



Engaging Researchers with Data Management The Cookbook

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7.1. Showcasing Peers and their Good Practice: Researcher Interviews at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Utrecht University

Author: Iza Witkowska

Contributor: Annemiek van der Kuil and Anneke de Maat

Staff at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Utrecht University interview researchers whose stories illustrate the value of good RDM, to provide peer-driven examples of good practice and raise the profile of exemplary researchers.

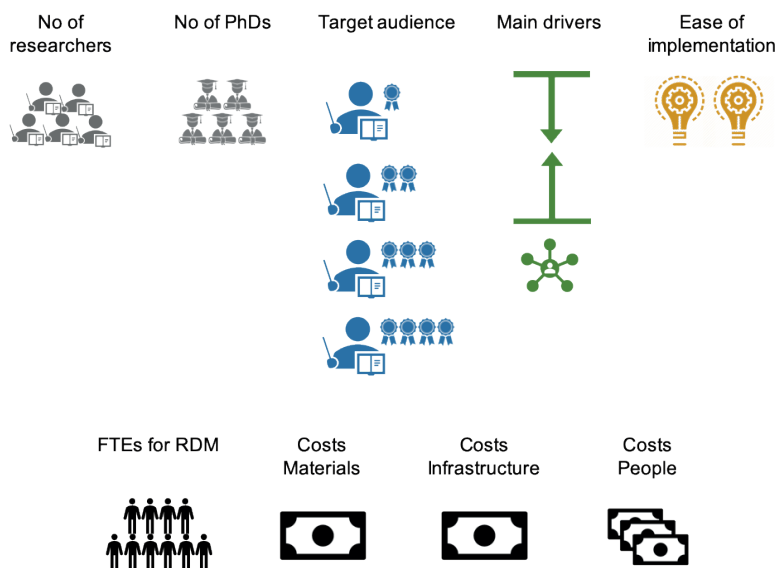


Table 7.1.1 Utrecht University, CC BY 4.0.

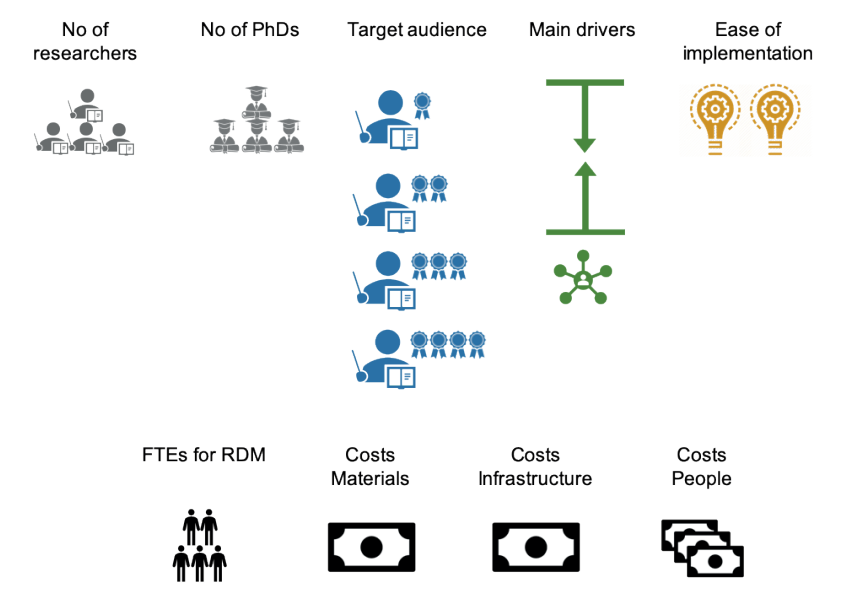


Table 7.1.2 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, CC BY 4.0.

