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Northampton Open Journals: a publishing service for researchers

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Northampton Open Journals (<http://journals.northampton.ac.uk/>) is a small collection of peer reviewed scholarly journals edited by staff at The University of Northampton and hosted and supported by the university library. This article will describe the development of the collection and the role played by the library.

Creating a new open journals collection

From the point of view of the library there were several good reasons for developing a journal publishing service:

- Interest in open access was growing, nationally and institutionally. By 2008 the University of Northampton could already offer researchers the 'green' route to open access through its institutional repository NECTAR, but had made no provision for open access via the 'gold' route. An in-house journal publishing service would fill this gap and extend the university's portfolio of open access services;
- The development of the service, including aspects of policy and procedure, would enable library staff to engage with the research community in a new arena. Library staff had a professional interest in the scholarly communication process and welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate this to researchers;
- Within the library we already had some editorial expertise in creating and developing a new journal using one of the most popular open source journal publishing products: Open Journal Systems (<http://pkp.sfu.ca/?q=ojs>); we were confident that our technical expertise was also more than sufficient to support a journal publishing service;
- At that time, the library was part of 'Information Services', a converged library and Information Technology department. This gave us access (following negotiation) to the server space that we would need.

From the university's point of view the service would provide another opportunity to showcase our research and enable university staff to develop skills and experience in the journal publishing process.

Implementation of the software

As noted above, library staff already had some experience of using Open Journal Systems (OJS) software but, to be thorough, we scanned the internet for other options. We did not have the resource to write our own software from scratch, nor did we have a budget to purchase software, so we limited our search to open source solutions.

The products we investigated (in 2008) included HyperJournal (<http://www.hjournal.org/>); ePublishing Toolkit (<https://dev.livingreviews.org/projects/epubtk/>) and Scholarly exchange (<http://www.scholarlyexchange.org/>). We were also aware of several from the SourceForge.net website: 'Online Journal Project', 'Paradigm digital journal', 'DPubS' (Digital Publishing System) and 'zdesk', but were unable at that time to gather sufficient information to pursue these options.

The SPARC website (SPARC, 2013) was then, and continues to be, a useful source of information about journal management systems. The FAQs on the OJS website

(Public Knowledge Project, 2012a) also cover this topic and provide links to a number of current publishing solutions.

We eventually chose OJS because it offered:

- A web-based workflow that supported the entire journal publishing process, from submission of a paper by the author, through peer review and editing, to presentation on a professional looking website;
- The ability to host the journal ourselves, on university servers;
- A high degree of flexibility, both in the functionality of the software (there are many user definable options) and in the visual design of the journal (OJS software uses cascading style sheets (CSS) to define the style and layout of the website). Although OJS offers a perfectly acceptable interface straight 'out of the box', we knew that we wanted to redesign it to match the styling of the university website. The ability to customise the software was therefore essential;
- A substantial number of existing implementations of the software (in 2008 there were around 1000 OJS-based journals; this number has since increased rapidly: as of October 2012 there were 14,700 (Public Knowledge Project, 2012b));
- An active user community with Editorial and Technical Support Forums;
- Compliance with Open Archive Initiative standards and, via plugins, the ability to integrate a range of useful tools.

Defining policy and procedure

As with our institutional repository, we were keen to ensure that our new open access journal collection was 'owned' by the research community. To this end we consulted with university research leaders in developing a policy and procedure for the creation of new university journals and sought approval for these from the University Research and Enterprise Committee.

The outcome was a Northampton Open Journals user guide for staff (Pickton, 2009). The guide covered the journal approval process; the constitution of an 'Open Journals working group' to oversee this process; and several pages of notes to support prospective editors in creating a journal. The guide served a dual purpose: to state the expectations of the university in establishing a high quality journals collection and to advise new editors of the issues they would need to consider in creating a journal.

It is not the intention of this article to replicate the detail of the guide, but some of the issues it addresses may be of interest.

Journal approval process

A two stage approval process was defined; this enables prospective editors to establish whether the proposed journal is acceptable in principle before they put in significant effort to meet the requirements of full approval.

The guide specifies the information required for full approval and the criteria for acceptance. For example, under 'Focus and scope of journal' editors are expected to include a justification of need for a new journal in this area; to state the position of the new journal within the sector; to state its anticipated contribution to knowledge and to avoid partisanship – journals should welcome academically rigorous contributions from all philosophical and intellectual positions.

Additionally, new journals are expected to conform to a series of standard requirements (for example they should be peer reviewed, open access, inclusive and must in no way adversely affect the reputation of the university).

The guide outlines the various possible outcomes from the approval process and criteria for continued inclusion within the collection. A process for appeals is also described.

The Open Journals working group

New journals are approved and monitored by a working group of the University's Research and Enterprise Committee. The group comprises the Executive Dean with responsibility for research, the research leader from the School to which the editor belongs and a representative from the library. Provision is made for the group to meet up to three times per year, as necessitated by the creation of new journals. However, in practice we have found that this frequency of meetings has not been necessary.

Journal creation and management

The largest section of the guide covers the process of setting up and managing the journal. In brief, the site administrator (from the Scholarly Systems team in the library) creates the journal and nominates a 'Journal Manager' i.e. the member of staff at Northampton who is the editor and 'owner' of the journal. The Journal Manager may then 'set up' the journal by defining basic journal details (such as name, ISSN, contacts etc.); policies; submission guidelines; several aspects of journal management (e.g. access and security, scheduling) and the look and feel of the journal. They may then create or modify journal sections, user roles and an extensive set of prepared emails.

