A Global Network for Data Stewards at the MWS – Chances and Challenges

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The [Max Weber Foundation – German Humanities Institutes Abroad](#) (Max Weber Stiftung – Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland (MWS)) supports German research in the humanities abroad and acts as a link between the host countries and Germany. The institutes are distinguished – among other things – by the diversity of research focus, scope, methods and funding providers.

In November 2023, the MWS adopted **Research Data Management (RDM) guidelines** [1] in order to establish a foundation-wide RDM concept. Subsequently, data stewards were introduced and onboarded at the individual research institutes and offices abroad. Following the train-the-trainer-principle, a working group was set up for the data stewards. The staff was recruited internally at the institutes and offices abroad. Consequently, the background and expertise in the group are diverse, coming from different fields of library, research, IT and others.

One of the primary challenges was creating a shared understanding and knowledge regarding best practices for data management plans, data publication, teaching, and consulting. To address this, a communication infrastructure and workflows were established, functioning exclusively in a virtual environment. After more than one year of working together, the group never had a chance of in-person-meetings because of the distribution of institutes and offices worldwide. Even in a virtual work environment and all modern infrastructure in place, time zone differences between Europe, Asia and North America make it impossible to meet during a normal business day.

However, the data stewards meet regularly with the central RDM staff and meetings are recorded for those who cannot attend. We started off by building up an internal knowledge base and discussing challenges and requirements arising from specific on-site conditions. The **MWS Best Practice Handbook on Research Data Management** [2] serves as the basis for training, information, and communication, providing further details on individual research data infrastructure offerings of the MWS for the public. This living handbook is intended for MWS researchers, data stewards, and other RDM professionals.

Additionally, we discovered that competences and knowledge regarding RDM vary significantly among researchers, depending on their background in Digital

Humanities, Social Sciences, Arts, or History. This led to the planning a "quickstart package", consisting of a central RDM website and introductory video tutorials. The prototye of the website and video tutorials were prepared by the [DHI Rome](#) in cooperation with the central office, offering other individual institutes and offices abroad the possibility to adapt and reuse the work. The launch of the website is scheduled for Autumn 2025.

Before establishing the working group of data stewards, another crucial step was the introduction of the central **[Research Data Management Organizer (RDMO) platform for MWS researchers](#)**. DMP software, such as RDMO, supports researchers in creating data management plans required for third-party funding and planning the handling of research data at an early stage. A specially adapted questionnaire was developed to meet the requirements of MWS researchers, querying both superordinate project information and metadata on individual datasets. This information is also required, at least in part, in other research infrastructures. To avoid multiple entries, a connection to standardised interfaces is necessary.

Project-specific information in the questionnaire (RDMO), relevant for monitoring and reporting, as well as feeding into the publicly searchable [MWS project database](#), only needs to be entered once by the researchers. Both databases are synchronized via an interface, and updates can be made within RDMO by completing or editing the questionnaire. This workflow gives all the power back to the researchers who control the information of their research project from the beginning to the publication. They plan their projects in RDMO and keep editing the information in only one tool. The MWS project database harvests the relevant metadata fields automatically. A new project entry also triggers an email notification to the person responsible for the project database and the central RDM team. The latter initiates central RDM support, if needed, and often leads to the early clarification of open questions.

Looking back after more than a year, both opportunities and challenges have become apparent.

It has become clear that institutional RDM cannot be implemented by a person or a small team at the central office, but must be accompanied by trained staff on-site who can provide deeper insider knowledge and consider specific needs. Regular exchange, discussions, and training sessions have led to a wider acceptance of the RDM concept.

However, the central RDM staff and their data stewards still face challenges. The scalability of consulting services in a distributed infrastructure is a challenge that is handled in cooperation with several NFDI consortia (Text+, NFDI4Culture) and the RDM-helpdesk-network in the NFDI section CommonInfra.

Task Forces have been established among the data stewards in the MWS working group to create training materials, to plan specific workshops and to advance the RDMO questionnaire to discipline-specific needs of researchers (e.g. for digital editions in preparation for publishing on the MWS platform QED). The task to define which metadata should be collected in RDMO for specific topics, is also connected to the Interest Group in the Research Data Alliance (RDA) "Collections as Data". In this particular context, we try to connect the idea of "Datasheets for Cultural Heritage data" to DMP-tools like RDMO (see submission for RDA Plenary25).

There is still a long way to go. However, with the active group, creating a good ratio of consultant vs. researcher, an established workflow for information, communication and training, plus the technical infrastructure (digital publishing services, RDMO, collaboration), we are kicking off in a good spirit.

References
[1] Max Weber Stiftung - Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland. (2023). Guidelines for the Handling of Research Data within the Max Weber Foundation. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10225705

[2] Max Weber Stiftung - Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland. MWS Best Practice Handbook on Research Data Management. https://projects.academiccloud.de/projects/fdm-praxis-in-der-mws/wiki/fdm-praxishandbuch-mws (21.5.25)