

Managing Your Research Project

Most researchers get little formal preparation for the reality that they'll be responsible for delivering a result without really being able to control the work or the people around them. That's not a personal failing — it's a structural feature of the research environment, and naming it removes some of the guilt that tends to attach itself to the friction it causes.

Four unspoken realities worth acknowledging

- 1) You have responsibility without authority. You're expected to deliver results, but you don't fully control the science, the output, the results. You're also relying on people — supervisors, collaborators, colleagues, technicians — people you don't line-manage. That's not a sign you're doing anything badly. It's the actual shape of the job.
- 2) The plan is a partial fiction. A grant application is written before the work begins, and by the time it starts, the field has often moved on. The plan is a genuinely useful starting point, but it isn't always a binding contract with reality.
- 3) People and relationships are often more complex than the work itself. A leader wants to publish, you're protecting data quality and reproducibility. A push for innovation meets a need for safety and rigour. Navigating those tensions takes real relationship-building skill, not just good data.
- 4) You're operating inside an evolving system. This isn't a problem better calendar organisation can simply fix — it's the nature of the research environment itself. Every researcher navigates this same friction; it isn't a sign that something's gone wrong specifically for you.

Reframing the tools

Standard project management tools are often treated as bureaucratic overhead. In research, they're better understood as strategic communication assets.

A timeline — your Gantt chart — isn't a prediction to defend — it's a living tool for honest conversation. When something changes or fails, an updated timeline is how you communicate clearly what the implications are and what's actually achievable now, what trade-offs might be needed — replacing a difficult conversation with shared, concrete information.

Risk management isn't a checklist of doom. It's a regular conversation with your team about where the project feels fragile — with people, data, or resources — so you can act before something breaks rather than being caught out by it.

Scope creep deserves particular attention. It often happens for good reasons — things get exciting, new opportunities emerge — but it's one of the most common reasons projects run late or over budget. Understanding your original scope gives you a way to say no to extra work or negotiate options without damaging the relationships that made the opportunity appear in the first place.

The Four steps, in practice

Manage yourself — prioritise what actually moves the work forward. Define your deliverables clearly, so you know what success looks like in a system that keeps shifting. Influence your stakeholders — build genuine relationships with people above and below you. Navigate complexity — anticipate risk and adapt honestly as the science changes.

You can't control the results as they unfold. It will surprise you and it will challenge your timeline. What you can control is how you respond to that — with a plan you treat as a living document, not a verdict on your competence.

This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins. Find more inside Research Navigator at [MargaretCollins.com](https://margaretcollins.com).

