

Research Administration in Europe

Research Support in Scandinavia – A Profession in growth

By Olaf Svenningsen

Back in the mid-1980's, when I started as a graduate student at Lund University in Sweden, I had never heard of such a thing as a "grants office" or "research support", at least not at a Scandinavian (Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian or Swedish) university. Back in those days, grants from external funders were much less common, and most (70-90%) of universities' funding for research came as block grants, paid directly from the government. When my thesis supervisors wrote grant proposals to the national research councils, they did not get specialist assistance with their applications, and rules and control were more or less absent, by today's standard.

Since then, the proportion of external research funding to Scandinavian universities has been

steadily growing, and now constitutes roughly half of the funding for university research. Under the influence from both politicians and internal needs, the nature of research has changed from relatively small, local groups to large, international, collaborative projects, with its added complexity.

The growing importance of research funding from the European Union (EU), under the so-called Framework Programs for research, have contributed to this development, profoundly affecting not just trans-national research funding within the EU, but also national funding schemes for research. This trend towards bigger, more complex research grants has had the apparently contradictory consequence that although there has never been more funding for research than today, it has never been harder for a researcher to obtain funding.

Research support in the Scandinavian countries was in many cases initially established because of the very complex procedures to apply for EU funding. The size and trans-national character of EU-funded research projects introduced a new level

of complexity in writing grant proposals, and research support functions sprouted at many Scandinavian universities, beginning in the mid to late 1990's. During the

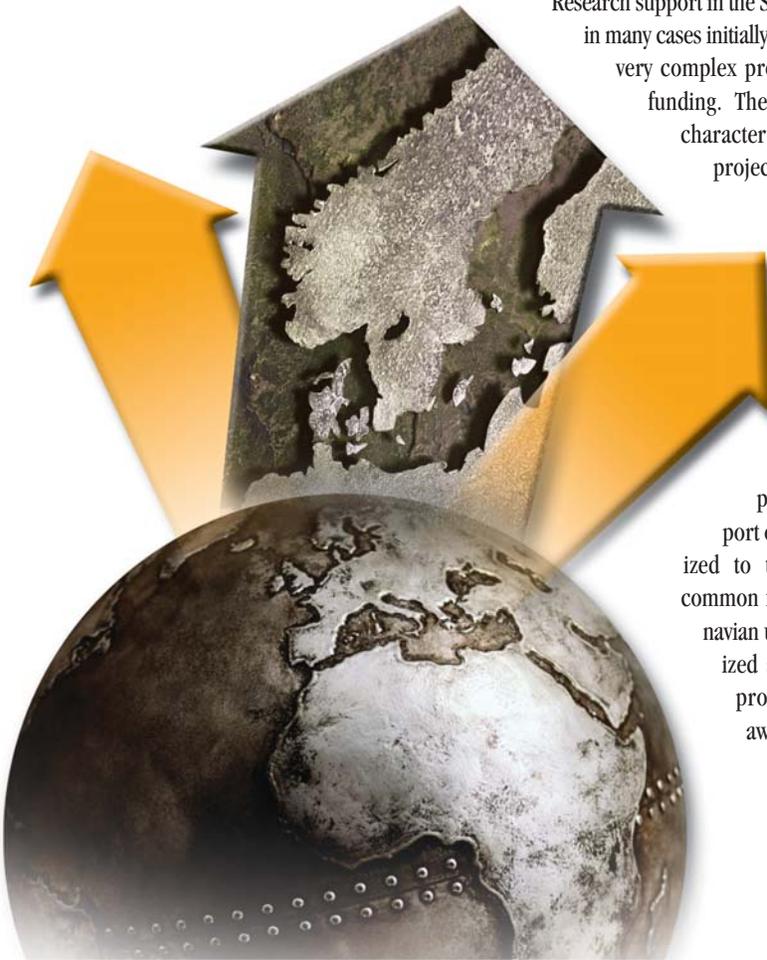
past 15 years, research support offices that are not specialized to the EU have become a common feature, and most Scandinavian universities provide organized services to support grant proposal development and award management.

I have participated in setting up 2 such research support offices (RSO's), beginning in 2003 at Uppsala University in Sweden, and from 2009 at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU). Through my own experience and professional associations like NCURA, EARMA, and DARMA it has become obvious that research support has the potential to be much more than just administrative support to grant writing – and to not appear condescending, let me quickly point out that administrative support to grant writing is a fundamentally important task, which is the core of my own job.

