

## Research Data Management advocacy – what works well

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### 5.1. INTRODUCTION: A RESEARCH-INTENSIVE UNIVERSITY

University College London (UCL) ranks among the top twenty universities in the world and is one of the most successful British research institutions at attracting funding. It is also one of the leading institutions in promoting Open Access to publications. Most academic disciplines are represented in its 380 research departments, units, institutes and centres<sup>1</sup>. UCL is home to 12,000 research staff and research students<sup>2</sup>.

In the context of *Science as an Open Enterprise*, a report produced by the Royal Society in June 2012, a Research Data Executive Services Group was created in the university to write the UCL Research Data Policy (published in August 2013) and to oversee Research Data services. Chaired by the Director of Library Services, this Group met regularly between 2011 and 2016 and reported to another cross-university board, the Research Information and IT Services Group.

Two Research Data Support Officers (RDSOs) work as part of Liaison and Support Services within UCL Library Services and in close collaboration with the UCL Information Services Division (IT), as well as several other central services. The RDSOs coordinate Research Data Management (RDM) advocacy and support. As is the case in many other UK universities, these positions were created relatively recently; the first RDSO having started in May 2015, and the second in November 2016. One of the main drivers to create these posts was a change in research funders' requirements<sup>3</sup> which prompted UK research-intensive universities to provide greater support for researchers in terms of interpreting and complying with funders' policies.

### 5.2. RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT

The Research Data Management Team's activities can be divided into three interwoven missions:

#### i Advocacy

In terms of advocacy, the team promotes best practice in data management and sharing, and communicates about services available within the university to support researchers throughout their research projects. For instance, one of the early tasks completed by the first Research Data Support Officer was to create a website dedicated to information about Research Data Management<sup>4</sup>.

Built with the help of a Working Group of library colleagues (see below), the website provides information on research funders' and UCL's policies, Data Management Plans (DMPs), as well as on best practices.

<sup>1</sup> As listed in the UCL Departments A to Z at UCL: [www.ucl.ac.uk/departments/a-z/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/departments/a-z/), (accessed 4 August 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Figure from UCL Human Resources as of 1st October 2015 and UCL Student and Registry Services as of 1st December 2015.

<sup>3</sup> In particular new research data policies were established by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council in 2015 and by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme in 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The website can be found at UCL: [www.ucl.ac.uk/research-data-management](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/research-data-management) (accessed 3 November 2016).

The website and all research data-related services are mainly promoted via short presentations given upon invitation in faculty and research department meetings. Other advocacy activities have included participation in university-wide induction events for new staff members; presentations for staff members in other professional services; delivering 1- to 3-hour bespoke workshops on data management in research departments; and conducting a university-wide Research Data Management survey.

## ii Support

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One-to-one and research group support are other key areas of activity. Responding to email and phone enquiries is part of the day-to-day support offered to researchers and research students. Meetings are proposed when the user needs advice on several topics, or when a discussion is required with the whole research group. In addition, the Research Data Management Team reviews Data Management Plans (DMP) written as part of research grant applications or as project deliverables. The review consists of feedback on the content and layout of the plan, but also advice on where to find funders' requirements and guidance to write the plan, and information on relevant university or external resources to improve the plan. Users are offered the opportunity to submit a final draft version of their DMP for a last review.

## iii Training

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A structured training programme enables the dissemination of information about resources and best practices to both researchers and to non-research staff in central services. A separate training programme to introduce Subject Librarians to Research Data Management has run since 2015. Four sessions with thirty participants in each have been convened to date. Since December 2016 a training programme for PhD students has been co-organised by the Research Data Management Team, the Research Integrity Team (in the Research Office), and the Doctoral School. Embedding RDM advocacy in communications about research support in general enables the Research Data Management Team to reach a wide range of researchers who are at early stages of their projects and careers. In addition to the structured programmes, tailored training sessions are delivered upon demand.

## 5.3. WHAT WORKED: COLLABORATION, PRESENTATIONS, IMMEDIATE HELP AND INFORMATION GATEWAY

### A Collaboration across central services

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Several of the activities described above were put together thanks to collaboration with other university central services. Joint work with the Information Services Division, the Research Office, the Ethics Committees and Legal Services has resulted in more efficient promotion of RDM services. Moreover, daily liaison both with the Research IT Services and within Library Services has established a growing network of research support and research data experts. Given that the RDM advocacy programme across the university is still relatively novel, and that the Research Data Management Team is still quite small, this network is proving most valuable. In terms of communications, this enables all of the teams to make the most of each invitation to give presentations at faculty or department staff meetings, and thereby to multiply the opportunities to speak about data management planning and the help available within the university.

