks of supporting research staff, but rather, they help staff to support each other by sharing knowledge and experiences.

Although there are many potential benefits to such a model, we will also point to a few potential challenges related to such types of mutualisation.

Firstly, we should consider these types of mutualisation against the backdrop of the points raised in section **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.**; i.e., that research support staff experience a high workload and that often, there is a high level of role ambiguity. Thus, we should consider that such networks can perhaps add yet another responsibility that does not help to solve the actual task in a very concrete manner. On the contrary, such a network could also be seen to make various aspects of research support more effective due to the experiences and knowledge that are being shared across universities.

Secondly, we should be aware that although some aspects of working with research support are easily transferable between universities, other aspects of experiences in research support cannot be shared. As we have shown in section 6.2 in the first report of the study, there are significant differences in organisational and institutional context between the partner universities. As such, we cannot expect knowledge or experience from partners with a high degree of advancement in research support to be easily transferred to other partners with a

lower degree of advancement. Accordingly, much experience and knowledge will demand a high level of translational work before it can be applied effectively in other partner units (Rose, 2004, p. 104).

4.3.5. RQ 3 – concluding remarks

Identification of potentials for mutualisation and pooling of resources is a key aspect of ERUA. Likewise, various forms of mutualising in research support align with overall goals relating to higher education in the EU, namely, the 17th action of the European Research Area.

The possibilities of mutualising various tasks related to research support are broad and could potentially comprise both formalised pooling of resources, such as a shared project application office as well as more informal initiatives, such as learning or experience-sharing networks.

However, generally, we should be aware that we have a clear goal with potential mutualisation initiatives: The decision should not be based solely on the idea of mutualising but rather on whether there are potential benefits to our alliance as a whole or to individual partner universities, such as meaningful knowledge transfer, synergies, capacity building or financial relief.

Additionally, as we have shown, research support staff emphasised the importance of physical proximity to complete their tasks effectively, and personal communication to establish a relationship with research staff was considered key to this type of work. Based on these insights, we call for mutualisation to primarily be considered in relation to those types of tasks that do not involve strong engagement of research staff and where physical proximity would be relevant, e.g., monitoring of overall trends regarding funds in the framework programmes, etc.

Finally, potential mutualisation should always be considered in light of the significant differences in the organisational build-up as well as the national context in which each partner university operates: On the one hand, this means that there is a large potential for learning from institutions operating in diverging structures and contexts. On the other hand, it also entails that the transfer of knowledge and experience of concrete initiatives and good practices might be constrained by contextual factors.

5. Concluding remarks

The context in which universities carry out their work has radically changed. Relevant to the work in this report, changes in funding structures in particular, have stimulated the rise of research support staff working to help research staff navigate the evolving funding landscape. In this report, we have assessed the good practices and challenges in research support in the ERUA partner universities as the research support staff themselves experience them. We have shown how they emphasise the importance of personal contact and good relationships with research staff as examples of good practices in research support. Generally, in addition to specialised knowledge related to project management, funding application and legal aspects of research projects, the skills that are being stressed as essential in this type of work are related to social and communication skills. Generally, research support staff emphasise support and service orientation as central to their professional identity. This echoes the finding of the first part of the study, namely that the most frequent factor considered important for determining the success of research support was relieving research staff of administrative burdens.

However, research support staff also experience significant challenges in their work: As an occupational group experiencing a growing push towards professionalisation, the boundaries of responsibility and tasks are continuously being negotiated. This is mirrored by the lack of clarity in the division of responsibility and, more specifically, that it can feel as though there are endless tasks to be done. Likewise, we observed a high share of respondents and participants that saw stress and overwhelming workload as the most significant challenges. Consequently, we highlight the importance of establishing effective organisational processes and clear boundaries of responsibility while still allowing room for creativity and innovation.

Furthermore, our investigation found that the professional identity of research support staff is aligned with the alliance's values of promoting interdisciplinarity and societal impact. Research from Re:ERUA suggests that universities can contribute towards societal impact by providing better dissemination support to their research staff, a task which could be covered by research support staff. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the contemporary incentive system in the academic realm poses significant barriers for research staff to engage in this kind of work.

