

## Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) Report: “Managing research in the area of Social Sciences and Humanities: specific challenges and innovative strategies”

CRIA - University of Porto

4 – 6 September 2017

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**Home Institution:** Université Clermont Auvergne

**Host Institution:** Universidade do Porto, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação (FCPE), Centro de Recursos Integrados de Apoio à Investigação (Center for Research Support)

**Date of STSM:** 4 to 6 September 2017

**Action number:** TN1302-The voice of research administrators - building a network of administrative excellence (BESTPRAC)

### SUMMARY

This STSM focuses on the challenges in managing research in Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH) area. During these days, after presentation of our institutions and missions, we detailed the main challenges encountered in our day-to-day work. Then, we presented best practices and tried to determine if they could answer to some of the identified challenges. Finally, we search collaboratively new innovative strategies that could resolve some more issues. Therefore, results from this STSM will provide us, but also the BESTPRAC Action, with the first elements to improve our daily practices in information and support of researchers in proposal writing and submission, as well as well in the monitoring of funded projects in the SSH area. These practices and strategies are intended to be tested, adapted and improved. In addition, many of them could probably be useful for managing research in all other areas of science. Besides those results, this STSM enabled the creation of new collaborations between the research support offices of the 4 participating institutions. We aim to make these synergies sustainable by maintaining contact for regular sharing of experience and practices as a working group that can be expanded to other interested research administrators.

## PURPOSE OF THE STSM

This STSM was dedicated to Research Managers or Funding Advisors that work in the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) area. Indeed, the underlying hypothesis is that this research area has some peculiarities that engender specific issues in assisting them in applying national or European funding.

The main goals of the STSM were:

- to identify specific challenges encountered in managing research in the SSH area, in pre-award and post-award phases;
- to share and compare the practices implemented by each Research Support Office to cope with those challenges;
- to define new innovative strategies to address the issues for which we have no current implemented practices;
- to share best practices related to both information activities, pre-award; procedures, project management and reporting.

In parallel, the STSM also aimed at exchanging general experiences in pre-award and post-award phases whatever the research area and promote future collaboration between institutions involved in this STSM.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

The STSM was divided in 3 main parts:

- 1) Exchange of experience and presentation of specific challenges in managing research in the SSH area
- 2) Description of best practices implemented by each Research Support Office to cope with some of those challenges
- 3) Brainstorming to identify new innovative strategies to implement in order to address some of the remaining unresolved issues

### Group Participants:

- o André Alves Tooley, Unidade de Apoio à Investigação, Reitoria da UPORTO, Porto
- o Andreia Zorrinho, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas – NOVA FCSH, Lisboa
- o Carolina Varela, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas – NOVA FCSH, Lisboa
- o Célia Pinto, CRIA@FPCE-UPORTO, Porto
- o Karina Gonçalves, CRIA@FPCE-UPORTO, Porto
- o (Katarzyna Drożdżiel; Polish Academy of Sciences - Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Warsaw) - **absent**
- o Luís Violante, CRIA@FPCE-UPORTO, Porto
- o Mélanie Rigal, Université Clermont Auvergne, Clermont-Ferrand
- o Pedro Leal, CRIA@FPCE-UPORTO, Porto
- o Rita Gil Mata, CRIA@FPCE-UPORTO, Porto
- o Sandra Mereu, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris
- o Tito Novo, Unidade de Apoio à Investigação, Reitoria da UPORTO, Porto

### Detailed work programme:

#### DAY 1

The first day was mainly for introducing the host institution and the participants. Thus, Rita Gil Mata, from CRIA (University of Porto) presented the University itself: its main characteristics, its structure in Faculties, Research units and Interface centers. She also detailed the structure of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FCPE) to which they are affiliated, and their own missions in pre-award and post-award phases.

After that, the participants introduced the sending institutions, namely the Central Services at the University of Porto (PT), the University of Lisbon (PT), Université Clermont Auvergne (FR) and Université Paris I – Paris Sorbonne (FR).

## **DAY 2**

During the second day we went to the Rectorate to meet the centralized Research Support office, the Project Management office and the International Relations office.

The **Research Support office** and the **Project Management office** have split in May 2016. The Research Support office supports pre-award phases until contract signing, while the Project Management office supports post-award phases, during project implementation. Both of them work on regional, national, European and international research projects.

On the other side, the **International Relations office** assist researchers applying on the Erasmus+ programme, on pre-award and post-award phases.

