

EPFL Research Office Assessment 2023



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INTRODUCTION

The 2023 Research Office survey aimed to gather overall impressions of the Research Office at EPFL, as well as feedback on its specific services, with the ultimate goal of improving service to the EPFL community i.e. researchers and administrators at all levels. The 2023 Research Office survey had 326 respondents (190 on the English version; 136 on the French version).

This report will summarize that feedback, adding context as needed. It will start with a summary of survey participants (Section 1) and their general feedback on the function of the Research Office as a whole (Section 2).

Next, the report (as the survey) will focus on the main missions of the Research Office:

- Informing the EPFL research community about funding opportunities (Section 3.1),
- Providing support during the application process (Section 3.2),
- Helping process awards and implement projects (Section 3.3), and

- Supporting researchers in ensuring ethics compliance (Section 4)

This is followed by the ancillary missions of the Research Office:

- Promoting and managing research awards (Section 5),
- Informing and training the research community (Section 6), and
- Communication of our services and resources (Section 7).

The report will finish by summarizing the key takeaways, offering our conclusions, and detailing future implementations and improvements. It concludes with Annexes including additional results and figures that compliment those in the main text.

The Research Office staff is grateful to all responders for taking the time to participate and for providing feedback that will prove invaluable in assessing and improving Research Office's services to the EPFL community.

MESSAGE FROM THE ASSOCIATE VICE-PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH

I would like to thank all members of our community who took the time to respond to the survey. This kind of feedback from all of you, at all levels of functions and seniority, is essential for us to optimize our service to the Campus and make it progress in line with the evolution of all the relevant boundary conditions, within EPFL, in Switzerland and internationally.

We are grateful for the appreciation of the Research Office's services that is apparent in many of the comments, in terms of the commitment of its Staff, its competence and the internal organization.

Even more importantly, we highly appreciate the constructive criticism and the many suggestions for improvement that were put forward.

We will do our best to implement all of these, slightly modifying our practices wherever appropriate, and increasing

as much as possible the level of 'customization' of our support.

It seems clear to us that one important point of attention is communication – which we understand can be a bit streamlined, more targeted when possible, and directed widely to all players in research.

Such communication needs to make the whole community aware of the various possibilities for research funding from all possible sources, but also of the help and support available to all researchers from the Research Office, clarifying the role of our Office with respect to that of other relevant central services of EPFL.

We look forward to further improving our services to the whole community and to collaborating with you all!

- Prof. Ambrogio Fasoli, VPA-AVP-R

Section 1

Information about the respondents

All Schools and Colleges are represented in the responses, in good relative proportions to their research corps. (Figure 1)

Respondents were largely faculty members: 33% were either professors or MER. In total, 76 out of 422 Professors responded (18%), as well as 30 out of 75 MER (40%). **These groups are considered large enough to represent the class opinion.** (Figure 2)

71 out of 531 Administrative Assistants (13 %) completed the survey, while only 55 out of 1520 Postdocs (3.5 %) and 82 out of 2087 PhD students (4%) replied to this survey, which is in line with the target public of the services the Research Office (ReO) offers.

In order to take the above into account, further analysis is sometimes separated into these five personnel categories.

