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Give us a brief overview of your professional career and how you ended up at St. George's University of London in your current position?

After my PhD in astrophysics at Cranfield University, I moved straight into an academic publishing role, overseeing the peer review process and strategic development of a number of physics journals, including one in medical physics. From there I moved to the bright lights, big city, and to my first research administration post as Deputy Scientific Secretary at The Institute of Cancer Research in London. I stayed there for eight years, developing European research collaborations, and establishing their first pre-award grants office. In June 2008, I moved to a larger role as Head of the Joint Research Office at St George's University of London, a medical school co-located with a large teaching hospital, which serves a large and varied population of south London.

What are your current responsibilities and what are the most rewarding aspects of your position?

Within my current role, my remit includes all pre- and post-award financial management of externally-funded research – whether to the university medical school or to the NHS hospital – as well as all the regulatory issues surrounding clinical trials and patient-based research. Externally-sponsored research activity is currently around the \$25 million per annum level and we authorize around 200 new clinical studies each year. We also provide management information on research activity to support planning and performance, and have a key role to play in the national research quality exercise, now known as the Research Excellence Framework.

I would say the most rewarding aspect of the role – for me - over the past year and a half has been to build a research support office almost from scratch, and to recruit an enthusiastic and hard-working team who take pride in the work they do as professional research managers, often in very difficult circumstances. As well as this, supporting and advising young researchers and taking pride in the contribution the office has made to their grant-winning activity – true partnerships.

What are the key qualities required for your position?

A difficult question and one that many people are trying to answer! I think that diplomacy and people skills are crucial - so often research administrators are trying to ‘square the circle’ of investigator demands versus institutional policy or strategy. We are – above all – problem-solvers and the key to this is to know and respect all sides of an issue. It can be a fine line to tread, but all the more rewarding when you can come up with a compromise that suits all parties.

In addition, you need organizational skills as there are many, many different problems to solve each day.

A sense of humor never goes amiss! I think research managers and administrators generally take great pride in their work – out of a natural empathy for research and the research endeavor - and so feel they are letting people down if they do not achieve their own high standards and tight deadlines. Therefore, the ability to put things into context and see the bigger picture is often essential.

Finally, in the words of Douglas Adams and the Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy – “Don’t Panic!”

What are the major issues you see in managing research in the United Kingdom?

The profession of research management and administration is still struggling to make itself heard in the UK and Europe, as a valuable and valued role, although some progress is being made through associations such as EARMA (the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators) and ARMA (the UK-based Association of Research Managers and Administrators).

There has been a move over the last decade or two in the UK towards concentration of research excellence, and towards the measurement of research quality and socio-economic “impact.” Measuring socio-economic impact is going to be difficult and research offices will have a role to play here. I also believe that we – as a profession – will need to shift more towards pro-actively building research activity in line with institutional strategies, rather than simply being seen as bureaucrats. If we can demonstrate – with real financial returns – the value we add in terms of numbers of grant awards won and the amount of full costs recovered on awards, then we will be a long way down the road to proper recognition.

Times are hard right now, following the recession, and it will be even more important for universities to be able to demonstrate proper financial sustainability of their research activities. Research offices are also crucial to this.

From a broader European standpoint, what do you think are the major issues that international research managers should be aware of when dealing with UK or European research?

I think the main issue from a viewpoint outside Europe would be to understand the sector and the way it works. In particular, to recognize that there is very little standardization in the 27 countries of Europe – all have their own public funding mechanisms and their own research agendas. The only common research theme across Europe is the Framework 7 Programme, which is operated by the European Commission and which applies equally to all nations of the EU. This is the nearest equivalent to federal funding schemes in the United States, in terms of size and complexity.

The issue of financial sustainability for research activities is also common to most European countries. In the U.S., you talk about “F&A costs.” In Europe, we talk about “full economic cost” or “full cost” as an equivalent.

Probably you should also be aware that the structure and governance of research support offices is not at all standard across Europe. There are almost as many models of externally sponsored research program support as there are universities! You need to be ready to ask for the team or unit that deals with your specific problem (finances, sign-off, clinical regulation, contractual, etc). Sometimes that may lie outside the research office!

How do you define “strategic research” at St. George’s?

Strategic research at St. George’s is defined as medium- to long-term – often collaborative – research, in specific clinical areas, such as stroke or neuroscience. It is often core-funded by government money, with direct costs paid for by charities, industry or research councils.

We have just gone through a strategic review exercise – here at St George’s – to move from six academic divisions to three, each of which will contain several research centres. These will be aligned with equivalent clinical care specialties in the hospital, with a view to focusing strategic research on improved patient health and clinical practice.

Are there any aspects of your international experience that colleagues in NCURA could learn from?

I think the obvious example is the European Commission Framework programs, in which international collaboration is required. Although opportunities for North American participation can be limited in Framework projects, I would be happy to advise on any particular aspect you might find yourself involved in.

In your opinion, what are the emerging issues in international research management over the next 5-10 years?

As mentioned previously, I think the profession still needs to achieve formal recognition and a wider awareness of where actually the research office adds value to a university – perhaps we need a good PR exercise!

Obviously, the regulatory and accountability burden is not going to decrease – quite the opposite – and I think improvement and standardization of research management systems (both IT-based and people-based) will be very important.

What have been your greatest successes and challenges in your current position?

Again, as described above, I view my greatest success as building an entire research support office almost from scratch. We have turned around processing times for new project applications, introduced more rigor to procedures and processes, and are on the way to turning round an embedded culture of poor practice in research management.

Following on from this, my next challenge is to actively build our portfolio and research base in the face of very competitive public and private spending rounds. In particular we need to explore alternative sources of funding, for example philanthropic, and attract a greater number of commercial clinical trials sponsors to St. George’s.

Do you have any final comments or observations for research managers, either in the UK or internationally?

In the words of Abraham Lincoln: “You can please some of the people some of the time, all of the people some of the time, some of the people all of the time, but you can never please all of the people all of the time” – the research manager’s creed!