During the afternoon, each participant presented one or several challenges faced in our day-to-day work, to which they already have or not solutions or mitigation measures. Then, we searched for additional issues and tried to group them into broader themes. Results from this brainstorming are detailed below in “Description of the main results”.

## **DAY 3**

The third morning was devoted first to divide the identified challenges between pre-award and post-award phases.

Then, each participant presented one or several best practices implemented in its institution. Then, we tried to determine whether each of those best practices could help address the challenges identified the day before.

The afternoon we searched new strategies that could cope with the challenges for which we had currently no solutions.

Then we summarized all the work done during the three days in a table associating challenges, best practices and/or new strategies in order to conclude in link with the STSM objectives.

## **CONTRIBUTION TO THE COST ACTION GOALS**

The STSM was strongly focused on exchanges regarding institutions and research support offices organization and missions. We discussed a lot about our practices in managing research in the SSH area but also more widely in our day-to-day work. Moreover, this STSM fostered interactions between the participating institutions that we wish to maintain in the future. The host institution will provide a document summarizing the main results presented in the next section (see below).

Thus STSM objectives and main results fully contributed to the COST Action goals that are to create a network of research administrators to share their experiences and practices and enhance their efficiency.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN RESULTS**

### **1-Identification of challenges in managing research in the SSH area:**

Each participant presented one or several challenges faced in his day-to-day work. Then we divided them in three types: that which are an integral part of our missions (indicated below as “**MY WORK**”), and some that must be solved by the target group itself - mostly researchers - and which are outside our missions (indicated below as “**TARGET GROUP**”). Some of them may be on both sides.

### List of the challenges identified by the participants:

- To deal and comply with strict institutional rules **MY WORK**
- To deal and comply with strict legal rules (project management implementation) **MY WORK**
- To foster an efficient communication among stakeholders, University, researchers, funding agency **MY WORK**
- To implement procedures between researchers and services, and among services **MY WORK**
- To motivate researchers to apply to calls **MY WORK/TARGET GROUP**
- Lack of knowledge of SSH researchers in project structure **TARGET GROUP/MY WORK**
- SSH researchers' difficulties with English **TARGET GROUP**
- To make their research more understandable/relevant/important **TARGET GROUP/MY WORK**
- To develop an international project culture - interdisciplinarity, broad range of stakeholders **MY WORK/TARGET GROUP**
- To publish in international peer-reviewed journals in order to apply for funding **TARGET GROUP**
- To define how to allocate the project budget? (they often have only small financial needs and do not always see the value of huge projects with significant funding) **MY WORK**
- To communicate on their topic of interest and research results **TARGET GROUP**

We concluded from this list that even if some of those challenges are specific to the SSH area, most of them could also be encountered in managing research in all science domains. Moreover, our exchanges have shown that some challenges are only or mostly linked to researcher nationality, culture or discipline.

### 2-Presentation of best practices:

Each participant presented one or several best practices implemented in their institution.

#### **CRIA (University of Porto):**

*1<sup>st</sup> challenge:* For national call for funding that was launched once a year, a lot of researchers requested the support of CRIA.

To manage this particularly busy period, they designed a process in 3 steps:

- a collective meeting 2 days after the call launch to inform all the researchers about the funding opportunity;
- 3 training sessions: on how to define objectives and articulation with activities; on communication strategy and outreach, how to make graphs and flowcharts; on budget expenses.
- coaching including individual meetings of 30 minutes, creation of a Questions and Answers tool that was frequently updated, early access to the submission platform to see forms and templates etc.

*2<sup>nd</sup> challenge:* When CRIA had few projects to follow, they filled the timesheets themselves for the researchers involved in the project. However, when the number of projects approved increased, they had to transfer this task back to the scientists. To simplify this duty, they provide them a chronogram with the number of working days to be carried out on each WP. CRIA ask for the timesheets every month and have a monitoring table to check if each people of each project have sent his timesheet. In addition, to prepare project financial reports in advance, they prepare a list of all the expenses to be declared, one month before the date of reporting. To avoid the fact that some scientists have not spent all the funds at the end of the project, they inform them every 2-6 months of the remaining budget.

#### **Research Support Office of the Faculty of SSH (University of Lisbon)**

*Challenge:* A funding agency asked to justify expenditures made on a project per diem of the people who traveled within the framework of this project. She wanted this to be provided by the University's human resources department. However, the human resources department did not know how to do it. To make it possible, the Research Support Office has planned meetings with the Human Resources Department to work on a dedicated tool and procedures. They changed the form they usually used to put all the information that the HR department needed in their database.