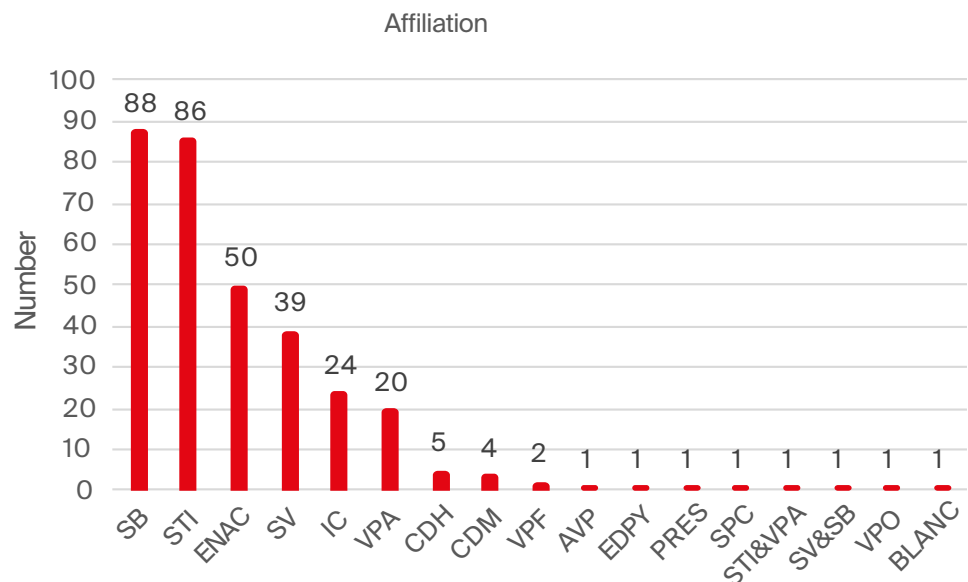


Figure 1

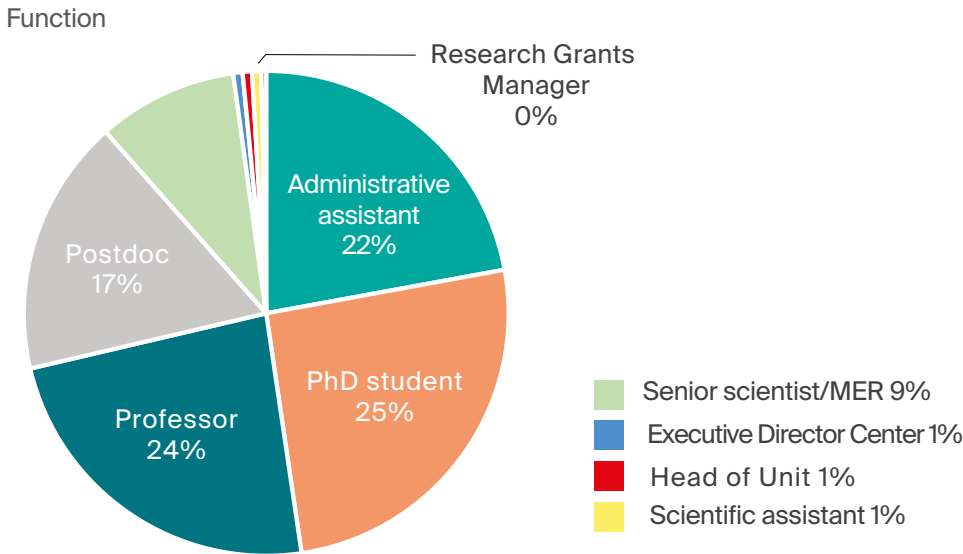


Figure 2

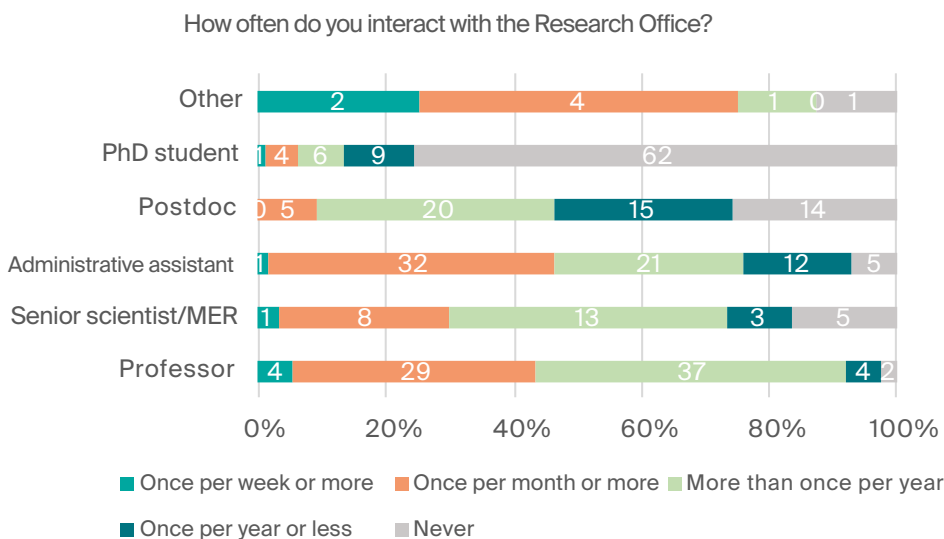


Figure 3

Faculty (Professors) and staff scientists (Senior scientists/MER) interact regularly with the Research Office, as do Administrative assistants. (Figure 3)

PhD students and Postdocs are in contact with ReO for very specific requests such as seeking support letters, interview trainings, ethics compliance issues and grant writing courses, as can be deduced from their

replies further in the survey.

90 respondents had never interacted with the Research Office: 65 PhD students, 15 Postdocs, 6 Administrative assistants, 5 Senior scientists/MER and 2 Professors. The survey ended here for these responders, which brings the total number of responders for **Section 2 to 236**.

Section 2

General Questions

Are you satisfied with the overall performance of the Research Office?

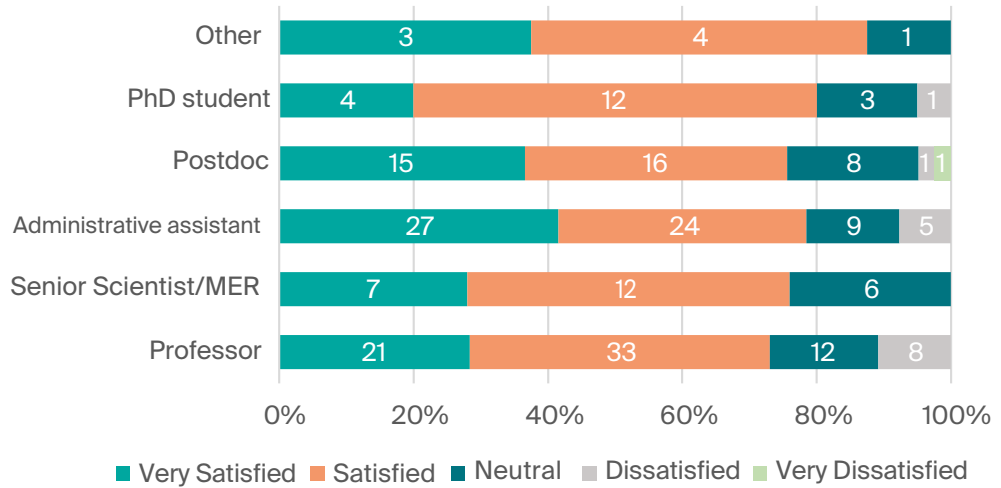


Figure 4

Responses suggest the campus community is satisfied with the overall performance of the Research Office. Overall, 76 % were either very satisfied or satisfied (average of all groups).

Rate the Research Office’s general service

Responses suggest the campus community is satisfied with the Research Office’s general services. They agree that the ReO responds promptly to inquiries (73% agree or strongly agree), and that it provides accurate (74%), consistent (70%), and meaningful (71%) advice. Importantly, they also agree that the ReO staff treats them with respect (88%). (Figure 4)

Section 3

Evaluation of Core Services

3.1 - Promotion of funding opportunities

Have you ever learned of a new funding opportunity via the Research Office?

A majority (63%) of responders have learned of at least one new funding opportunity through ReO's communication channels. (Figure 5)

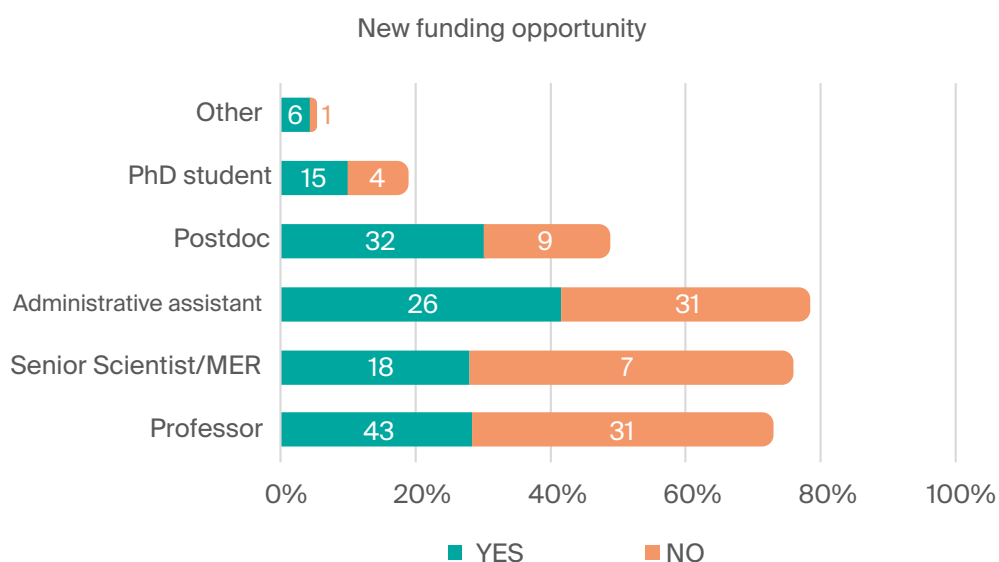


Figure 5

Where do you usually learn about funding opportunities?

The scientific community leans on the Funder's websites, the ReO Newsletter and ReO announcements via e-mail to learn about research and mobility funding opportunities.

Less relevant sources to learn about new funding opportunities are the "memento", information events and

social media posts.

Responders also identified some other means of discovering funding opportunities:

- Colleagues
- Word of mouth
- Personal network
- Newsletters from other institution and/or funding agencies
- Compendium listing all funding opportunities.

Are you overall satisfied with the dissemination of information on funding opportunities from the Research Office?

ReO's dissemination of information on funding opportunities seems to fulfill the campus needs:

researchers are satisfied (62%) with the dissemination of funding opportunity information from the Research Office.

3.2 - Proposal preparation support

The ReO offers a range of pre-award services in terms of preparing and submitting research proposals (figure 6), including (but not limited to):

- Funding source identification (personalized searches)
- Clarification of eligibility criteria
- Toolkits for proposal preparation
- Applicant workshops
- Budget preparation assistance
- Grant writing (trainings)
- Grant writing/reviewing (personalized assistance)
- Mock interview trainings
- Provision of host institution support letters.

Have you ever had support from the Research Office in preparing a proposal?

Within our pre-award services, about half of the overall research corps have utilized at least one type of proposal preparation service from the ReO.

Have you ever utilized the Grant writing service?

The Research Office launched grant writing services in July 2021 (<https://www.epfl.ch/research/management-support/grant-writing/>).

