Supporting Academic Research
Understanding the challenges

Findings from a 2021 study of researchers and members of Research Offices in the UK, the US and Australia
Background

Following a difficult year across the globe, research departments in higher education are showing a remarkable adaptability in the face of greater challenges to secure funding, limited resources and competition for talent. While some disciplines have thrived in the last 12 months from increased attention, others have been left behind in the fight for funding; and this could have an impact on research output for years to come.

Some changes in the last year have the potential to shape research in higher education in positive and exciting ways. Covid-19 demonstrated why societal impact is a worthy goal, for example, which has led to the higher education sector shifting its focus accordingly. The potential impact of research is also being enhanced by greater collaboration across disciplines and new governmental or funder requirements. These changes create greater challenges in supporting researchers and demonstrating the value of research, yet they also present an opportunity for technological innovation to support institutions in meeting these goals.

Project

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

This paper includes findings from two surveys of researchers and senior members of Research Offices across the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. It follows two similar research studies conducted in 2019 and 2020 about the challenges faced in the research landscape.
Our survey of 106 senior members of Research Offices included...

UK - 41%
US - 37%
AUS - 23%

Director of Research 26%
VP or Assistant VP of Research 21%
Pre-Award Officer 13%
Director of Technology Transfer 5%
Other roles 35%

Our survey of 308 researchers included a range of disciplines ...

Arts 6%
Humanities 11%
Social sciences 37%
Natural sciences 15%
Formal sciences 22%
Other 9%
Key findings

Research funding remains a key priority, placing substantial and increasing pressure on researchers. The pressure of finding research funding is increasing amongst researchers; and they consider finding and applying for funding their most difficult tasks. Research Office leaders are increasing the support available to researchers, seeing it as their number one priority. Covid-19 has significantly impacted research funding, with STEM subjects seeing increases in available funding to the detriment of non-STEM subjects.

Institutions are increasingly showcasing their research expertise, though more can be done to ensure that online profiles are comprehensive and fully up to date. Researchers and Research Office leaders are increasingly showcasing their expertise through online profiles and the institution’s research portal. However, many profiles accessed through institutional portals are only partially up to date. This may be driven by the number of profiles researchers are keeping across ORCID, Google Scholar, LinkedIn and Academia.edu, among others.

Demonstrating the impact of research is an increasing priority; however, monitoring methods are inconsistent between researchers and Research Office leaders. Though citations remain the most popular metric to measure impact, alternative metrics - most notably, media mentions - have increased in importance for researchers over the past year. This trend was already evident in the past, but the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the focus on societal impact as an indicator of the influence of academic research on public policy.

Researchers are spending a high proportion of their time on administrative tasks, and Research Office leaders find it challenging to provide support due to a lack of time and resources. The administrative burden on researchers is high. Seven in ten researchers spend 30% or more of their time on such tasks. Though Research Office leaders are providing some support, they are also suffering from limited resources and a lack of time.
Interdisciplinary collaboration is high on researchers’ agenda and around a quarter of Research Office leaders think collaboration is a priority.
Researchers would like to see more support from their institutions in finding collaborators during the Covid-19 pandemic. Only 27% are satisfied with the level of support they are receiving in this regard.

Collaboration between Research Offices and libraries has increased over the past year, especially in relation to open access compliance.
After faculty deans and researchers, libraries are the next most significant partners in terms of supporting research. Senior members of the Research Office report a 6-percentage-point increase, on average, in their collaboration with the library compared to last year. The majority of Research Office leaders are satisfied with their current level of collaboration with their institution’s library.

Researchers expect more from libraries in 2021 than in 2020, but have similar expectations from the Research Office.
In 2021 more researchers expect support for the majority of their administrative tasks. Almost two thirds of researchers are satisfied with the support they receive from their institution’s library; however, they expect more from their library than before. Specifically, there is a rise in their demand for assistance with depositing publications and for data research services.

Despite support for remote working, substantial challenges remain.
All Research Office leaders feel there has been at least some level of disruption to research at their institution as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, with almost half classing this disruption as high. Researchers are more satisfied with the level of support they receive from their institutions for working remotely; however, they could do with more support in finding funding, identifying collaborators, and conducting their research in general.
Research funding remains a key priority, placing substantial and increasing pressure on researchers.

