Engaging researchers with RDM

Universities have used different approaches to engage researchers in RDM service design and delivery. The mini case studies below provide further details on a few different approaches, ranging from quite formal, coordinated groups to more free-form, self-selecting networks.

Read through and consider what may be useful in your context. And share ideas of your own!

Academic-led steering committee at Edinburgh

In order to implement the data policy and storage recommendations at the University of Edinburgh, an RDM Policy Implementation Committee was convened in 2012. The group had representation across IS and was charged with delivering services to meet the policy objectives. This group later transitioned to the RDM Action Group, again containing representatives from across IS, each of whom is tasked with delivering separate elements of the RDM roadmap whilst ensuring that the entire programme remains integrated.

To compliment the implementation groups, the Vice Principal also established an academic Steering Committee led by Professor Peter Clarke from the School of Physics, with membership representing each of the three
colleges, IS and Edinburgh Research and Innovation (ERI). Their role is to provide oversight to the activity of the Action Group, ensuring the services meet the needs of University researchers. Having senior academics from each College advising on the services as they develop helps to increase awareness and encourage adoption. It also acts as a failsafe, preventing the endorsement and delivery of services that are a poor fit to user needs.

Creation of an RDM project group at Cambridge

Pursuing a completely open, democratic approach, the University of Cambridge issued a call for any member of the University who was interested in Research Data Management and willing to work together towards improving practices to join its RDM project group. The project group will discuss and address gaps in the current RDM provision in Cambridge.

The team received over 40 applicants, far more than expected. Each applicant was asked to explain why they were interested and what they could bring to the group. 20 were selected, ensuring representation from various stakeholders across the University (PIs, postdocs, students, librarians, IT people, ethics etc.). The group was split into 4 sub-working groups as 20 people can't work productively all together. The sub-groups cover: Outreach and Support; Preservation Standards and System Integration; Personal/Sensitive Data; and Policy.

The RDM Project Group meets every 2 months and the sub-working groups report on their activities and discuss future actions (with comments from everyone). This means that sub-working groups can effectively work together between meetings, but that the activities of sub-working groups are joined up. The group provides direct feedback from the academic community to help shape the delivery of services at Cambridge.

Data communities and fora

Many universities are developing informal networks to bring together early adopters or RDM champions. These provide a space for researchers to connect with peers and share lessons. Many hope to motivate researchers to go forth in their communities to spread the word, while some assign specific responsibilities to members such as providing local training and helping to support colleagues. Having a broader data network or community is a way to blur the boundaries between services and their users, and to foster a more collaborative, shared-ownership approach to the challenges RDM poses. The networks also provide a focus group to help iteratively gather requirements and check proposed approaches as work develops. With regular meetings, the network can also help to represent the different communities and put forward recommendations to the University.

Engaging the research community in infrastructure development

One of the primary issues that RDM services face is in encouraging adoption from the institution's academics. Often, the implementation of services is supplemented by parallel efforts to engage with researchers through early adopters and RDM champions. At Imperial College, London, the 'Green Shoots' initiative attempted to encourage a bottom-up approach to RDM infrastructure development by establishing a project fund which would support academically-driven projects developing frameworks or prototypes enabling open research. Ultimately, the fund supported six development projects and helped to build channels of communication with the academic community, while developing RDM infrastructure. This kind of researcher-led development can achieve better levels of adoption as services are tailored to specific community needs and are embraced and promoted by the researchers.