Approaches to research data management

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http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/library/usingthelibrary/
servicesforresearchers/datamanagement/
managingresearchdata/conference.aspx

This event was originally aimed at universities with a smaller research profile, but the delegates included a number of staff from the larger research-led institutions. It became clear during the course of the day that most universities are currently taking their first steps in research data management (RDM) and this was a timely event designed to explore different approaches to building the services and infrastructure that will support researchers in managing their digital data and enable future preservation. The programme was introduced by the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research and Business Development at the University of the West of England (UWE), who emphasised the importance to universities of the management of research data and of bringing together expertise from academic departments and professional services such as IT and the library to build the required infrastructure.

Simon Hodson from JISC gave an overview of the national picture. All universities hold data, not always in a central storage area, and although there is a growing awareness of this data as a university asset there is currently little appreciation of how vulnerable it is. Universities are also missing out on opportunities for re-use of data to ask new questions and to take advantage of collaborations sharing existing data. The Hubble Telescope data is a good example of data re-use, where the publications on existing data outnumber those on the first use of new data. JISC will be providing new training on RDM and putting out a call for projects to develop management systems and processes.

Key elements in the development of an RDM strategy were discussed in the breakout sessions and presented in a number of case studies. The UWE approach was to develop a project to establish good practice, building on the success of a large institutional repository. The project team is working with researchers to evaluate tools from the Digital Curation Centre (DCC) and testing new materials such as flowcharts. A case study from the University of Lincoln described the JISC-funded Orbital project, looking particularly at engineering data and working on the minimal viable product for effective research data management. A particularly reassuring message from this case study was that universities with a smaller research profile should not try to take on all the issues relating to RDM, but should define their own needs and work on systems and processes to support them. Further information on the Oracle project is available at http://orbital.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/. Sue Childs from the University of Northumbria described how they have embedded RDM into the postgraduate research training programme. Students look at the data lifecycle, review a case study and start their own data management plan using a template. Sarah Jones highlighted the very useful set of RDM tools now available on the DCC web site at http://www.dcc.ac.uk/resources/external/tools-services.

Topics in the final plenary session covered data curation models, concluding that no one size fits all, the increasing scale of the problem and the importance of involving all stakeholders in the data management lifecycle. A final piece of good advice for universities embarking on an RDM project was to be careful about scope slippage, to focus on your own problems and, rather than being intimidated by other excellent work, using this work as a platform to build on. This was a very useful day for staff in universities starting out in this very important area of work, and I certainly felt more confident going back to the workplace to start talking to colleagues about our own approaches.