Gathering NECTAR at The University of Northampton

Introduction

There may be other librarians with the job title 'Queen Bee' but probably not many. This is the story of how I came to claim that title - the story of NECTAR, The University of Northampton's open access institutional repository.

Although the idea of an institutional repository for The University of Northampton was being floated as long ago as mid 2005, it was not until January 2007 that the project officially kicked off. Prompted by the RAE, with its demands for comprehensive research output data and evidence of support for research activity, members of the research community and the Department of Information Services identified an opportunity to collaborate on a new digital repository.

> *From the start, NECTAR has been a joint project between the Department of Information Services and the research community. This was not to be seen as a 'library thing'.*

Early discussions

The first actions to be undertaken were a series of interviews with potential stakeholders across the institution. Talking to a range of role holders from research administrators to the Pro Vice Chancellor for research, the objectives of these interviews were to establish people's understanding of the concept and purpose of an institutional repository; to discuss their needs with respect to the repository; to determine the scope of the repository; and to identify individuals willing to form a working group to take the project forward.

A second round of interviews sought to clarify the technical requirements for the repository – we wanted to be sure that none of the existing university systems could be re-purposed to serve our needs; we also wanted to learn from our colleagues' experiences of managing university-wide systems.

> *By consulting widely at an early stage we gained greater understanding of our future users' needs, generated interest in the project and flagged up future challenges.*

As a result of these discussions two groups were formed: a Steering Group and a Project Team.   The Steering Group provided direction for the project and strategic support for the repository; the Project Team was responsible for the day to day management and operation of the project. While the Steering Group had regular formal meetings, the Project Team primarily relied on email and informal contact and met formally only when it was felt necessary.

> *Gaining commitment from your own senior management is crucial; involving them in the direction of the project is even better.*

Agreeing repository purpose and policy

The first action of the Steering Group was to agree the purpose of the repository – "to showcase and preserve the research outputs of university members" – and the

principles underlying its operation. With these principles in mind, and having found 'institutional repository' a bit of a mouthful in our discussions, a shorter name for the repository was also chosen – the "**Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses And Research**", to be known as NECTAR.

> *A snappy name, ideally with positive connotations, is easy to remember and works well later in marketing and advocacy activities.*

A briefing sheet[1] outlining the purpose and principles of NECTAR was circulated by email to senior university staff and to the research community. This met with a resounding silence. Its appearance at a University Research Committee, however, generated more interest, and a focus group of senior researchers was convened to thrash out the details. Members of the focus group were primarily concerned about the quality of NECTAR content and it was decided that NECTAR should contain only items that had previously been made available in the public domain. So, published journal articles, exhibited artifacts and presented conference papers were acceptable; internal working papers and other unpublished work were not. Research degree theses (PhD and MPhil level) were to be included, but not undergraduate or taught Masters level dissertations.

> *Gaining acceptance of NECTAR's fundamental principles by the University Research Committee gave them ownership of the repository and gave it an authority which could be exploited later.*

Specifying and selecting software

Now we knew what we were aiming to create, we could draw up a requirements specification for the repository software. Covering visibility and accessibility, the user interface, file handling, support, management, product demonstration and hardware advice, the specification was used to evaluate and compare the different software products.

We invited four suppliers to Northampton to demonstrate their products. On each occasion, Steering Group and Project Team members were invited to attend, as were the research administrators and interested library staff. Feedback was sought from all attendees. In parallel to the commercial demonstrations, Project Team members also visited local implementations of the two most commonly used open source software products - DSpace (at Loughborough University) and EPrints (Nottingham University).

Eventually it was decided that The University of Northampton would go for the Eprints software, and specifically, the 'Professional package' offered by Eprints Services. This package provided us with a fully installed repository, amended to our specification and hosted on our own server. Once implemented, our technical staff could take over the day to day control of the repository, knowing that expert help was only a phone call away.

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[1] The NECTAR Briefing Sheet is available from:
http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/NECTAR_briefing_sheet_200607.pdf

The combination of outsourced initial implementation followed by ongoing in-house support has worked extremely well for us; the service provided by the Eprints team has been particularly good.

Funding

Shortly after reaching a decision on software, we were successful in winning funding from the JISC as a repository start-up project in their Repositories and Preservation Programme. This award gave us not only some very welcome financial security, but also the credibility associated with winning a significant bid from an important external funder. Our "100% success rate" was much bandied about in the research community – the very community we were trying to engage.

There were other consequences of winning the JISC funding. It had taken nearly a month to put the bid together, another six weeks before we heard the result and a further two months before we knew the funds had arrived. In the meantime our plans to purchase the software and hardware were put on hold. This delayed the project and we missed our self-imposed start of year deadline. Then of course there was the JISC paperwork…

Populating NECTAR

While the technical folk were busy installing and rewriting the Eprints software, the research administrators were coming to the end of the RAE submission process. It was decided that the RAE items would be among the first to go into NECTAR.

Populating the repository with the institution's most prestigious research outputs not only set a high standard for the showcase, but also conveyed a clear message to potential depositors: this is where the best research should be.

Basic metadata were exported from the RAE database and imported to NECTAR. Suddenly there were 400 items in the repository! We could have immediately 'gone live' with these items but we chose to save them in the repository's 'review area' pending metadata enhancement. One of NECTAR's selling points is the high quality of its metadata.

