Digital Preservation Policy: A subject of no importance?

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Abstract

There are relatively few digital preservation policies within institutions: is digital preservation a subject of no importance? This paper presents ongoing work and findings from a JISC funded study on institutional digital preservation policies which aims to provide an outline model for digital preservation policies and in particular to analyse the role that digital preservation can play in supporting and delivering key strategies for Higher Education Institutions in areas such as research and teaching and learning. Although focussing on the UK Higher Education sector, the study draws widely on policy and implementations from other sectors and countries and will be of interest to those wishing to develop policy and justify investment in digital preservation within a wide range of institutions.

Introduction

A recent synthesis of the UK Joint Information Systems Committee's digital preservation and records management programme noted that 'the costs and benefits of developing a coherent, managed and sustainable approach to institutional preservation of digital assets remain unexplored'(Pennock, 2008). Across many sectors the development of institutional preservation policies is currently sporadic and digital preservation issues are rarely considered in key strategic plans. The lack of preservation policies and as a result the lack of consideration of digital preservation issues in other institutional strategies is seen as a major stumbling block.

This paper presents the current work and emerging findings of a new JISC -funded study (completing late September 2008 and to be published Autumn 2008) to help institutions the UK Higher Education sector understand, develop and implement relevant digital preservation policies.

Institutions may have a range of central and devolved functions and departments that will need to consider digital preservation in some form. The study is therefore ensuring that it promotes approaches to policy and guidance which will underpin and inform the activities of a wide range of relevant functions and stakeholders within institutions.

The research that has been undertaken in the course of this study references existing institutional policies and also seeks to include information from outside of the UK HE/FE sector where appropriate. It does not have resources to develop recommendations for all areas from scratch but has referenced and build upon other work, case studies, and tools and services and seeks to identify and position its recommendations to complement existing resources.

Its aim therefore has been to produce a practical "how to" guide for developing an institutional digital preservation policy. It contains strategic policy advice supported by further reading sections which select and provide brief descriptions of key existing resources to assist implementation using specific strategies and tools.

We understand the very different types of institutional needs that need to be supported by the study. We are therefore including guidance on how to tailor a policy for the needs of a specific institution or function. This combined with a modular approach should allow selection and tailoring for a wide range of individual needs.

Finally but perhaps most importantly, we have recognised developing an institutional preservation policy will only be worthwhile if it is linked to core institutional business drivers and strategies: it cannot be effective in splendid isolation. We have therefore devoted significant effort to mapping and linking a preservation strategy to other core university policies including research and teaching and learning.

The format of the remainder of this paper is an overview of progress to date (August 2008) focussing on the development of a model policy and the analysis of high-level institutional strategies from UK universities and potential support for them from digital preservation activities. This is still very much a work in progress and the reader is encouraged to consider the completed version of this work which will be published by JISC in Autumn 2008 and presented at the conference in late September.

Institutional Digital Preservation Policies

After consulting a large range of resources and example policies, it is clear that whilst a high-level policy

framework is needed, a certain degree of practical guidance, to implementation level, must also be offered.

The outline model policy we have created is based on some of the principal themes picked out from a variety of existing digital preservation policies identified and analysed in the desk research. Some key strands are shared in almost all the policies examined: preservation objectives; mission statement; contextual links; financial support; staffing; intellectual property issues. The policy is comprised of two parts, policy and implementation. Policy level is examined in more detail and includes direction on how to structure these high level policy statements and highlights how the principle clauses can tie into other key organizational policies. The implementation level includes technical guidance, containing information about metadata and auditing as well as references to distributed archiving and standards such as the Open Archival Information System (OAIS) Reference Model (CCSDS, 2002). Particular policies/documents of note for our study have been from: the UK Data Archive (Woollard, 2008); the former Arts and Humanities Data Service (James, 2004); the JISC/NPO Beagrie-Greenstein strategic framework for creating and preserving digital resources (Beagrie and Greenstein, 2001); the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (McGovern, 2007); the Canadian Heritage Information Network (Canadian Heritage Information Network, 2004); University of Columbia (Columbia University, 2006); and the Cedars Guide to Collection Management (The Cedars Project, 2002). While the research focussed on policies from Higher and Further Education, the British Library (British Library, nd) and the UK National Archives (Brown, 2003) have the most comprehensive technical and administrative strategies. A paper of particular note is the Preserv digital preservation survey report (Hitchcock, Brody, Hey, and Carr, 2007).

