Data management in perspective:  
the career profile of social science researchers

The Research Information Network (RIN) and JISC were co-funders, in partnership with the Digital Curation Centre (DCC), of the Data Management Skills Support Initiative (DaMSSI), which supported five JISC research data management training projects*. These aimed to help researchers and their institutions to plan effectively the development of data management skills and training.

DaMSSI has drawn together a range of short career profiles to illustrate the relevance of data management skills to four graduate professions represented by the JISC training projects. These professions are: conservator; social science researcher; clinical psychologist and archaeologist. Each profile demonstrates how the value of data management skills learned alongside other research skills during graduate and post-graduate study contributes to and underpins high-quality professional performance. DaMSSI has also drawn up a career profile for describing the work of data managers, to help raise awareness about this emerging new profession.

This leaflet describes the second in the series of these profiles, covering the role of the social sciences researcher working in a non-university context.

* Details of the 'RDMTrain' projects are available online at: www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/mrd/rdmtrain.aspx
**Studying to be a social science researcher**

Social science researchers working in a commercial or other non-university context have generally studied a humanities subject to degree level. They may then enter the profession as a graduate trainee or do so after a postgraduate degree, often a Master's by Research or a PhD.

**What social science researchers do**

Researchers in the social sciences are commissioned to collect or collate information on a given topic, summarise it and deliver its messages in a way that is understandable to a specified audience. They may work in commercial research agencies or public sector research institutes, and may be commissioned by government, local authorities or commercial organisations.

Some researchers specialise in a particular method, such as longitudinal surveys or telephone interviewing; others may specialise in a given field such as public health or crime and justice. Some work with a variety of methods or across disciplines.

The datasets gathered and supplied by researchers are often used by government or other high-profile clients, and so the ways in which these datasets are collected, held and analysed need to be able to withstand scrutiny from the press and public. Excellent data management skills are fundamental to success in this role.

**Daily duties and necessary skills**

Main daily duties within the profession involve participation in teamwork as most research activity in this context is undertaken with a variety of other people, including researchers carrying out the fieldwork, transcribers, project managers, developers and other research-related professionals.

The daily tasks for researchers depend upon the project they are working on. They may be actively involved in designing the method of the research, specifying the research instruments, interviewing subjects, cleaning or checking data, documenting data, performing analysis on the data, presenting findings or liaising with the client who has commissioned the research. They may also spend considerable time on preparing paperwork for tenders and costing potential projects.

Qualitative research requires strong interpersonal skills, confidence and social awareness, good active listening skills and the ability to multi-task. Quantitative research calls for strong numerical ability, although formal statistical training is not usually required.

Working in the commercial research arena requires awareness of the need to generate financial profits, with all that this implies for the handling of budgets and diligent timekeeping. Researchers working for large commercial agencies receive extensive training on in-house procedure and systems.

Researchers in all contexts need a strong ability to think laterally, question assumptions and to have a highly-organised and systematic approach to work.

**Professional standards**

Organisations which carry out social research need to comply with relevant industry standards to be able to tender for various types of contracts. Many research organisations are audited to ensure compliance with various ISO standards, and to ensure adherence to the Market Research Society Code of Practice and the Data Protection Act.

Individual researchers may be members of associations such as the Society of Research Associates, the Market Research Society or the Applied Quantitative Methods Network.
The importance of good data management

The data supplied by researchers can be the basis for important financial or policy decisions, and so can be subject to scrutiny. Datasets are often large and complex, and may also include sensitive or personal data. These circumstances dictate that researchers must be able to produce rigorous and understandable documentation of the data with which they work, and of the decisions made about the research project. Version control and secure storage and access to data are other important elements of data management which can make a difference to the reputation of the agency and the success of the research project.

Datasets used in social science research can often be very large and complex. Many studies run for government are longitudinal and so may include data from ten or more years ago. Researchers therefore should have awareness of the preservation challenges for older data.

Standardised folder structures are an important part of research work in a commercial environment, and systems in these agencies are generally tightly controlled to ensure legibility across the entire organisation.
Further reading...

**Market Research Society Code of Conduct:**

**ISO 20252 for the market research industry:**
www.iso.org/iso/pressrelease.htm?refid=Ref1005

**Information Commissioner’s Office: Data Protection Act for organisations:**
www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/data_protection.aspx

**Applied Quantitative Methods Network:** http://aqmen.ac.uk

Data management training resources for postgraduate students in the social sciences are available from the JISC DataTrain project at:
www.lib.cam.ac.uk/dataman/datatrain/socanthintro.html and the JISC MANTRA project at:
http://datalib.edina.ac.uk/mantra/introduction.html