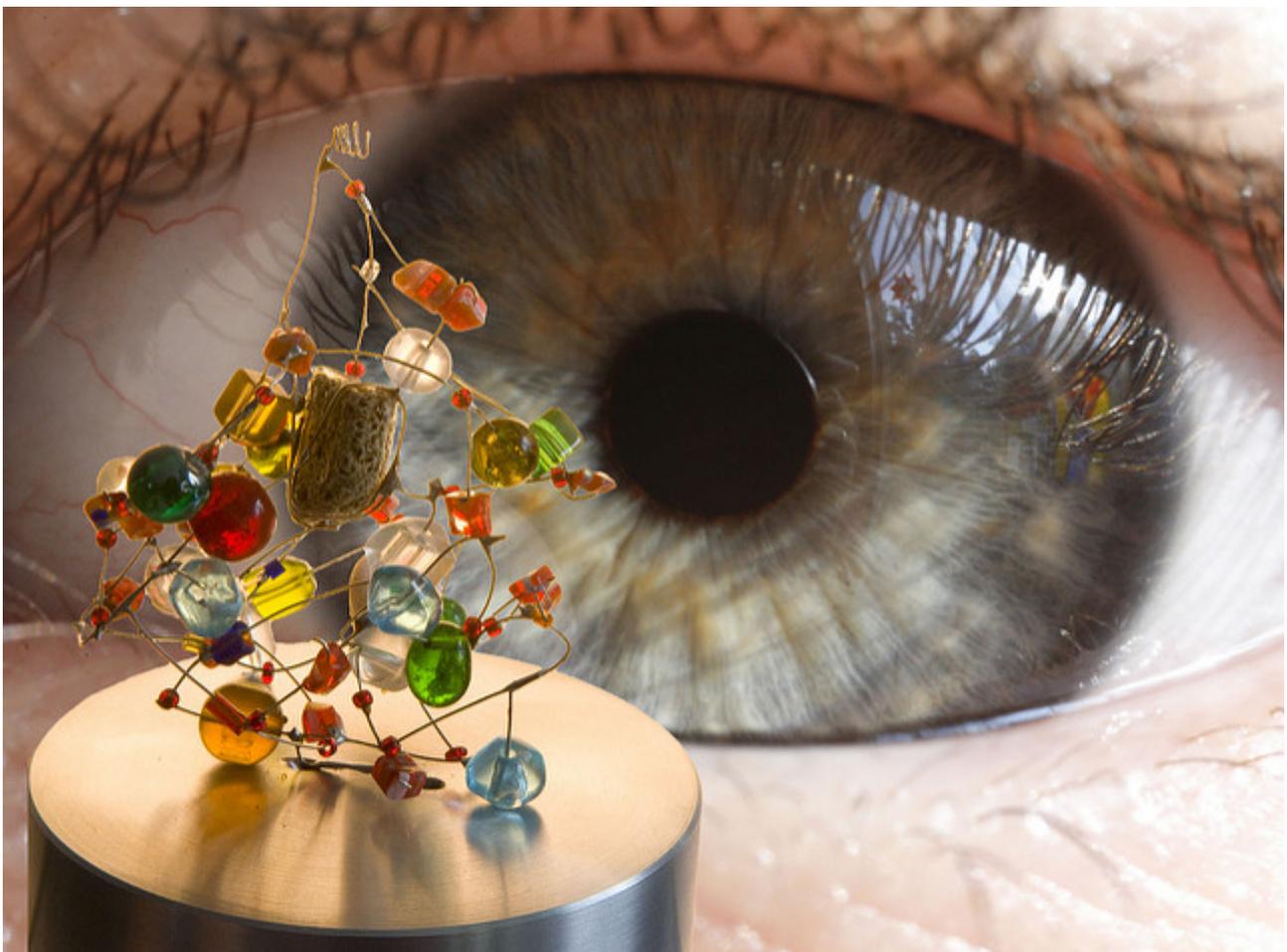


*The parachuting of a politician with no research experience into the coveted top position at INRA, France's national institute for agricultural research, last summer did not go down very well with the scientific community in the country. This raises the question of whether research institutions should be managed by professional research manager without first-hand experience of research? This issue keeps arising in discussions across European academic institutions. And it is unlikely to go away any time soon. Fiona Dunlevy investigates for EuroScientist.*



Published in [EuroScientist](#) via [SciencePOD](#).

