The makeup of a teaching and learning repository support network

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The makeup of a teaching and learning repository support network

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Sue Manuel, Charles Oppenheim
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1.0 Introduction

Removing barriers to the contribution of digital teaching and learning materials to an Institutional Repository (IR) can be viewed as a way of encouraging and rewarding users. One way this can be achieved is by the provision of support to make the process as straightforward as possible. Interviews with academic teaching staff at Loughborough University have given an indication of the processes involved in creating digital teaching and learning materials and of making them available to others via Learn, the university's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Support staff were consulted to provide an indication of the type of assistance that is available for the creation and dissemination of digital teaching and learning material. This network of support will be similar at other institutions but there may be local differences to take into consideration. This short report outlines support available at this institution for the creation of digital teaching materials. From this background information it is possible to suggest what assistance might be required for creating and depositing materials into a teaching and learning repository.

2.0 Support network

A range of potential sources of support for academic teaching staff in the creation and dissemination of their teaching materials were initially suggested by the project team. This included staff under the following headings:

- Administrative
- Teaching specialists
- Learning Technologists
- IT
- Library
- Professional Development
- Colleagues
- Peers
- Professional groups

A picture of the support available has been gathered from interviews and email questions addresses to some of these groups. Academic teaching staff across the university were also interviewed so that any gaps in this picture could be identified and the key demands on support staff identified.

2.1 Summary of support interviews

Academic teaching staff and students made approaches for assistance to the support groups listed above. The services they provide are also targeted at staff and students. However, our investigations focused on support services for staff. Several additional suggestions for sources of support were made during the interviews we conducted:

- Information Officers in departments
- English Languages Study Unit
- Disabilities and Additional Needs Service (DANS)

Departments utilise a variety of different methods to promote their support services. This included attending departmental staff meetings; delivering presentations and training sessions; direct email; traditional advertising materials; online information;
and targeting approaches to new staff at the university. Support was provided via personal contact, face-to-face sessions or online materials.

Barriers to seeking support were reported to be:

- Time
- Lack of motivation in respect of teaching and learning
- Having to ask for ‘help’ – this can be viewed as a failing
- Reliance on others for assistance – help may not arrive in time to resolve a problem

The combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches to encouraging the use of new initiatives was believed to achieve the best results. Top-down, to explain what is intended, and the benefits. Bottom-up, to include input from staff and initiatives that arise from the needs of staff. It was reported that technology was sometimes blamed for problems when it is in fact the material that is not entirely suited to electronic delivery. An additional issue in attempting to encourage interest in teaching and learning is that this university has a clear research focus, therefore, supporting and enhancing teaching is not seen as the top priority.

2.2 Summary of Academic interviews

The support departments, identified by the project team (listed in Section 1.0), were supplemented by specific sources of support, or individuals highlighted at interview:

- Learning and Teaching coordinator – enhancing student learning
- Technical Tutor
- Online Learning development Officer (OLDO) – CourseGenie, Computer Aided Learning (CAL), Computer Aided Assessment (CAA)
- Library – Academic Librarians, Library Online Reading List support, Study Skills, Research web pages
- Higher Education Academies
- External examiners – comments on teaching materials
- Industry
- Students – module and courseware feedback

Academics tended to build their own network for sources of support. When they were unsure who to seek support from they tended to find their own ways of doing things, or they devised an alternative solution to a problem. As support departments are dispersed across campus it can sometimes be difficult to identify the best source of support. There was general agreement that support at Loughborough was good and assistance could be sourced if required.

3.0 Institutional Repository support

Loughborough University Library has an established IR for the university’s research outputs. The Library Systems Manager maintains this service. A Repository Manager advertises the service, liaises with departments and individuals, deposits items and adds supplementary metadata. In the event that the projects proposals for a blended repository are implemented this IR could potentially be used to house certain categories of materials relating to teaching and learning. Both the Library Systems Manager and Repository Manager would play a key role in supporting this extended service. Their experience of running an IR service places them in an ideal position to
Outline their current commitments to the service and to suggest the possible impact of the inclusion of teaching and learning materials into the equation.

**Supporting an IR**
The following questions were put to the Library Systems Manager and the Repository Manager:

1. How much time and work is involved in supporting the Library's repository?
2. Can you gauge how much more of a demand a repository housing teaching and learning materials might place on your time?
   a. This could be from a system point of view - different files to manage, backup, migrate. Or,
   b. from the deposit and staff support angle - additional items if mediated deposit continues, checking metadata, deposit of multi-part items, email / telephone enquiries and so on.

