

Recognising and rewarding professional support roles - an experiment into understanding the status quo

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Background

Recognising and rewarding contributions to research is changing in the Dutch academic landscape. With the position paper '[Room for everyone's talent](#)' (2019) the knowledge sector in the Netherlands aims to enable the diversification of career paths, stimulate team science and open science, encourage academic leadership and generally improve the quality of the work done in Dutch public research institutions.

Research support staff at these institutes can make important contributions to the work of research teams, as they bring specific professional expertise to the research process (Bennett et al, 2023). Nevertheless, these roles have not received much attention from this reform movement so far, apart from a footnote, included in the recent Recognition and Rewards (R&R) [road map](#), where they are referred to as 'other groups'. The movement to a new and more inclusive R&R system is a key opportunity to involve support staff at research institutions. This is why a group of people working in research support roles at various Dutch research organisations put together a workshop on this topic for the Recognition and Rewards Festival on the 13th of April 2023.

The workshop was used mainly as a forum to exchange experiences and success stories on how to diversify career paths for both academic and support staff. During the workshop, a survey was co-created with the ~30 participants, focusing on how to identify challenges and experiences by support staff, as well as solutions that the R&R movement can offer. This survey, to be sent out to all attendees of the R&R festival, was meant as a first step towards a better understanding of the perceived position of supporting roles in the reform of research assessment. It was also intended as a potential first step towards a more extensive survey that can be used by Dutch academic institutions to broaden the scope of academic research profiles and include other roles in research evaluation.

Workshop: creating the survey

The session began with two short presentations providing an overview of the support staff landscape at the universities of Utrecht and Wageningen, with particular emphasis on the need for new categories and strategies to undergird these emerging forms of labour. These case studies provided a common ground for framing the survey questions in the "pressure cooker" part of the workshop. In introducing the concept of the survey, session organisers

asked participants to identify issues that support staff are confronted with, while at the same time consider how R&R might be an appropriate frame to grapple with these issues.

During the “pressure cooker” part of the session, organisers provided a scaffolding for the survey by organising tables in the room around five themes:

1. Supporting role identities
2. Hybridity / team science nature of roles
3. Career experience / development
4. Current challenges / barriers and practical issues experienced
5. Including supporting roles in the recognition & rewards movement
6. A wildcard group of which the topic could still be chosen by the participants

Participants were divided into groups around these tables and themes. In a 50-minute period, participants first formulated questions within their respective group and table, and subsequently a subset visited other tables to suggest, discuss, and compose questions that would populate the survey. The 50-minute survey creation session was followed by a 40-minute period in which the workshop organisers deduplicated, selected, and implemented questions into Qualtrics (a content management system to collect survey data).

The survey

The Qualtrics survey was introduced as follows: *“How can the recognition and rewards movement be more inclusive of supporting roles in research? This survey aims to identify issues that support staff are confronted with in research institutions, and explore possible solutions.”* The survey consisted of 10 closed questions and 1 open question. Respondents were allowed to skip questions. The estimated time to complete the survey was less than 5 minutes. The survey was open during the day of the festival [for the over 250 attendees](#), and for another week for the members of the RRview platform that brings together the R&R community in the Netherlands. In total 64 responses were recorded, 55 of which at the festival itself and 9 afterwards.

Survey questions:

- In your experience, are support staff and academic staff equally valued?
- Where in the continuum (from academic to support) would you say most of your activities are?
- Does your function description reflect the actual work that you do?
- Do you experience obstacles in combining roles?
- Do you feel like your line manager is capable of assessing the work/tasks that you do?
- If you moved from an academic to a support function, did you benefit from it in your development?
- Could a support staff member, in principle, be a Principal Investigator?
- What is the added value of working in a hybrid team (with both academic and support staff)?

The results

It should be noted that the survey was primarily an experiment to create an impromptu survey during a pressure cooker session and a means to raise awareness and discuss the experiences of the participants related to recognising and rewarding support roles. Furthermore, the sample of researchers and support staff at the festival and those with access to the [RRview platform](#) is a very skewed subset of all researchers and support staff. In addition, the majority of survey respondents were support staff, which might mean that the answers were more representative of the opinions of support staff, rather than representing all institutional staff (including researchers). The results presented in this section should be interpreted with these limitations in mind and should be considered as preliminary and **not generalisable**.

Respondents primarily consisted of support staff (34) compared to academic staff (13), with 9 respondents having other functions (management, funder, enabler, PhD student, business owner, funder). Respondents identified as female (n=36, 64%), male (n=13, 27%), non-binary (n=1, 2%) or did not specify (n=4, 7%).

According to the respondents, the academic staff and the support staff were not equally valued (n=35). Of the 53 respondents that answered this question, only two respondents thought that these positions are equally valued. Other respondents thought that for their own position this was the case (n=18) but they did not think this was the case for other cases.

