Initiating an Arts Repository: the gateway to research at University College Falmouth

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The Academy for Innovation and Research building, opening in Spring 2012.

Case Study written by Amy Robinson, VADS, based on an interview with Tim Shear, Tom Readings, and Doreen Pinfold, University College Falmouth, on 17 June 2011.
Background

The University College Falmouth is a specialist arts institution in Cornwall providing courses in art, design, media, and performance. The expertise that the University College offers ranges from traditional practices and subjects, such as drawing from observation, through to contemporary practices, such as video and digital animation. The University College has undergone significant growth and change in the past academic year. In addition to its two campuses at Woodlane in Falmouth and Tremough in Penryn, it has recently merged with Dartington College of Arts, widening its course portfolio to include performance and theatre, with courses at the Dartington campus moved to a new purpose-built Performance Centre at the Tremough campus in October 2010. In the same month, the University College announced that it had secured £9 million to establish the Academy for Innovation and Research (AIR). This new Academy will offer opportunities for businesses and researchers to participate in high profile collaborative projects aimed at improving business performance in Cornwall, and a new building for the Academy is due to open at the Tremough campus in 2012. In particular the Academy will bring specialist expertise in the areas of sustainable design and the digital economy. These developments mark key milestones in the University College’s ambition to develop into the Arts University Cornwall by 2014 and become one of the top five specialist creative institutions in the world.

Expectations

The University College’s stated research objectives for the period 2010-2015 include: to establish a profile of international excellence in selected areas of research through strategic and targeted investment; to maximise the impact of this research in support of Cornwall’s growing, creative economy; to ensure provision of a sustainable, high quality and stimulating research environment both to develop staff capabilities and to frame postgraduate research student programmes; and to ensure that research and enterprise activity directly enhances learning and teaching.

With these objectives in mind and with the significant changes that have taken place within the University College in the past year, there is now a growing case for establishing a repository for the University College’s research outputs. It is expected that an institutional repository will have a number of benefits which will help to further these objectives, such as: ensuring a long term record is maintained of the research that has taken place within the University College; showcasing this research to potential students and staff and wider audiences; holding information in a structured form that will aid with reporting to the Research Exercise Framework (REF) in 2014 and securing future research funding; and helping research staff to make connections and foster collaborations with other researchers working in related areas both in the University College and the wider community.

During the first six months of 2011, the Library has therefore set out to conduct initial investigations and to scope the development of a new research repository, with the ultimate aim of securing support from the Management Board and dedicated funding from the University College to set up a working repository during the next academic year, 2011-2012. This case study outlines this initial background research, technical investigations, and advocacy work that has been undertaken during this preliminary six month period. This work has been undertaken by the Head of Library and Information Services, the Digital Resources Officer, and Learning Technologist, time permitting amongst existing duties.
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Approach

1. Gather overview of research within the institution

One of the first steps made during this initial scoping exercise was to gather an overview of research that is taking place within the institution. The University College’s web pages provided an initial source of information on the current research groups at the University College and their areas of focus, including:

- Articulating Space: Exploring issues of space, place, site, location and narrative through user and participant focused methodologies of research and practice.
- Autonomatic - digital manufacturing technologies in the creative process of designing and making three dimensional objects
- Connected Creative Communities - exploring the ways in which creative communities - past, present and future - develop and maintain connections between individuals and groups.
- Performance Writing - extended, interdisciplinary textual practices.

There are also proposed research groups and acknowledged research strengths in choreography, music, photography, theatre, creative writing, art and design practice, and music and sound practices.

The team was also able to draw upon the results of a recent research audit conducted by the Research and Enterprise Development Unit, a new unit that has been set up within the Academy. The Unit has undertaken a survey of research staff in order to gain an updated view of the characteristic research outputs of the University College. This data has only just been gathered and is currently being processed but will provide the team with a more accurate, comprehensive, and detailed indication of the balance and range of research output types and the different media that the repository will need to accommodate, also helping to inform the development of a future taxonomy for the repository.

2. Collaborate with related projects

At the beginning of 2011, the Learning Technologist was also tasked with developing a web presence for the Academy. The intention of this new web portal for the Academy is to publicise the University College’s research and enterprise activities in particular to local businesses, as well as to utilise online community tools to help facilitate collaborative working and to host the Academy’s online events. At the heart of the Academy building will be a technology-rich, 3D enabled, interactive room or ‘sandpit’ for creative idea generation and the planning of research and development projects. The new portal is intended to provide an online equivalent to this physical space.

It became clear that the repository and portal systems will both hold related information and multimedia documenting the University College’s research and there is a need for collaboration between the two initiatives. Consideration is now being given to how these two developments will interact and integrate with one another, and from the business angle, the Learning Technologist is also considering how the portal will interact with the University College’s customer relationship management system. This blended project team, including staff from the Library and from Learning Technology, is also benefitting the project by drawing on a wide range of skills, knowledge, and experience, from technical development through to metadata and information management expertise.
In addition to collaborating across these staff teams, contact has also been made with relevant external projects through participation in the four JISC-funded Kultivate project workshops during 2011. At these events, attendees have shared their experiences of working with institutional repositories in specialist arts institutions across the UK, ranging from institutions that are just embarking on the creation of their repository, to those that have an existing repository and dedicated repository staffing. This contact has been invaluable to the team at Falmouth by informing them about the potential issues that may be encountered when creating their own repository and the approaches that are being used at similar institutions. The usability testing and development of the Royal College of Art EPrints repository, has been a particularly useful reference for the Digital Resources Officer, since the repository is at a similar early stage in development.

