Engaging Researchers with Data Management
The Cookbook

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Connie Clare, Maria Cruz, Elli Papadopoulou, James Savage, Marta Teperek, Yan Wang, Iza Witkowska, and Joanne Yeomans, *Engaging Researchers with Data Management: The Cookbook.* Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2019, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0185

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This is the eighth volume of our Open Report Series

ISSN (print): 2399-6668

ISSN (digital): 2399-6676

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-78374-797-9

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-78374-798-6

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-78374-799-3

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-78374-800-6

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 978-1-78374-801-3

ISBN XML: 978-1-78374-802-0

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0185

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Cover design: Anna Gatti.

2.3. Timing Is Everything When It Comes to Engaging with Researchers at the University of Technology Sydney

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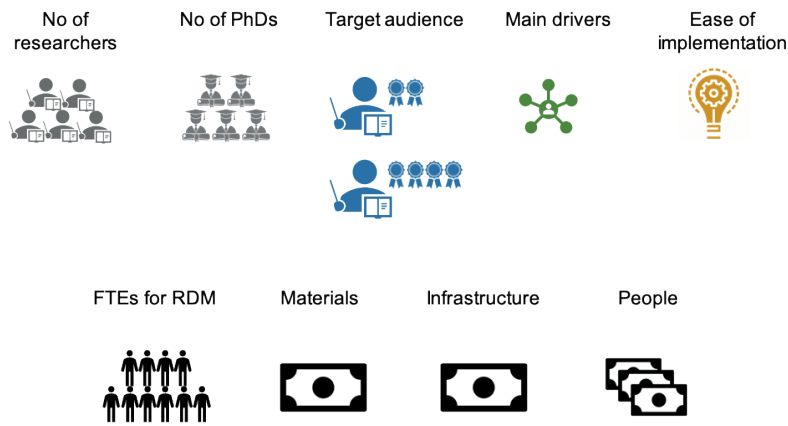
At the University of Sydney, support staff provide grant recipients with 'stub' DMPs and interviews at the right time to maximize researcher engagement.



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At the University of Technology Sydney, the eResearch Unit[5] in the Central IT (Information Technology) Division and the Library's Research Data Team[6] collaboratively approach recipients of major research grants and offer them a 45-minute interview to provide data management support and create a data management plan (DMP). The aim of this activity is to help grant recipients to comply with the data management plan policy from Australia's major research funders and to simultaneously engage them with discussions about research data.

Many Research Data Management (RDM) support services within universities and research institutions do this, so what makes the work by the team from the University of Technology Sydney so successful and noteworthy? Well, it's all in the details.

First, they come to researchers with a 'stub' DMP: a pre-filled DMP based on the abstract of the funded grant application. This advance work helps to make things run more smoothly and means they can structure the interview around whether the draft plan accurately characterises the researchers' data management activities and requirements. And why does this approach work? Well, as the saying goes 'you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar'. The stub DMP is the 'honey' because it takes researchers one step closer to meeting funders' requirements. The expected outcome of the interview is not to have a completed DMP, but to have started a conversation about data management.

Second, persistence. It's not always easy to get the lead investigator to respond to the first contact, but our colleagues from Sydney don't give up. They repeatedly attempt to schedule an interview, and will approach more junior researchers on the project, especially those responsible for data curation/custodianship, if the lead investigator remains unavailable.

Third, their timing is right. These interviews target research teams at the right point in the project cycle to make data management decisions. They also provide an immediate connection to eResearch support if complex software or computational infrastructure is required.

5 eResearch Unit, https://eresearch.uts.edu.au/

6 Library's Research Data Team, https://www.lib.uts.edu.au/research/research-data-management

There are benefits on both sides. Researchers engage with research data, and gain awareness of RDM infrastructure and the support available at the university before they need it. The provision of appropriate data storage solutions, software or other infrastructure for their research projects is guaranteed. Policy compliance becomes less of a hurdle, and the increase in collaboration between service units within the university helps to break down institutional silos. Librarians can demystify research data management practices for researchers in a friendly way, while gaining a deeper understanding of specific data management requirements.

The good news is that any organisation able to provide a DMP tool (in this case, Stash,[7] a home-grown service integrated into the research management system) and build communication between IT infrastructure and Library/RDM services, can implement a similar initiative. Good communication channels and the ability to provide a swift follow-up are also essential. In order to achieve this, it's helpful to have a coordinator in place, especially someone familiar with the available IT infrastructure.

To take this service to the next level, this activity can be linked to broader institutional campaigns surrounding academic integrity, raising its profile within the university. Other options are to strengthen collaboration with other research support offices and collect evidence that DMPs improve data management practices, for example, by conducting user satisfaction surveys. To secure the project in the longer term, it is also important to document and communicate its success to senior administration.

7 Stash, research data management tool, https://www.lib.uts.edu.au/research/research-data-management/research-data-management-plan-rdmp