



## **Improving access to research for the social services - can higher education digital repositories help?**

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This report explores the potential for higher education digital repositories to make a greater contribution to improving access to research for the social services. The report is based on primary research undertaken between February-May 2012 by Fiona Sherwood-Johnson who worked with IRISS during this period as part of the [ESRC student internship scheme](#).

### **What is a higher education repository?**

Higher education repositories are online spaces where university staff can deposit their research outputs, making them freely available for anyone to access. Most higher education institutions in Scotland have their own repositories, which are the focus of this report, but there are also subject-based repositories, for example, focusing on social science or social work.

## What we did

The project focused on seven universities in Scotland, which we identified produced the majority of social services related research. The project involved mapping the range of research material related to the social services available on the seven repositories, and comparing this with the research not available via this channel. We also conducted interviews with managers and staff of the digital repositories at each of these universities about policies and practices regarding the deposit of research publications and the extent to which their services were public facing.

## Why we did it

A practical aim of the project was to find out whether RSS feeds (automatically generated feeds to transfer information) could be used to capture details about research contained in these repositories and feed these details into the Social Services Knowledge Scotland (SSKS) - a gateway to research and learning materials for the social services. If this were possible, it would immediately help to improve research access by simplifying the searching process (ie rather than needing to search each university's repository, one search of SSKS would deliver the same result).

A further impetus for the study was the Scottish Declaration on Open Access, which all seven of the universities studied here have signed. This commits universities to making their research outputs open access and was one factor behind the establishment of university digital repositories. This project sought to investigate the extent to which the repositories were meeting this aim.

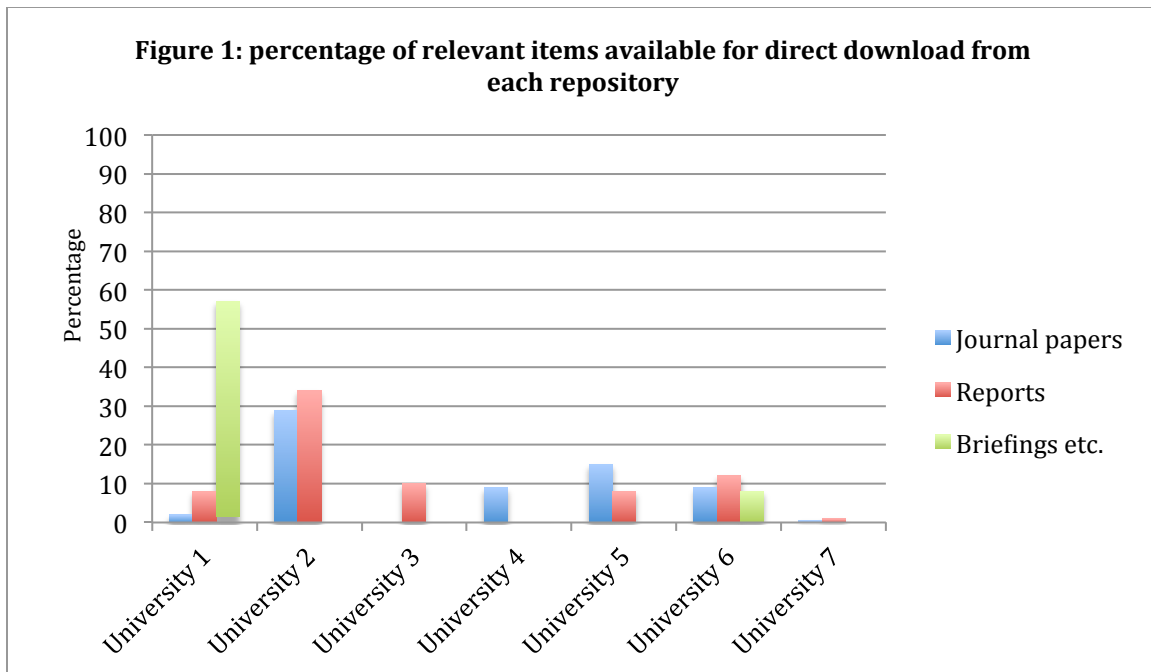
## What we found

### **1. Repositories are not delivering open access to all, or even most, research outputs at any of the universities studied**

Across the universities, on average 9% of journal articles and 8% of research reports of relevance for the social services were available for download. There were relatively small numbers of relevant other items, such as practice papers and research briefings, identified by the mapping exercise, and most do not appear on the repositories. However, one research centre deposits such large numbers of its research briefings in one institution that it takes the proportion of relevant items deposited at that institution to 57%.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Further information about what the mapping exercise involved can be found in Appendix 1.



