



Engaging Researchers with Data Management The Cookbook

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8.2. Starting at the End: Seniors' Research Data Project at the UiT The Arctic University of Norway

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Contributors: Stein Høydalsvik, Leif Longva

The Library of UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, gives insight into their Seniors' Research Data project and walk us through the links and networks established so far, and all of their achievements to date.

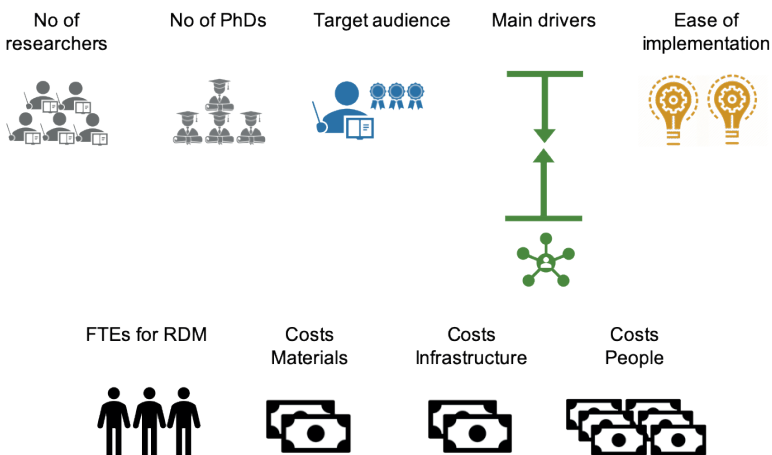


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What If You Start at the End?

What happens to data once a researcher retires? According to Lars Figenschou, from the Library of UiT The Arctic University of Norway, ‘there is empirical evidence that the data collected by researchers who are leaving research are those most at risk of being lost. This is a huge problem for the research community, as well as for the institutions.’ Stein Høydalsvik, senior advisor at the library, clarifies that the main driver of their project is re-usability: ‘We need to be able to access and re-use data that have been generated within our institution; it’s equally a matter of preserving the legacy and of enabling others to make something new out of it.’

The goal of the Seniors’ Research Data project is to identify the most valuable datasets created by senior researchers. The library is responsible for curating data (reviewing the submitted data and communicating with the submitting researcher on how to present the data through good metadata and descriptions, and on recommended file-format conversions, etc.), while the faculty is expected to help researchers select the most valuable datasets and advise them on the most suitable, discipline-appropriate data management practices.

One of the UiT faculties supported the project by allocating money to fund research assistants to help their senior researchers prepare their data for archiving, for example, by digitising, structuring and describing the data. However, not many researchers made use of this funding. The reason appeared to be that, even with funded assistants, researchers themselves still needed to prepare their research data materials for archiving. A major obstacle to the success of a project like the Seniors’ Research Data project is the fact that research data archiving, especially of old data, requires time and effort by the researchers.

How Do Senior Researchers Differ from Early-Career Researchers?

It is sometimes thought that acquiring a new skill gets harder with age, but in Stein’s experience the most important factor is the willingness of individuals to learn new things. The impression in the Research Data Management (RDM) team at UiT is that senior researchers are more

motivated to secure their research legacy than researchers in earlier stages of their careers. Senior researchers, especially those about to retire, seem quite willing to learn how to adequately prepare their data for sharing, perhaps because they feel less competitive as their career is established and because they have no further plans to use the data for their own research.

A similar effect is observed when reaching out to researchers who are about to make a career shift, and who rely on the library archives for storing and preserving their data. However, Stein warns that researchers at this stage often hold the messiest data. Perhaps this is to be expected given that senior researchers have been collecting data for longer: years of modifying documents, creating new versions and formats of the same files, using the same file names on multiple occasions, and similar issues can lead to data chaos when compounded over time.

Targeting the Right People

Here is where support from the library, with its strong networks and collaborations, comes in handy. Stein explains how they have adapted the library's RDM support workflows to fit the Seniors' Research Data project.

It starts with effective communication from the Library Director, which then cascades down to the Deans of Faculties, Heads of Departments, and then to Principal Investigators and individual research groups. Next, an RDM specialist from the library usually starts by arranging meetings on different levels within the faculty: first with the Dean and key personnel to inform them about the Seniors' Researcher Data project, then meeting with research groups and faculty to discuss what is needed from their side.

If there is interest, the archivists organise hands-on sessions and provide detailed guidelines, sometimes with one-to-one conversations and meetings, as appropriate.

Coming Out of Your Comfort Zone: A Tough Decision

Stein explains that the success of the Seniors' Research Data project crucially depends on staff, for example, on subject librarians willing

to leave their desk and having the courage to approach and cooperate with researchers on a topic that they don't necessarily feel comfortable with. However, Stein says that, 'it's not the specific role or job title that librarians have that will make a difference, but their attitude. Knowing the RDM policy landscape is one thing, but in order to be heard, you have to go where the researchers are and talk to them in a language that they understand.'

Prof Robert T. Barrett reflects on the selfish benefits of archiving his data: 'It's just positive and fun if my time series data can benefit others. And extra nice if they refer to me. I get a quote, and at the same time others know that I actually collected the data.'

However, the benefits go far beyond merely selfish reasons: 'as a researcher, one can always make excuses about lack of time, but we actually have a moral duty: what we have published is only part of the legacy. We should be proud enough of what we have done during our research career to make all our data and research materials publicly available, for the benefit of younger researchers and all our successors.'



Fig. 8.2 Prof Robert T. Barrett collecting data about seabirds and migratory birds. Retired in 2018 after 40 years of work at the UiT. © Adrien Brun, CC BY 4.0.