**3.1 Library Systems Manager’s response**
The Systems manager provided estimates of the time commitment from a technical perspective.

- Installing server: 1 day
- Installing DSpace (for the first time): 3 days
- Configuring DSpace: 2 days
- Maintaining server (hardware and operating system): 1 day a month
- Maintaining DSpace: 1 day a month
- Responding to ad hoc enquires/problems: 2 days a month
- Upgrading DSpace (maybe annually): 3 days

Having an additional repository to support would add another 50 percent to the support times listed above.

**3.2 Repository Manager’s view**
Timings for duties undertaken by the Repository Manager were more difficult to gauge because there are so many variables to take into account. However, the following information was provided.

During the first year between 25-75 percent of their time was spent on IR related work. This varied at different times due to the volume of content, and different types of advocacy to be undertaken. The upload time for each item is minimal, 2-5 minutes. Additional time has to be added for conversion of supplied files to pdf format, checking bibliographic and copyright details, as well as adding additional subject headings. Therefore, the total time spent on each item can range from 5 to 30 minutes. In the event of a query being sent to a publisher then the time taken can be even longer.

In her view, depositing teaching materials would be more complicated than research items. Multiple files may be supplied; additional rights information would need to be added; and specific metadata will need to be added. The process could be speeded up if all the necessary information was supplied along with the items to be deposited. The creation of a generic request form to streamline the process was suggested. If a self-depositing system was introduced, metadata would need to be checked and this
would take a significant amount of time. These activities would vary depending on the file type submitted; at this stage, the time involved was very difficult to estimate.

The Repository Manager also believes that queries would consume a lot of time. Different types of deposit may well have different rights attached, and this will probably need a lot of explaining. The biggest time and effort will always be expended in gaining support for the repository. Once systems are in place and patterns for certain tasks emerge, the process gets quicker.

Permission to make use of the Repository Manager’s skills, particularly in cataloguing items for the project, is being sought.

3.3 Academic Librarians
The IR was officially launched in July 2006, and at this time, a shift in repository responsibilities occurred. Electronic versions of research papers are to be sent to the appropriate Academic Librarian or to a dedicated repository email address. Academic Librarians will also carry out advocacy duties for the repository. This group already has established contacts in departments, which means they are well placed to advertise and encourage use of the repository. Conversely, academics may not appreciate library requests being made by the same individuals. The impact of these changes will become apparent over time.

4.0 Computing Services viewpoint
Computing Services offer a variety of support to Loughborough University staff in their use of IT equipment. This assistance is provided in the form of:

- A staff desktop service – a managed service providing an installation of the university’s operating system and core software.
- Solutions to problems with equipment and software – via a Help Desk, telephone and email facility.
- Online user guides – office desktop packages, email systems, printing, accessibility.

Computing Services have reported that, in general, they do not currently get questions via their Help Desk relating to the creation of teaching materials and uploading information to Learn.

The Learn support team provide a range of assistance from minor tweaks to access rights to full blown bespoke programming and is dependant on the time of year.

5.0 Professional Development
Professional Development are a central support unit offering a wide range of support to staff at this institution. This includes IT support for academics and assistance with the creation of their teaching and learning materials. Interviews with staff in this unit have highlighted the fact that some academic staff are reluctant to adopt new technologies. Professional Development staff have also indicated that it is sometimes difficult to generate interest in new initiatives, like repositories for sharing. They are keen to secure the provision of a greater amount of interactive materials for students, this will be provided through the VLE. The Rights and Rewards Project has similar aims in that we are attempting to make more materials available to teachers.
Online Learning Development Officer / Online Learning Support Officer

OLDOs have a role to support academics at this institution in the production of their e-learning materials. They promote new ideas and initiatives to improve teaching and learning. Their support is provided through a range of training and promotional activities, by online materials and one-to-one assistance.

The project will seek to extend appropriate support provided by Professional Development to include our demonstrator repository service.

6.0 Departmental IT support

Each of the six Departments in the Engineering Faculty has IT support staff in place. A request for information about their role in supporting the creation of electronic teaching materials in their respective departments was circulated. This was followed up by questions being sent to three respondents to the original email. A reply was received from one individual.

