May 22, 2013

A Seat at the Table: Involving the Library in Planning Institutional Research Data Management Policies and Responsibilities. A Conversation with the iridium Project at Newcastle University (UK)

Andrew T Creamer
A Seat at the Table: Involving the Library in the Planning of Institutional Research Data Management Policies and Responsibilities-- A Conversation with the *iridium* Project Team at Newcastle University (UK).

By Andrew Creamer, MA Ed, MSLIS

**Getting a Seat at the Table**

In the spring of 2013 Dr. Elaine Martin, Donna Kafel and I taught a pilot course on Scientific Data Management at Simmons College’s Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) in Boston, Massachusetts. We had a variety of speakers from the library and scientific research worlds come to describe their experiences producing and managing research data. Among these speakers was Rebecca Reznik-Zellen, the Digital Strategies Coordinator at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst Libraries. Rebecca had presented on the work done by a team she leads within the library called the Data Working Group (DWG). This group consists of volunteer librarians from different library departments that share a professional interest in offering data management and researcher support services. In the autumn of 2010 this group issued [The Data Working Group report](#) outlining the data management expertise and infrastructure that they and their library possessed to support the University’s researchers. Over the last three years the DWG has been putting these words into action: teaching RDM courses, offering RDM consulting, helping faculty to assign persistent identifiers to their research output, and helping their students and researchers to write data management plans.

However, Rebecca felt that it was time for her library team’s expertise and work to be formally recognized by the University’s administration and the other academic units and offices on her campus. In her lecture, Rebecca touched upon the importance of a library’s involvement with the shaping and implementation of an institutional research data policy as one way towards gaining this recognition. She related how the DWG, like many librarian-led taskforces and committees in libraries here in North America and abroad, is now endeavoring to go beyond the walls of the library to connect and sit down with other campus partners such as the Office of Research and Information Technology to help formalize the library’s data management services role that the DWG outlined in 2010 and has been implementing since. Any librarian at a large research university understands how challenging it can be to coordinate efforts among such a network of schools, departments, and administrative bodies. Indeed, one of the most common questions my colleagues and I have been asked by librarians interested in getting involved with RDM at their institutions is how to get involved at the policy level and get a seat at the table so that the library can be formally recognized as having a responsibility to offer and support researchers’ data management. Many feel that without such formal recognition, the library cannot be appropriately resourced and funded to fulfill this role.

Rebecca’s informative lecture inspired me to take a look at a university that is successfully reaching across campus partners in its endeavor to create and support an institutional research data management policy. Below are the major takeaways from two visits I made this year to
Newcastle University in the UK to learn from colleagues about their experiences drafting an institutional research data management policy. These are lessons I learned from speaking with the University Librarian, and from my interviews with other members of the University’s JISC-funded iridium project team and steering group. Their experiences can help us to better understand what we librarians need to be aware of after we are given, or in some cases take, a seat at the institutional data policy table.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The iridium Project at Newcastle University

Managed by the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine (MEDEV) at the School of Medical Sciences Education Development, iridium is a collaboration of the Newcastle University Research Office, the Digital Institute, the University Library, Information Systems & Services and MEDEV. The project’s principal project outputs, set in the autumn of 2011, were to create “an institutional research data management policy (as required by the funding councils)” and “a costed business case for a sustainable institution-wide research data management infrastructure to support that policy.” In March of 2013 the iridium project team posted the first draft of its Research Data Management Policy Principles & Code of Good Practice for faculty consultation. Librarians in the UK and abroad have praised the Newcastle University data policy for its inclusive language outlining a role and responsibilities for the library (The policy successfully builds upon the EPSRC (Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council) Roadmap and other university data policies such as Edinburgh’s aspirational Data Policy (See Robin Rice’s slides here). The resulting Newcastle University draft stands as a great example of how the library can be formally recognized as a partner in the campus RDM enterprise and integrated successfully into an institution’s research data management policy.

This year I had the fortunate opportunities to have conversations with University Librarian Wayne Connolly about the possible future of Newcastle University libraries and RDM, and with iridium Project Manager Lindsay Wood, MEDEV Centre Manager Victor Ottaway, and MEDEV Director Dr. Megan Quentin-Baxter about their experiences and challenges drafting an aspirational institutional research data management policy. Here are some of the many lessons I learned from these conversations.

**How does the library get a seat at the institutional research data policy table?**

The iridium Project Manager, Lindsay Wood, noted how some previous JISC-funded projects have been driven by the university IT groups and some have been driven by the library, but the iridium project from the very beginning wanted and needed to bring in all relevant campus partners to develop Newcastle University’s research data management infrastructure and policy. According to Lindsay, “RDM support crosses campus services.” He felt many of the RDM issues or questions that researchers have cannot always be resolved by just one campus office. “It seems that RDM can often be mistaken as just an IT or IS problem, whereas in reality, issues with data storage, curation, and preservation touch upon many of these offices on campus. You
really need all the campus services tackling it.” In addition to the University Librarian, the iridium steering group also benefits from having strong library allies such as Dr. Megan Quentin-Baxter, Professor of Health Professions Education and the School of Medical Sciences Education Development's Director of Engagement. She researches Open Educational Resources (OERs) and copyright interpretation for learning and her scholarship in these areas is well regarded by librarians and libraries at academic and medical libraries in the UK and abroad.