Researchers are playing a more active role in searching for funding in 2021. This enhances the pressure on them, with 61% saying that finding relevant funding opportunities is difficult and more than two in five successfully securing funding less than 25% of the time.

“The number of opportunities is limited, and competition is fierce.”
UK, Post-doctoral fellow

During the Covid-19 pandemic (between March 2020 and March 2021) in particular, less funding has been available for research in the arts and humanities, while more has become available in STEM fields.

Thinking about the time period between March 2020 and March 2021, to what extent has Covid-19 impacted research funding at your institution across the following disciplines?
Base: All Research Office leaders, excluding Not applicable (varies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>A lot less funding</th>
<th>Slightly less funding</th>
<th>The same level of funding</th>
<th>Slightly more funding</th>
<th>A lot more funding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal and Applied Sciences</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other disciplines</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Funding for Education/Social Science grants are very thin in Australia at the best of times, but have almost evaporated since Covid. Competition therefore is extremely fierce. No grants for the last 12 months in my area of expertise!”

Australia, Faculty staff

A positive notable trend is that support from the Research Office for finding relevant funding opportunities is more widely available in 2021.

The trend of more widely available support from the Research Office is likely to continue due to increased competition for funding, with Research Office leaders calling it their number one priority. However, like researchers, Research Offices are also struggling with the pressure.

Almost 2 in 5 list obtaining funding as one of their top three challenges.

“Our budget has been decreasing for the past 5 or so years. This makes it increasingly harder to properly provide resources to our researchers.”

US, Research Office employee
Institutions are increasingly showcasing their research expertise, though more can be done to ensure that online profiles are comprehensive and fully up to date.

Researchers and Research Office leaders are increasingly showcasing their expertise through online profiles. The rise in these figures over the past year shows a significant step for institutions in the right direction.

- 77% of Research Office leaders in 2021 state that their institution has a research portal with the purpose of displaying publications and profiles, compared to just 60% in 2020.
- 61% of Research Office leaders say their research portal is up to date in 2021, compared to 55% in 2020.
- 81% of researchers have a profile on the university portal or repository in 2021, compared to 76% of researchers in 2020.
- 43% of researchers say that they keep their profile fully up to date in 2021, compared to 34% in 2020.
Despite the rise in the use of online profiles, half of the researchers surveyed say they are only partially updating them. More work is needed to provide researchers the support they need to update profiles such that they accurately showcase their research output. This challenge may be exacerbated by the sheer number of different places researchers are sharing their work. While the university repository (81%) remains a key showcase for researcher expertise, ORCID (80%), ResearchGate (70%), Google Scholar (69%) and LinkedIn (68%) are also utilized by a large proportion of researchers.

In which of the following places, if any, do you have a profile associated with your academic work?
Base: All researchers (308)

- University portal/repository: 81%
- ORCID: 80%
- ResearchGate: 70%
- Google Scholar: 69%
- LinkedIn: 68%
- Academic.edu: 46%
- Twitter: 35%
- Personal blog: 12%
- Other: 8%
- None of the above: 2%
Demonstrating the impact of research is an increasing priority; however, monitoring methods are inconsistent between researchers and Research Office leaders.

Research Office leaders are required to demonstrate the impact of publications more frequently.

58% say they have to demonstrate the influence or impact of publications ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ in 2021 ...

50% ... compared to 50% in 2020.

Demonstrating the impact of research is the second most important priority in 2021 after obtaining funding. 50% of Research Office leaders currently see this as a priority, compared to just 38% in 2020.

**What are the main priorities of your institution with regards to academic research?**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obtaining more funding to produce more research</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating the impact of research undertaken</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving the rank and prestige of the university</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Citations are most commonly used by researchers and Research Office leaders as impact metrics. Among researchers and Research Office leaders this has increased by four and five percentage points, respectively, since 2020. Though citations remain the most popular metric, alternative metrics have increased in importance for senior members of the Research Office over the past year. Most notably, the proportion of Research Office leaders measuring social impact has increased by 13 percentage points. Though this trend was already evident in the past, the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the focus on societal impact as an indicator of the influence of academic research on public policy.

