

Supporting Academic Research

Understanding the challenges

Findings from a 2020 study of researchers
and senior members of research offices
in the UK, the US and Australia.



Background

Researchers and research administrators in higher education are under pressure to adapt to an ever changing landscape of funding opportunities and efforts to make research more accessible. At the same time, they are being challenged to demonstrate research impact. The Covid-19 pandemic has only aggravated these pressures, with a shift of focus to managing day-to-day operations and away from strategic research priorities and the research ecosystem. Predicted changes in student enrolment due to the pandemic have also led to cost reduction efforts, increasing the strain on research support budgets.

At the same time, technological changes and advances also make the future of research more exciting, allowing collaboration across different disciplines and institutions, increasing opportunities to share data, and supporting researchers with tools that facilitate the research process and enable greater impact.

Project

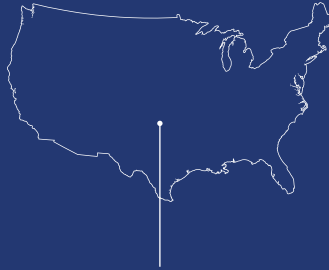
Alterline, an independent research agency, was commissioned by Ex Libris to assess the experience of researchers and senior members of university research offices in conducting, and supporting the production of, research at institutions of higher education.

This paper includes the findings from two surveys with researchers and senior members of research offices across the UK, the US and Australia. This follows on from a similar research study conducted in 2019 about the challenges faced in the research landscape.

Our survey of 101 senior members of research offices included:



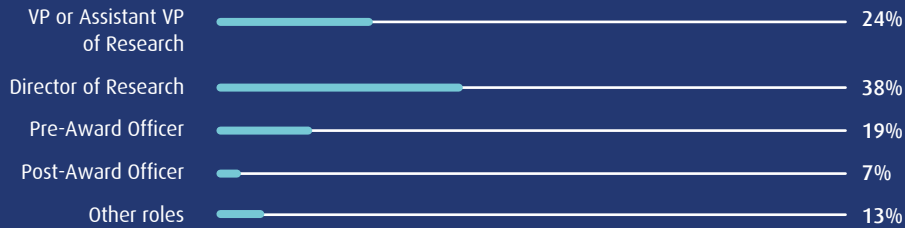
UK - 33%



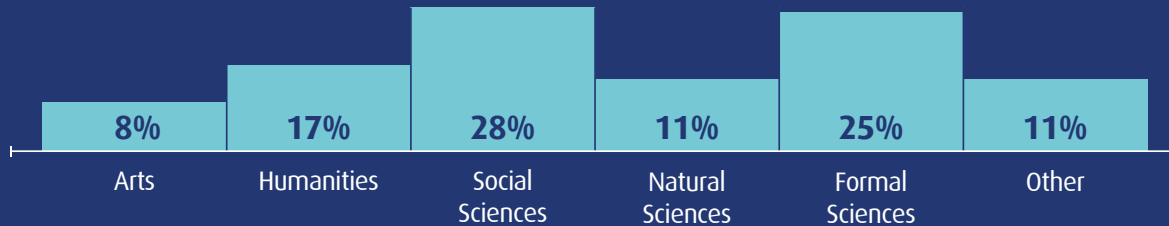
US - 51%



AUS - 16%



Our survey of 314 researchers included a range of disciplines:



Key Findings

Funding remains the top priority

A lack of time and resources continues to be a key challenge to obtaining high-quality funding opportunities amongst researchers and research office members. Covid-19 has exacerbated this, with fewer opportunities in certain disciplines and less resources available to bid for opportunities.

Showcasing expertise is hindered by data systems

While this is a key priority, a substantial proportion of staff in the research office do not have a research portal to access and showcase publication data. Meanwhile, researchers lack the time to keep their profiles up to date over an ever-increasing number of systems.

Citations are a necessary evil when measuring impact

Researchers are increasingly frustrated by citation-based metrics. Researchers and research office staff say there are better ways to measure impact, but compiling data in a timely manner is a challenge. Researchers want more nuanced measures, which are suitable across all disciplines and reflect the social impact of their work.

Open Access support is growing

While making publications available openly is not the main priority in the research office, researchers' support for making their own work openly available is growing.