This service consists of personalized grant writing services and grant writing training. 33% responded, of whom 62% were aware of service and 9% utilized it in the past.

Please rate your satisfaction with different pre-award services

Responses to this question sparked two main findings: there is a variety in awareness of ReO services, and of those that are known, a wide variety in their usage.

For some of our core services, including the clarification of eligibility criteria, toolkits available for proposal preparation, and budget preparation assistance, respondents were generally very aware of (87%, 84%, and 81% respectively) and satisfied with (71%, 70%, and 65% respectively) these services. (Figures 6 and 7)

Some other services were less well known, notably the grant writing services and the mock interview training. For the latter, this is not surprising, given that only certain applicants are invited to participate in selection interviews and therefore offered a mock interview training. Interestingly, services that were less familiar also received many "neutral" ratings, signaling that participants may have been choosing "neutral" rather than the more appropriate "was aware but have not used" category.

Across all services, dissatisfaction was low, never mounting more than 7%.

ReO's current panel of proposal preparation services is judged to be satisfactory by the campus. However, not all services seem to be used and/or known by the scientific community.

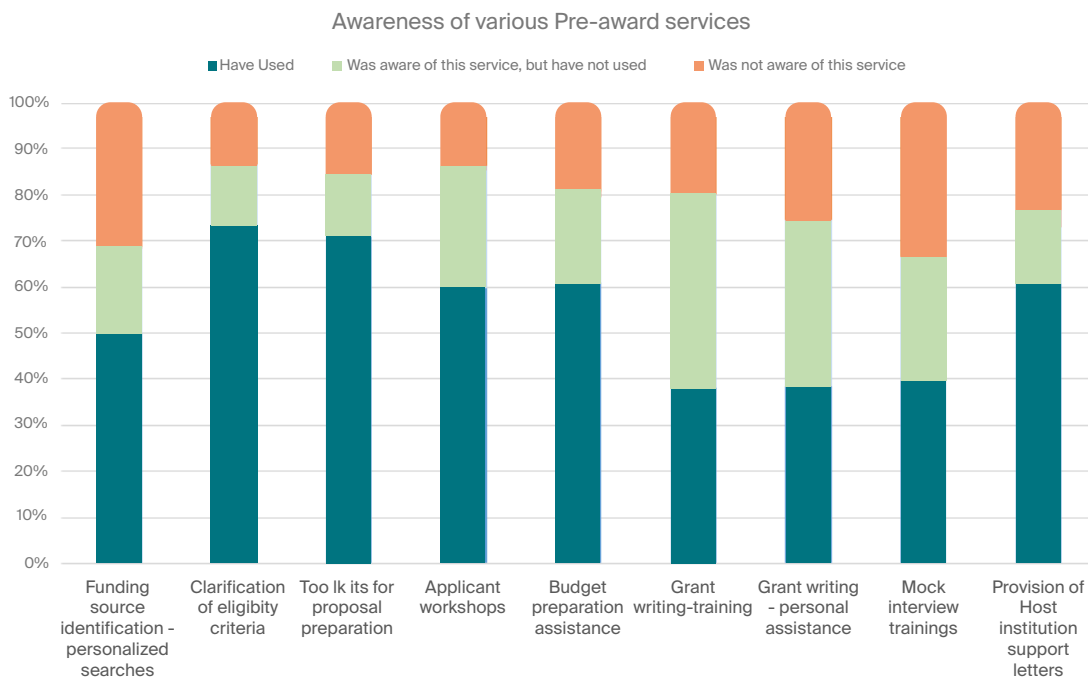


Figure 6

Satisfaction with Pre-award services among users

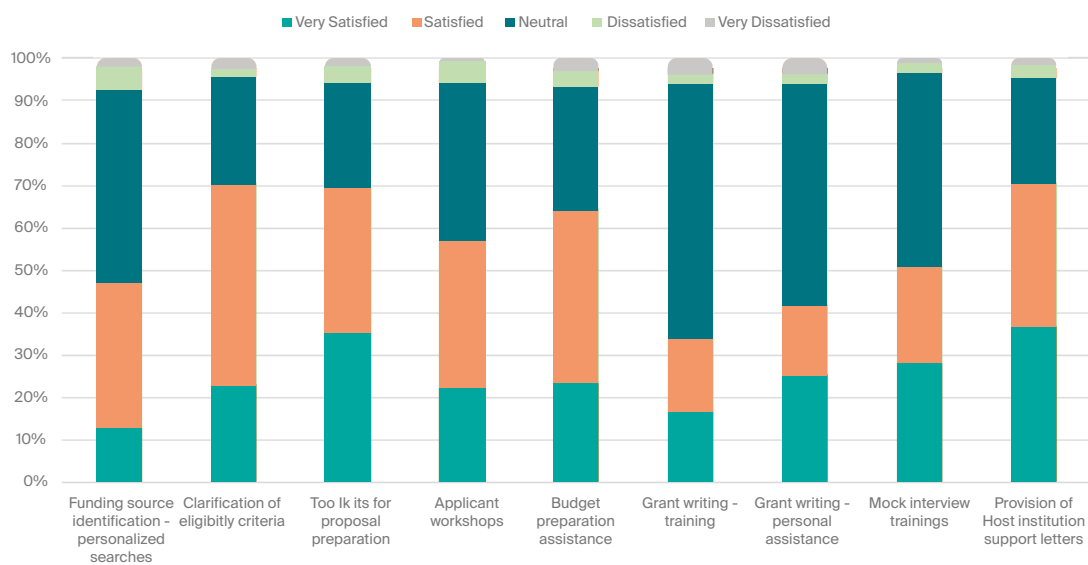


Figure 7

This pair of charts for Awareness and Satisfaction shows data from all respondents versus only a subset of respondents: only those who answered the Awareness question in the affirmative «Have used» (top chart) were included in the analysis for Satisfaction (bottom chart). This is true for all such pairs of charts on the following pages.

If the Research Office were to expand its proposal preparation services, which would you find most useful?

The research community gave lots of useful feedback and ideas on how our pre-award services could be expanded.

The scientific community would like to see more efforts from ReO in the preparation of the administrative parts of the proposals and the creation of a repository of past successful proposals.

3.3 - Award processing and Project implementation

118 responders (36%) either currently hold or have held 3rd party grants and as such have had access to the project implementation services provided by the ReO. These services are addressed in this section. (Figure 8)

- Coordination of contract review with VPA Legal Affairs
- Support for Institutional Signature of contracts
- Requests to the VPF for account opening
- Communication with the funding agency on the researcher's behalf
- Start-to-run meetings at the project start*
- Assistance with research integrity compliance
- Intra-project follow-up meetings*
- Explanation and assistance with EPFL and funding body regulations
- Complimentary support for financial reports generated by the Controlling department
- Assistance with amendments and prolongations
- Resolving administrative problems when they arise

*Post-award services offered only to projects under certain funding programs

After a decision to fund a proposal, the Research Office helps process

the contract and get the grant running from the administrative side. To this end, please rate your satisfaction with the following Post-award services. (Figure 9)

Many of our post-award services are well-known to the community of current or past grant holders (average across services: 84%). Exceptions are start-to-run meetings and intra-project follow-up meetings, both of which are offered only to projects under certain funding schemes (e.g., European Commission, Innosuisse, etc.); therefore the lack of awareness from the wider community is expected.

