



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

Cover image: Photo by Johannes Groll on Unsplash, <https://unsplash.com/photos/mrIaqKh9050>

Cover design: Anna Gatti.

4.3. Let's Talk Data: Data Conversations at Lancaster University

Author: Marta Teperek

Contributor: Joshua Sendall and Hardy Schwamm

Researchers at Lancaster University build an RDM community of practice through informal events on research data with multiple speakers and plenty of discussion time.

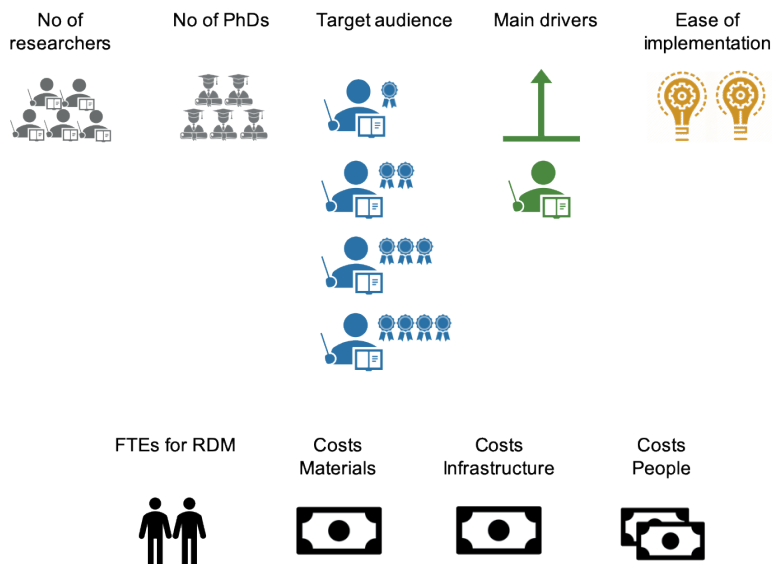


Table 4.3, CC BY 4.0.

Little Time? Little Money?... But Still Want to Have a Community of Researchers Talking with Passion about Data? You Can Have It with Data Conversations!

Lancaster University started their Data Conversations initiative with the belief that to improve data management practice, they needed to turn away from policy-driven approaches and address cultural issues instead.

Data Conversations are informal, lunchtime talks with time for discussion, which channel researchers' passions to focus on the human aspects of Research Data Management (RDM). 'They bring research data stories to life,' says Joshua Sendall, Research Data Manager and the organiser of Data Conversations at Lancaster. 'An approach which communicates the intrinsic value of RDM best practice seems to be a better vehicle to drive people to best practices than one which mandates compliance,' he reasons.

So What's the Recipe?

It is simple: book a nice venue, invite speakers, order pizzas, advertise the event and sit back and let researchers do the talking. Joshua estimates that it takes about two-and-a-half days to organise such an event. He admits that, in practice, the event promotion can be time-consuming. In addition, it's important to think carefully about the topic: subjects that appeal to a broad range of researchers will attract a more diverse audience from a broader group of disciplines. Of course, a catchy title always helps!



Fig. 4.2 Joshua Sendall, Research Data Manager at Lancaster University. © Joshua Sendall, CC BY 4.0.

If You Want to Talk about Data, Allow Time for Talking

To increase the diversity of views, each Data Conversation has at least four speakers. Lancaster identifies the speakers in two ways: ‘if we already know about an expert on the topic, we will approach them,’ explains Joshua, ‘but then there is also the open call — when people sign up for the data conversation, they can sign up either to attend or to speak.’

About fifty percent of the speakers are invited, while the other half is identified through the open call. The presentations typically take no longer than 10 minutes and are followed by lively and dynamic discussions. ‘We strive to provide enough time for discussions, so there are always long breaks timetabled between the talks,’ adds Joshua.

Community Building and Cultural Change

Lancaster University Library organises Data Conversations twice a year and has already held 7 events with almost 240 attendees in total. Some of the PhD students who had been attending Data Conversations from the beginning have now graduated and moved on. ‘It’s nice to know that they are embarking on their careers with the awareness of open data and good RDM,’ reflects Joshua.

But does the initiative really lead to cultural change? Joshua sends out a survey after each event and the feedback has been positive, but he prefers to focus on qualitative measures. ‘Researchers said that Data Conversations have changed their practice and we’ve seen it act as an interdisciplinary incubator,’ he says. Data Conversations bring people together from various disciplines. ‘This is where our investment pays dividends: in the relationships developed through these conversations. And there is a sense of community as well,’ reflects Joshua.

Data Conversations have also acted as a springboard for other initiatives. Due to the interest that the attendees expressed in open research, Lancaster has now started a new initiative, ‘Open Research Café’. In addition, they recently partnered with researchers from the Department of Psychology at Lancaster to run a full-day workshop on open research based on the Data Conversations model.

‘FAIL’ Means ‘First Attempt In Learning’

While the initiative is relatively easy to implement, Joshua warns: ‘Be mindful that initiatives such as Data Conversations can take some time to gain traction. Building a brand and awareness takes time.’ Joshua also thinks organisers shouldn’t be afraid of failure. Laughing, he says that in Lancaster they remind themselves of the saying ‘FAIL means First Attempt In Learning’. ‘You learn from experience, and put a different spin on things which didn’t work,’ he adds.

Joshua always approaches the day of the event with a degree of nervousness and apprehension. He wonders if things will go to plan, if people will turn up, if pizzas will arrive. However, he reflects, ‘once the event is taking place, you put all those apprehensions aside and you become lost in the event and you realise, that’s it, it has been a success!’

Additional Resources

- Information about the Data Conversations initiative from the University of Lancaster, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/library/rdm/data-conversations/>
- Blog post by Maria Cruz who attended one of the Data Conversations events: ‘Building Connections through Data Conversations at Lancaster University’, 28 February 2019, <https://www.rd-alliance.org/blogs/building-connections-through-data-conversations-lancaster-university.html-0>
- Research support news from the Lancaster University Library, ‘Highly Relevant’, <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/highly-relevant/>