Which measures do you use to monitor the impact of your research?
Base: Researchers who monitor the impact of their research themselves (245), All Research Office respondents (106)

- **Citations**: 68% of researchers and 94% of Research Office leaders
- **Journal impact factor of published research**: 49% of researchers, 71% of Research Office leaders
- **Media mentions**: 33% of researchers, 41% of Research Office leaders
- **Views**: 15% of researchers, 40% of Research Office leaders
- **Social media mentions/engagement**: 24% of researchers, 35% of Research Office leaders
- **Social impact**: 28% of researchers, 57% of Research Office leaders
- **Policy papers & regulations**: 22% of researchers, 47% of Research Office leaders
- **Cross institution collaboration**: 20% of researchers, 46% of Research Office leaders

Similar to last year, Research Office leaders and researchers are somewhat divided as to the metrics they use to measure the impact of research. Research Office leaders are more likely than researchers to reference social impact, policy papers, government regulations and cross-institution collaboration; whereas, researchers are more likely to use citations, journal impact metrics, media mentions, views and social media engagement.
Researchers are spending a high proportion of their time on administrative tasks, and Research Office leaders find it challenging to provide support due to a lack of time and resources.

As we saw last year, the administrative burden is high for researchers, with 21% of them spending over half their time on such tasks. This pressure is not isolated to a small minority, however, and half of researchers spend at least 30% of their time on administrative tasks instead of focusing on research.

How much of your time is invested in administrative tasks versus actual research?
Base: All researchers (308)
Most researchers generally continue to conduct research-related administrative tasks themselves, with only a few areas seeing substantial levels of support. However, there are positive changes in workload between 2020 and 2021. Notably, the support offered by the Research Office in finding sources of funding has increased (45% in 2020, compared to 54% in 2021), as has support by the library for deposits to an institutional repository (20% in 2020, compared to 25% in 2021). Yet, given the amount of time researchers continue to spend on administrative tasks, much greater levels of support are needed to substantially reduce their workload.

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

Base: All respondents (308)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>I do this myself</th>
<th>Research office</th>
<th>Library</th>
<th>Research assistant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding relevant funding opportunities</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying for funding grants</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing Data Management plans</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding relevant journals for publication</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submitting your research for publication</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring compliance with Open Access policies</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposit to an institutional repository</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Article Processing Charges (APC)</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring the impact of your research</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interdisciplinary collaboration is high on researchers’ agenda and around a quarter of Research Office leaders think collaboration is a priority.

Researchers are collaborating between disciplines on much of their research. This aligns well with Research Office leaders’ priorities: 25% of senior members of the Research Office say promoting interdisciplinary collaboration is a priority; and 23% of senior members of the Research Office say promoting collaboration with partners outside the institution is a priority.

However, collaboration across departments at the same institution is lower on researchers’ agenda.

Researchers could use more assistance, as only 27% report satisfaction with the level of support they received from their institution in finding suitable collaborators during the Covid-19 pandemic.
Please tell us in your own words what are the top challenges you face when working towards your priorities?

“We’re fragmented and decentralized, which means that it can be difficult to get people (and leaders) to work across institutional boundaries.”

US, Assistant Vice Provost, Office of Research

“Finding collaborators outside of academia.”

US, Research Development Manager

“Finding ways to connect faculty with external organizations and identifying opportunities to collaborate.”

US, Director of Research/ Research Operations
Collaboration between Research Offices and libraries has increased over the past year, especially in relation to open access compliance.

After researchers (92%) and faculty deans (75%), libraries (54%) are the next most significant partners in supporting research.

Almost 3 in 4 Research Office leaders are happy with the level of collaboration with the library (this has increased by 9% since 2020), while 1 in 4 would like it to increase. Very few (2%) would like to see less collaboration with the library.