There is an appetite to build relationships with the library

Beyond Open Access and publications, more strategic alliances would be beneficial for both the research office and the library.

Researchers are bearing the burden of research administration

A large amount of researchers' time is spent on administration; and there is a key opportunity for the research office and library to reduce this burden.

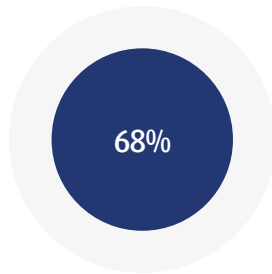
Support during Covid-19 has been positively received

Researchers are broadly positive about support from their institution to move to remote working, though perceptions of the support offered by the research office and library have declined since 2019.



Finding research funding remains a key priority and a key challenge

Of research office members...



say finding funding is their main priority

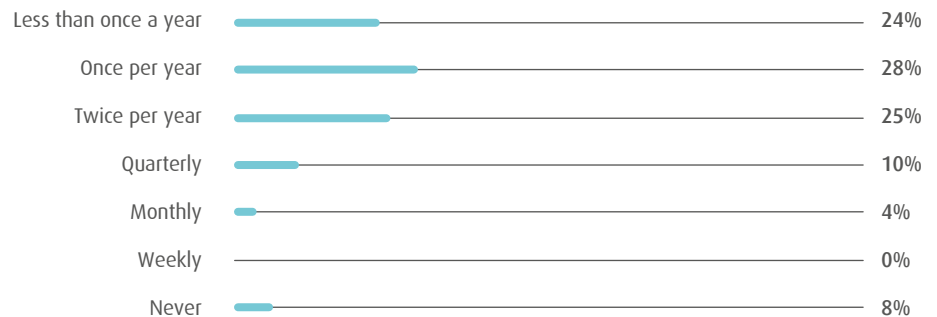
In the changing landscape of funding opportunities, both members of research offices and researchers feel there is limited time and resources to focus on finding funding opportunities. Researchers do not report applying for funding often, despite pressure mounting to deliver funded projects for their institutions.

WHAT ARE THE TOP CHALLENGES FACED WHEN WORKING TOWARD YOUR PRIORITIES?

“Changing funding landscape and highly competitive environment for securing funding for research.”

UK, Pre-Award Officer

📉 On average, how frequently do you have to apply for funding?

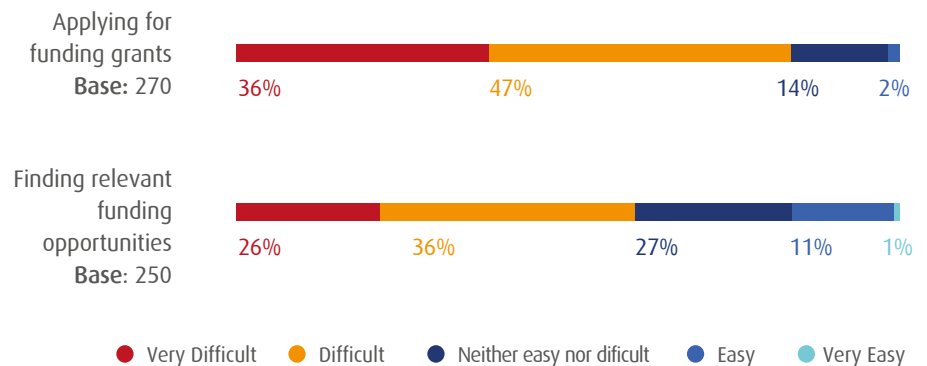


There is a clear gap between how researchers approach the search for funding and what they expect from the research office.



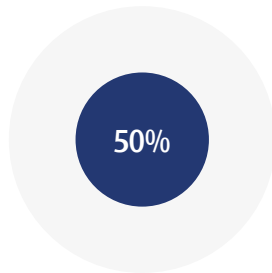
Research office staff report being time constrained, making it more difficult to support the funding needs of researchers. This has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, during which the already short supply of resources has dwindled. Yet, researchers need much more support in finding and applying for funding, which are reported to be the most difficult tasks related to research activities.

Thinking about the whole research lifecycle, how easy or difficult do you find organizing and managing the follow aspects?

