



Engaging Researchers with Data Management The Cookbook

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6.3. Ever Heard of Five-Legged Sheep? Data Managers at Utrecht University Give Researchers a Leg-Up!

Author: Iza Witkowska

Contributor: Martine Pronk

Utrecht University employs a pool of data managers who can be flexibly hired and embedded within research teams for short or long periods, providing highly targeted RDM support and allowing researchers to concentrate on research.

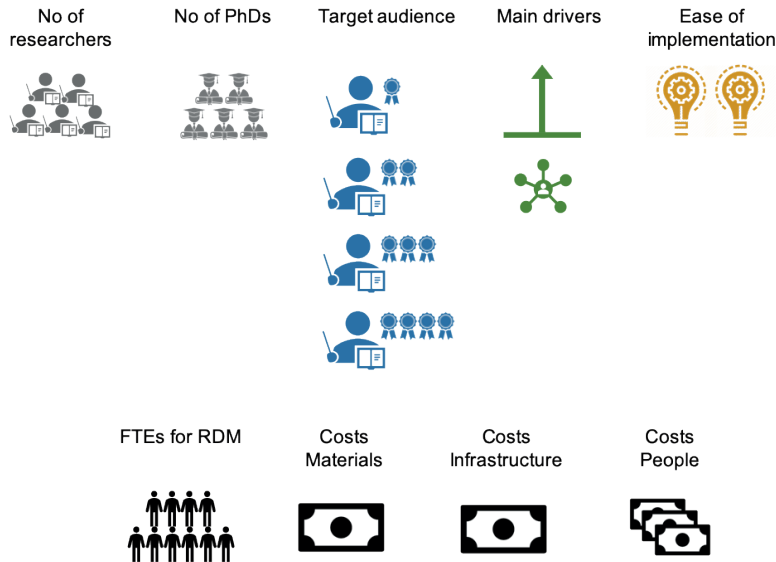


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‘Demands in the various phases of the data cycle are so diverse that finding all expertise in one person is comparable to searching for the proverbial “five-legged sheep”,’ says Martine Pronk, the head of Academic Services of the Utrecht University (UU) Library.

The ‘five-legged sheep’ is an old Dutch expression, referring to somebody who needs to be unreasonably versatile. And sadly, this is what is expected from the twenty-first-century researcher.³ Transparent and well-documented data management is one of many tasks that researchers now need to add to their already heavy workload.

The UU flexible data managers’ pool takes the technical aspects of managing data away from overwhelmed researchers. A data manager can be hired from the library and embedded in a research project part-time or full-time, either short-term for small, specific tasks, such as support in writing a data management plan, or for longer periods, for example to set up a data flow and help to manage the data collection over an entire project. In this way, expertise that is developed stays within the university, in contrast to the scenario of hiring an external (and most likely expensive) expert for the same job.

At UU the data manager service was set up in response to a request for expertise. In 2017 the program director of an ongoing large-scale study with multiple partners, the YOUth cohort study,⁴ requested a skilled professional to help with managing data. The library responded enthusiastically to this request and the service of the embedded data manager was born. Reflecting on the success of this project, it was expected that more of these projects would be initiated at the UU (and elsewhere). The popularity of this service has since increased and it has been promoted as vital by satisfied customers⁵ to their peers.

‘The data managers’ pool fits well in the traditional values of the library to make research output findable, available, accessible and re-usable. What’s new is that in response to the changing needs of the scientific community and digital innovations, the library and its employees move closer to the researchers,’ says Martine.

3 ‘Reflections on Research Assessment for Researcher Recruitment and Career Progression — talking while acting?’ (blog post), <https://openworking.wordpress.com/2019/05/20/reflections-on-research-assessment-for-researcher-recruitment-and-career-progression-talking-while-acting/>

4 YOUth Cohort Study, <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/youth-cohort-study/youth>

5 Interview with Prof. Chantal Kemner, 24 June 2019, <https://www.uu.nl/en/news/mapping-the-territory-of-child-development-with-team-science>

The best way to start this service is by having large, data-driven, complex projects or programmes with multiple (inter)national stakeholders. These projects are more likely to have enough funding and to require high quality data management support to manage all the data flows. It also helps to have a well-developed Research Data Management (RDM) network within the university to promote the service among the researchers and help identify researchers and projects that could benefit from it.

The Secret Ingredients Are People

The perfect candidate for the role of data manager should be someone who is able to act as an advisor, project manager and leader, as well as contributing technical skills in RDM. He or she needs to be proactive, flexible, show initiative and be able to work effectively within, and contribute to, a positive team environment. They also need to be capable of building productive networks both internally and externally. And of course, they need to have both passion and experience with managing data and the ability to communicate their expertise to others.

For data managers, having a PhD might be helpful to understand the research environment, but is not required. What is necessary is the ability to communicate effectively with researchers. Because this function is new and the field of data management is dynamic, data managers have a unique opportunity to develop and customize their role according to the needs of the scientific community and their own professional interests.

The main challenge for the service is acquiring new projects and doing so in a timely manner, in order to have enough projects on the go at any given time. The pool and individual data managers have targets and they need to meet them: currently 65% of the collective FTEs (Full-Time Equivalents) need to be outsourced to projects. To achieve this goal, data managers need to look continuously for projects and use their networks to increase the visibility of the service.

Although it's a relatively new service, there are two clear indicators showing that this service is well received by the scientific community and promotes good data management practices. 'Firstly, interest, demand and appreciation for this service is growing, and researchers themselves promote this service to their colleagues. Secondly, data managers act



Fig. 6.3 Data managers Ron Scholten and Danny de Koning at the KinderKennisCentrum of Utrecht University. © Annemiek van der Kuil | PhotoA.nl, all rights reserved.

as ambassadors of FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Re-usable) and open data. They educate and advise researchers on good data management practices, including how to archive or publish data and metadata standards. More and more datasets get published at the UU,' says Martine.