If you would convince a man that he does wrong, do right. But do not care to convince him. Men will believe what they see. Let them see. — Henry David Thoreau

If you want to promote good data management practice, do this by highlighting the work of those researchers who lead by example. Tell their stories and showcase why and how good Research Data Management (RDM) helped them to achieve their goals. ‘People are more convinced by the information which is given by their peers. Social norms govern the behaviour of members of a society. When researchers see that other researchers from their peer group use certain tools or services, they are more likely to start using these tools and services,’ says Anneke de Maat, the communication advisor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU).

Interviewing people is a fun and interesting activity. You get an opportunity to get to know the person with whom you are talking, and the subject about which they are passionate. ‘Researchers do like to talk. They like to talk about their research experiences and beyond; about

their success stories and frustrations,’ explains Annemiek van der Kuil, the RDM consultant at the Utrecht University (UU). ‘They feel flattered and take this as an opportunity to raise their professional profile,’ adds Anneke. Annemiek’s and Anneke’s advice is that you ‘just go and try’ interviewing as a form of engagement!

Both Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam¹ and Utrecht University² write up and share their interviews online, and archive them for future reference. Interviews are conducted with researchers at all stages, from PhD students to senior academics, and cover topics such as disciplinary norms, use of specific software, and best practices for managing certain kinds of data.

What Ingredients Do You Need to Get Started?

Ingredient one: an excellent communications officer or a member of your team who can approach a researcher and ask the right questions.

Ingredient two: a dedicated colleague, or even better, a network of colleagues, who work closely with researchers and are able to identify interesting case studies. ‘At the UU, members of the RDM network are our best friends and ambassadors!’ says Annemiek.

Ingredient three: good fortune on your side, so that the identified researcher is willing to participate. Even better, if you can identify an influential researcher with a catchy subject and their own broad network, then the story can go viral after its publication. ‘At the UU, we were lucky to interview “Mr. Drought” [Niko Wanders], the national expert on drought!’³

Ingredient four: someone who can take good photos. ‘It gives this extra touch to the whole experience and researchers definitely like it!’ says Annemiek.

1 Archive of the VU newsletter with all interviews, <https://ub.vu.nl/en/news-agenda/vu-research-support-newsletter/archive/index.aspx>

2 Interviews with researchers at Utrecht University, <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/research-data-management/rdm-stories>

3 Interview with Niko Wanders, 7 February 2019, <https://www.uu.nl/en/background/in-our-research-community-data-sharing-is-the-norm>

Ingredient five: a good story: ‘a story which is as personal and honest as possible; one that draws a realistic picture and provides concrete and practical information to the reader,’ says Anneke.

Ingredient six: have, or create, communication channels to distribute your message.

Need more tips and tricks? Here they come: (1) prepare for the interview by researching the subject and the interviewee; (2) conduct the interview on your own; (3) be as objective and open-minded as you can — try to withhold any judgement over what the interviewee tells you; (4) let the researcher talk; and, (5) write your story with enthusiasm and with the interest of your audience at heart.



Fig. 7.1 Elise Quik at the David de Wied Building of the Faculty of Science, Utrecht University. © Annemiek van der Kuil | PhotoA.nl, all rights reserved.

It's not all 'butterflies and rainbows'; this activity can be time consuming. 'It takes 6 to 7 working hours to do the interview, write and edit a story,' says Anneke. Hiring an external communication officer can be expensive. Moreover, researchers at VU have busy agendas, need to

prioritize tasks and might not have time to be interviewed. Identifying new stories and making sure that your story reaches the right ears gets easier with experience and as your network grows, but can be challenging to start with.

How do we know that this activity creates engagement and promotes our cause? 'At the UU, more and more researchers find their way to our RDM Support Office. We believe it's not only because of the growing need for the RDM Support, but also thanks to our increasing visibility,' says Annemiek. 'We haven't had a researcher refusing our invitation to be interviewed. Researchers, as well as their peers, are happy to share RDM stories and, at the end, researchers learn from each other about good data management practices,' conclude both Anneke and Annemiek. This is called 'a job well done'!