Satisfaction is relatively high in contract administration matters such as signature and account opening (77% and 81%, respectively), as well as in assistance with amendments and prolongations (73%). However, satisfaction is notably low in the fields of research integrity and intra-project follow up meetings (47% and 39%, respectively). The latter is potentially due to the fact that intra-project follow up meetings are only routinely and proactively offered for projects under certain funding schemes. There is potentially a desire from the campus for more global post-award follow-up. As for research integrity, this is difficult to interpret, since the question covers a wide array of services from ethics authorizations to conflict of interest.

Awareness of various Award and Post-award services

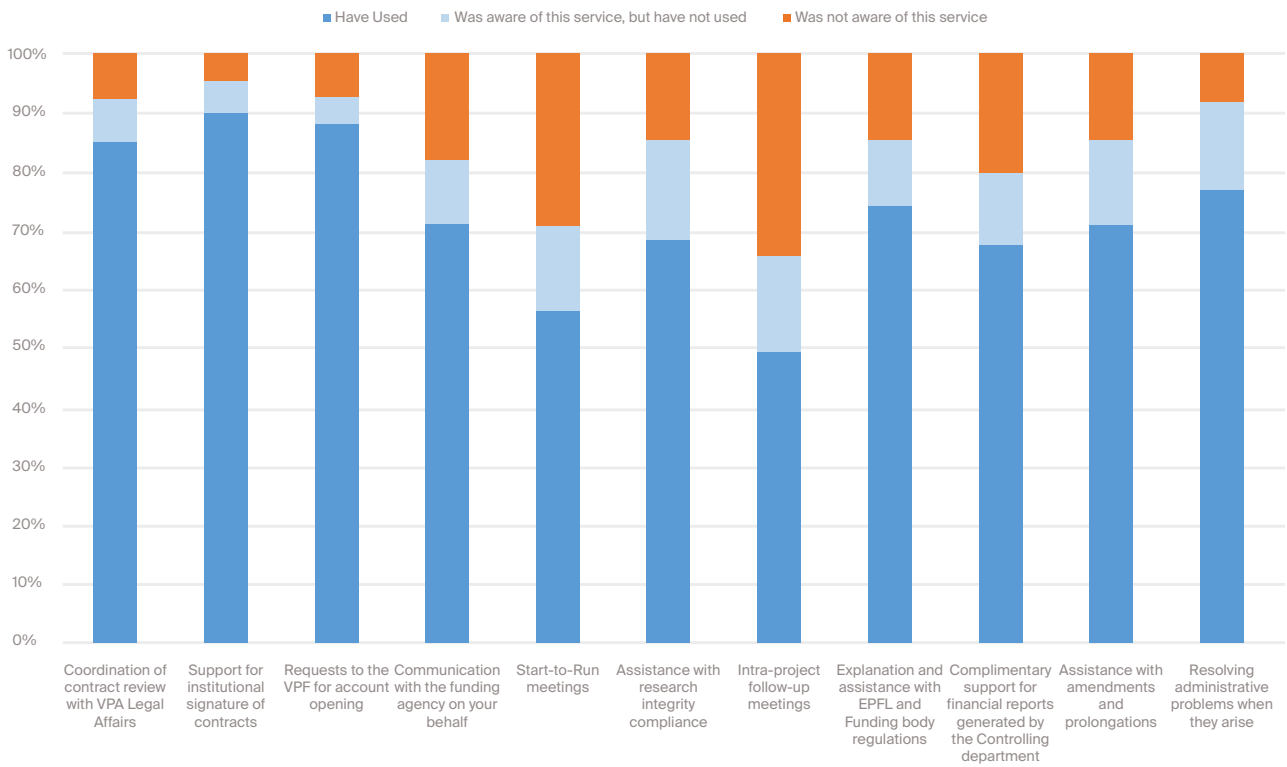


Figure 8

Satisfaction with Award and Post-award services among users

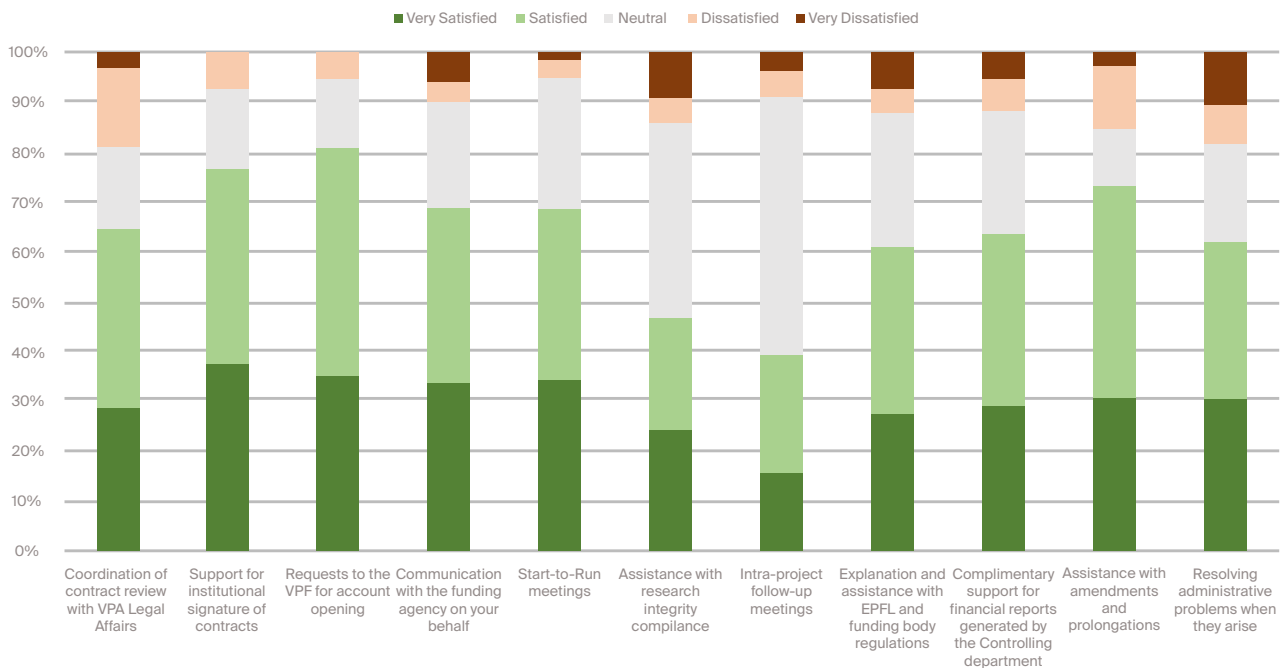


Figure 9

Section 4

Evaluation of Services - Ethics Compliance

Please rate services from the ReO Ethics Affairs team

A total of **17 respondents** answered the questions about Ethics Affairs. This might be explained by the ordering of the questions: The first question in this section was about HREC, and may have misled participants to skip the more general ethics service questions.

