Targeted Advocacy to Encourage Engagement with the Data Asset Framework Survey: a Case Study

1. Background

The Open Exeter Project is funded until March 31 2013 under Strand A2 of the JISC Managing Research Data Programme, 2011-13. The project is building on the work of the University’s Science-driven Exeter Data Archive, extending the pilot DSpace data repository across the University to all disciplines and merging with our research outputs repository so that a paper and its underlying data are available from the same place. In addition we are developing training materials and courses and offering support for data management planning and policy development. The overarching aim is to bring these various strands together in conjunction with other key institutional stakeholders to form a sustainable, integrated research data management service for the University.

In order for us to provide an effective and efficient multi-disciplinary service, we first needed to understand what kind of data exists throughout the University, and how it is used and handled. Following a period of initial research, the Data Asset Framework (DAF) methodology was selected as the most appropriate tool with which to survey University researchers. The team approach built on findings and lessons learnt by previous DAF implementations at, for example, Edinburgh and Northampton.

It is known that previous similar surveys have resulted in limited participation and for this it was decided that a programme of advocacy, awareness-raising and promotion should be conducted before the survey launch.

2. Advocacy

2.1 Aims:

- To achieve the highest possible response rate to the Open Exeter online DAF Survey across all Colleges and subject areas.
- To encourage researchers at all levels (including PGR students) to complete the survey.
- To gain high-level support for the Open Exeter Project within Academic Colleges.
To raise general awareness of the Open Exeter Project and its remit.

2.2 Planning

As noted, DAF implementations elsewhere have resulted in limited involvement from the research community. Considering the possible reasons for this, the first issue we examined was timing and how this might impact on 1) the availability of researchers and research students and 2) inclination or opportunity to complete the survey. Initially our preference had been to release the survey in the first couple of months of the project, however, this would have involved a pre-Christmas launch at which time we felt many researchers and students would be on holiday.

We therefore opted for a launch early in 2013, well before the start of preparation for exams and with no other obvious major academic events that might impede participation.

**DAF Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dec 11-Jan 2012</td>
<td>Creation and iterative evaluation of survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beg Feb 2012</td>
<td>Pilot with PGRs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beg-mid Feb 2012</td>
<td>Final amendments to survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End Jan-mid Feb</td>
<td>Pre-survey advocacy meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan- Feb 2012</td>
<td>Creation and printing of promotional materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 February 2012</td>
<td>Online survey launched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-Mar 2012</td>
<td>Distribution of posters, leaflet drops, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb-Mar 2012</td>
<td>College Managers forward details to colleagues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb-Mar 2012</td>
<td>Library Liaison Officers in departments forward details to their colleagues</td>
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<td>Feb-Mar onwards</td>
<td>Promotional talks in departments</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2012 onwards</td>
<td>Interviews conducted with researchers and relevant support staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>30th March 2012</td>
<td>Online survey closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-27 April 2012</td>
<td>Data entry in NVivo</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>Data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>Report write up started</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 June 2012</td>
<td>Draft circulated for comment</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 June 2012</td>
<td>Summary for Steering Group available</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 2012</td>
<td>Public version of report released</td>
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**Piloting**

We piloted the survey with a number of PGRs from different subject areas, to ensure that the language and terminologies used were not biased towards a particular field, and could be easily understood. We anticipated that due to the nature of the survey topic we would receive more responses from STEM/M subject areas than Humanities and Social Sciences where there is less familiarity with the concept of managing ‘data’. In order to get a balanced picture of practice right across the
University, it was particularly important that the survey content should not alienate potential HASS respondents. Finally, we piloted the survey with our team of Subject Librarians and members of Exeter IT.

The final questions can be accessed from our blog.

### 2.3 Activities

In the weeks prior to the launch members of the project team met with senior members of the six academic Colleges including College-level Associate Deans of Research and Assistant College Managers for Research as well as departmental-level Directors of Research (see chart outlining College management structures). Meetings allowed the team to explain the aims and objectives of the project and survey and to outline the long-term benefits of engagement with project strategy to the College. These face to face meetings allowed the team to build a good rapport with senior College staff and to gain ongoing support for project work.