The decision had already been made to offer a 'mediated service' for populating NECTAR, at least in the first instance. Bill Hubbard of SHERPA and the Repositories Support Project[2] (a very helpful JISC-funded group doing just what their title suggests) advised us to advertise this as a limited opportunity in order to encourage early take-up. To support this mediated service we had included NECTAR duties in the job description of one of our new 'Information Services Assistants', but of even greater help in the first instance were the two job-sharing RAE administrators. These two individuals spent the best part of the next four months adding and enhancing metadata records in NECTAR. They added abstracts, URLs and other relevant information to the RAE records and created another 600 or so new records from the Schools' annual research returns.

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[2] http://www.rsp.ac.uk

Each year The University of Northampton, like other similar institutions, produces an Annual Research Report (ARR). The ARR lists all research outputs from each School and is made publicly available on the university website. In previous years this report has been produced as a set of word-processed documents; NECTAR provided the opportunity to generate the report automatically. Matching the previous years' style of output involved a huge raft of changes to the Eprints software, but on the plus side, it meant that any research not included in NECTAR would 'not count' in research reporting terms – a huge incentive for researchers to engage with NECTAR.

> *By embedding NECTAR into the research reporting processes of the university, the repository immediately became part of researchers' normal workflow.*

Advocacy and dissemination

Concurrent with this frenetic 'back office' activity, a NECTAR advocacy programme was well underway. The experiences of earlier repositories had suggested that the costs and complexity of implementing repository software were minor in comparison with the efforts required to gather content.

We had had the support of Professor Hugh Matthews in our Steering Group from the very start. As Chair of the university's Research Degrees Committee and Deputy Chair of the University Research Committee, Hugh gave us very useful influence in both groups. A proposal for the mandatory submission of electronic copies of research degree theses was accepted by the Research Degrees Committee in December 2007 and a proposal to ensure that all research outputs are included in NECTAR is scheduled for discussion in June 2008.

Presentations and demonstrations of NECTAR were given to groups of Readers and Professors, School research forums, colleagues in Information services and research students. NECTAR-related notices were posted on the university's intranet, the library blog, the university newsletter and the Information Services magazine; emails were sent to RAE authors, research students and, via School Managers, to research active academic staff. Efforts were made to respond immediately to any feedback or queries generated by these activities.

Where are we now?

NECTAR officially 'went live' in April 2008 with announcements throughout the university and on external repository-related email discussion lists. At that point, there were about 80 metadata records in place and several hundred waiting for further processing behind the scenes. This backlog of items was a symptom of the success achieved by the RAE administrators in importing and creating new records - unfortunately, the cataloguer responsible for applying Library of Congress subject classes was completely swamped. Additional staff have had to be temporarily deployed to NECTAR to check the metadata and add subject classes.

We have also secured the services of the department's Marketing team in publicising and promoting NECTAR. A requirement of the original software was that it should be possible to amend it to match the standard university web branding - a fairly stark black and white design. We have livened this up with a photograph of a bright red

flower and a nectar-gathering bee. We tested both photographs and line drawings for the design, eventually choosing the photograph for its greater impact.

We are now preparing for the official NECTAR launch party. Those in the know (the Repositories Support Project) have stressed the importance of celebrating milestones with promotional activity. Our party will be held in June in the middle of a research supervisors 'update day' – we intend to take advantage of this captive audience but also to invite others from our own and other institutions. Our Vice Chancellor has been invited to open the event, and Andrew McGregor from the JISC will be speaking about the national context of the repository. A six foot tall inflatable champagne bottle is on order…

What next?

At 16 months into our original repository project and nearly half way through the JISC project, we have barely started collecting full text and other full content (e.g. multimedia items) so that is our next priority. We know that the acquisition, copyright checking and upload of research outputs will be time-consuming and laborious so we are investigating ways to share the workload and ensure the sustainability of the project.

We have ordered a new computer server to support NECTAR. This will be used to hold a test copy of the repository, for backup purposes, and to permit changes to the software to be implemented and tested without threatening the live service. We have plans for added value services such as the generation of individual and departmental publication lists. We have agreed to be a pilot for the new IRStats[3] repository statistics – we hope that usage statistics will help us to demonstrate the value of NECTAR to our research community.

We have already been in touch with local and regional agencies with a view to sharing NECTAR content with outside organizations. The University of Northampton is committed to the furtherance of an agenda that seeks to encourage community and employer engagement. By increasing the visibility and accessibility of university research, NECTAR will help the institution fulfill its role in the social and economic development of its local community and region.

Throughout the course of the project we have been active participants in workshops, conferences and other events organised by members of the repository community. This sharing of experience is critical to the healthy development of repositories and to the open access movement. We have already hosted a couple of events ourselves – an EMALINK[4] repository advocacy workshop and a Professional briefing and networking event for the Repositories Support Project[5]. We will be working with colleagues at the University of Warwick on a JISC-sponsored event later this year for other projects in the Repositories and Preservation Programme[6].

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[3] http://trac.eprints.org/projects/irstats
[4] EMALINK is the East Midlands Academic Libraries network, monthly workshops are held on a range of topics.
[5] http://www.rsp.ac.uk/events/ProfBrief.php#north
[6] http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_rep_pres.aspx

We undoubtedly have challenges ahead – acquiring full content, working within copyright law, preserving research outputs in the longer term – these are all significant issues to be addressed.   We are confident however, that with the help of our colleagues at Eprints Services, the Repository Support Project, the JISC and in other universities, we will succeed.