However, among this small pool of respondents, there was general satisfaction with the online submission platform (67%), advice on ethics compliance requirements (50%), and support for review applications to ethics commissions (50%). (Figure 10)

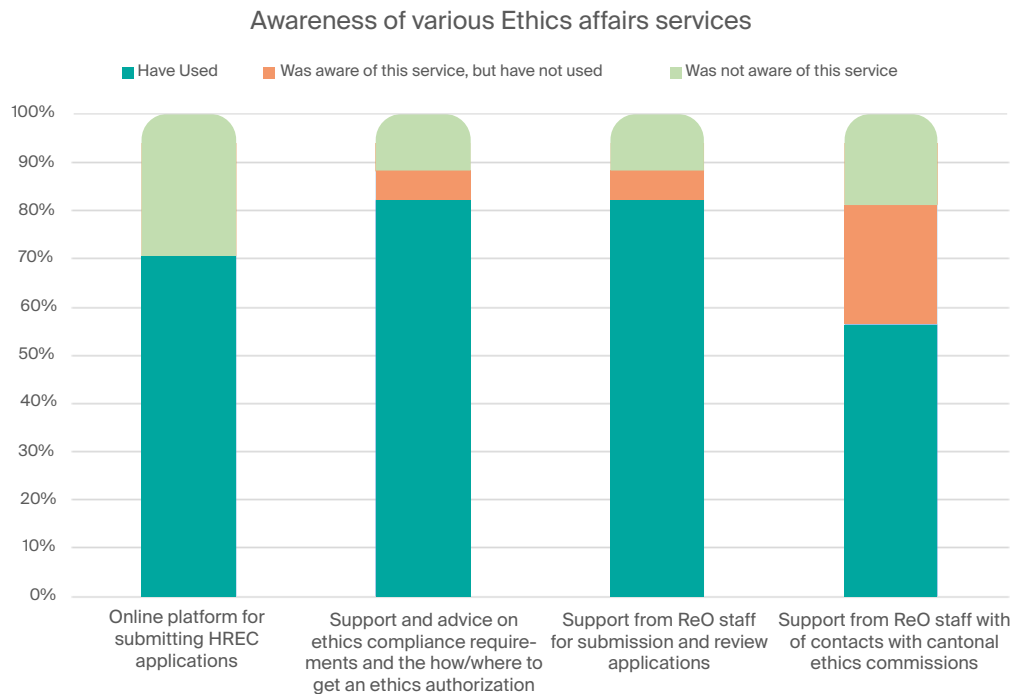


Figure 10

Satisfaction with Ethics affairs services among users

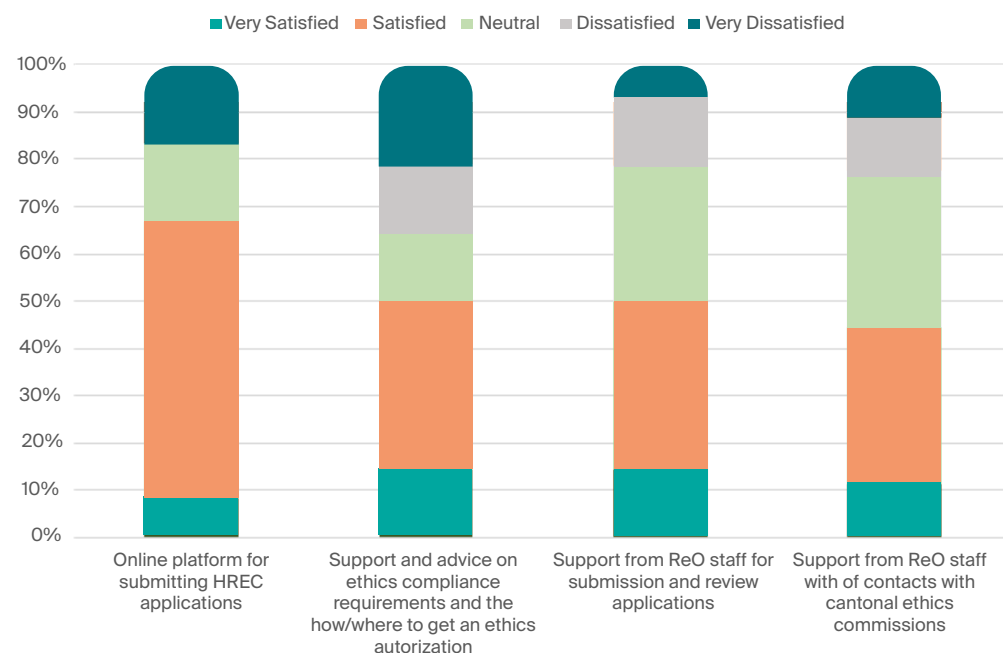


Figure 11

Have you, within the last 3 years, submitted a project to the HREC (Human Research Ethics Commission)?

A total of 27 respondents have submitted an application to the Institutional Review Board HREC within the last 3 years. At the same time, only half of respondents were aware of the existence of the HREC. A possible explanation is the nature of the research portfolio at EPFL and the number of researchers who never interact with human participants or personal data. There is however still room for improvement, as the protections for humans involved in research is a generally important topic. (Figure 11)

Section 5

Evaluation of services - EPFL internal research awards

Have you been involved in the nomination of a candidate or preparation of an application for one or more of the following Research Awards: EPFL Doctorate Award, ABB Award, Hausmann Award, IBM Research Award, Wasserman Award, Ville de Lausanne Award, University Latsis Award, ZKS Award, Symposium Latsis Award?

A total of **47 respondents** have submitted an application to EPFL's major research awards. (Figure 12)

Please indicate your level of satisfaction with ReO support in certain aspects of Research Award management

Dissemination about Research awards and support during the application process are well known (100% and 80%, respectively) and considered satisfactory (63% and 50%, respectively). The online submission portal for Research awards is also satisfactory (51%). (Figure 13)