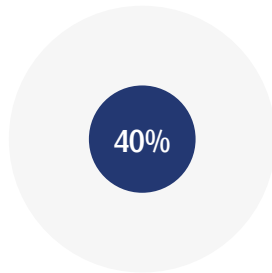


Showcasing institutional research expertise is important, but the systems to do so are lacking

Of research office members...



say improving prestige is their main priority

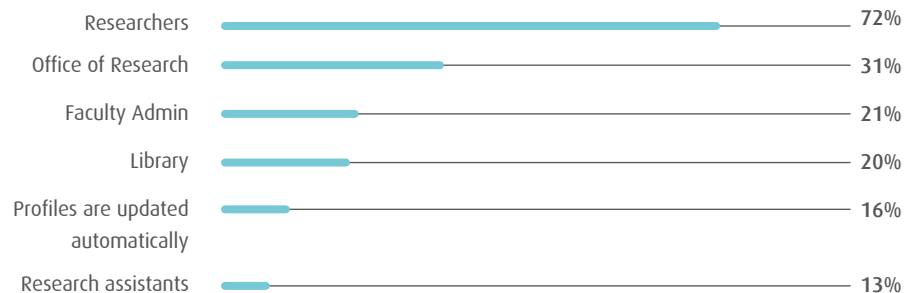


say they do not have a research portal to showcase the work of researchers

Improving the ranking and prestige of the university is the second main priority for senior research office staff. However, 40% of them said that their institution does not have a research portal to enable them to showcase researchers' work, which also makes the task of monitoring publications much more difficult.

76% of researchers report they have a profile on their institution's research portal; however, these profiles are not updated often and nearly one in ten (8%) do not update them at all. This may be exacerbated by the sheer number of different people and departments expected to keep profiles up to date.

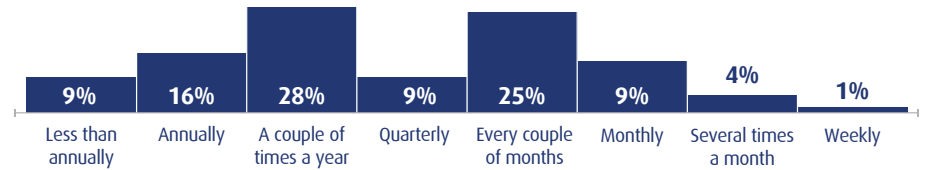
Who in your institution is responsible for managing and keeping research profiles up to date?



Base:

All research office members with a research portal (61)

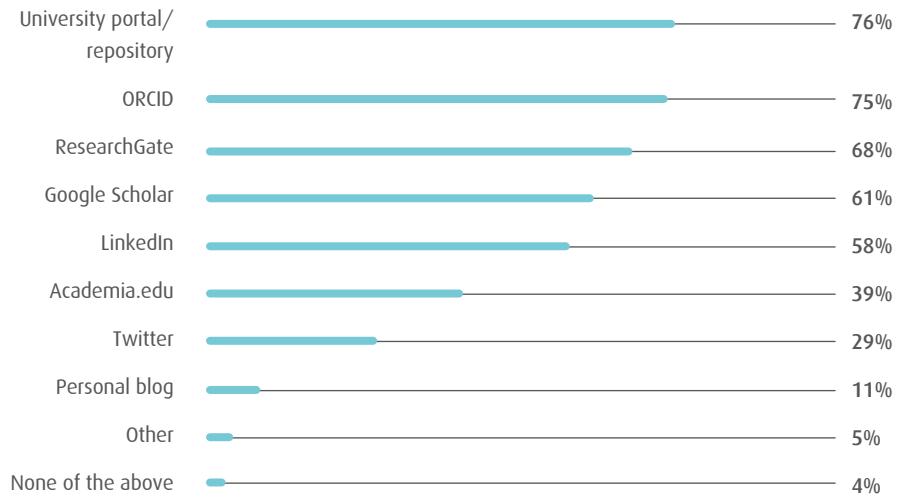
↘ How frequently do you update your profile(s)?



Base:

All researchers who keep their profiles up to date (277)

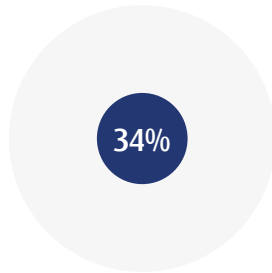
↘ In which of the following places, if any, do you have a profile associated with your academic work?