An important focus of this report was the assessment of possible routes for development for ERUA initiatives, specifically in terms of mutualisation. Such initiatives might comprise a wide range of potential cooperation, which can vary in their degree of formalisation within organisations. Based on previous findings from part 1 of this study as well as our assessment

of good practices and challenges, we question the potential scope for mutualisation. We argue that such measures should primarily be implemented in relation to tasks that do not require physical proximity to research staff, seeing as physical proximity and personal interactions are emphasised as crucial to the success of this work. Generally, we call for awareness of the vast differences in institutional layout. Likewise, there might be differences stemming from the contexts of the individual partner university. Such differences may prove challenging in terms of designing and implementing mutualisation. Consequently, we should be aware of these when considering such measures. If we are to implement mutualisation, we argue that it is crucial to keep clear strategic goals in mind. More specifically, such goals might guide us in the question of where mutualisation is fruitful, as we should not pursue mutualisation for its own sake. Such goals might include knowledge transfer, synergies, capacity building, or simply cost-saving by pooling resources.

The insights from this report raise further questions related to research support at ERUA and more generally. A clear limitation of our design is that we do not include the perspective of research staff. Likewise, research staff's experience with research support services is absent from the literature. However, an examination based on the experiences of research staff might be beneficial, as it could help us learn more about what is seen as core services and which services should be prioritised. This type of analysis might assist in organising research support in a way where the division of tasks and responsibilities becomes clearer. Finally, such an exploration could help shed light on whether and how research staff experience the tensions that are emphasised in the literature and which also appear in our findings. For example, we found that a large share of research support staff found that demands of research staff are often in conflict with the structural demands of the current research climate, and likewise that it can be hard to engage research staff in the issues that are important in their work. This raises the question of how research staff experience interaction with research support staff and why it seems difficult to engage in these matters.

In sum, we hope that the analysis carried out in this study contributes to and stimulates further discussion of the organisation and tasks of research support within the partner universities of the alliance – specifically in the context of possible mutualisation initiatives. We highlight that mutualisation initiatives should be implemented with careful consideration of potential drawbacks and benefits. Finally, we encourage further research and additional involvement of other stakeholders, which is needed to explore more specific formulations of recommendations, both aimed at the alliance as a whole as well as the individual partner universities.

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7. Appendix

RAAAP Survey

The presented analysis utilised data from the 2019 RAAAP (Research Administration as a Profession) survey. The survey includes 4,325 responses from more than 70 countries, reflecting a significant and diverse group.¹² However, it is essential to note that the frameworks in which the respondents carry out their work may vary significantly across countries and institutions. After an initial exploratory quantitative analysis of the survey data, the focus was narrowed to questions related to the challenges of showcasing the impact of research outside the academic realm. The participants' qualitative feedback on their challenges when undertaking impact-related tasks in the context of research support was systematically coded.

Survey on research support at partner universities

In addition to the RAAAP survey, we conducted a separate online survey in February 2023 to gather input from individuals working with research support at the five partner universities. The overall goal of the survey was to shed light on the challenges and good practices perceived by those working with research support.

To map the organisational framework and services of research support at the five partner universities and to identify potential participants for our survey, we searched university websites and directories using a broad understanding of research support activities. Next, invitations to take part in the survey were sent to all identified participants via personal emails. Overall, 95 personal invitations were sent out, with the number of individuals contacted varying considerably between the five partner universities, reflecting the differences in the organisational settings. In addition, central contact points at each university, such as the head of the research support office, were identified and contacted to help distribute the survey among their respective team. This was done to ensure that anyone who may have been missed in the initial distribution was given an opportunity to participate in the survey.

¹² The RAAAP survey 2019 was carried out by a taskforce under INORMS (The International Network of Research Management Societies). Data and documentation can be found here. The RAAAP Survey aims to develop a longitudinal dataset about the research administration profession. The first round of the RAAAP Survey was conducted in 2016. The third iteration of the RAAAP survey (RAAAP-3) was launched in 2022. However, the results were not yet available at the time this report was being compiled.