At this stage, therefore, the potential of the repositories to improve access to research outputs is limited. RSS feeds from the repositories cannot be expected to provide users of SSKS with a reasonable level of access to the range of relevant research that Scottish universities are currently producing, as an alternative to costly journal subscriptions.

The reasons for this are multiple and multi-layered but include:

- the system of academic publishing and copyright which is increasingly restrictive and increasingly subject to challenge
- priorities at university management level which result in making limited resources available to deliver significant levels of open access
- the rationale for repositories was, in the main, about keeping a record of research outputs (for the Research Excellence Framework) rather than to improve access

## **2. There are practical steps higher education repositories could consider to improve the accessibility of their research**

- repository policies that exclude the deposit of pre-peer-reviewed versions of research outputs may create a barrier to open access. The best performing repository does not require deposited items to be published or peer-reviewed.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This also chimes with the Report of the Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings (2012), which argued that the 'infrastructure of subject and institutional repositories should be developed so that they play a valuable role complementary to formal publishing, particularly in providing access to research data and to grey literature, and in digital preservation'

- the inclusion in repositories of citations to reports that are not available online in full text appears to frustrate users as they have no way of obtaining the full report. This frustration could be removed by offering a 'search for full text only' option. Such an option would also ensure that RSS feeds would deliver only full text materials to SSKS
- the embargo functions on several repositories do not appear to be working well. One repository in this study contains a number of items labelled as being embargoed until a date which is now in the past. Another repository contains items which appear to have been embargoed for significantly longer than is necessary for papers in that particular journal.

### **3. The leadership required to make significant progress in relation to open access is likely to come from research funders and governments demanding greater public access to publicly funded research (rather than from individual universities)**

Several interviewees anticipated that significant progress is most likely to come as a result of pressure from above, in the form of the requirements increasingly imposed by research funders and governments. Interviewees cited that bodies like the Wellcome Trust were leading the way in this regard<sup>3</sup>, and there is movement towards support for open access amongst all of the research councils including the ESRC<sup>4</sup>. In 2012 the UK Government recruited Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales to help make all taxpayer-funded academic research in Britain available online to anyone who wants to read or use it, suggesting that there may be significant movement in the near future.<sup>5</sup> A working group was established to investigate this issue, and in July 2012, recommended that all publicly funded research should be free to access by 2014, with publishers receiving revenue from authors rather than from readers.<sup>6</sup>

### **4. There is a need to address concerns about copyright**

Concerns about copyright were frequently mentioned as a barrier to academics depositing their work. Some academics were concerned that depositing in the institutional repository would breach their contracts with publishers and others were concerned that depositing would mean copyright passing from them as an individual to the repository or university. There is confusion about this issue, particularly with respect to the version of an item that may be deposited: many academics seem unaware that depositing a post-print (the author's final version of the article submitted to the publisher after undergoing review for

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/About-us/Policy/Policy-and-position-statements/WTD002766.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/guidance/grant-holders/open-access.asp>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/may/01/wikipedia-research-jimmy-wales-online>

<sup>6</sup> Report of the Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings (2012) Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: How to expand access to research publications <http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/>

copy-editing and formatting) is usually allowable. One interviewee suggested that some academics were resistant to having their material openly available, although this was felt to be less of an issue for established academics as opposed to doctoral students.

### **5. Individual academics are often committed to improving access to their work and more could be done to encourage them to take action**

While research funders and governments may be able to exercise the most significant pressure to increase access to research, there are also indications that individual academics are often generally supportive about improving access to their work. However, there are clearly barriers to the translation of this support into action. A common reason cited for the low levels of research outputs across the repositories concerned the awareness and commitment of academics. Several interviewees felt that open access is just “not on the radar” of many members of the academic community and many of them lacked the time or inclination to personally arrange for their work to be added. Awareness varies considerably from department to department, and was thought to be generally higher within life sciences and medicine than elsewhere. It is speculated that this is due to funders of medical research supporting open access.

There was some disagreement about the best approach to encourage academics to deposit their outputs, with some institutions using mandates and other repository managers preferring a more supportive voluntary model, encouraging and helping academics rather than making the deposit of research “another hurdle for them to jump over”. Despite this, there was a general acceptance that more could be done to make academics aware of the benefits, both to themselves and others, of depositing in the repositories. Additionally, all of the repository managers interviewed were keen to engage with those who would value access to the research produced by their institutions.

### **6. There are other routes to improve access**

Beyond the university digital repositories involved in this project, we have identified a range of other resources which can be used to identify freely available research. We have made the links to these resources available as a collection on the Learning Exchange: [Research resources collection](#). We anticipate that some of these will be unknown to the social services. Additionally, academics may be unaware that while their own university’s repository may, for instance, only accept peer-reviewed outputs, there are a range of other places (academia.edu or social science research network etc) where academics can share their pre-peer-reviewed work, if they are so minded to do so.