Awareness of various Research Awards services

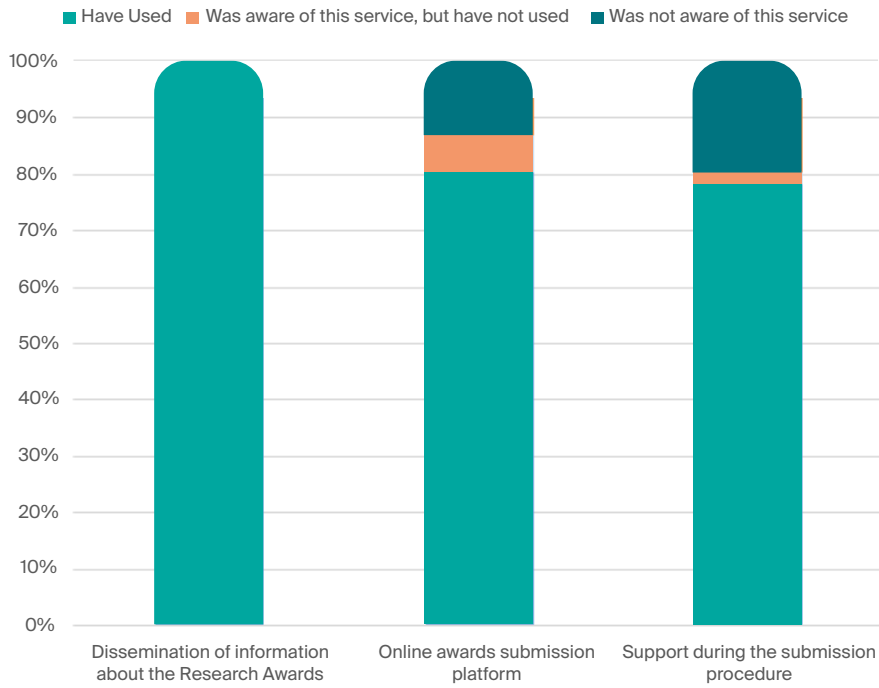


Figure 12

Satisfaction with Research Awards services among users

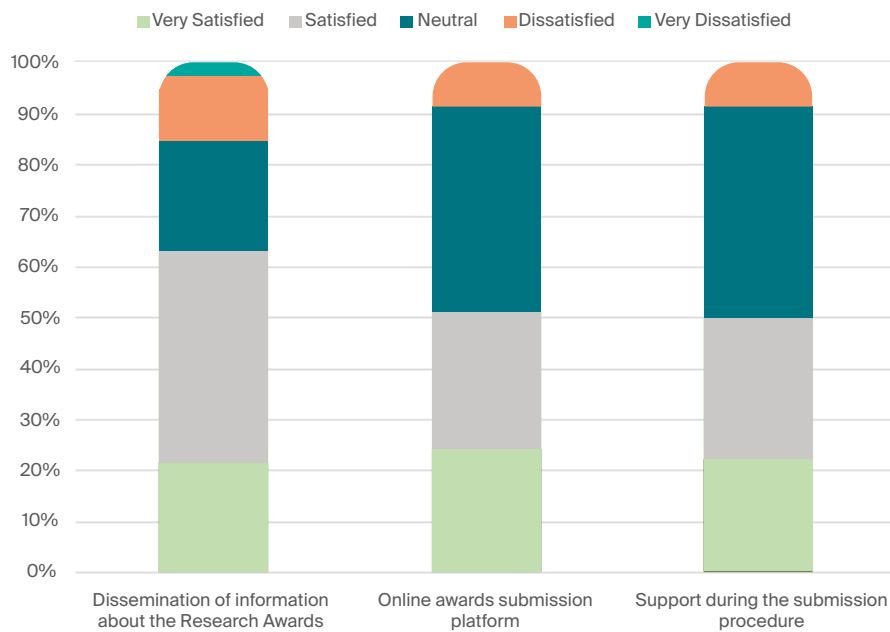


Figure 13

Section 6

Evaluation of services - Training and workshops

Have you ever followed a workshop or training from the Research Office?

Training sessions and workshops are a large part of ReO's pre- and post-award services. The majority (76%) of respondents were aware of these trainings. Overall, 67 respondents (57%) had already followed at least one training or workshop organized by the ReO staff. (Figure 14)

Indicate your level of satisfaction with ReO offerings in terms of training

When results were parsed across trainings, we see high awareness for our three core trainings, such as the GrantsDB and H2020 trainings and the admin assistant meet-and-greets (91%, 91%, and 81%, respectively). (Figure 15)

Awareness is lower for the "ReO at your service!" workshop (60%), but this is not surprising since this workshop is targeted at a small audience (mainly new professors).

Satisfaction is moderately high for those same three core trainings (69%, 66%, and 69%, respectively), but overall quite variable across the training offerings. Results are potentially skewed due to small sample size in some categories, such as the recently started Grant Writing courses (see Annex 2 for complete figures).

Awareness of various Training opportunities

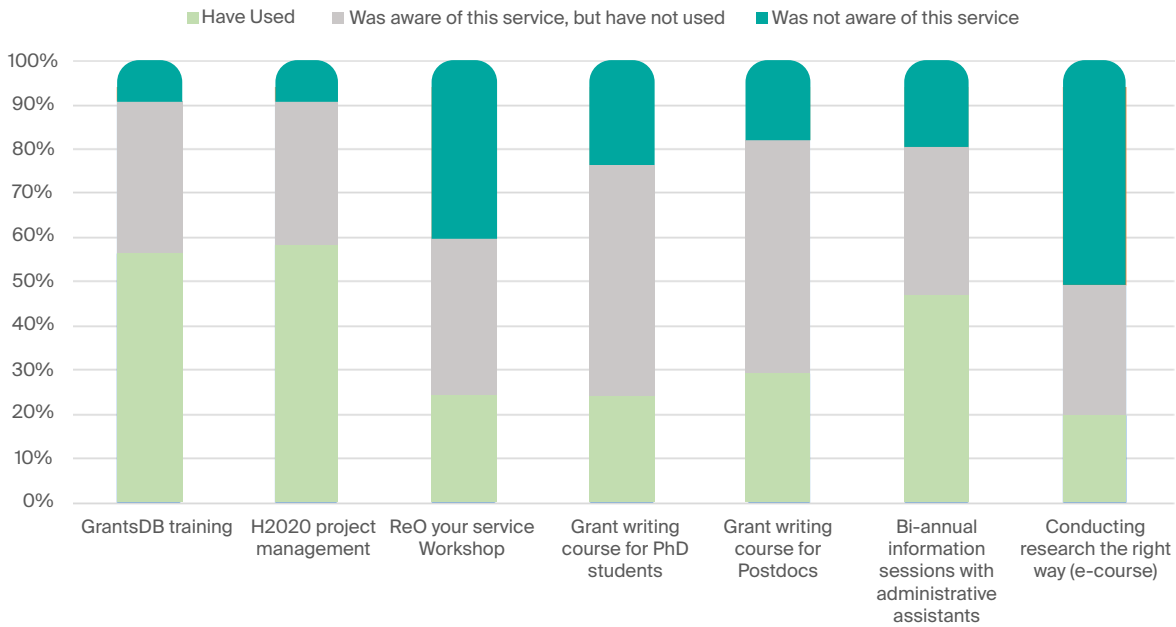


Figure 14

Satisfaction with Training opportunities among users

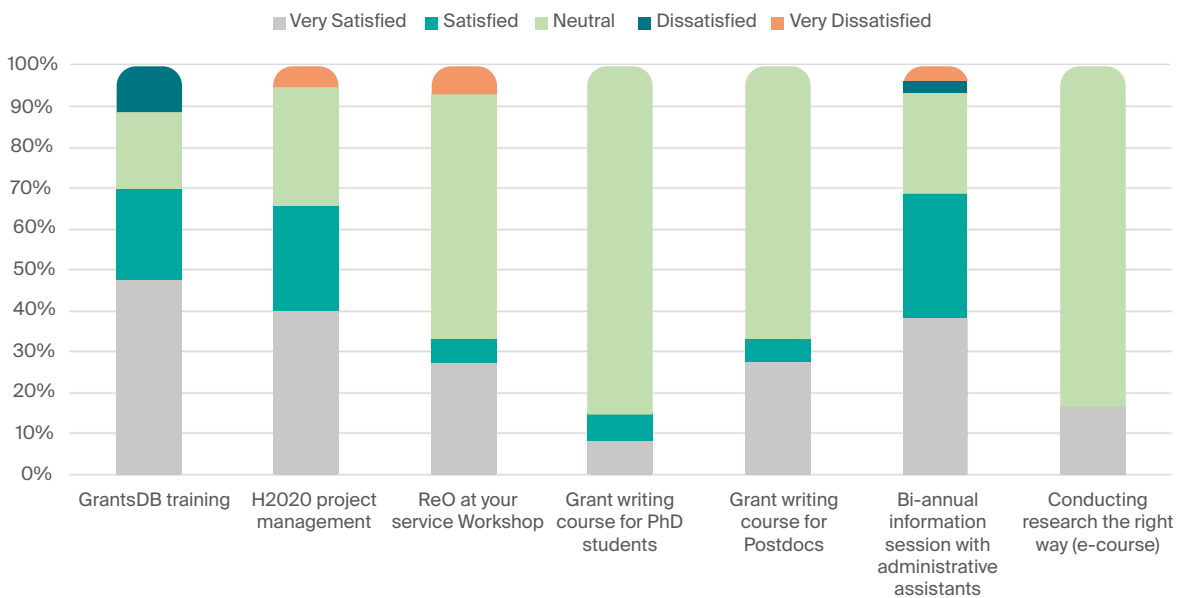


Figure 15

Section 7

Communication

Rate the Research Office communication tools

The campus is generally very aware of passive communication channels (e.g. email), less aware of communication channels that require active searching (e.g., website, toolkits, and mementos), and even less aware of ReO social media presence. Overall, the ReO newsletter has the highest awareness at a perfect 100%, while social media had the lowest at 46%. (Figure 16)

