Research Data Management at University of Cape Town

The University of Cape Town implemented a range of services and training opportunities to support the uptake of RDM and FAIR data skills and practices at the institutional level. These activities are targeting students at the master level, doctoral candidates, academic staff and other researchers as well as the non-academic staff of UCT and of other interested institutions.

The case study shows how needs and challenges related to the implementation of RDM and FAIR data practices are not limited to Europe but are a global issue. The experience of the University of Cape Town includes several commonalities with the lessons learned from the European case studies, such as the importance of national and institutional policies, training needs for RDM and FAIR data, and opportunities coming from the collaboration with partners at the regional, national and transnational levels. Dialogue and exchange of good practices with international partners, therefore, has the potential to broaden the discussion and foster cross-border collaboration in the field of managing research data.

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Use case: building staff capacity and creating new training activities and organisational units as support actions for the implementation of institutional policies

Type of initiative: support services and training sessions on RDM and FAIR data topics open to students, researchers and the university's staff

Organiser of the initiative: University of Cape Town (UCT)

Scope and objectives

The Digital Library Services (DLS) of the UCT Libraries is one of the university's departments responsible for supporting and fostering Open Science practices at the institutional level. The DLS inhabit this role as one of the stakeholders in the UCT eResearch landscape, providing a variety of services, systems and resources to ensure that good research data management is performed within the university's teaching, learning and research activities. This includes giving recurring training sessions on several RDM and FAIR data topics and ad hoc training activities and consultations on request by different university departments. Support is also given to researchers and their support staff in using dedicated UCT infrastructures, such as the data management planning platform and the institutional data repository. Training delivered by the DLS is not limited to UCT affiliates and is open to all interested individuals from other South African (and international) institutions.

Training activities are provided as support measures to ensure that students at the master level, doctoral candidates and other researchers and the university's staff can comply with the objectives set by the institutional policy on Research Data Management. In particular, the RDM policy aims to "ensure consistent research practice related to data management principles that support effective data sharing, including open access; and the need for data to be discoverable, accessible, reusable and interoperable to specific quality standards".

Interviewees also highlighted how providing training activities to support the implementation of RDM and FAIR data practices and more broadly the transition to Open Science contribute to the broader UCT's strategic agenda. In particular, **it is crucial to define a leadership role for the university in the changing landscape of research and higher education, supporting UCT's capacity to address new challenges and needs in the way research is produced, shared and managed in the long term**.

Interactions with international partners located in both the African and European continent played a key role in highlighting the need for more training activities related to FAIR research data practices. Interviewees highlighted the importance of participating in transnational fora such as the 2018 SciDataCon conference in Botswana, which was a landmark event for promoting the creation of an African community in the field of research data. Other key opportunities for building the Research Data Services at DLS have been regular attendance at the International Digital Curation Conference (IDCC) as well as the CODATA-RDA Schools of Research Data Science. More recently, the UCT Libraries became a member of the Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC), which was welcomed by interviewees as a milestone achievement for the South African university in terms of building contacts and fostering the exchange of experiences with other institutions in the context of an established international community.

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Implementation

The Digital Library Services of the UCT Libraries started delivering regular training activities on RDM and FAIR data in 2016. The implementation was the result of the commitment of the university and in particular of the Libraries to dedicate more attention and resources to issues related to research data. Over the past two years, a dedicated series on RDM practices was launched and during the pandemic period pivoted to online webinars.

The development of a draft policy regulating RDM practices in 2015 was UCT's first attempt to foster the emergence of data-related skills in the university. The final document was formally introduced in 2018. **Interviewees underlined how the Policy was particularly effective in providing key arguments to the university leadership on why good RDM practices had to be fostered and which support measures were needed to support their implementation at the institutional level**. As a result, more and more senior researchers, who also serve as academic staff, have had to engage with the implementation of this policy and have it trickled down to their students.