Most of the respondents indicated that they had mixed responsibilities in the academic and support continuum (**Figure 2**). The three activities listed most frequently by support staff were: coordination, planning and training. The academic staff's top three activities were coordination, analysis, and societal engagement followed by data collection, teaching and supervision.

Where in the continuum (from academic to support) would you say most of your activities are?

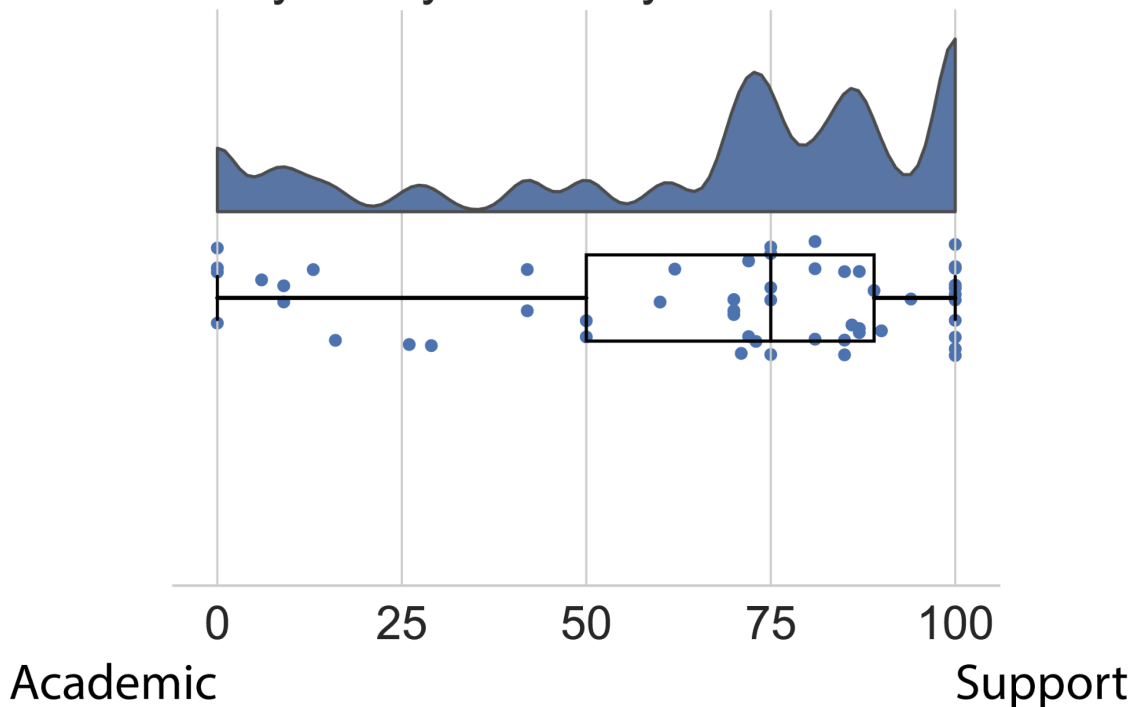


Figure 2. Responses to the question “Where in the continuum (from 0=Academic to 100=Support) would you say most of your activities are?” There is a difference in the amount of support staff ($n=11$) and academic staff ($n=4$) that define their activities as fully ‘academic’ or fully ‘support’. Most respondents falling within the category ‘other staff’ indicated they were involved in a broad range of this spectrum. The top of the figure illustrates the (smoothed) distribution of responses; the box plot illustrates the range, median and quartiles; the dots indicate participant responses.

In relation to the question on whether their function description fit the actual work they did (**Figure 3**), almost half of the respondents ($n=24$, 44.4%) indicated a good agreement (75 or above on a scale from 0 to 100), even though only 6 respondents indicated “total” overlap between the two. One respondent in ten ($n=6$, or 11.1%) indicated a very low overlap (24 or below on a scale from 0 to 100).

Does your function description reflect the actual work that you do?