#### 2.3.1 Pre-Survey Advocacy Meetings:

- Associate Deans for Research and Knowledge Transfer (ADR). ADRs are responsible for all research related activity within their College. They report directly to the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Transfer.
- Assistant College Managers for Research (ACMRs). ACMRs are responsible for the administration of research within their College and work closely with the relevant ADR.
- Departmental Directors of Research (DoRs). DoRs are departmental academics with teaching and research commitments who also have responsibility for their department’s research. Generally, they have regular meetings as a group with their College’s ADR.
- Library Liaison Officers (LLOs). LLOs are generally academics and act as a point of contact between the Library and relevant department.

In addition to establishing advocates within academic departments, the meetings provided valuable insight into the research data issues facing the different Colleges. These insights in turn helped to finalise the survey content.

College Managers recommended appropriate means of dissemination according to College practice. Awareness of the different communication routes preferred in Colleges meant that the project team was able to tailor the dissemination of the survey to the individual College’s needs. It is understood that researchers receive a huge amount of email and other forms of communication, so it was important that the team chose trusted, recognised means by which to reach them.

As a consequence of these pre-survey meetings communications that were sent to researchers informing them of the survey, although drafted by members of Open Exeter, were actually distributed through internal College and department mechanisms. In this way the survey appeared to be promoted by a recognised senior member of the researcher’s own academic community rather than an unknown central services staff member with an unknown agenda. The project team
feels that this high-level College involvement and support helped greatly to raise survey awareness and engagement.

2.3.2 Methods of Promoting Survey Awareness:

Promotional postcards and posters were sent out by email, placed on departmental notice boards, and distributed in meeting places, such as cafes, common rooms, PC clusters, receptions, Library meeting rooms, and so on. We arranged for versions of the posters to be displayed on plasma screens in College and Library reception areas.

As the survey started to gather responses, we were able to identify specific subject areas that were under-represented. We could then target these disciplines for additional awareness-raising and promotion. We were able to gauge any increase in activity in a certain subject area subsequent to targeted promotion and in many instances a positive effect was apparent.

The actual distribution of promotional materials was carried out by the team. It is not something that we initially expected, but simply by going into departments and looking at notice boards, we became aware of talks, seminars and events that we subsequently offered to talk at.

In addition to repeated leaflet and poster dropping, we used the following methods to reach our audience:

- Announcement in College newsletters.
- Promotional emails sent by College administrators to staff via College email lists.
- Promotional emails sent by the PGR administration offices to PGRs via established mailing lists.
- Interviewees were asked if they would be willing to speak to their colleagues and research students and advertise the survey.
- Subject Librarians included information about the survey in their regular newsletters to their departments.
- Subject Librarians sent information for distribution to Academic Library Liaison Officers.
- Announcement in the News in Brief email (this is a University-wide update and sent to all staff whether Professional Services or Academic).
- Our PGR helpers were asked to promote the survey within their own departments.
- We gave a number of brief talks to research groups.
- Information included on Library and departmental plasma screens.
- Frequent updates on Twitter.
- Promotional page on Facebook.
- Regular updates on our blog.
- Promotional page on our web site.
As encouragement to complete the survey a Kindle was offered as a prize for a randomly chosen respondent. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this acted as an additional incentive.

3. Outcomes

Our survey remained online for six weeks and resulted in 284 completed responses. Response was fairly balanced across Colleges (see chart below).

![Number of responses by College](chart)

Engagement with the survey peaked in the first three or four weeks and dropped off noticeably in the last two weeks. We felt that by this time, all those who were interested or understood the purpose of the survey had probably responded.

One interesting finding was the amount of researchers, particularly in Humanities, who started the survey but did not complete it (approximately 40). Unfortunately we are not able to discover the reasons why some forms were abandoned half-way through but feel, at least in the case of Humanities respondents, that the language used may have been off putting. We know from interviews that many researchers in Humanities do not even consider that they have or work with ‘data’.

To conclude, the team feels that this focussed advocacy work played a large part in gaining such a substantial response from researchers and PGRs. There is no denying that the work was demanding, tiring and intense, taking place as it did over a relatively short period of time, but the pay-off has been, following analysis, the
ability to draw some valid conclusions about research data management practice across the University, based on solid evidence.

**Find out more**

The report on DAF findings is available from our repository: [http://hdl.handle.net/10036/3689](http://hdl.handle.net/10036/3689)

Other project outputs are available from: [https://eric.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10036/3360](https://eric.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10036/3360)

More on the Open Exeter project at:
- Our web site [http://as.exeter.ac.uk/library/resources/openaccess/openexeter/](http://as.exeter.ac.uk/library/resources/openaccess/openexeter/)
- Blog [http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/openexeterrdm/](http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/openexeterrdm/)
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