**How do you identify institutional RDM roles and responsibilities?**

Project Manager Lindsay Wood stated that from the very beginning the project has always understood that the library would have a role. He has kept current with the [movement within the library profession to “upskill” for data management roles](https://www.irlslibrary.co.uk/). He has attended RLUK (Research Libraries UK) presentations, and he has followed the research of Sheila Corral, Andrew Cox, and other researchers interested in training librarians for RDM roles as well as several recent JISC-funded projects focusing on RDM professional development for librarians such as [RDMRose](https://www.rdmrose.org/).

Specifically, the Newcastle University draft policy has a very clear and concise delegation of responsibility for RDM. Under the tab “Who is responsible for what?” the policy names “Research Active Staff, Research active postgraduates, Research & Enterprise Services (including Legal, Joint Research Office & University Research Office), Library, ISS (inc. Governance Office), Head of Academic Units, University Research Committee, PIs, Project Team Members” as responsible personnel. Furthermore, under item 3.6 of the [Code of Good Conduct](https://www.newcastle.ac.uk/), the policy states that the library is specifically responsible for:

- *advising on the long term curation of research data outputs*

- *providing guidance on the categorisation and classification of research output metadata (i.e. descriptive information relating to the data)*

Victor Ottawa, MEDEV Centre Manager, described the division of these RDM roles and responsibilities using a very good analogy: going on a blind date. He said that it will take some time for these academic units and offices to know what kinds of questions and services will be asked of them before they have a better understanding of what their roles and responsibilities should and can be. “It's only when you open the door that you can see what is going to come through it.”

Victor is currently working on a Newcastle University custom data management plan (DMP) template that the University’s researchers can use to write their data management plans (see
For each section on the web template he adds placeholders that help guide researchers to specific academic units on Newcastle’s campus that may be able to assist them with certain aspects of securing, storing, annotating and sharing their data. He said that one of his goals is to create placeholders that would include roles for the library. For example, if a section involved asked the researchers to describe their metadata standards or curation, archival and preservation plans, then the placeholder could suggest that they could talk with their librarian for appropriate advice.

An example of another project that iridium is developing that could utilize a librarian skillset is a Research Data Catalogue. Developed as a proof of concept tool, it is intended to link the University’s MyProjects and MyImpact business systems so that one could track a researcher’s datasets and scholarly output created under funded projects at the University. Using such a system one could easily find a research project's data location (such as within a local, discipline, or national repository) and the types of data that were created, the size of the files, and the types of file formats. The challenge, of course, is training researchers to use the system and to complete the necessary metadata for optimal discovery.

**Now that the library has a specified role, what are the next steps?**

In February when I sat down with University Librarian Wayne Connolly I learned that the libraries at Newcastle, much like our medical school’s library and like many academic libraries in our region, are currently in the process of soul-searching with University partners to explore what their RDM services will be, who will be responsible for performing them, and how they will be resourced and funded, etc.

His libraries’ experience will sound familiar to many of us. In the New England region we do not have a standard academic library model for providing RDM services: some libraries have liaison librarians that have voluntarily or involuntarily added RDM to their responsibilities and have “upskilled”; some have been fortunate enough to have had administrative support, funding and resourcing; some libraries have delegated RDM services to specified committees or working groups; and some libraries have delegated RDM responsibilities to a single librarian; and some are choosing to not offer any. In addition there is no one standard model among academic libraries for which departments should house and offer RDM services, since they cross the boundaries of public access, technical services, systems, and archives.

In April I asked Lindsay, from his view as a non-librarian, about his thoughts on the future of libraries and RDM. He said that after attending RLUK events and reading related literature such as *Upskilling Liaison Librarians for Research Data Management* (Cox et al, 2012), he understood that there could still be librarians that may not feel confident about offering RDM services and where the library fits into the overall campus RDM infrastructure. While he recognized that some librarians may be uncomfortable in this role, he sees that there are librarians that are very keen on getting involved in RDM and they are actively developing the necessary skills to evolve with the information needs of their researchers.
Conclusion

The experiences of the DWG at UMass Amherst and the *iridium* Project at Newcastle University highlight that our library profession can face challenges when it comes to getting a seat at the data policy table and after we have the seat. They reflect the situations of many global research libraries exploring RDM roles: some are piloting RDM services and are struggling to get a formal policy recognition for having a responsibility and capability to support the university’s research data management infrastructure, and others have been recognized as having a responsibility and are now exploring their strengths, capabilities, and willingness to develop and pilot RDM services. What libraries share is the current challenge noted by Lindsay in our conversation about RDM and the future of libraries: libraries and librarians face trying to evolve under the added constraints of shrinking budgets and resources. His wise advice for us is to be strategic about where we see ourselves in the next twenty years and that “upskilling” may be just the opportunity we need to maintain our future relevance. Lindsay and his colleagues at the successful *iridium* Project at Newcastle University are aspirational examples for the type of campus partnership and allies that we librarians need to pursue within our own institutions to keep our place at the RDM table.

For more information about the *iridium* Project at Newcastle University please visit: http://research.ncl.ac.uk/iridium/aboutourproject/

For more information about Research Data Management at Newcastle University please visit: http://research.ncl.ac.uk/rdm/

For more information about MEDEV (School of Medical Sciences Education Development) at Newcastle University please visit: http://www.medev.ac.uk/

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Wayne Connolly, Professor Megan Quentin-Baxter, Lindsay Wood and Victor Ottaway for their time.