## Research Support Office of Université Paris I -Sorbonne

*Challenge:* the University wanted to attract more post-doctorates by increasing applications and success rate for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowships (MSCA-IF).

To this end, Sandra Mereu, in charge of the pre-award phase, organized a specific masterclass. Some scientists invited potential candidates throughout Europe. Those candidates already prepared their proposal before the session. The masterclass included a presentation of MSCA-IF characteristics and then reviews and feedbacks on each proposal by European Commission experts who already evaluated MSCA-IF projects.

Sandra Mereu also described the implementation in the CNRS research center (Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique) of a timesheet management software. This has helped reduce or even completely eliminate mistakes from researchers and from project managers in the completion of timesheets (work during weekends, or abnormal number of working hours, delays, etc.).

Finally, we also addressed the recent issue of the need for our institutions to sign the declaration of endorsement of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, particularly for MSCA-IF applications.

Then we tried to identify other best practices which could also contribute to cope with the identified challenges and divided them in 7 broader themes:

- ⇒ **Best practice A** Pre-award support organization and training
- ⇒ **Best practice B** Time reporting
- ⇒ **Best practice C** Consequences for no compliance
- ⇒ **Best practice D** Communication with stakeholders – email for management board
- ⇒ **Best practice E** Implementation procedures – flexibility and openness to make new initiatives,
- ⇒ **Best practice F** Negotiation with services -create dynamics and interactions
- ⇒ **Best practice G** Preparing participation in information sessions/increase of research involvement
- ⇒ **Best practice H** HR excellence in research/charter for researchers (*Transversal*)

### 3-Links between challenges and best practices, and identification of new strategies:

The next step was to associate the best practices to the challenges we face during day-to-day work.

In order to do that we first numbered the challenges, subdivided some of them, and distributed them between pre-award and post-award phases.

Then, for each challenge, we associated one or several of the 7 best practices. This classification showed that some challenges could not be addressed thanks to any of these best practices. For them, we searched for innovative strategies in order to cope with them.

By this way, we identified 3 new strategies to implement:

- ⇒ **New strategy I** To identify issues that impact on the acceptance or non-acceptance of a project but which are beyond our control or our missions. For example, the institution has not enough projects because researchers have issues in English. These are challenges we face but we cannot directly impact on.
- ⇒ **New strategy J** Post-award training sessions
- ⇒ **New strategy K** To increase the awareness of the internal services about the tasks of the Research Support offices

We also discussed the fact that the best practices to be as effective as possible should be tailored to each researcher, each with a different background, culture, temperament.

Finally, in order to summarize all our results, we generated the table below.

MY WORK		TARGET GROUP		
Challenges	Best practices	Challenges	Best practices	
<b>PRE AWARD</b>	1. Project culture	A	7. Project culture => to broaden their mindness	A, G
	1.1 Motivate SSH researchers to apply	G, A	7.1 Professional identity, scientific background	A, G
	1.2 Interdisciplinarity	A	7.2 Applying to funding is communication (including science outreach)	A, G
	1.3 Different stakeholders (identification of partners)	D, A	8. Difficulties with the English language	I
	1.4 Budget	A	9. Publish international articles for track-record	I
	1.5 Research design	A		
	2. Communication among stakeholders	D, A		
<b>POST AWARD</b>	3. Project culture regarding the budget	B, C, J	10. Project culture	
	4. Strict legal rules	B, C, E, F	10.1 Lack of knowledge of project structures dynamics;	B, C, G, J
	5. Implementation procedures	E, F	10.2 Science outreach including publishing open-access international articles for project dissemination	J
	6. Communication among stakeholders	D, K		

### WHAT I LEARNED FROM THIS STSM

I applied to this STSM because I felt that I still have room for improvement in my practices regarding SSH researchers. Indeed, after obtaining a PhD in Biology, I have been working for 2 years in the Research Support Office helping researchers from Life Sciences, Health and Environment, as well as Social Sciences & Humanities. In the course of exchanges with researchers with very diverse disciplines, I noted more accentuated issues in the SSH area.

That is why this STSM seemed to me to be completely in line with my needs.

This visit offered me the possibility to expose my own difficulties I face day by day, and to see that at least some of them were shared by other colleagues from similar research support offices, even specialized in the SSH area. This allowed me to understand that these issues were not (or not only) related to the fact that I did not follow an academic course in SSH but were also experienced by colleagues themselves graduates in this field of research.

In the same sense, I felt a daily difficulty restricting myself to my own missions and not overriding them when the researchers insisted or had no answers from the dedicated services.