For the analysis, 39 full and 41 partial responses could be processed and interpreted. For respondents we identified, the response rate was 37.9 %. The following table gives an overview of the responses differentiated according to the five partner universities. While the unevenly distributed responses across the five universities are not ideal, they also reflect the differences in the institutional context and understanding of research support at the partner universities. Hence, it is sufficient to draw meaningful conclusions from the data collected.

ERUA University	n
New Bulgarian University	45
Roskilde University	14
Paris 8 University	10
University of Konstanz	9
University of the Aegean	2

Table: Number of responses per university

Conducting a complementary survey with researchers as participants was not within the scope of this report. Yet, we recognise the potential benefits such a survey could bring to understanding the needs and perspectives of researchers concerning support structures and the areas of tension between different professional groups. Thus, we believe that further research in this area is needed to fully explore the field of research support.

Survey design

We designed the survey based on themes and perspectives that emerged from our literature review and the RAAAP data. For a detailed overview of the questions, please refer to the table below.

Question		Aim
Do you work with research management and/or administration?	Close-ended Yes No	
With which level of research management do you work?	Close-ended Central level Department or faculty level Other	This question aimed to provide context to the responses regarding the institutional settings.

Question	Aim	
How would you define your current role?	Close-ended Leader or Manager Operational Don't know Other	This question aimed to determine the participants' positions in the institutional hierarchy. By asking this question, we could better understand the role and responsibilities of the participant.
In your work, which of the following sub-areas of research support do you spend the most time on? Please rank the sub-areas you previously selected from 1 (most time spent on) to 5 (least time spent on)	Close-ended Choose up to five sub-areas	The aim of this question was to determine the areas of focus in their work with research support. By asking participants to rank the sub-areas they previously selected, we gained a better understanding of how their time is divided among different tasks in research support.
To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your job? Overall, I am satisfied with my job I feel appreciated for my contributions at work In my unit, participation in further training and development opportunities (e.g., professional accreditation or project management courses) is encouraged I receive adequate support from my management team I get the help and support I need from my colleagues I often feel overwhelmed by the amount of work I have to do I find my job stressful	Close-ended Agree strongly Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Disagree strongly Don't know	The aim of this set of questions was to evaluate job satisfaction, support from management and colleagues, opportunities for development, workload, and stress levels of the respondent.
To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your work with research management and administration? Research staff and research administrators often have different views of things. It can be hard to engage research staff in the issues that are important in my work. I feel that my work is being appreciated by the research staff I feel that with my work I am shaping the way research is conducted at the university or at the department/faculty The demands of the research staff seeking support and the structural demands of the current research environment (e.g., requirements of research grants, audit culture) are often conflicting It can feel as though my work is often invisible to research staff	Close-ended Agree strongly Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Disagree strongly Don't know	This set of questions aimed to provide insights into the respondent's perceptions regarding the interaction between research staff and research support staff, including their work's value, impact, and visibility, as well as potential conflicts that may arise from the demands of research staff seeking support and structural requirements.

Question	Aim	
<p>To what extent do you agree that your work in research management and administration...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... helps to support the possibility to conduct novel and innovative research ... helps to support the possibility to conduct interdisciplinary research (e.g., by facilitating contact of researchers across faculties, departments and/or disciplines) ... helps to promote collaboration and cooperation amongst researchers from different faculties, departments and/or disciplines ... helps to promote an environment that fosters societal impact of research ... helps to support dissemination and public engagement of research 	<p>Close-ended</p> <p>Agree strongly Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Disagree strongly Don't know</p>	<p>This set of questions aimed to assess the extent to which participants perceive their work in research support to promote the core values of ERUA, such as innovation, interdisciplinary research, societal impact, and public engagement.</p>
<p>In your opinion, what factors do you consider most important for determining the success of research management and administration? Please rank the factors you previously selected from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important)</p>	<p>Close-ended</p> <p>Choose up to five statements</p>	<p>The aim of this question was to identify the factors that the respondents consider crucial in determining the success of research support. By offering predefined statements to select from, the responses could be more accurately compared.</p> <p>The raking of the statements previously selected helped to clarify the respondents' priorities.</p>
<p>What do you consider the biggest challenge in your work?</p>	<p>Open-ended</p>	<p>The aim of this question was to identify the most significant challenge that the respondent faces in their work in research support.</p>
<p>Can you share examples of good practices in research management and administration that have proven to be particularly successful or effective, either from your own work or from others that you have observed? (e.g., good or effective ways to structure work processes, successful initiatives, effective strategies, fruitful collaboration efforts)</p>	<p>Open-ended</p>	<p>The aim of this question was to gather information on successful or effective practices in research support.</p>
<p>What are in your experience the most important factors that enable good research management and administration?</p>	<p>Open-ended</p>	<p>The aim of this question was to gain insight into the respondents' perspectives on the essential factors that enable effective research support.</p>
<p>If resources were not a limitation, in what ways could the work with research management and administration at your university and/or in your department and/or faculty be improved?</p>	<p>Open-ended</p>	<p>The aim of this question was to explore the respondents' ideas and vision for potential improvements in research support.</p>

