Working together for the greater good: the mutual benefits to be gained from engaging with your institutional repository project

‘A mechanism for storing and managing digital content’; ‘a set of services designed to help people carry out their functions’; ‘systems which collect, preserve, manage, re-use and provide access to intellectual outputs’. Sound familiar? Sound fairly standard descriptions of a records management system? Well, on this occasion they are not.

What is being described here is an institutional repository (IR), a technology which is rapidly finding favour in many further and higher education institutions, but often in isolation from their records management programmes – despite the similarity in remit between the two areas that the above definitions indicate. There are, of course, differences between the institutional repository and records management (RM) agendas reflected in their origins, objectives and approach but we should not let this blind us to the similarities, or stand in the way of mutually beneficial collaboration. Nor should those working outside of the further and higher education sectors necessarily dismiss this as a topic unrelated to their own organisations. Though the particular type of IR being discussed here may largely be specific to universities and colleges, more and more organisations are choosing to implement their own digital asset management systems to manage multimedia sources and other knowledge assets and these may well expose the same underlying issues as discussed here.

Institutional Repositories: origins and current status

There are currently some 121 Open Access institutional repositories up and running within UK colleges and universities, with at least 1128 in existence around the globe. The growth of IRs in the UK has been a fairly recent and rapid trend, with the most significant expansion seen from 2003 onwards when JISC began to make significant investment in the area via their repositories and preservation programme. Through this initiative they are making a £14m investment in Higher Education repository and digital content infrastructure.

One of the main drivers for creating institutional repositories in the UK has been the Open Access movement. Traditional research publishing is funded by the public but readership of the intellectual content is limited by economies, i.e. research articles are typically only available to those who make a payment of a subscription or other access fee. This traditional model sees authors signing away the rights to their work and publishers creating monopolies on information, while the general public have limited access to the end product. Open Access publishing offers an alternative model. Open access repositories are online web sites where authors, or their designated intermediates, deposit copies of scholarly publications for anyone to read. The open access tag refers to the free availability of their contents to all. Thus there is, or should be, no subscription or registration required to read papers within them. Open access has been shown to have many benefits to institutions by encouraging a wider use of information assets, increasing citations and making potential readership of research far, far greater than that for articles where the full-text is restricted to subscribers. On an individual author level the benefits of making research outputs available on open access might be increased feedback on the use of their research, better opportunities for discussion or collaboration, and improved recognition and career development.

Consequently, exposure of information to the wider world is a prominent message coming out of the repository community and is often a key element driving the establishment of any institutional
repository. However, in addition to the access agenda with its potential improvements to visibility and impact, many additional benefits to creating institutional repositories are now appearing. Many of these further motivations for an institutional repository are perhaps more closely tied in with and better reflect the records management agenda. The additional drivers stem from the potential to use the repository as a management information tool. Institutions have realised they can use repositories to create a marketing showcase of research or other intellectual outputs they create; and conversely they can interrogate the repositories of other institutions using what they find as a competitor analysis tool. Repositories can assist in the implementation of collection stewardship by ensuring consistency and the preservation of data and content collected. Economies of scale can be realised by centralising activity surrounding key institutional processes which rely on research publication data, such as RAE or QAA audit. As these are often important strategic drivers for the institution the arguments for better managing the information processes sitting behind them become compelling. Accordingly, for some institutions, these additional drivers are overtaking the accessibility argument and making the repository a key driving force behind reviewing institutional information management strategies.

1 http://www.opendoar.org/find.php?format=charts
2 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_rep_pres.aspx

Why is this of relevance to the Records Manager?

Clearly, any project relating to the creation or management of information within your organisation should automatically be of interest to the records manager. Gone are the days (if, indeed, they ever existed) that we can afford to ignore anything which happens to fall outside of our traditionally understood definition of a ‘formal business record’. But this is especially true with IR which so clearly and unambiguously overlap with our own objectives. After all, here are services which, as we have seen, exist to capture content, to apply rules to enable it to be managed consistently and to preserve its integrity for as long as is required.

Those records managers who are not currently engaged with the development of their local IR might comfort themselves by dwelling on the apparent differences which exist between them and their own work. After all, they have emerged from different communities, largely serve different audiences and concentrate on different subject matter. Few records management programmes have previously taken an active interest in ‘grey literature’, technical reports, pre-prints and post-prints—so why bother now?

The answer is largely three fold and can be summed up in the following statements:

1. they need us;
2. we need them;
3. the perceived gap between our remits is narrowing all the time.

They need us
Though the current focus within the repository community is largely centred on populating IRs with content, it is clear that attention must shortly turn towards questions of management: questions which records managers have been grappling with for decades. But, we must be careful to ensure that the advice we give and the measures we suggest are proportionate and fit for purpose. We may not always realise it, but records management does have a reputation (perhaps sometimes deserved) for heavy-handedness. For insisting on all or nothing, best of breed, belt and braces solutions when, frankly, they are not called for or are just not practical in the circumstances.