In terms of satisfaction, the proposal preparation toolkits are seen to be very effective means of communication (85% satisfaction), followed by the channels routed through email (Newsletter and targeted announcements, at 75% and 74% respectively). Social media was considered to be the least effective, with only a 29% satisfaction rating and with 33% of respondents claiming the tool was not effective at all. (Figure 17)

In general, participants report that the ReO communication channels are effective, and identify them as relevant sources of information (see Section 3, Promotion of funding opportunities).

Awareness of various Communication channels

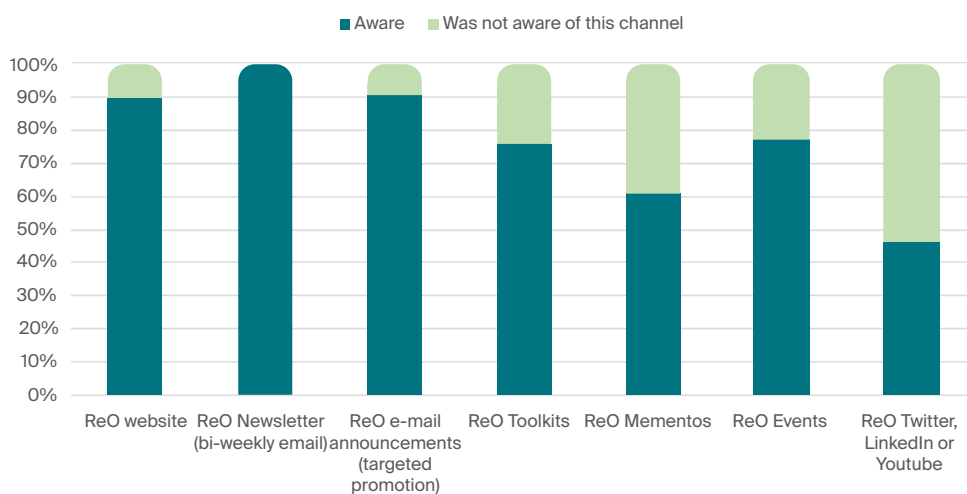


Figure 16

Satisfaction with Communication channels (aware only)

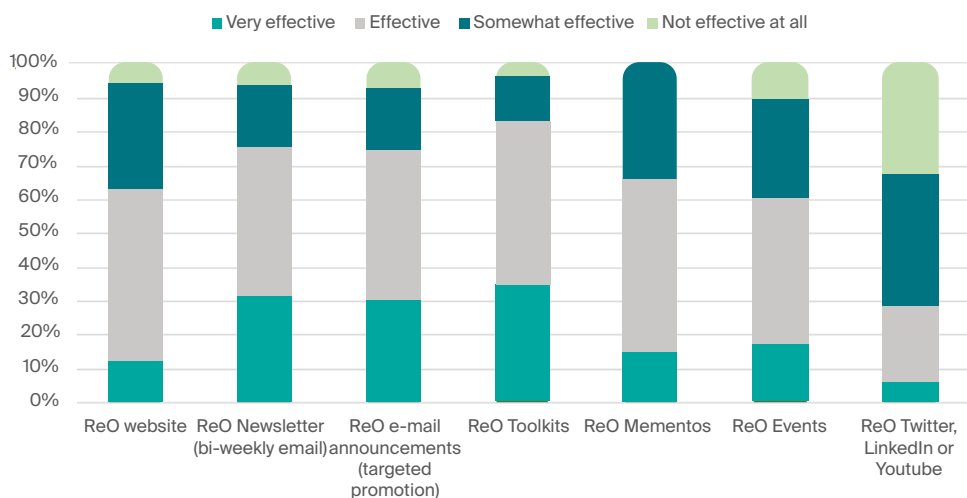


Figure 17

The Research Office anticipates a major overhaul to our website in 2023. To help facilitate this, please rate particular sections of our website

General awareness of the ReO website, not to mention awareness of its various subsections, is not as high as expected (Figure 18). Average awareness across all

subsections is only 73%. Within the subsections, satisfaction varies, from being reasonably high for Find funding and GrantsDB (73% and 72% satisfied, respectively), to relatively low for Chronos (only 47%) (Figure 19).