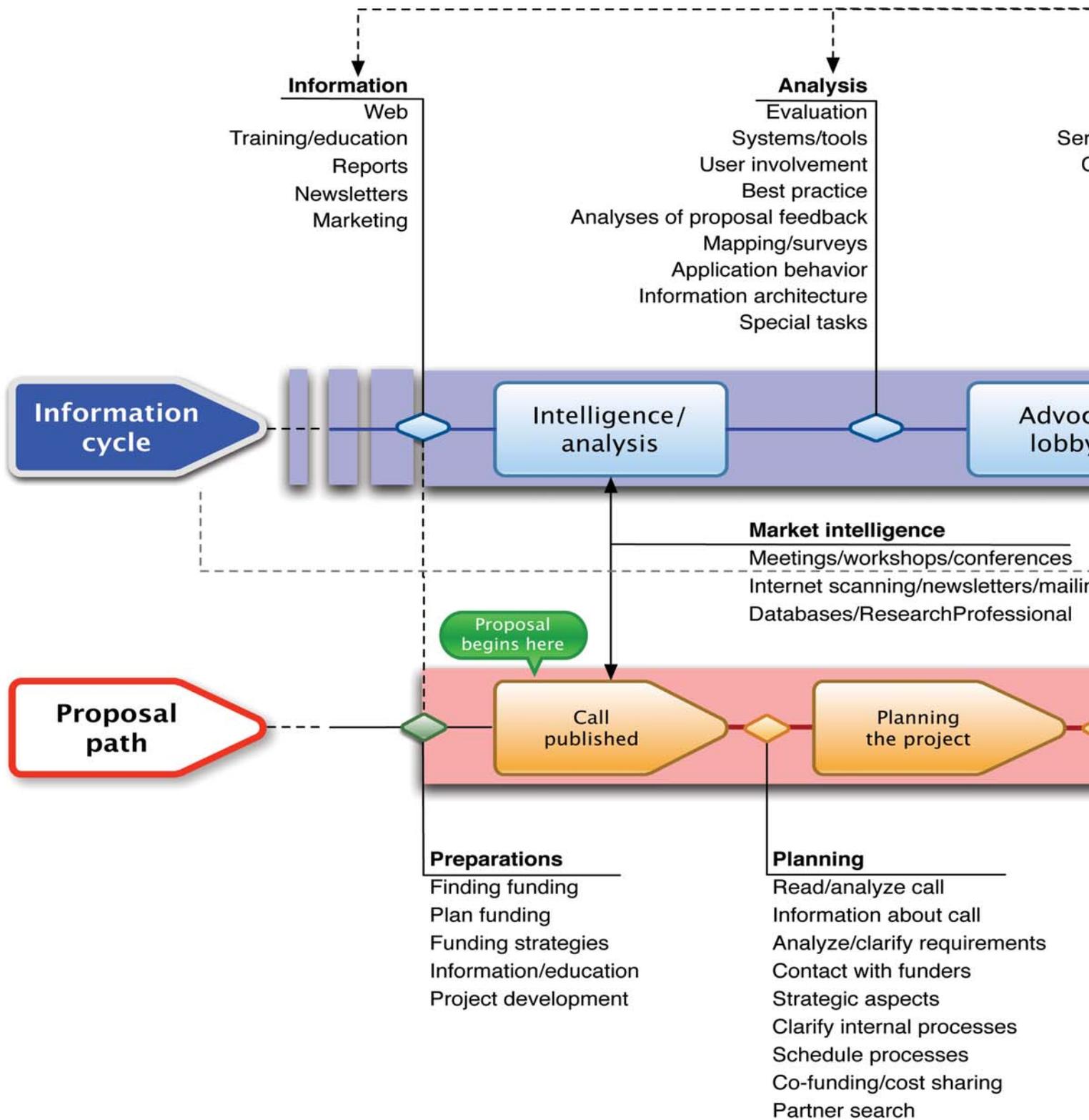
It did not take long for me to experience that traditional administrative functions – finances, legal issues, HR, communications – at Scandinavian universities did not always realize what the point of a separate research support office might be. Expectations from university management were not always focused either; the initial mission statement for many RSO's have been to "attract more external research funding" without much further specification of what this actually means. This is the root of the ever-popular – and seemingly endless – discussion of how the output of an RSO should be measured; it is, or should be, the scientific quality of the proposed project that is the deciding competitive factor, so the RSO provides added value. How can added value be measured?

