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A FRAMEWORK FOR AGREEING STANDARD TERMINOLOGY

This document outlines a process that can be followed to reach agreement on standard terminology for a community or topic.

Introduction

Where there are different understandings of what a word or phrase means within a community, it can be difficult to share, compare, and re-use data. Confusion and misunderstandings may also arise. If agreement can be reached about meaning, these issues can be reduced, resulting in increased efficiency and better working relationships.

This process can be used to deal with terms individually when required or by a group planning work on a collection of terms. It can be modified as the group sees fit. It is important to try and engage all the relevant stakeholders in the process to understand different perspectives and encourage acceptance and use of the agreed definitions. It is not essential for each stakeholder to change their local vocabulary if there is good reason to retain use of a different term, but they should be able to map or relate their terms to the agreed terminology.

The Process

1. A stakeholder group or individual identifies one or more areas where problems are arising from terminology being interpreted in different ways. If there are several areas to work on, the group may wish to prioritise a specific topic or set of topics.

2. One party invites members of the community to express interest in joining a working group.

3. The lead party or a small group assess the responses and convene a working group or groups taking care to ensure that representatives of all stakeholders are included wherever possible.

4. Each working group should decide on the number of terms to be examined initially. It is a good idea to start with a small number of terms, perhaps a maximum of twelve key terms on the topic. The terms can be divided among the group members: each drafts an initial definition based on their knowledge and research, for example, from websites. An example template for term definition is in appendix 1.

5. The working group reviews the draft definitions and discusses different interpretations.

6. Ideally, this is followed by an open review. Anyone interested in the topic can be invited to comment on the terms and potential definitions. The open review can be advertised via networks that the stakeholders are involved in.

7. The working group reviews all comments and agrees a definition for each term considered.

8. The agreed terminology is published. This might be on a professional membership website, a wiki site or any other appropriate location. It is best to use or create a neutral venue not associated with any one stakeholder and openly available to all. Include a method for readers to get in touch, as this will inform future reviews of the terminology.

   Where possible, the process from initial drafting to publication of agreed definitions should take no more than three to four months to maintain momentum and engagement.

9. Promote the new standard terminology.

10. Stakeholders can embed the terminology (or mapping to it) in their systems and processes.

11. Consider the next batch of work.

During the process, other terms may come to light which need a standard definition. They may be included within the first phase of work or put aside for future consideration. It is important for the community to review the agreed terminology at least one a year as new requirements and gaps in the agreed list of terms may emerge. With this approach stakeholders should enjoy reaping the additional benefits of increased cooperation and tolerance and reduce 'them and us' mentality.

References

The framework is based on the Consortia Advancing Standards in Research Administration (CASRAI) process.

CRediT

David Baker: conceptualisation, methodology
Valerie McCutcheon: writing – original draft
Alison Spence: writing – review and editing
Simon Kerridge: writing – review and editing

Appendix 1 – Definition Template

Term	Mandatory	The agreed wording to define the concept
Short Definition	Mandatory	We recommend a maximum of 30 words to outline the concept
Extended Definition	Optional	We recommend up to 100 words to expand the concept, using links to further detail if necessary
Synonyms	Optional	
Acronyms	Optional	
Related Terms	Optional	
Sources	Optional	

Example

Term	Dataset
Short Definition	Any organised collection of data in a computational format, defined by a theme or category that reflects what is being measured/observed/monitored. The presentation of the data in the application is enabled through metadata.
Extended Definition	
Synonyms	
Acronyms	
Related Terms	Research Dataset
Sources	Research Data Alliance http://smw-rda.esc.rzg.mpg.de/index.php/Main_Page Mapping the Data Landscape 2011 Summit; TBS Standard on Geospatial Data (ISO 19115:2003); Environment Canada data stewardship handbook (draft).