

[Group STSM in Porto \(Portugal\) : « Managing research in the area of Social Sciences and Humanities : specific challenges and innovative strategies »](#)

Location: CRIA, University of Porto, Portugal

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Summary

At the beginning of September 2017, I participated in a STSM at the University of Porto. Particularly attracted by the title of the mission, I wanted to get most out of this experience since it was perfectly in line with my daily work at my home institution. As research support staff, we all have to face different challenges every day, but according to the organisation of our institutions, our departments and the specific public we work with, the ways we tackle problems can be very different and request a continuous improvement. A STSM in a department that faces problems that are similar to mine could only be beneficial for both parties since the main objective of such experience is to share practices and find the most efficient ones.

My home institution is a very well-known university in France and worldwide for its excellent research in humanities and social sciences. As such, I believe that the potential of its researchers should be exploited at the maximum, that's the main reason that pushed me to participate in the STSM at Porto. A comparison of techniques of research management as well as a deep discussion on what can work for a specific audience has proven to be useful and can be applied to my tasks as well as some of my colleagues'.

Purpose of the STSM

The purpose of the STSM in Porto was to learn and share best practices within project officers, particularly in the area of social sciences and humanities.

By comparing work organisations, tools of project management and local project procedures, the different participants could benefit from new ideas and see if they could apply them to their home institution. The University of Porto has a very different internal organisation of pre and post-award management of research projects from the one of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. Not only this is due to the fact that national laws are obviously different from a country to another, but also the choice of management structure and in particular how research support is organized from one institution to another. This is what made the mission particularly interesting: such different system can be inspirational but cannot be applied as such for obvious reasons mentioned before. However, certain techniques of project management can be applied in my home institution and this is what I intend to do, believing that they will help a smoother running of the research projects my department manages.

My role is double at my department since I have to combine support to researchers at all different stages of the project cycle as well as provide support to my colleagues. Indirectly then, the STSM will benefit not only me as a person, but more broadly, my department.

Detailed description of the work carried out during the STSM

Day 1 (4th September 2017) : CRIA – University of Porto

The day started with a short introduction of each participant. Several people were from CRIA, which is a research support centre of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Studies of the University of Porto.

Very quickly, we all agreed on the fact that « project management » is something very vast and what research support staff do cannot be reduced to « project management » ; we can say that we manage science as a whole, which is different from project management since it goes beyond that. The COST action BESTPRAC is exactly about the same point : research administration is a very varied and multi tasks job which demands a large variety of human abilities and qualities. It goes without saying that we all hope that another COST action similar or complementary to BESTPRAC will be funded soon.

The variety of participants had different duties, namely pre or post award phase support, some both and others had only certain projects (i.e. national) to deal with.

The crucial job of NCPs was mentioned by several of us and it seemed that in Portugal they are very active and offer some very useful support. In fact, they organise some tailor-made trainings for project managers, which is something missing in France. Portuguese research support staff is trying to get organized in a professional manner, in a network called PIC (Science Interface Platform) and they are organized into different groups :

1. Science policy
2. Career and training
3. Mapping (for different data)
4. Coordination

The presentation of the University of Porto by Rita Gil Mata allowed us to clearly understand substantial differences between our home institutions and the University of Porto. The 14 faculties of the university benefit from a certain autonomy that I have never experienced in the two universities where I worked. Like in France, R&D units are regularly evaluated and need to get very good (if not excellent) grades in order to get funding.

Since the University of Porto has become a public foundation, it has one PIC number and only one VAT number. Before that, each faculty was independent and had its own VAT number which gave them even more autonomy. The R&D units are attached to a specific faculty; they are not independent so if they want to apply for a funding they have to go through the faculty. In France, the approval has to come from a higher level, the President of the University. Another interesting difference between the French and Portuguese university system is that as a researcher, in Portugal, one has to dedicate 1/3 of his/her time to teaching, 1/3 to research and the remaining 1/3 to community

services while in France a research has to divide its activity into teaching and research on an equal share.

The afternoon was dedicated to a much deeper presentation of everyone's home institution and duties. What came out from the different contributions is that a particularly efficient system is based on a rather clear separation between the pre-award phase support office and the post-award phase support office. At Porto University this is the system that is in place and working well, as one would expect. I believe that, in order for my research office to be particularly operational, we would need to adopt the same type of organisation.