Question		Aim
Which skills and competencies do you feel are the most important for your work?	Open-ended	The aim of this question was to understand the respondents' perspectives on the most critical skills and competencies necessary for their work in research support.
Do you feel that there are currently any important competencies (e.g., project management, contract negotiation or budgeting) lacking in your unit that might improve the work of your unit?	Close-ended	This question aimed to identify any skills or competencies that the respondent believes are currently lacking in their unit but could be beneficial in improving their unit's work in research support.
Do you have any other comments or experiences you would like to share relating to your work with research management and administration?	Open-ended	With this last question, respondents had an opportunity to provide any additional feedback or comments that they believe are relevant to their work with research support but may not have been covered by the previous question.

Analysis of open-ended questions

As described in the table above, we included several open-ended questions in the survey to allow respondents to provide their own unique perspectives and experiences. The following table shows the shares of respondents that replied to each open-ended question.

Question	Share that responded
What do you consider the biggest challenge in your work?	42.5 % (n = 34)
Can you share examples of good practices in research management and administration that have proven to be particularly successful or effective, either from your own work or from others that you have observed?	31.2 % (n = 25)
What are in your experience the most important factors that enable good research management and administration?	38.8 % (n = 31)
If resources were not a limitation, in what ways could the work with research management and administration at your institution could be improved?	38.8 % (n = 31)
Which skills and competencies do you feel are the most important for your work?	37.5 % (n = 30)
Which important competencies do you feel that there are currently lacking in your unit that might improve the work of your unit? *	21.2 % (n = 17)
Do you have any other comments or experiences you would like to share relating to your work with research management and administration?	5.0 % (n = 4)
	172 qualitative responses

Note:

* Only asked to respondents who stated that they felt that important competencies were lacking in their unit

Across all the open-ended questions, we retrieved 172 qualitative responses. We analysed the responses using NVivo software. Our coding strategy followed a 'deductive-inductive' process (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 34), in which we developed thematic categories based on various iterations

based on our initial understanding of the issues raised whilst being open to the themes and reflections presented in the data. We employed a thematic approach, identifying categorisations related to our research focus within the comments (Bryman, 2012, p. 580). Ultimately, we used a framework approach where each respondent was assigned in rows, and codes were organised in columns (Bryman, 2012, p. 579). To ensure the highest possible validity of the results of the coding process, several individuals coded the materials independently of each other. After the individual coding processes, we compared and consolidated the results.

Focus group

We conducted a focus group to complement our analysis of survey responses. The focus group was organised as an online meeting in March 2023. As is pointed out in the methodological literature, group interviews like focus groups often result in participants being required to make explicit certain logics that are typically implicit because the interview is structured as a social negotiation between participants (Halkier, 2016).

The focus group aimed to 1) explore current good practices in research support, 2) discuss challenges faced by research support staff in their work, and 3) identify opportunities for improvement in research support, including new approaches that could enhance the effectiveness of research support activities. By bringing together research support staff from the partner universities, the focus group discussion provided a platform for sharing and exchanging knowledge and experiences.

To recruit participants for the focus group, we utilised two approaches. Firstly, we directly contacted individuals and requested their participation in the focus group. Secondly, we included an invitation to join the focus group at the end of the survey. Although more participants had initially signed up, for various reasons, only four participants from two partner universities attended the focus group. Nonetheless, their insights proved informative for our research purposes.