One of the benefits of the OJS software is that it provides example text for a wide range of purposes; all editable by Journal Managers. At Northampton it was agreed that, in order to ensure consistency across the collection, certain text should follow an agreed format, so standard text is given in the guide for the copyright notice, competing interest statement, open access policy and author self-archiving policy. Other text, such as the review policy, author guidelines, article layout template and submission preparation checklist will normally be amended by the Journal Manager.

Editing the journal

There are eight basic steps in publishing a journal article:

- Author submits an article (includes creation of appropriate metadata; agreement with submission checklist; acceptance of copyright statement; and upload of text and (optionally) supplementary files)
- Editor receives submission
- Editor initiates peer review
- Reviewer performs review
- Editor records decision and notifies author
- Submission is edited (by editor or nominee)
 - Copy editing (optional) – editors can make changes to the text and, if they wish, return the article to the author for checking
 - Layout editing – to conform to the journal's 'house style' – this includes creation and upload of 'galleys'
 - Proof reading by editor and/or author (optional)
- Editor assigns the article to an issue
- Editor publishes issue (includes ordering of papers and page numbering)

The OJS software supports each of these steps.

The role of the library

Library staff provide technical support, training and advice to editors throughout the process of journal creation.

The library's Scholarly Systems team were responsible for the initial implementation of the OJS software and undertake necessary software upgrades. A multiple journal installation was chosen so that all the university journals could be accessed from a single web address (<http://journals.northampton.ac.uk/>); however, editors are free to promote the URL of their own journal's home page if they prefer.

University branding was applied to the Northampton Open Journals home page and the collection was linked to from the 'Research' section of the university website. Again, this was to ensure that the collection was owned by the research community rather than the library.

Editors are free to choose the 'look and feel' for their own journal's interface. The CSS approach means that editors with some experience of writing HTML code are able to make changes for themselves; otherwise, the Scholarly Systems team will support the design process. Advice can be taken from the Marketing department if necessary.

Enquiries from prospective editors are usually passed from the Academic Librarians to the library's Research Support Team. With several years' experience of supporting open access through the institutional repository, a professional interest in scholarly publishing and practical journal editing experience, this team is well placed to advise new editors.

The team offer training on demand in the use of OJS software. Both one-to-one and small group sessions can be arranged. The software is very comprehensive and the learning curve can be steep, so editors seem to value support from a colleague on the end of a telephone. We have noticed that as more academic staff gain expertise in using the OJS software, they have increasingly turned to each other for support, rather than to the library.

Despite offers of formal roles in Northampton Open Journals (for example, membership of the editorial team), library staff make it clear that their role is to support the creation of journals and not to be involved in an ongoing editorial capacity. We draw a distinction between supporting the research process and contributing to it, and our view is that the role of library staff in this instance should be professional rather than scholarly. From a practical point of view, we do not have the resource to be actively engaged with every journal. It is policy that once launched, each journal is the full responsibility of its editor or editorial team.

As a by-product of this work, the Research Support Team is increasingly called upon to advise on other matters related to publishing. Typical questions include: Can I have an ISSN for my journal? How can I assign DOIs to my articles? Will my journal be indexed by Google Scholar, Web of Science or Scopus? Can I apply for an impact factor? The team has recently been invited to speak to the committee of a Learned Society about ways to increase citation counts for its articles.

It is clear that librarians have much to offer in this area.

Reflections

The first Northampton Open Journal, 'Enhancing the Learner Experience in Higher Education' (ELEHE), was launched in 2009. To date, this is our only live journal.

Over the last few years a number of Northampton staff have shown an interest in creating a new electronic journal. Some have come to fruition, but not as part of the Northampton Open Journals collection; others have fallen by the wayside. So for example, a journal developed as part of a collaboration with an institution in the Middle East collapsed after one issue when the political situation there deteriorated; another was under development when the editor left Northampton for employment elsewhere; a third journal, featuring the best dissertation work from our School of Education, is being developed as a separate instance of OJS because it is not appropriate for it to fulfil the fairly strict requirements of the collection (one requirement of Northampton Open Journals is that each journal should have international representation on its Editorial Board).

In a number of other cases prospective editors have chosen not to proceed with their plans for a journal. The editorial workload in creating and maintaining a brand new self-hosted journal is huge. The OJS software supports the process extremely effectively but the large administrative element is a deterrent. An editor of a commercially published journal will probably be expected to allocate papers to referees and undertake some copy-editing; they will not normally be required to manage the entire publishing process.

Sustainability is a challenge. ELEHE has already undergone a complete change in its editorial team, following the move of its original editor to another institution. Succession planning is now one of the criteria for full approval of a new journal.

Since the collection was first created, the university website has been through three re-brandings. Since our policy has been to replicate university branding on the Northampton Open Journals website, this involves significant extra work for the library's Scholarly Systems team. As of March 2013 we are awaiting an upgrade to the latest branding.

The library's capacity to provide technical support and software training for the Northampton Open Journals collection depends on skills residing in a relatively small number of staff. Sharing that skill set among a broader group is a challenge which has yet to be addressed.

Conclusion

The process of developing an open journals collection for the University of Northampton has been valuable in many ways. In terms of skills development, reputational benefit (internally for the library and externally for the institution), and service provision, the outcomes have been extremely positive. The facility plugs a gap in our open access services and enables library staff to say "yes, we can help with that". I believe that is justification enough.

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