At the University of Porto the Research Support Office is composed of 4 people who offer their services for the pre-award phase for any national and international projects. The support for the management of projects is provided by the Office for Project Management which works in liaison with the Research Support Office. For instance, the day a GA is signed, the members of the research support office have a meeting about the project and pass on information to the Project Management Team.

In general, they offer help to all 14 faculties unless there is a local support team in place (this is the case at the faculty of psychology for instance, with the CRIA).

The specific services offered by the Research Support Office can be summarised, but not limited to, the following :

1. Mapping and dissemination of funding opportunities
2. Submission of applications
3. Project negotiation and contracting

The rest of the discussion made us conclude that, as Research Support Staff, we act as a main information point for a variety of issues related to research. This reinforced the idea of the morning, that is, we are not « simple » project managers.

As an example, we are often asked to answer HR questions and even though we all want to help our researchers, such questions need to be answered by HR professionals who can be much more accurate than us. This will avoid misunderstanding between colleagues and therefore tensions.

Day 2 (5th September 2017) : University of Porto Rectorate

In the morning of the second day, we were welcomed at the University Rectorate in order to meet some members of the Research Support Office as well as some of the International Office. The Rectorate is located in the old town of Porto, a particularly charming city, where art and the Portuguese lifestyle perfectly made us understand why it won the award of best European destination of 2017.

We were given a detailed presentation of the Research Support Office by André Alves Tooley who explained that in May 2016, the Research Office split into two offices : one dedicated to the pre-award phase and the other one to the post-award phase (project management). Details of the presentation included the number of people working in the two offices and their functioning, the number of projects managed, as well as the different ways they use to spread the information to the academic staff (professors, researchers, students).

His presentation was followed by one of the Project Management Office given by Ulisses Silva Martins. We were then introduced to the different services this office provides which include :

- Organization of the project dossier with all contracts, official documents and regulations
- Management of the financial execution of revenue and expenditure of co-financed projects
- Ensuring the project closure and the calculation of final project balances
- Monitoring of audits and the implementation of eventual recommendations
- Calculation and distribution of overheads.

This last point was particularly interesting since, if in my home institution there is one rule that applies to all departments, at Porto University, the situation is very different. Every faculty has certain autonomy and can decide how to distribute the project overheads. The rules can vary significantly from one faculty to another. Thus, the faculty can decide to keep the overheads, give them to the PIs and/or to the Research office.

The Research support office is presently planning to organise a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Masterclass like the one I co-organised with some colleagues at the archaeology department of my home institution. This gave me the opportunity to share my experience with them and give some advice.

Another couple of presentations introduced us to the International Office as well, which is dedicated to other type of projects, such as Erasmus+ ones.

In general, I was particularly impressed by the quality of the different speakers. The presentations were all clear, concise and easy to follow. Everything was explained in excellent English, which made things even more pleasant to follow. It showed a high level of professionalism at different levels, which made me guess that if the University of Porto is successfully setting up and managing several projects, this is mainly due to the efficiency of the staff in both, « Research Support » and « Project Management », offices.

The afternoon session was back at CRIA, which is located in a rather distant university campus from the Rectorate.

We all presented the main challenges and characteristics of our jobs, which can be summarised as such :

- Respect of strict institutional rules ;
- Respect of strict legal rules (project mgt/implementation) ;
- Communication among stakeholders (research centres, researchers, funding agencies) ;
- Implementing procedures between different services of the institution ;
- Motivate SSH researchers to apply for funding ;
- Lack of knowledge of SSH researchers in projects' structure ;
- Difficulties with English and or translation ;
- Make their research more « understandable/relevant/important » ;
- How to use the project budget ;

- How to develop a project culture? / Another view of science? / Interdisciplinarity? / Different strategies?;
- Make the researchers understand the « Grant cycle » and that applying for funding is about communication ;
- How to teach researchers to make an idea understandable in graphics (Gantt charts, Perth, ...).

The culture of the sciences is specific so writing scientifically is a hard task even for very good researchers.