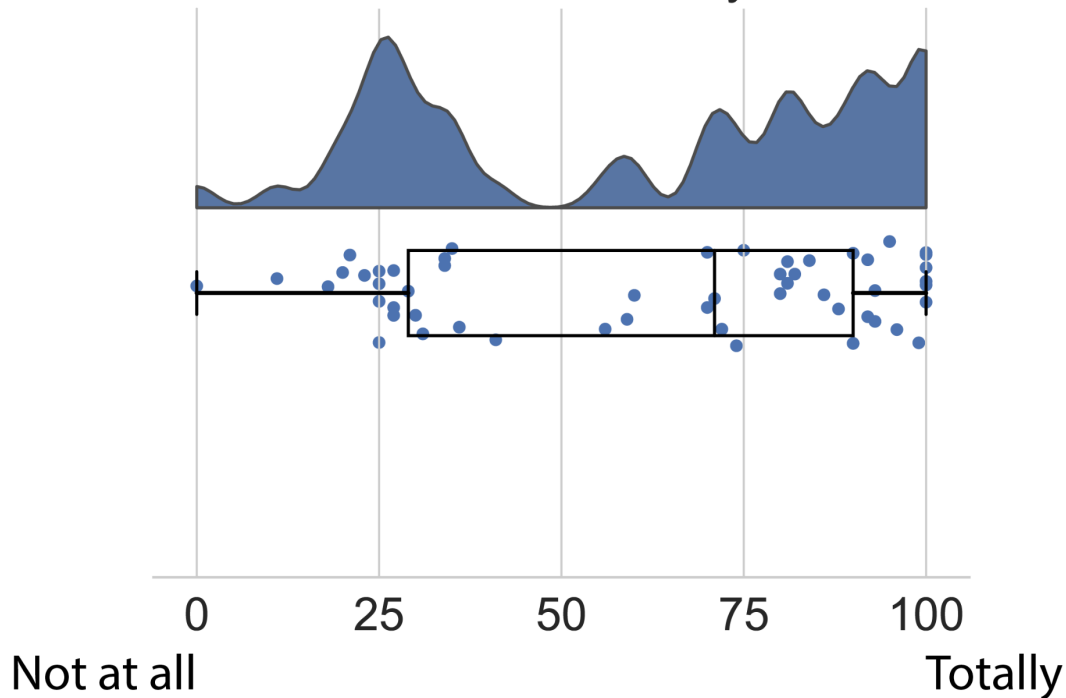


Figure 3: Responses to the question “Does your function description reflect the actual work that you do? (from 0=Not at all to 100=Totally)”. The top of the figure illustrates the (smoothed) distribution of responses; the box plot illustrates the range, median and quartiles; the dots indicate participant responses.

The majority of respondents within the category ‘Support staff’ felt appreciated by their line manager (60%), compared to 23% of respondents within the ‘Academic staff’ and 12% of respondents within the ‘Other staff’ category. When moving from an academic position to a support position the majority of respondents (86%, n=24 out of n=28) found the move beneficial to their development.

The majority of the respondents thought that Support staff could be a Principal Investigator (61%). Within the categories, 64% of ‘Support staff’ responded ‘yes’ to the question as to whether or not a support staff member could become a Principal Investigator, compared with 46% of ‘academic staff’ and 77% of ‘other staff’ responding ‘yes’ to this question.

When asked about the added value of working in a hybrid team (with both academic and support staff), respondents indicated that hybrid teams have:

- Increased efficiency, effect, and impact
- Increased quality of work
- Enrichment of perspectives and skills

Discussion

This survey generated during the R&R Festival was meant as a first step towards a better understanding of the position of supporting roles in the R&R movement, and as a potential first step towards a more extensive survey that could be used by Dutch academic institutions to broaden the scope of academic research profiles and include other roles in research evaluation. What is clear based on the discussions held during the workshop and people's enthusiasm in completing the survey, is that there is a lot of interest in the topic and a pressing need to look into recognising and rewarding the work of professional support staff. However, before any effective action can be taken, we first need to have a clear understanding of the experiences of professional support staff.

Our quick and dirty experimental approach demonstrated that a survey could be a valuable way to get such an initial understanding. Naturally, the results of our survey have to be treated with caution, given the substantial limitations to survey design, sample size and its representativeness. Therefore, it might be useful to undertake a professional national survey as a follow-up on this preliminary experiment. The joint and co-creative approach towards survey design and development in our workshop allowed the inclusion of various perspectives and experiences, suggesting that such a collaborative approach could be a suitable way for drafting such a national survey. However, such an ambitious national-level undertaking would require dedicated resources and coordination.

Clearly, more work needs to be done to address the issues around recognising and rewarding professional support staff. This work is necessary if we are to fully embrace the notion that teams composed of members with diverse skills and experiences allow research to be more effective and efficient.

Methods & References

The figures for this blog were created using the [PtitPrince](#) package, a Python implementation of the raincloud plot (Allen et al., 2021).

Allen, M., Poggiali, D., Whitaker, K., Marshall, T. R., van Langen, J., & Kievit, R. A. Raincloud plots: a multi-platform tool for robust data visualization. **Wellcome Open Research** 2021, 4:63. <https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.15191.2>

Bennett, A., Garside, D., Gould van Praag, C., Hostler, T., Kherroubi Garcia, I., Plomp, E., Schettino, A., Teplitzky, S., Ye, H. 2023. A Manifesto for Rewarding and Recognizing Team Infrastructure Roles. **Research Equals**. <https://doi.org/10.36850/mr8>

[Background info with the survey results](#) prepared by Jeroen Bosman.