Having wrestled with this problem throughout the years in Uppsala, one of the first things we set out to do when Southern Denmark Research Support (SDRS, the RSO for health sciences at SDU and the Region of Southern Denmark) was established, was to map the activities of the office and put them into a context that would make it easier for us to explain to our colleagues and management what research support is, with the (not very) hidden agenda of pointing out what it could be, given ad-

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What does a Research Services, tasks and process



Support Office do?

Services in pre-award support

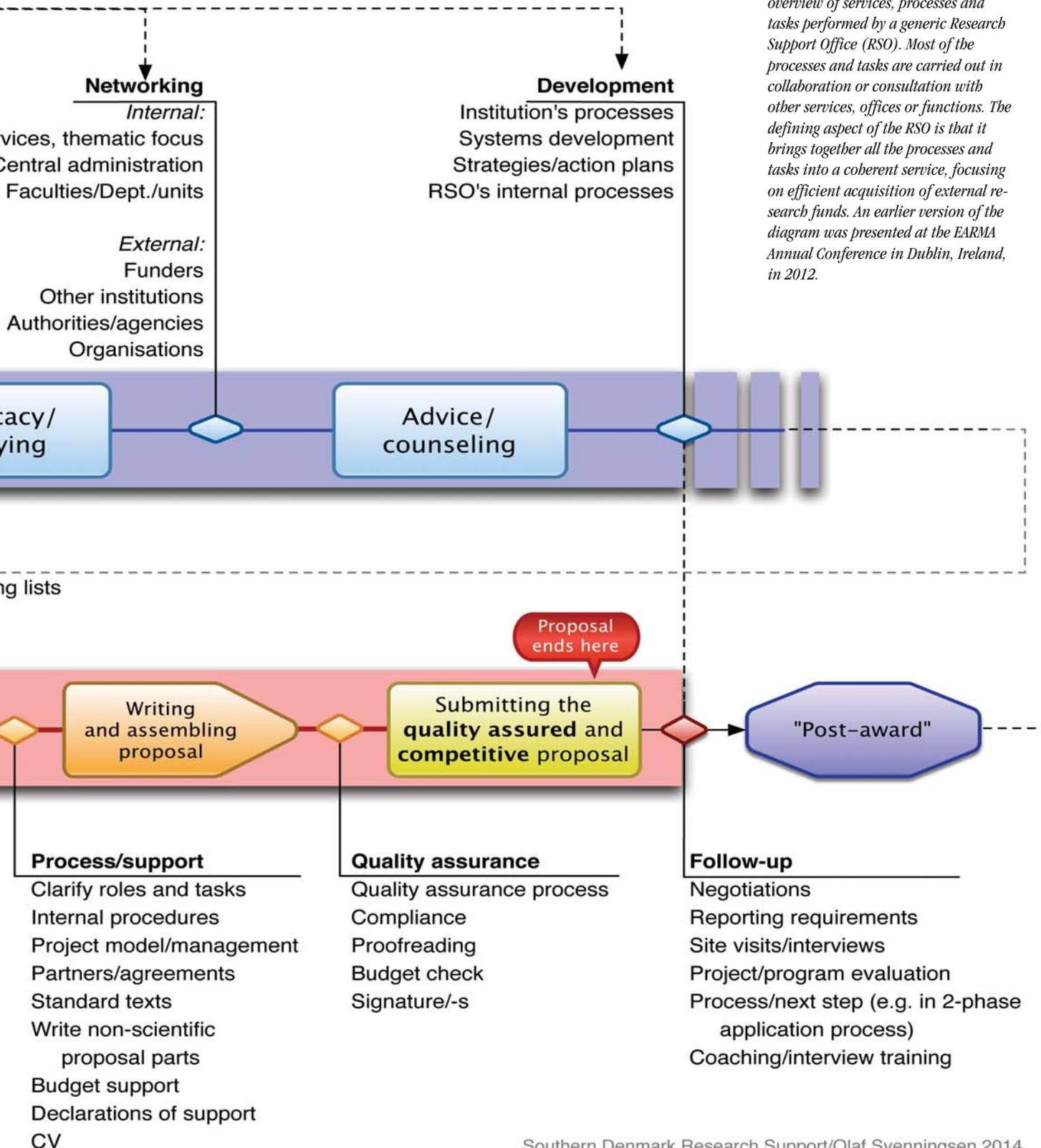


Figure 1. This diagram provides an overview of services, processes and tasks performed by a generic Research Support Office (RSO). Most of the processes and tasks are carried out in collaboration or consultation with other services, offices or functions. The defining aspect of the RSO is that it brings together all the processes and tasks into a coherent service, focusing on efficient acquisition of external research funds. An earlier version of the diagram was presented at the EARMA Annual Conference in Dublin, Ireland, in 2012.