DAY 3 (6th September 2017) : CRIA

The last day of the STSM was dedicated to identify « CHALLENGES - STRATEGIES - BEST PRACTICES » in the management of research in the area of SSH.

At CRIA, in the framework of FCT Funding programme (national funding), once the calls are published, they base the procedure into 4 points :

1. Information/tools (after the call publication, each researcher receives a Google invitation to an information session about the call), another tool was the creation of a specific e-mail address dedicated to that specific call, a Q&A tool, a mailing list to keep them informed, early access to database.
2. Setting up of deadlines (internal deadlines) – 1 month delay between the call publication and the deadline to submit proposals which should be 10 pages long.
3. Training sessions : 3 sessions all dedicated to particular subjects (project activities, communication, budget preparation)
4. Coaching (individual and collective coaching), each little meeting is 30 minutes long.

In the post-award phase, the best practices included the setting up of a tool for the filling up of timesheets, which had regularly been a problem. They then created an Excel map to keep track of who is involved in what project and if the researchers sent them timesheets. This helped the CRIA staff to better monitor their projects.

Other best practices that came up during the participants presentations included tools for better communication between stakeholders. At the University of Porto, research support staff created a « fiche projet » so all the necessary (important information) is summarised in one single paper. This « fiche » allows all different stakeholders involved in the project to have essential information about the project.

The fiche is prepared at the submission stage so the dean, who has to sign any paper concerning the project, is aware of what each lab of the faculty is preparing.

Thematic information sessions are common activities organised by all participants, in particular, in order to make these meetings more useful, it was agreed that it is better to ask researchers to prepare their questions before the information session.

The main points that I shared about during my presentation about best practices at Paris 1 University included :

- See who can apply to a national funding and who can apply to a European funding (they are not the same researchers!) and then meet individual needs.
- Marie Skłodowska-Curie Masterclass can be a very useful experience for MSCA candidates but also for the different research projects support staff.
- The particularities of a JRU in the French system.
- Different problems in filling timesheets.
- The CNRS model of claiming timesheets to its researchers and the consequences of not following the rule.
- The electronic timesheet model « SINCHRO » and its advantages.
- Translation of documents for HR colleagues / colleagues of the financial department, etc.
- The HRS4R and the « HR excellence in research label », the advantages that the label can bring, especially for certain types of projects (MSCA and ERC).

The table below represents a summary of the different challenges identified together, as a group :

	MY WORK	TARGET GROUP
PRE-AWARD	Project culture : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Motivate SSH researchers to apply - Interdisciplinarity - Different stakeholders - Budget Communication among stakeholders	Project culture : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional identity and scientific background - Publishing for track record - Applying to funding is communication (including science outreach) Difficult with languages (English) Publishing for CV / track record
POST-AWARD	Project culture : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Budget Strict legal rules Implementation procedures Communication among stakeholders	Project culture : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of knowledge of SSH scientific project structures dynamics - Science outreach (publishing in open access) mandatory

CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, there is a need to adopt new work methodologies and tools for a successful management of SSH research projects. What came up during the 3-day STSM is an increased need to better communicate between stakeholders, a further development of project culture among researchers, the setting up of implementation procedures among different services and to identify issues that interfere with the project success, but that are out of our control as research support staff.

SSH researchers have a « recognition problem » since, in a way, they have always been the « unwanted child » in research. Moreover, SSH sciences have a very unique language in each one of them, the use of the national language to express an idea is important since you cannot translate the same phenomena in other languages with the same results. Hard sciences do not have the same problem, the language they use to communicate is much more international since is based on mathematical references.

We all agreed that there is a need to recognize specialised services and let them do their work. This is valid for us as « project managers », but also for other services like RH departments. Even though our job requires a variety of tasks, we cannot answer all questions, especially if there are specific services in our institutions that can do that better.

The recognition of our job specificity seems to require further work and we all believe that a strong network of research administrators can efficiently collaborate to reach this goal.

Other comments

I would like to thank all the participants of the STSM in Porto and in particular the CRIA staff (many special thanks to Rita Gil Mata who organised the training session), I am very lucky to have had the chance to meet this group of very professional and pleasant people and exchange with them my experience as a research administrator.