While the JISC 04/04 digital preservation programme projects (Pennock, 2008) were varied in their outcomes, many of the results can be synthesised and drawn into the report. Tools are hard to review as it is not yet fully examined how they are received or used within the community. We have thus had to be selective as to what tools are pointed to in the study. With regard to standards, RLG/NARA's Trustworthy Repositories Audit & Certification: Criteria and Checklist (TRAC) (RLG/NARA, 2007) is very comprehensive and is often cited, along with the OAIS reference model as a key standard.

Function-specific areas were looked at such as: e-journals, IRs, organisational electronic records, digitised images, and research data. There is certainly a commonality between different communities and the similar materials they are preserving, for example policies tend to be clearer and more focussed if homogenous sets of materials are the target contents of a repository. However, clear parallels can be drawn between a different range of policies, and on the whole they don't differ hugely between these functional areas. Examples are Glamorgan Research Repository (University of Glamorgan, 2008), Jorum (Stevenson, 2006), Ethos (Key Perspectives, 2006), and Preserv (Hitchcock, Brody, Hey, and Carr, 2007).

Looking at the high-level policy objectives in the outline model policy, there is significant scope for mapping over to broader organisational policies, such as Teaching/learning, Research, and ICT/Information strategies.

Other High-Level Institutional Strategies

Universities selected for sampling of their high-level strategies were a mixture of teaching-led and research-led institutions (the latter from the Russell Group) and a Further Education college.

University research and learning and teaching strategies have been looked at in most detail so far. These are discussed below.

Research strategies

The strategies were varied in approach and detail so that it was difficult both to condense their key points into only a few categories and to compare them. In fact, in broad terms the teaching universities were surprisingly similar to those leading in research. The principal shared research strategy aims are to:

- *Maximise staff and research excellence*: and increasing active research staff numbers. Central to these strategies are staff development and support.
- *Provide a high level of administrative suppor*t: Strategy aims include offering a co-ordinated administrative service involving an integrated and expanded Research Office, providing support for staff drafting and submitting applications for research funding, and generally supporting the work of full-time research staff within the Department.
- *Recognise and promote the link between teaching and research:* (this finding applied equally across all university types examined, and was not necessarily stronger in teaching-led universities).
- *Increase income and financial sustainability:* Universities are particularly aware of financial considerations and wish to achieve targets for external research funding, including research student funding, and to invest in institutional funding for selective research activities.

Strategy aims that either only applied to teaching-led universities, or were particularly emphasised were noted. Teaching-led universities tended to:
- Include more peripheral aims such as attracting a diverse student body;

- Place greater emphasis on interdisciplinary and collaborative work, including the involvement of external organisations. It may be that established research-led universities do not need to explicitly state this, whilst teaching universities may see them as an excellent way to raise the research profile;
- Explicitly aim to disseminate research– again, presumably to raise the institutions' research profiles;
- Offer more staff support for research.

Learning and teaching strategies

The main themes of the learning and teaching strategies of the various universities concern:
- The skills, knowledge and experience of the students;
- The use of e-learning;
- The fostering of excellence through staff development and effective leadership;
- Equality awareness.

Strategies tend to emphasise the development of a wide range of skills. In addition to those related to specific disciplines, others included intellectual, generic, and social skills. These are designed to be transferable, to help foster independent and lifelong learning and 'the appropriate attitudes and values associated with successful graduates' (Open University Learning and Teaching Strategy 2004-2008). Teaching and learning aims that promote the employability of students are also, unsurprisingly, common.

There is also an emphasis on students developing research skills, and for teaching to be informed by research.

There is a universal commitment to working with and developing new technologies, including virtual learning environments, e-learning programmes and resources such as access to datasets using powerful search tools and services supported by Library and Learning Resources. Many institutions wish to establish e-learning as an integral part of teaching and learning activities.

Strategies also concern the development and refinement of teaching methods, staff development and the general promoting of the institution through the excellence of its teaching programmes. Some institutions mention developing an effective and enabling educational leadership and management structure in order to facilitate this.

Equality awareness and opportunity are also common themes as are the aims emphasising the need to attract international students as well as those from diverse domestic backgrounds.

Additional High-Level Strategies

The comparison and aggregation of publication schemes provides some useful input on records management but has fewer digital preservation implications at this stage. More recently a selection of university Information or IT strategies, Library and "Special Collection" strategies, and records management have been compared and aggregated and digital preservation impacts are now being assessed.

Conclusions

Overall there were some significant common aspects of the other high-level institutional strategies examined that have important implications for digital preservation and that can be linked into our work on developing institutional digital preservation strategies. These cross-correlations are now being made by the study team. Our work to date reinforces our initial view that for institutions digital preservation must be seen as "a means to an end" rather than an end in itself: any digital preservation policy must be framed in terms of the key business drivers and strategies of the institution.

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