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equate resources. The result of this effort is presented as a diagram (Figure 1), where two bands illustrate the RSO's tasks, the lower one being the grant proposal process; the upper is the continuously ongoing, more strategic activities. The diagram is intended to be general, and not specific to any particular funder.

Our starting point in creating the diagram was a discussion of what the "product" of the pre-award activities is. Writing a grant proposal is a fairly well defined process, most of the times starting when the call is published, and ending with the submission of the final proposal. The actual delivery of the RSO is actually not "more external funding" – even if that is a desired long-term effect – but something else: a competitive, quality-assured grant proposal. The RSO can provide "competitive" and "quality assurance", and that is our "product".

Working backward from this, we defined the framework for the proposal process in 4 stages; call published, planning the project, writing and assembling the proposal, and finally submitting the competitive and quality-assured proposal. For each stage, we defined the actual tasks that an RSO may perform, and they are listed underneath the red band.



So far, so good. Having finished this mapping, we quickly realized that something fundamental was missing: We are providing all this advice about complex things that are continually changing; laws and regulations are updated, funders change their programs and focus, every 5 to 7 years EU's funding schemes change more or less dramatically (often more), not to mention that changing political agendas shape the conditions for research funding. We must keep ourselves up to date, but how do we do it? How much work is involved?

"Market intelligence" is the answer, and it is a fundamental activity of any RSO, but it did not fit into the "Proposal path". We realized that our intelligence activities are the "glue" between the proposal path and the other large set of continuously on-going tasks. A never-ending "Information Cycle" was defined, illustrated by the blue band in the diagram. We chose to define three stages in the information cycle; intelligence and analysis, advocacy and lobbying, and (internal) advice and counseling. Actual tasks are listed just as with the proposal path, but above the blue band.

Now the diagram started to look interesting, I thought. It provided a structured picture of our job that at least I could recognize, and it illustrated the dynamic complexity and variety that I suspect that many, if not most, research administrators are very familiar with. Even better, the diagram had the potential to be used as a tool for the development of SDRS, or maybe even any RSO.

For example, our web information needs to somehow reflect the proposal path, and any system or tools to support our activities needs to take the entire picture into account. Having the tasks set into a context makes it possible to design our development processes in a coherent way, with a focus on the grant proposal process as a whole, not just the separate parts. Guided by the insight provided by this mapping process, we have launched a number of initiatives, for example:

- Setting up an accredited training program in research funding and project management for early-career scientists.
- Recruiting an EU research liaisons officer stationed in Brussels.
- Mapping the university's regulatory framework for grant proposals for coherence and clarity.

- Introducing new IT systems for efficiently monitoring proposals and awards, allowing better analyses of the university's activities within external research funding.

Interestingly, I believe that I can discern a trend: At Uppsala, research support became gradually more involved in central, strategic processes, and the same seems to be going on at SDU at present. The RSO often grows out of a strictly administrative back office function, to include a more dynamic and strategic role. The RSO sits in a unique position, at the intersection between research, university administration/management, and funders, always with a focus on external research funding. Since external research funding is critical to the survival of most modern universities, the RSO is a potential key function, if put to efficient use. SDRS' motto is that we are co-players in research.

However, since one of the main products of an RSO, as we defined it, is "added value", it is crucial to have a crystal clear picture of what this added value is, and what we do to provide it. The experience of mapping our own processes and activities from a general perspective was very useful, and gave me interesting insights. The slight fuzziness of the term "added value" in combination with the ever-changing research funding landscape actually provide opportunities for growth and development that I believe are quite unique for research support.

Acknowledgements: The mapping of RSO processes was made possible through the collaboration and contributions of colleagues at SDU-Lone Bredahl Jensen, Hanne Dahl Mortensen, Gitte Toftgaard Jørgensen, Arne Bækdahl Hansen, and Helen Korsgaard. ■



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