Engaging Researchers with Data Management
The Cookbook

Connie Clare, Maria Cruz, Elli Papadopoulou, James Savage, Marta Teperek, Yan Wang, Iza Witkowska, and Joanne Yeomans

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5.1. Data Champion Programme at the University of Cambridge

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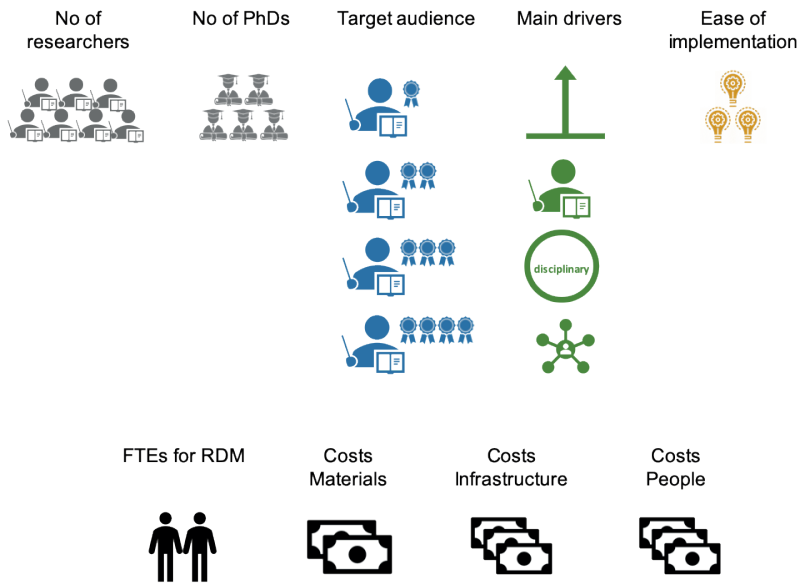
Contributors: Lauren Cadwallader, Sacha Jones, James Savage

The University of Cambridge links central RDM support to a network of volunteer Data Champions to efficiently disseminate RDM knowledge and training, start conversations across research units, and gather discipline-specific expertise for input on policy.



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Establishing a Data Champions Network

The University of Cambridge kick-started their Data Champion programme[1] in September 2016 to drive cultural change towards open data within 6 academic schools and around 100 departments and institutes across the university. The programme is centrally coordinated by the Research Data Management Facility in the Office of Scholarly Communication (OSC).[2]

The OSC provides information about good Research Data Management (RDM) practice, short training courses, consultancy, and guidance for researchers depositing their data in the institutional repository, but it cannot meet demand. Lauren Cadwallader, Deputy Head of Scholarly Communication and manager of the Research Data Management Facility, explains how establishing the Data Champions network has helped the OSC to meet these growing research demands. 'Without our Data Champions it would be physically impossible for the OSC to reach the many thousands of researchers at the University.' With only two employees, who each spend about 0.3 FTE (Full-Time Equivalent) of their time coordinating the programme, Lauren reveals that 'embedding Data Champions within many schools and departments has dramatically extended the influence of the OSC in promoting the open science agenda across a breadth of research disciplines.'

Growth of a Community

Since its inception, the University of Cambridge Data Champion programme has made three successive calls for volunteers. Following the most recent call made in January 2019, the programme comprises an impressive 87 active members.[3] This substantial cohort of Data Champions welcomes anyone interested in data management, including researchers (from early to established), technicians, data managers, IT professionals, librarians and data scientists. The programme also includes 'affiliated' Data Champions, who are individuals who contribute their RDM expertise without working to benefit any specific department.

1 Cambridge Data Champions, https://www.data.cam.ac.uk/intro-data-champions
2 Cambridge Research Data Management, https://www.data.cam.ac.uk/
3 Members of the Cambridge Data Champions community, https://www.data.cam.ac.uk/data-champions-search

Fig. 5.1 A cartoon advertising the Data Champions network at the University of Cambridge. © Clare Trowell/University of Cambridge, CC BY-NC-ND.

What Does It Take to Become a Data Champion?

The first call for volunteers (September 2016), outlined the various roles and responsibilities of prospective Data Champions, requesting that they act as local experts and advocates for good RDM, serve as RDM representatives by attending bimonthly forums, forward questions to the RDM team, and conduct at least one workshop per year. However, as the programme evolved it became apparent that the first cohort of Data Champions were delivering RDM support and advocacy in a variety of ways, from writing data management plans to conducting electronic lab notebook trials, but not necessarily by conducting a workshop. Consequently, the second call (February 2018) was amended such that Data Champions were not required to deliver any particular type of support.[4]

4 'Cambridge Data Champions — reflections on an expanding community and

What's in It for You?

Becoming a Data Champion has many benefits. Lauren highlights the opportunity to enhance professional development through the programme. 'Many individuals join the team to learn new skills and improve their own RDM practice.' She adds, 'by undertaking OSC training and organising extracurricular activities, individuals can develop essential transferable skills to boost their CV and future career prospects.'

Joining the vibrant community of Data Champions can facilitate multidisciplinary collaboration with like-minded personnel, increase an individual's impact beyond their immediate circle, and present opportunities for networking beyond the University. This was wonderfully demonstrated by Data Champion and postdoctoral researcher from the Department of Zoology, James Savage, who received funding through the OSC to attend the International Data Week 2018[5] conference in Botswana and gave a presentation on the Data Champion Programme. James embraced this opportunity by engaging with representatives of similar programmes at the conference, disseminating the knowledge he gained back to the Data Champion programme, and ultimately publishing a practice paper[6] to summarise the progress made on the establishment of the Data Champion community at the University of Cambridge.

The Challenges

Whilst establishing a community of Data Champions provides many benefits, there are also many challenges. The main issues revolve around: (i) attracting new volunteers, in particular from the arts, humanities and social sciences; (ii) sustaining motivation and productivity amongst the existing cohort; (iii) maintaining central support; and, (iv) providing incentives to devote time to the programme.

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strategies for 2019' (blog post), 19 June 2019, https://unlockingresearch-blog.lib.cam.ac.uk/?p=2602

5 Information about the International Data Week, https://internationaldataweek.org/

6 J. L. Savage and L. Cadwallader, 'Establishing, Developing, and Sustaining a Community of Data Champions,' *Data Science Journal* 18:1 (2019), 23, https://datascience.codata.org/articles/10.5334/dsj-2019-023/

James emphasised the additional problem of bias towards STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines in the current demographic of Data Champions (since only 18% of current Data Champions work in humanities and social science disciplines, with none in the arts). To address this problem, the language of the most recent call was altered to make it more inclusive to individuals working within those disciplines. James stressed the importance of promoting diversity and inclusion when establishing a community of Data Champions. 'The programme was designed for all disciplines. All researchers should have a voice to direct the future of the Data Champion programme at the University of Cambridge.'