They reported that requests for support from academics varied. Some academics are very computer literate and they require little assistance. Others, who are less confident in their IT abilities, need more support and guidance. A combination of quick enquiries, that can easily be resolved on the spot, and lengthier queries were reported. The more involved enquiries might require a timetabled meeting between IT support personnel and academic. Alternatively, a problem solving session is undertaken and the solution is reported back to the academic. The time commitment for this work varies depending on the time of year; it can be anything from a few hours a week to nothing.

An idea of whether support for academics depositing items into a repository can be gauged by the fact that some need support when uploading items to Learn. When asked to estimate the additional workload that a repository might create the response again indicated that it would be difficult to say. Some academics would be able to create a variety of file formats and complete a web form on their own. Others would need guidance at all stages in the process. The amount of material being deposited and who was depositing would determine whether a great deal or nothing was added to IT support staff workloads.

This individual was, in principle, willing to support staff in their use of the repository. This would obviously have to be agreed with HoDs.

7.0 Administrative support

7.1 Background

An Administration Assistant was interviewed to gather information on their involvement in the process of getting materials supplied by academics onto Learn. The administrator interviewed had undertaken a Learndirect course: Complete Web Publishing. Their interest in this area has led to their role in the department being extended so that it did not simply involve the placement of materials onto the Learn server. The administrator discusses modules with the lecturer responsible for them, and together they agree what information to include on the module Web page. The interviewee then creates the Web page for that module. The course content is organised and presented in suitable ‘bite sized chunks’ of information for learners by the administrator. This process benefits academics’ and learners’ alike. Module Web pages generally include an image of the lecturer (with their agreement); module
objectives (aims); learning outcomes / objectives; and the method of teaching / learning / assessment. The information given depends on what the lecturer wants, but it is generally displayed via Lecture Topics, Seminars and Guidance on Study Notes, or a link to material by Lecture. Links to a coursework handing in sheet and the course handbook are provided where appropriate. The materials provided by academics could be text for the Web page, Word documents, PowerPoint slides, pdf file, or a list of Web links. The interviewee also checks Web links included in the text to ensure that they are accurate and available.

7.2 Workflow and workload
Questions were asked about the workflow and workload associated with receiving materials from lecturers and making it available on Learn. This gives an indication of the amount of support required by the lecturers’ this administrator assists.

The administrator was asked about the process of getting materials onto Learn and what this entailed.

- Files are exchanged via email, content and links are checked and the information is broken down into appropriate chunks.
- The administrator is happy to make any changes to Web pages or files. This could be editing existing text or adding in additional links.

The administrator was then asked how this work was distributed over the year.

- The distribution of the work varies depending on who is teaching, what and where. Some academics like to put materials up after lectures others have different views. This is discussed with individuals. First Year Modules are more difficult as there are lots of modules for these. The administrator creates a timetable and allocates slots for when each set of module Web pages can be handled. Reminders are sent to academics alerting them to their timetabled slots. In this way the administrator was able to organise their own workload more effectively.

The interviewee was asked if they maintained a record of the number of items they handle and the associated time commitment.

- No record was kept of the number of items uploaded or the workload involved. As a guide the administrator was able to give a rough percentage of time spent on this activity per semester. They gave an estimate for the first term: in the first week 100 percent of their time was taken up with Learn duties. This reduces to 50 percent, then 20 percent as the term progresses.

7.3 Demonstrator repository workflow
The possible work involved in sending materials from academics to a repository representative was outlined. This would probable involve forwarding emails with attachment(s), and liaison with repository staff and academic. The interviewee would be happy to act as a contact between their academics and the Repository Manager.

8.0 Conclusion
In encouraging and exploring the potential benefits of greater dissemination and exposure of digital teaching and learning items, we hope to raise awareness of the
benefits of sharing. For academic teaching staff these benefits are: duplication of effort can be avoided; resources for use in teaching are leveraged; new and existing ideas and expertise can be shared more widely; and time to locate resources can be reduced. These are just a few of the possible advantages of using a repository service for sharing digital materials.

Support for the creation of digital teaching and learning materials for a repository service, and for submission to the repository service, will clearly play a vital part in its success. Academics seek support from a range of sources when creating digital teaching and learning materials, the assistance provided at this institution has been praised. New sources of support have recently been implemented to enhance existing support, this includes OLDOs, an OLSO, and the engCETL. Their input is already considered to be part of the university’s overall support network. There are individuals who do not require a great deal of support in creating materials and they may not need assistance when placing items into a repository. For others, it will be essential if they are to their have the opportunity to submit their own materials to a teaching and learning repository.