Perhaps at this stage of most repository projects a lighter touch is required; a pitch which strikes the required balance between ensuring that appropriate foundations are put in place now, whilst the repository is still comparatively small, so as to prevent the need for costly retro-engineering at a later date, but which respects the fact that the priorities of the project team may, by necessity, currently lay elsewhere.

Nevertheless, records managers do have considerable expertise in matters relating to retention management, access control, system quality and the preservation of evidential value – all of which are, or at least soon will become, issues for repository project teams. But be warned – asking for a meeting to discuss how your retention schedule can be extended to cover their repository may not get you very far; whereas the suggestion that you can help them to work out how long to keep stuff for just might!

Indeed, at this stage perhaps the best service we can offer the repository team is to plant the seed: to encourage them to ask themselves the right questions and then to invite them to come back to see you when they need help with the answer. For example, raising the question of whether it is anticipated that the repository will be used to store and manage draft versions as well as final copies, which, depending upon the answer arrived at, may well generate a discussion about the best approach to managing version control.

We need them

It is worth us remembering that though many IR projects are comparatively new and still in their infancy, they have actually come along way in a relatively short space of time. Consider how many institutions have repositories – far more, one suspects, than have implemented records management systems. They have managed to attract significant levels of investment from both within institutions and from external bodies and have managed to grab the attention of senior management in a way which should impress all records managers. So, perhaps, when it comes to thinking about how to ‘sell’ records management within the institution, we could do far worse than to look to their example.

It is also more than likely that we will rely on the IR and the team managing it when it comes to achieving some of our own objectives. For example, when it comes to responding to an FOI request on information that is held within the repository; or when ensuring that the institution’s digital preservation strategy is consistently and comprehensively applied to all relevant information. The IR may well soon contain a significant amount of valuable information and it is beholden on all involved to work together to ensure its safekeeping.

The perceived gap in our remits is closing all the time
Once upon a time we may have been tempted to dismiss the contents of the institutional repository as belonging to the library and therefore as being of little real concern to ourselves. After all, there has long been a commonly understood, if less rarely articulated, division between they types of information held and managed by the library and that managed by the records management function. Surely what with the type of content IR’s are focusing on they fall squarely into the librarian’s remit and outside that of the records manager? As things currently stand there might be some validity to this argument, after all pre-prints, learning objects and dissertations etc are all more likely to be considered as ‘library resources’. But for how long will the repository’s remit be restricted to such materials? We are already seeing a growing interest in repositories extending their scope to also include administrative documents: perhaps the original grant application to be stored alongside the research data to which it relates, or simply using the repository as the means to provide access to particular committee papers. Content such as this move the IR very definitely into the records management orbit and the necessity of adopting a consistent strategy to managing such content, and the dangers of failing to do so, should be self evident.

The danger is that without prior planning and appropriate collaboration, institutions may run the risk of maintaining parallel, overlapping systems and managing duplicated material in an uncoordinated, perhaps even contradictory, manner. At its most basic, questions need to be asked and answered regarding where the master copy of any such information officially resides and whose responsibility it is to manage it, before moving on to more detailed issues surrounding access, management controls and integration into business processes.

**Promising first signs**

There are already interesting examples emerging of institutions who perceive the synergies between the IR and RM agendas and who are taking innovative steps to explore the possibilities that their IR might offer as an integral element of their institutional records management programmes. Perhaps the most pre-eminent example of this at present is the University of Hull’s REMAP project.

The REMAP project [http://www.hull.ac.uk/remap/index.html](http://www.hull.ac.uk/remap/index.html) is a JISC funded initiative investigating the use of an IR to support the embedding of records management and digital preservation within the context of a higher education institution. It has gathered user requirements with regards to records management functionality and taken steps to develop the infrastructure using their repository to support such requirements. These include lifecycle management, version control, automated metadata extraction and workflow management – all topics dear to the records manager’s heart.

This notion of embedding records management requirements within the design of ‘non records management specific’ systems and processes is also in tune with the ethos behind the Information Management infoKit [http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/information-management](http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/information-management). This infoKit describes a consistent framework within which the management of information can be considered; a framework which is flexible enough to accommodate the variety and range of information now being created and ultimately to ensure that the right decisions regarding its management are being considered and made at the right time throughout its 'lifecycle'.


The benefits of collaboration

Colleges and universities have always been complex, information-rich organisations and records managers have long appreciated that the task of managing the information they produce and consume must be a collaborative effort to stand any chance of success. In the repository community there exists a new opportunity to extend the reach of records management principles into areas of institutional life which have hitherto often remained untouched. Records managers do hold the answers to many of the problems that institutional repositories do, or shortly will, face; but we must be willing to be pragmatic in our approach, to bide our time and to concentrate at this stage in forging the contacts and establishing the constructive working relationships on which future joint endeavours can be based. How about taking the first step in that process today by finding out who is responsible for the repository within your institution and arranging a time to pop along to introduce yourself? I guarantee that you will both be glad you did.

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