## **The art of research management**



### **Should managers without a research background be in charge of academic institutions?**

The French agricultural research organisation [INRA](#) went through a [tumultuous](#) summer. The surprise and largely unwelcome appointment of the politician Philippe Mauguin as INRA president sent

shockwaves in the French scientific community. Researchers at INRA and across France took to the internet this summer using the hashtag @INRAalert to vent their displeasure. They complained about the parachuting of a politician with no research experience into the coveted top position at the institute. In this article, Fiona Dunlevy investigates for [EuroScientist](#) whether it is necessary to have a scientist to head up research organisations or could managers do an equally good, or even better job?

## Rise of the research manager

So what is a research manager? "There's no single definition," says [Jan Andersen](#), Senior Executive Officer, and research manager at the Technical University, Kongens Lyngby in Denmark. "In general, it's the person mitigating the internal rules of the organisation or the rules of the funder and the researcher." Research managers operate as a support service to research teams, he explains, helping researchers both to pull in funding and to fulfill their administrative obligations to those funders.

In today's value for money society, funders are increasingly asking that research spending is justified. This generates additional reporting requirements, according to [John Donovan](#), chair of the EARMA European Association of Research Managers and Administrators ([EARMA](#)) and research manager at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Ireland. "Principal investigators don't like administration so they appreciate us taking the pain out of it", says Donovan, "The objective is to make research a nice smooth experience."

Andersen agrees that researchers appreciate the help. "If we do a good job, they are happy to have us," he says, "On a generic level, they think that all administration is a burden. But in reality when we help them write a successful application, they can see how we take the burden off researchers' shoulders."

## Experience matters

Clearly research managers can be well appreciated by researchers. So why did the researchers at INRA react so strongly to the appointment of a manager as their president? A major problem is Mauguin's lack of research experience, explains [Patrick Lemaire](#), principal investigator in developmental biology at the CNRS, Montpellier, and spokesperson for the lobby group [Sciences en Marche](#). "Mauguin has been in ministerial cabinets his whole life," says Lemaire, "He has no connection with the scientific community."

What scientists are worried about is that the vision [of INRA] comes from the president, according to Lemaire. And it cannot be just an administrative vision, it has to be a scientific vision," he says. A related problem is that Mauguin does not hold a doctorate which means that he could be seen as "underqualified by many of his foreign peers," says Lemaire.

## Public accountability

However, managing a research organisation is not just about the science. It is also about being accountable for the science, according to [Robert Dingwall](#), consultant sociologist and professor at Nottingham Trent University, UK, and author of the [Sage Handbook of Research Management](#). "It is

really about managing the politicians, the public, the taxpayers to keep supporting the work and communicating the value of the work," says Dingwall.

Taxpayers are the ultimate funders of research. And scientists need to justify the value of their work, even if the impact is not immediate. "Scientists aren't used to making that case, whereas politicians absolutely are," says Dingwall, explaining that it can be an advantage to have an organisation leader "who knows how to talk to other politicians, to talk to the public, who knows how to construct that kind of narrative. This is pretty crucial in a period of austerity. If you want to justify the science funding you got to be able to make a case."

## The right person for the job

Andersen admits that good scientists do not necessarily make good leaders. But he also believes that having good academic CV does matter for the credibility of research organisation heads, "because you're communicating with your peers who have this academic background, and it is a part of the job to show academic excellence in such a position."

EARMA's Donovan agrees, adding that a solution is to have two people running the show. "The figure heading of the research is obviously better done by a researcher who's familiar with what's going on and who has the peer credibility that opens doors," says Donovan, "But the efficient running of the business is probably better done by someone who understands how a business runs efficiently. They'll often not be the same person and they'll often disagree on the boundary between the two zones."

## Dual function

This is exactly how INRA used to be organised, according to Lemaire, who explains that there used to be both a president and a general director. "At that time it happened a few times that the president would be a scientist and the general director would be from one of the elite engineering schools," Lemaire says, "but it was considered acceptable because the president of the organisation was a scientist." He also adds: "Now that the two functions have been fused to the same person, it makes it more complicated to have someone who is not a scientist fulfilling the two functions."

Having non-scientists in the top job appear to be the exception, however. "Very seldom is a research organisation or university 'headed' by a person without a PhD degree," points out Lidia Borrell-Damian, director of research and innovation at the [European University Association](#) (EUA), in Brussels, Belgium, "If so, it is usually because the organisation is 'double-headed', meaning that there is a person in charge of academic or scientific affairs, normally a well-recognised researcher, and a 'non-academic' person – with or without a PhD degree - in charge of the organisation's strategic development, management and finances."

It seems that, with many controversies, context is everything. As research becomes increasingly competitive and funding is held more accountable, [research managers and administrators are showing their mettle](#). As for whether the top jobs at research organisations can or should be handled by non-scientists, the jury is still out. In the meantime, all eyes will be on INRA and Mauguin...

Fiona Dunlevy

Photo Credit: [Michael Heiss](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)