Base:

All researchers (314)

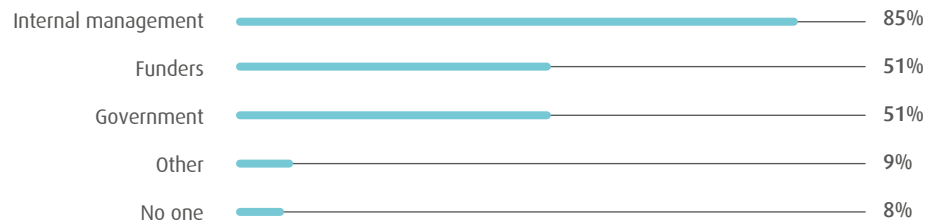
A lack of adequate data on publications makes internal monitoring more challenging



of senior research office members have immediate access to up-to-date publications information

Tracking publication data is important both internally and externally, with 85% of research office members stating they have had to report such data to internal management, and 51% to funders and to government in the last three years. However, systematically collecting publication data presents a challenge, with only 34% of research office staff saying they have immediate access to up-to-date information.

↳ To whom have these publication numbers been reported to in the last 3 years?



Base:

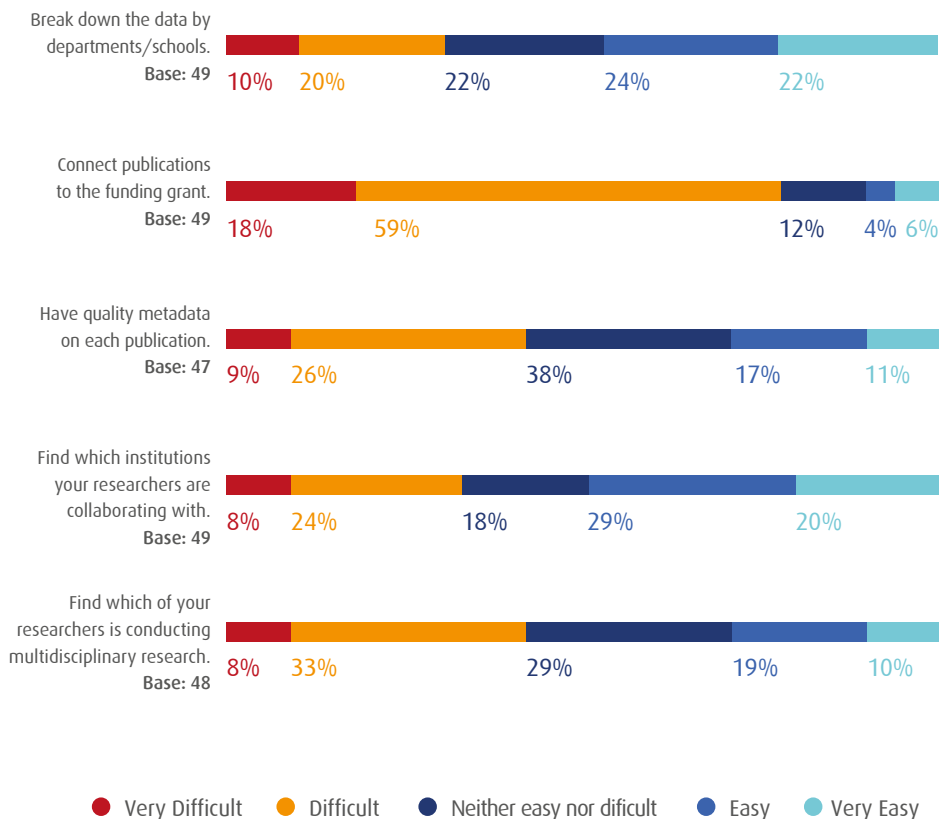
All research office members who have access to publications information (53)

This makes deriving meaningful information about publication difficult:

Thinking about the number of publications generated by faculty in your institution how easy or difficult is it to?

“A key challenge is opaque data, where it’s definitely telling you *something*, but not directly, about the questions you’re being asked. Data quality from all (but especially internal) data sources is also very weak.”