During the STSM we evoked this issue which has been in fact experienced by most if not all participants. The advice that emerged from the exchanges was to limit ourselves to our missions so as not to take the risk of giving information on subjects for which we are not competent and to have more time to do our own tasks to the best of our ability. This issue was also reflected in the challenges identified since we saw that most of those we had indicated were out of our reach and had to be dealt with by the researchers themselves. The discussions revealed that we worry about problems that do not concern us directly and thus to start a work to take a step back. The strategy we proposed for the challenges only linked to the target group is to identify them and change the focus to show to the researchers that they have to work on those issues on their side as those are beyond our control or our missions. These exchanges gave me a lot to relativize the problems that I meet and in the confidence in me and my competencies within the framework of my own missions.

Besides, I of course gained knowledge on other institutions, particularly on specificities of Portuguese Universities.

I was very interested in how each institution structures its research support offices, allocates staff, in pre-award and post-award phases, between types of projects, between disciplines etc.

I will also keep in mind the excellent teamwork set up in CRIA office, and try to work on myself to further improve teamwork in my own service.

I will inform my office and institution on some of those aspects in order to improve our own practices (see next section).

On the other hand, I learned a lot about how to better plan tasks and manage time, in the face of the diverse and abundant solicitations of researchers or other internal or external actors, which was also one of my main challenges in the day-to-day work.

Finally, more practically, the STSM also provided new ideas to improve the information to the researchers about funding opportunities and project management. I can cite notably the cycle of conferences CRIA has launched this year on two aspects: « Opportunities » to inform on one specific funding opportunity (ERC/ITN/COST etc.) in 30 minutes (+30 minutes questions) and « Competencies » to provide them (in maximum 2 hours) transferable skills that are useful to apply to calls for projects and manage their implementation, for example on proposal writing or on communication of research results.

### **WHICH BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES WILL I TRY TO IMPLEMENT IN MY INSTITUTION?**

Since this visit was very enriching, I wish to implement in my institution most of the practices exposed by the participants that that are currently lacking, in order to maximize efficiency of our research support office.

As detailed in the previous section, I will discuss with my team on generating specific tools to better plan our tasks and our missions. When a call for which there are many applications is launched, I would like to provide applicants early with appointment dates and availability slots to meet. This would be useful for our office, but also for researchers to organize their own work schedule until the project is submitted. Moreover, I wish to organize 2-3 training sessions that are dedicated to all the applicants and specifically devoted to one aspect such as budget estimation, or how to write the impact section of their proposal.

The idea is to be efficient in a restricted time, to make familiar with those aspects for subsequent applications, and to avoid repeating the same rules and advice to each individual applicant.

Regarding the post-award phase, I thought that the Innovative Strategy J could be particularly useful for our researchers. Indeed, as the other participants, I noted that SSH researchers often have no or partial knowledge on how to manage European and even national projects and communicate its results. Therefore, I aim at implementing training sessions to present them how a project is structured, what are the steps and

obligations in project implementation, how and by which channels they could communicate and disseminate their project outputs etc.

### **FUTURE COLLABORATION WITH HOST INSTITUTION**

The STSM allowed me to meet European colleagues from other research support offices. I aim at maintaining and reinforcing those synergies.

Indeed, the topic of this STSM may interest lots of other research administrators and the results from it are only a first step in addressing it. Practices are evolving and can always be improved. Therefore, this work group needs to be maintained and even expanded in order to maximize its inputs and impacts.

We aim thus to feed this list of best practices and innovative strategies. We will also give feedbacks after implementing some of those practices in the institutions as we are also aware that our practices have to be adjusted to each researcher with his own temperament and culture, those adaptations could be useful for other colleagues.

Finally, it could be really interesting to exchange with other administrators specialized in different research areas to go deeper in the area specificities. This could also help to identify practices already efficiently implemented in other areas that could be useful to address the SSH challenges, and reciprocally.

### **FORESEEN DOCUMENT TO RESULT FROM THE STSM**

Rita Gil Mata from CRIA (host institution) will provide a document from the STSM summarizing the main results detailed above. It will particularly focus on best practices and innovative strategies that may help cope with challenges in managing research in the SSH area.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*I would first like to thank Martina Pöll and Rita Gil Mata for accepting my application to this STSM, and the latter also for offering and hosting it.*

*Secondly, I thank the Research Support office, the Project Management office and the International Relations office that presented their missions and shared their experiences and practices.*

*Then, I would like to conclude by thanking all the participants for this exchange of practices and information.*