Ideally, would you like to collaborate with the library?
Base: All Research Office respondents (106)

Open access compliance is by far the main area of collaboration between Research Offices and libraries. However, the data is driven by respondents from the UK, who are collaborating in this area more than their United States and Australian counterparts.
Researchers expect more from libraries in 2021 than in 2020, but have similar expectations from the Research Office.

Just under two thirds of researchers are satisfied with the support they are getting from their institution’s library. This is consistent with satisfaction levels in 2020. However, the types of activities for which researchers expect libraries to provide support has increased in 2021 compared to 2020. This could suggest higher levels of awareness of library services and expertise.

Which of the following do you expect the library to do to support your role as a researcher? (Top 5 only)
Base: All researcher respondents (2020: 314, 2021: 308)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2021</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deposit publications and datasets</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide research data services (e.g. data citation services)</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure compliance with regulations</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide research impact reports</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide information literacy education</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Expectations of the Research Office remain similar in 2021. However, researchers have a higher expectation that the office will provide support for regulatory compliance.

Which of the following do you expect the Research Office to do to support your role as a researcher? (Top 5 only)
Base: All researcher respondents (2020: 314, 2021: 308)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2021</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support funding proposal/ submissions</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate access to funding opportunities</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help ensure I comply with regulations</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate collaboration across institutions</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report research project progress to funders</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Despite support for remote working, substantial challenges remain.

All Research Office leaders who took part in the survey said there has been at least some level of disruption to research at their institution as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, with almost half classing this disruption as high.

To what extent has Covid-19 disrupted research projects at your institution?
Base: All Research Office respondents (106)

- 2%: 1 - a low level of disruption
- 17%: 2
- 33%: 3
- 28%: 4
- 20%: 5 - a high level of disruption

Just over 1 in 5 researchers are more in favor of open access initiatives as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, with only 4% saying they are now less in favor. This increase seems to have been driven by respondents in the United States, with 26% reporting increased favorability.
As we progress through the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers have become more satisfied with the level of support provided by their institution for working from home.

**How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the level of support provided by your institution with working remotely during the coronavirus situation? Showing satisfied only.**


> 73% 2021 > 66% 2020

In relation to finding funding and collaborators, researchers are experiencing low satisfaction levels with the amount of support provided by their institution during the pandemic. While satisfaction with support for conducting research is relatively high, large proportions of researchers state they are dissatisfied with efforts to help them with their research during Covid-19.

**How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the level of support provided by your institution with the following?**

Base: All researchers (306)

- Finding collaborators during the coronavirus situation
  - Very dissatisfied: 12%
  - Dissatisfied: 13%
  - Neither satisfied or dissatisfied: 48%
  - Satisfied: 19%
  - Very satisfied: 8%

- Finding and securing funding during the coronavirus situation
  - Very dissatisfied: 10%
  - Dissatisfied: 21%
  - Neither satisfied or dissatisfied: 34%
  - Satisfied: 24%
  - Very satisfied: 10%

- Conducting my research during the coronavirus situation
  - Very dissatisfied: 8%
  - Dissatisfied: 18%
  - Neither satisfied or dissatisfied: 22%
  - Satisfied: 33%
  - Very satisfied: 19%
Reflections

As always, efforts to source research funding remain a top priority for researchers and the Research Office. However, this pressure is falling more on researchers than ever before and the Covid-19 pandemic has created disparities between disciplines, from which it may be difficult to recover.

As might be expected, the Covid-19 pandemic has continued to cause significant disruption to research. However, researchers have adjusted well to remote working and institutions have provided a good level of support in this area. There have also been positive changes to research in the higher education landscape during this period, which may pave the way for exciting new approaches to research and research management.

Greater interest in interdisciplinary collaboration, greater support for open access initiatives and an increasing move toward framing success around societal impact all present new opportunities and challenges for research institutions.
Ex Libris, a ProQuest company, is a leading global provider of cloud-based solutions that enable institutions and their individual users to create, manage, and share knowledge.

In close collaboration with its customers and the broader community, Ex Libris develops solutions that maximize the impact of research activities, increase library productivity, enhance teaching and learning, and drive student mobile engagement.

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