UK, Research Information Systems Director



Measuring impact through citations is popular, but everyone agrees this is not the best way

“So many different figures H-index, Impact factors, mentions, etc. Everyone counts different things, and includes different journals in different counts. It’s very non-standard. So you have to first learn all these measures, figure out how they count things, and how to represent it in your tenure packet or annual report. Very tedious!”

US, Faculty staff

“Impact is quite an indirect and nebulous thing. I have to report on impact for funding purposes, but I hate doing it and feel that it’s a box-ticking exercise.”

UK, Faculty staff

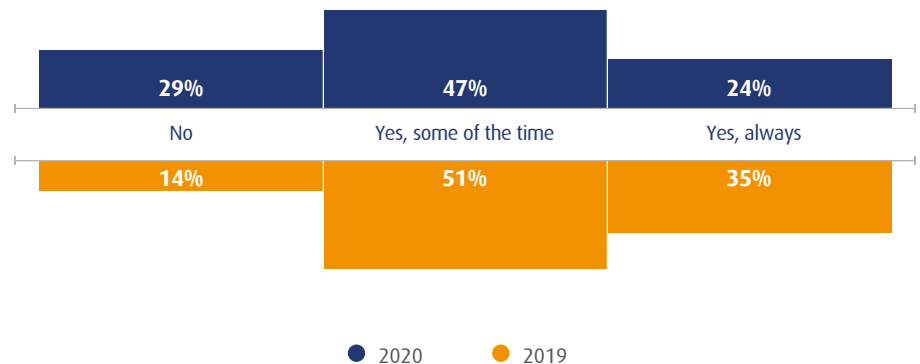
“Traditional measures like citations are meaningless beyond academics. Many of my partners come from industry or government, and they care about demonstrable outputs of a project beyond publications.”

Australia, Faculty staff

Citations remain the most popular choice for measuring the impact of publications. Researchers report frustration with these metrics, particularly in fields where citations are less frequent, such as humanities and arts.

Members of the research office recognized other factors, such as journal impact, policy changes and societal impact, as much more important for verifying the effect of research. Yet, they reported challenges in assessing these factors in the short term and linking them back to individual publications.

Do you need to report the impact of your research to funding partners?



Researchers are measuring the impact of their research through:

Researchers office staff think it's important to measure impact by:*

90% ————— “ ” ————— 63%

Citations

30% ————— ☞ ————— 39%

Media Mentions

16% ————— 📄 ————— 38%

Policy Papers and Regulations

29% ————— 📱 ————— 19%

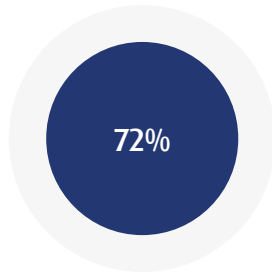
Social Media Engagement

34% ————— 🕶️ ————— 13%

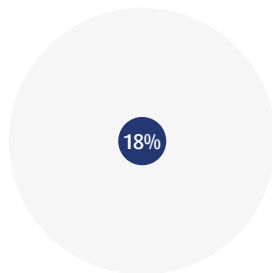
Views

* Only members in the research office were surveyed about their perceptions of the journal impact factor; 50% indicated it as an important factor to measure

Researchers' support for Open Access is growing



72% of researchers were in favor of Open Access prior to Covid-19

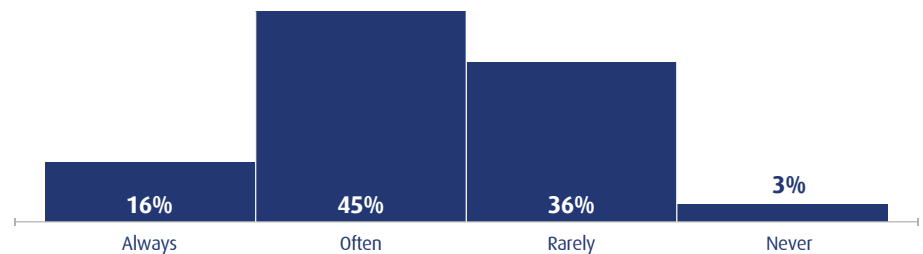


18% of researchers view Open Access more positively since Covid-19

61% of researchers need to publish datasets as Open Access all or a lot of the time. While support for Open Access policies was already high among researchers (72%), almost one in five say they view Open Access more favorably in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

7% of research office staff reported that ensuring research is available openly is one of the top three priorities for their office. However, many referred to this as something for which they share responsibility with researchers and other departments within their institution.