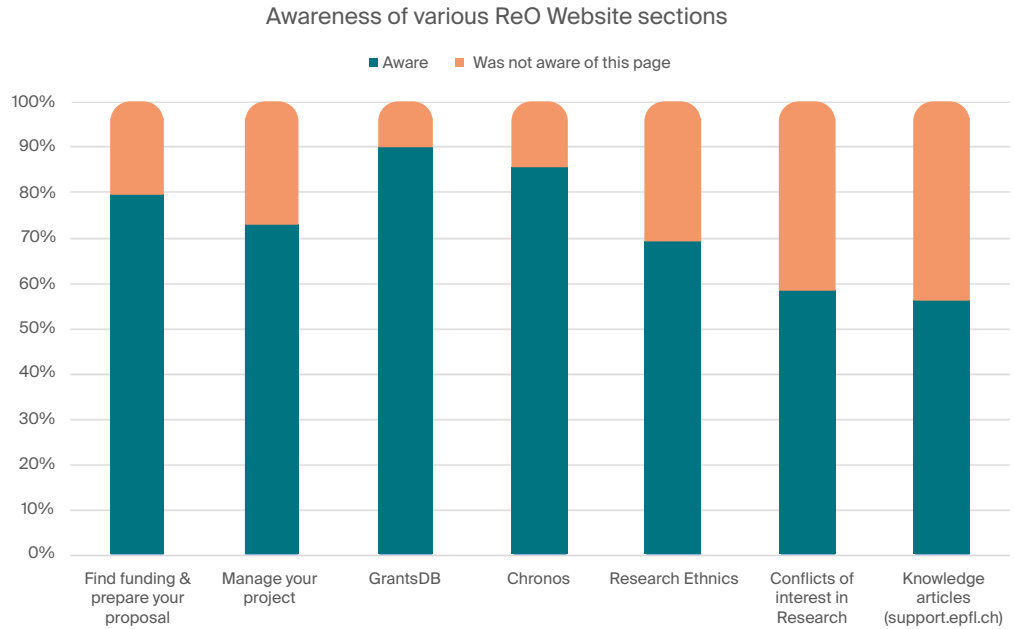


Figure 18

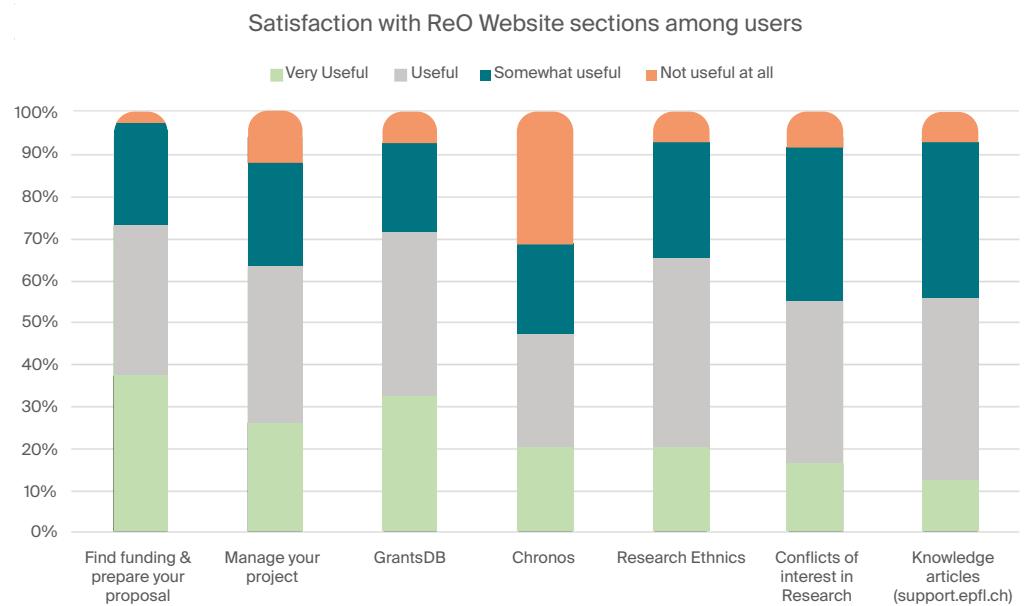


Figure 19

OPEN COMMENTS

Three open-ended survey questions requested information regarding: 1) general comments or feedback, 2) positive feedback on Research Office services and 3) how the Research Office services can be improved. 43 respondents provided general comments and feedback, 33 provided positive feedback and 24 provided input for additional or improvement of ReO services (see Annex 1).

A number of general comments addressed the following topics:

- Chronos
- GrantsDB
- VPA Legal Affairs – workflow
- Ethics compliance
- ReO role in post-award financial monitoring (vs. VPF)
- ReO Newsletter subscription/ unsubscription
- Grant writing service for junior PATT, postdocs and collaborative projects

Examples of additional or improvement of ReO services desired:

1. Greater assistance finding funding opportunities on all levels, but specifically on School and individual levels.
2. Provide more support to increase the competitiveness of submitted proposals (more proofing and feedback services) and to make submitting proposals more feasible.
3. Increase the number of training events focusing on topics such as grant management.
4. Greater transparency regarding research management policy and procedures at the Institutional level.

A number of other comments made clear that there are still many individuals unfamiliar with the Research Office, who would like to know more about ReO services and how the office can assist them.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE ACTIONS

The large number of total responders (326) indicates that the EPFL community is concerned about and wishes to participate in the shaping of services provided by EPFL's Research Office.

We summarize and synthesize the above-detailed results in the following sections: Key takeaways, Conclusions, and Future directions.

Our key takeaways:

- Faculty (Professors) and staff scientists (senior scientists/ MER) interact regularly with the Research Office, as do Administrative assistants.
- A majority (63%) of responders have learned of at least one new funding opportunity through ReO's communication channels.
- The personalized search service is largely unknown by the EPFL scientific community.
- The scientific community would like to see more efforts from ReO in the preparation of the administrative parts of the proposals and the creation of a repository of past successful proposals.
- **Satisfaction** was found in:
 - Responses suggest the campus community is satisfied with the overall performance of the Research Office. Overall, 76% were either very satisfied or satisfied.
 - ReO's current panel of proposal preparation services is judged to be satisfactory by the campus. However, not all services seem to be used and/or known by the scientific community.
 - In terms of funding opportunity information, participants report that the ReO communication channels are effective, and identify them as relevant sources of information (see Section 3, Promotion of funding opportunities).
 - Respondents acknowledged ReO staff professionalism, responsiveness, promptness, friendliness, willingness to work to solve problems, and willingness to assist when questions or concerns arise.
 - Finally, several open comments noted improved performance and services from ReO in the recent past.
- **Dissatisfaction** was also found in some key areas:
 - Unclear understanding of exactly what services ReO provides and how it interacts with other central services.
 - Not enough useful assistance in understanding institutional and funding body regulations.
 - Implementation of the Chronos timekeeping tool and communication surrounding its use and relevant regulations.

We conclude:

- Third party funds at EPFL are mostly brought in by established researchers (Professors/MERs) and this group is well-represented among the survey respondents. In addition, administrative assistants have an important supporting role in managing these third party funds and they are also well-represented among the survey respondents.
- A large majority of responders learn about new funding opportunities through the ReO.
- Though there was overall satisfaction with the dissemination of funding opportunities, several responders nonetheless requested more discipline-specific or individual-level communication of funding opportunities.
- Although we clearly see an increased interest for the grant writing service, further promotion and communication is needed. This promotion should be targeted to the pertinent audiences for the service:
 - i) scientists preparing large collaborative proposals and
 - ii) junior scientists.
- A final important finding is that there remains a lack of clarity with regard to ReO's mission and role at EPFL. The most commonly cited examples of uncertainty about ReO's services include:
 - ReO service portfolio: Survey findings suggest that respondents expect ReO to provide some services that fall outside of its mission (e.g., contract review, timekeeping follow-up, financial reporting, project implementation, etc.)
 - ReO's place in the central services: Survey respondents appear to frequently confuse ReO and the VPA Legal Affairs, Controlling, and Human Resources, regarding mission, responsibility, and even staff.
- In addition to the above point, several other pre-award, award, and post-award services offered by ReO are not well known by the campus. The foreseen overhaul of ReO's web-site will pay special attention to this point.

Future Actions:

In an effort to address these issues and improve customer satisfaction, the ReO plans to implement a number of systematic changes in the coming year:

1. We will send a clearer message of exactly what the Research Office provides and to whom it is provided, as well as the relation between the different central services implicated in grant acquisition and implementation.
 - a. A first step will be information dissemination via the ReO website, followed by an information campaign in our traditional communication channels.
2. We will improve promotion of the personalized funding search service. This will take place through ReO's traditional communication channels as well as through direct advertising to Schools, Colleges, and Centers.
3. The scientific community shows interest in an expansion of ReO services, including more administrative form templates and a repository of past proposals. We will deliver:
 - a. New templates for ancillary proposal documents, such as Biosketches, CVs, career plans, and institutional facilities descriptions.
 - b. A case study on proposal repositories currently offered by peer institutions, including feasibility of launching such a service at EPFL. Special attention will be paid to maintaining researcher confidentiality.
4. In terms of communication strategy, we will deliver:
 - a. A more detailed analysis of social media usage would allow to identify followers' profiles and needs, in order to generate appropriate content.
 - b. A reformatted Newsletter in order to improve readability and reduce its length.
 - c. Fewer email announcements through improved targeting, for example by filtering funding calls by topic or career stage.
 - d. Transparency as to how the generic address <research@epfl.ch> functions and what users can expect.
5. New Chronos interface: The VPO-SI will launch a new Chronos interface during the second half of 2023. ReO will take charge of promoting the new features and informing the campus of best use and good practices.

Any questions or concerns may be addressed to the Research Office - research@epfl.ch