3. Identify the most appropriate infrastructure

As well as assessing what the repository will contain, co-operating with relevant internal projects, and learning from the experiences of other institutions, the Digital Resources Officer has also undertaken an assessment of the various software options available, narrowing the choices to two preferred systems: EPrints and Drupal.

The Kultivate project workshops and web-based research quickly indicated that EPrints is one of the key pieces of open source software currently being used for open access research repositories and that it has a large user base particularly in Europe, with significant support from JISC. The Digital Resources Officer has also experimented with the Kultivate project’s EPrints repository demonstrator to get a clear picture of the workflow it encapsulates and some of the functionality represented.

From the perspective of University College Falmouth, the Drupal open source content management system is a favoured software option since there are a number of staff within the learning technologies team who are already experienced in implementing the software, and the portal for the Academy for Innovation and Research (AIR) is already being developed using Drupal. One of the key criteria for the repository system is that it integrates well with existing systems within the University College, in order to avoid a proliferation of different platforms.

Drupal 'out-of-the-box' is more of a general use content management system, so the team has started researching the scope and limitations of the various module-based plugins which may be needed in order to create a research repository. For the most fundamental repository features such as open access provision, the Library's Digital Resources Officer has created Drupal installations and taken the first steps towards configuring this functionality. This technical testing is being undertaken in order to verify that Drupal can indeed meet the repository requirements appropriately, and to help inform the decision between the two preferred software options.

The Digital Resources Officer has also begun investigations into relevant metadata standards and has started researching schemas ranging from the Dublin Core metadata standard, which is the base requirement for the Open Access Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH), through to arts-based schemas such as the Visual Resources Association’s VRA Core Categories Version 4, which provides a delineation between ‘work’ and ‘image’ which could be a useful feature for the large proportion of visual materials that the team is anticipating.
4. Advocacy and engagement with research staff

During these initial stages, the team has focused on securing buy-in and support for the repository project from key stakeholders, in particular from the Head of the Research and Enterprise Unit and the Associate Deans for Research and Enterprise in the new Academy, and the Deans of the two Schools of Art and Design, and Media and Performance.

This has taken place against a backdrop of major change within the University College, as it has moved from a three school to a two school structure; the committee structure is just in the process of being set-up. The team has had many conversations and discussions with staff at different levels on an informal basis. Through the more formal routes, the Director of Academic Services is planning to present a paper to the Management Board to report on the project’s progress, and formal recognition for the project has also come in the form of a successful business plan submitted to the University College in order to fund the development of the proposed institutional repository, in conjunction with colleagues in Learning Technology, IT, and the Schools of Art and Design, and Media and Performance.

In terms of the Academy portal, the Learning Technologist has also focused on securing support from key stakeholders during the first six month development period, including the Professoriate and any staff who have funding from the University College to work extensively on research. A small group of alpha testers have been invited to provide feedback on early iterations of the portal, including the Associate Deans for Research and Enterprise, research group leaders, and two independent researchers. This group was kept intentionally small, as experience from previous projects suggested that the larger the group the more difficult it is to design by committee and to reach a consensus. Awareness and interest in the portal is now starting to filter through to the wider academic community in the University College and other members of staff are starting to contact the learning technologists to ask if they can become involved in the portal project and to have access to the test system.

The next stages in terms of advocacy for both the portal and repository projects will be to broaden this engagement to all staff involved in research within the University College. In particular, the team has learnt from other repository staff involved in the Kultivate project that: there may be significant challenges when it comes to asking researchers to self-deposit; there may be resistance from some researchers particularly if it isn’t explicit in their contracts that they should upload their work; and there is a need for one-to-one discussion and assistance on an individual basis. It is hoped that this level of support should be viable when the repository is rolled out, given the relatively small size of the University College and its research community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

These preliminary investigations into the development of a research repository for the University College have so far been carried out on a small scale ‘ad hoc’ basis utilising existing staff time. However, these first steps have now enabled the team to gain dedicated funding and resources for the project for the next academic year, in support of the University College’s research objectives. The team’s expectations have been confirmed and there are increasing aspirations and support from senior management for an online repository for showcasing their research, profile raising, preservation, and reporting to the REF.
A key recommendation from this work includes the importance of exploring the outcomes and findings of current and previous JISC-funded repository projects as soon as possible to avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’. Whilst the team considers that the repository project at Falmouth might have benefited from starting earlier and potentially participating in the original Kultur project from 2007 to 2009, the timing and environment within the University College is another important factor, and it has been invaluable to have the Academy and the work on its portal taking place as part of this process.

The team is aware that there is a lot more advocacy work to be done, as well as addressing questions such as those surrounding the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) of the content that will be hosted, and strategies for managing this IPR. Whether the final software selected is EPrints or Drupal, there is still potential for open source collaboration with other institutions further down the line, which the team is interested in exploring.

Key Points

- Collaboration within the institution can maximise available internal resources, and provide a wide range of skill sets.

- It is important to ensure that institutional systems which hold related information are developed alongside one another as far as is possible to avoid duplication and to focus resources and knowledge.

- Informal conversations and discussions with key stakeholders are just as important as formal advocacy routes, particularly at a time of significant change and as new committee structures are being determined.

- Liaison with JISC projects in the area of institutional research repositories is useful in order to avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’, to learn from others and to form future partnerships and collaborations.

- The significance of face-to-face meetings with staff in other arts-based institutions who are addressing similar issues cannot be underestimated and ‘brings to life’ the details that are available from their websites about their own repository projects.

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