Do you need to publish datasets as open access?



Base:

All respondents who are required to publish primary datasets alongside their research (67)

There are key opportunities for more strategic collaboration between the research office and library

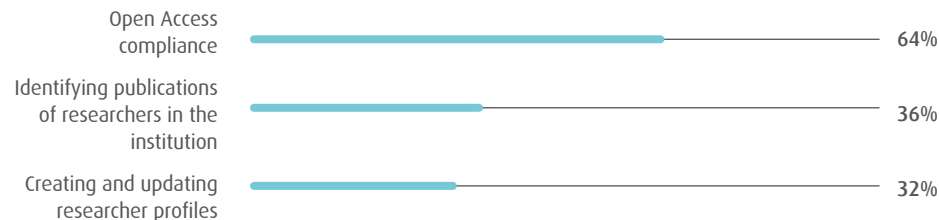
“Most of the [Open] Access issues have been handled by the university library. It would be good to have more resources available to faculty via the Office of Research to help faculty know about and use Open Access.”

US, Vice Provost for Research

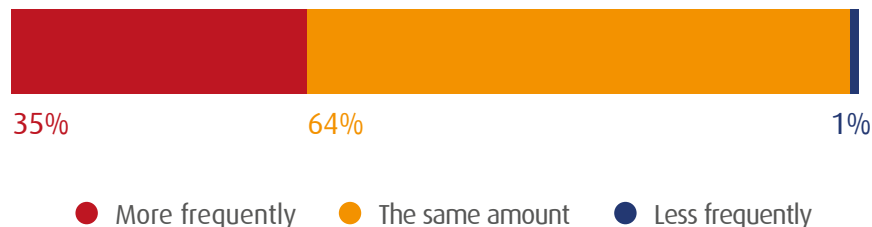
Open Access is the largest area of collaboration between the research office and the library, demonstrating the library’s role in complementing the research office’s priorities and areas of expertise.

35% of research office staff want greater collaboration with the library. Better systems for identifying publications and updating research profiles may be beneficial for enabling a collaborative focus on key priority areas for both parties.

➤ The top three current areas of collaboration between the research office and the library were reported to be



➤ Members of the research office would like to collaborate with the library



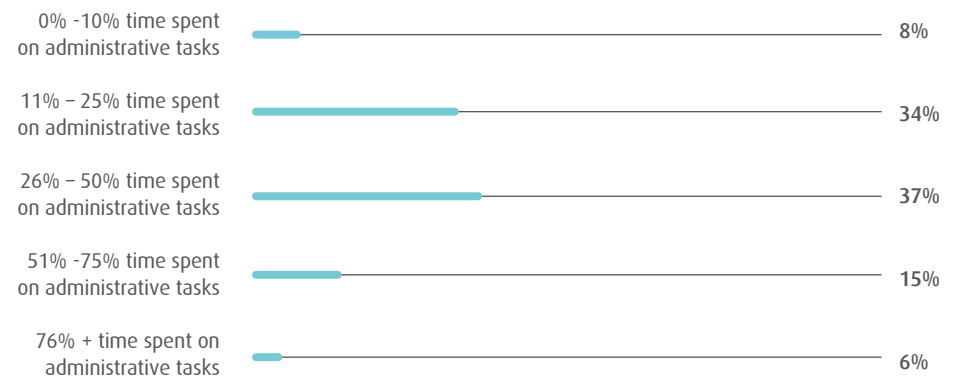
Base:
All research office respondents (101)

Researchers are undertaking a lot of research administration, but research offices and libraries are playing vital support roles

Research office members are contributing more heavily to helping researchers find and apply for funding, and, to a lesser extent, monitoring the impact of their work. On the other hand, the library is helping more with depositing publications to institutional repositories and with Open Access compliance.