Interviewees identified another important step for the implementation of the RDM-related training in the recruitment of two Data Curators within the Digital Library Services department as of 2016, and a Digital Scholarship Specialist as of 2018. **The presence of these staff members dedicated to working on RDM was crucial in terms of planning the development and implementation of new services**. In 2016, a Data Managing Planning platform was introduced, followed by the institutional data repository in 2017. The creation of the two infrastructures highlighted the need to start helping students, researchers and their support staff understand why and how these tools should be used. To do so, new skills had to be developed and training activities implemented. Since then, further systems and services have been added by the DLS team for the digital preservation and online showcasing of digital data.

Capacity

All training activities organised by the Digital Library Services receive funding from the institutional budget of the University of Cape Town.

The Digital Library Services team plays a key role in providing training activities and services related to RDM, as part of the Libraries and its role within UCT eResearch Centre. As mentioned in the previous section, the presence of full-time experts whose work is dedicated to addressing RDM issues, challenges and practices has been instrumental in ensuring the development and the success of the activities put in place by the Digital Library Services.
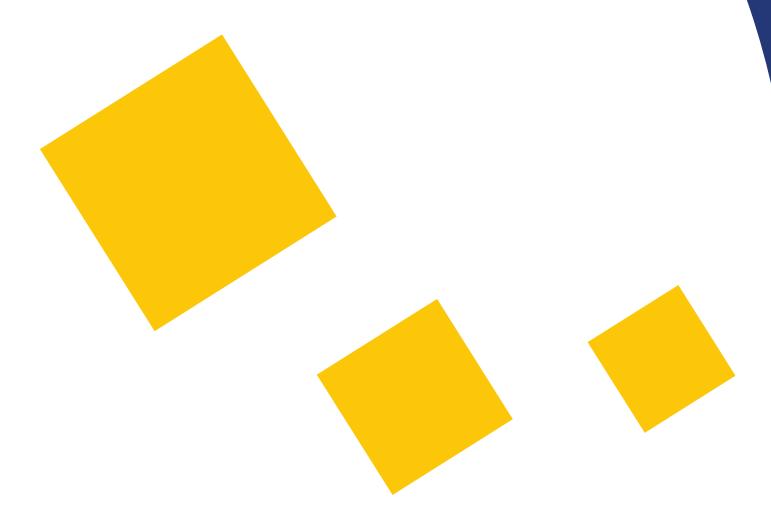
Impact

Attendance in the Digital Library Services' training activities was deemed satisfactory by the department. Attendance rates also grew in the training held from March 2020, as a result of the health measures imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to online learning which made the sessions more accessible. Interviewees highlighted how referring to the usage figures on relevant platforms, such as the DMPs platform and the data repository, can provide alternative indicators to measure the impact that the training is having on how RDM is performed within the institution.

While the work of the Digital Library Services gathered good results in the past years, interviewees from UCT underlined how ensuring that new scientific knowledge is produced in compliance with RDM and FAIR data practices is an ongoing process. Each year, new groups of students and researchers have to be trained, while the staff needs to keep pace with a field that is in continuous evolution. To support this process, the Digital Library Services department together with the whole staff working in the UCT Libraries need to find new opportunities for capacity building, sharing their experiences and skills to allow anyone within the university community to be designated and act as a Data Steward, as required. Furthermore, the work on building a growing community of Data Stewards (researchers, staff and postgraduate students, who can extend the reach of DLS and provide more discipline-specific practices) has also contributed to the impact. DLS also ensures that it itself practices good RDM by making all of the online training sessions openly accessible as recordings, slides and recently, transcripts.

At the same time, **the university community should not be left alone in this endeavour and top-down support should be provided to enhance and sustain the impact of institutional efforts in fostering RDM and FAIR data practices and skills**. When asked about what types of support measures they would expect from the national level, interviewees underlined the need for South Africa to adopt an Open Science policy, which could offer a broader, more effective and sustainable national framework to support the activities happening in the various institutions, for example, consortial provision of shared, sovereign data storage. Interviewees also called for a more committed engagement of South Africa within the Research Data Alliance (RDA), hoping for the country to become a south(ern) African node within the Alliance. **Exchanges with the wider international community need to be fostered** as each country can bring its own ideas, experiences and good practices in the field of research data, contributing to enrich the policy dialogue on how the university sector can support and advance the implementation of RDM and FAIR data skills and practices.

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