The Library Working Group dedicated to RDM is another network on which the team can rely. The Group provides discipline-specific knowledge and essential support for short-term projects such as the building of the website, and designing and promoting the cross-university survey. This Group is formed of thirteen volunteers (Librarians, Records Manager, Digital Curation Manager) who work on a specific project each summer; not all Working Group members are required to participate in all projects. It is planned to offer more training to these members and other librarians so that in the future they can answer basic RDM enquiries and review Data Management Plans.

### B Presentations at staff meetings and review of Data Management Plans

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It has been possible to draw a direct link between verbal presentations given in departmental and faculty meetings and a subsequent increase of email enquiries received. The average allocated time for such presentations is only 10 minutes, but this enables us to point to a range of university services which are often previously unknown to researchers, and to answer several questions. Regarding feedback on our service, it is the reviewing of DMPs which triggers the highest volume of positive feedback. This includes comments such as:

*"I wanted to say a huge THANK YOU [sic] for your time with this feedback and also meeting with me in person. It was incredibly helpful."*

*"Your comments are very detailed and helpful. Thank you especially for looking at it so quickly. I can't seem to find your internal number on the website. I just wanted to give you a ring to say thank you!"*

*"Thanks again for your thoughtful comments on our draft. It has helped a lot to revise it!"*

Although reviewing one DMP can take up to two hours, this assistance has an extensive and immediate impact on the user's grant application and future project. It also enables an opportunity to point to services, and to explain several aspects of data management to a researcher. These documents are moreover valuable source material to analyse the types of data being produced in the university.

### C Gateway to other university services

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Being seen as a first point of contact is one of the Research Data Management Team's objectives. Because of the size of the user community and the variety of its enquiries and needs, the Team aims to develop an excellent and up-to-date knowledge of who does what in the institution rather than attempting to become knowledgeable in each and every aspect covered by data management. This strategy has so far been successful and in three cases it has enabled putting researchers in touch with the relevant experts. It has proved the right one whenever several experts had to be brought to one table to help a research group. In a similar perspective, the RDM website has been planned as a gateway to find research support resources across the university.

## 5.4. THE CHALLENGES OF OPERATING IN A VERY DIVERSE RESEARCH INSTITUTION

While many of our approaches have worked well, working in such a large research-intensive institution does pose challenges. Because only generic knowledge can be developed by a small Research Data Management Team, advocacy has so far failed to extend to discipline-specific needs. This can be frustrating

for both service providers and users alike. To help to address this, the RDM Team now recommends that faculty and department data experts should act as the primary contact for subject-specific questions. The idea is that Research Data Management central services are available to complement help offered by local research support staff (such as permanent data managers, research managers and IT officers) who are able to maintain a subject disciplinary expertise. We also aim to foster and support a network of subject-specific data managers across all faculties.

The diversity of research contexts within the university also forces the RDM Team to prioritise its advocacy effort. The strategy so far has been to help users who self-identify as needing it. This can be because their funder has explicit requirements on research data; or because they generate a large amount of digital data. As a result the Team has been slower to assist and reach out to potential users who do not appear to have data management issues. For example, internally-funded and student projects are not forced to use DMPs; or there can be a misunderstanding of what “research data” encompasses. Solutions found so far to help to overcome these limitations include targeting students via the new training programme, giving presentations in all faculties and stressing in our communications that help is available for all researchers whatever their discipline or type of data produced.

## 5.5. CONCLUSIONS: MEASURING SUCCESSES

Measuring the success of a service focussing on advocacy and awareness-raising is extremely difficult in terms of metrics. Having only existed for less than two years at the time of writing, relatively little hard data is available. Furthermore, being an entirely new area of engagement for the institution, there is no baseline data from which to measure successes. Instead, we have focussed on qualitative data to promote and inform service development. An institution-wide survey has provided a baseline in terms of key areas, including awareness and understanding of RDM, and we would hope that this can be repeated periodically in an attempt to measure the impact that the RDM Team is having and to further inform service development.<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> This survey is described more fully in the Toolkit below, pp. 47-58.