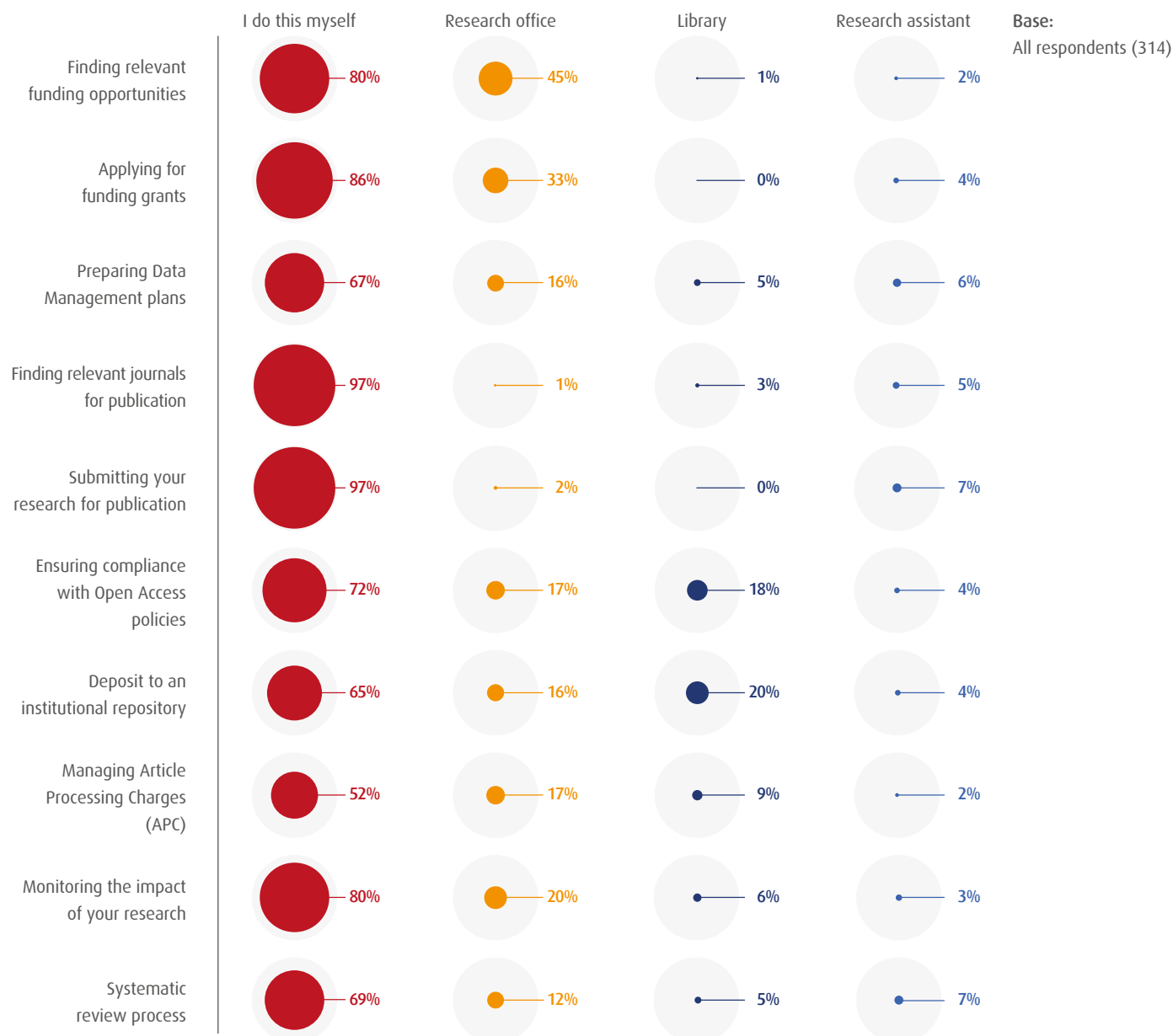
This support provides clear help to time-poor researchers; however, a substantial proportion of the workload remains administrative, with over one in five researchers reporting that more than half their time is dedicated to research administration. Increased pressures due to Covid-19 may have added to the administrative burden, with support services less able to assist due to competing priorities and new administrative tasks for continuing research.

▾ How much of your time is invested in administrative tasks versus actual research?



Base:
All researchers (314)

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?



Researchers report lower levels of support from the research office and library this year

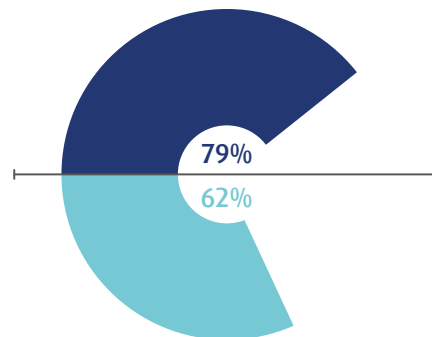
“We have always been one of the most short-staffed divisions in our universities. Now with COVID-19, we have laid off four people already and managers are being reassigned duties. Faculty are not going to get research-adjusted load anymore, seed funding, or sabbaticals until finances pick up in years to come. This will definitely halt research productivity.”

US, Director of Research

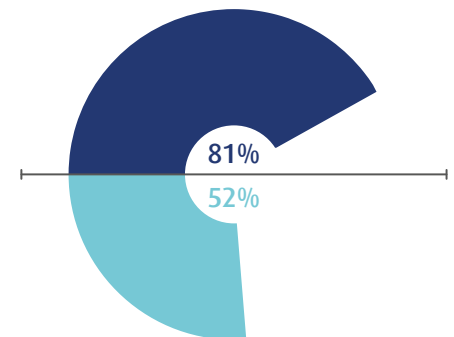
While the majority of researchers say they feel supported by both the research office and the library, the percentage is substantially lower than observed in 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic may be a contributing factor, with research priorities shifting, resources shrinking and focus moving to operational fundamentals, such as the shift to remote working.

Researchers are receiving help in core areas they feel the research office (finding and applying for funding) and library (depositing publications) should contribute.

↘ Satisfaction with the support received from the library



↘ Satisfaction with the support received from the research office

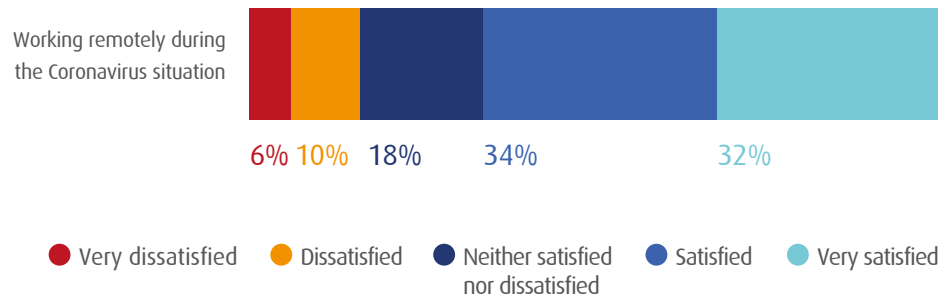


● 2020

● 2019

Most researchers feel their institution has provided them with support to work remotely during this period, though more could be done to streamline this.

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



Base:

All respondents, excluding 'Not applicable' (311)

IN WHAT WAYS COULD RESEARCHERS BE SUPPORTED MORE?

"No one has reached out to see if we could use any support for research."

US, Faculty staff

"I spend my days working in isolation at a computer, seen only as someone that must produce 'output'. I don't feel a part of an organisation or team that is working together to achieve an outcome."

Australia, Faculty staff

"There's an issue with lack of access to e-resources for students and staff, in terms of databases, etc."

UK, Faculty staff

Reflections

2020 has posed unique challenges for the higher education sector. In spite of this, the research priorities remain similar to previous years, and researchers and research office staff are aligned in meeting the same goals. Finding quality funding opportunities and demonstrating the impact of publications are becoming increasingly difficult; and both parties need greater resources and better data to respond in ever-changing circumstances.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in substantial difficulties in supporting researchers, which may explain the lower levels of support they feel they have received from the research office and library compared to 2019. However, broadly, researchers still feel they have been supported by their institutions during this period. As research offices and libraries prepare for 2021 and beyond, they may consider the opportunities identified in this report to fill the gaps by strengthening core areas of expertise, leveraging new technologies, and increasing efficiencies through collaboration and organizational alignments.





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