Beyond repositories, there is also a growing trend amongst academics to cultivate an online presence as part of their work. For example, some academics use Twitter or blogs to publicise their research, to test out and

discuss ideas and to keep up with new knowledge and research<sup>7</sup>. Some resources have been developed to support academics who are interested in beginning to explore these possibilities<sup>8</sup>.

## The future and next steps

For IRISS, this project has been incredibly useful in demonstrating that, for the moment at least, there is some, but limited, benefit to be gained in integrating research available from the repositories into SSKS. This is due both to the scarcity of relevant material deposited in the repositories and the design of the repositories themselves, which often make it difficult to restrict search results to full-text materials only (excluding bibliographic citations to materials only available offline).

We have identified two universities with relatively well-populated repositories relevant to social services where there is the potential for taking an RSS feed for only full-text entries. Our initial next steps will, therefore, be to:

- Attempt to set-up an RSS feed on SSKS from one university repository
- If this is successful, we will raise awareness of this example to demonstrate how digital repositories can help to further improve access to research

Given the current limitations with the digital repositories, this research has also highlighted that there is potentially greater value in raising awareness of mechanisms beyond the higher education digital repositories. Therefore, we also plan to:

- Explore whether it is possible to take feeds from other sources of freely accessible research and integrate them into SSKS (see [Research resources collection](#))
- Develop resources targeted at academics which raise awareness of the benefits of making their research more widely available (benefits both for themselves and others) and highlight some of the channels available to do this.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/#!/Info4Practice>

<sup>8</sup> Research Information Network (2011) Social media: a guide for researchers, [www.rin.ac.uk/social-media-guide](http://www.rin.ac.uk/social-media-guide); [www.networkedresearcher.co.uk](http://www.networkedresearcher.co.uk) ; Mollett, A., Moran, D. and Dunleavy, P. (2011) 'Using Twitter in university research, teaching and impact activities: A guide for academics and researchers', Impact of Social Sciences: Maximizing the impact of academic research, LSE Public Policy Group, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/38489/>; [http://www.academicblogs.org/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://www.academicblogs.org/index.php/Main_Page); <http://edublogs.org/>

## Appendix 1: Information about the mapping exercise

Mapping the repositories was a desk-based exercise that involved building up a picture of the types and volume of relevant research being produced at each university from online sources other than the repository: for instance, from staff profile pages or the webpages or websites of particular research institutes, projects and collaborative networks. This picture was then compared with the contents of the repositories, and in particular the *full-text* holdings of the repositories that were available for direct download. The emphasis of this exercise was on research outputs, particularly journal articles and research reports, together with some items like 'practice papers', 'discussion papers' or 'research briefings', where these were listed amongst the outputs of an individual researcher, school or unit.

The methodology of the mapping exercise was limited in a number of respects. In particular, decisions had to be made about the departments, units and staff members who were to be included, which inevitably means that some research of potential relevance to the social services will have been excluded. The comparison with the university repositories is also based on an assumption that staff profiles or departmental webpages are up to date. Therefore, it is likely that our estimate of the percentage of materials on the university repositories is an over-estimate.

## Appendix 2: Interview schedule

### **Improving research access through digital repositories** Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS)

**Purpose of the project:** The purpose of this project is to explore ways to make relevant research materials held on university digital repositories as accessible as possible to social services workers via the existing knowledge and research gateway, SSKS [<http://www.sks.org.uk/>].

**Use of information:** The information collected will form the basis of an internal report to IRISS/SSKS, the purpose of which is to gain a clearer picture of how digital repositories are being used in key Scottish universities, their contents and features, and what the potentials might be for integration of relevant material into SSKS.

Summaries of relevant findings will also be made available more widely in anonymised form.

**Recording:** If possible, I would like to record our conversation. This is so I can keep as full a record as possible of the points that you raise. The recording would be held internally, for my own use, and would not be transcribed. It would be deleted in three months' time, after the final project report is completed. However, if you are uncomfortable with this then that is fine, and I would just take notes.



## Background and functions of the repository

- When was the repository first set up? How has it developed since then?
- What are the main functions of the repository currently? ie who and what is it for?
  - Is disseminating research to audiences outside the institution an intended function?
  - Is reaching audiences outside academia an intended function? How much of a priority is this?
- Is there any information about who currently uses the repository to access information, and how much? In particular, what is known about users external to academia?

## Repository contents

- What kinds of materials are accepted by the repository?
- What kinds and range of materials are deposited in practice?
- Are all of the institution's research outputs deposited in the repository?
- If not
  - why is this?  
*[Are there barriers to depositing work? Are there incentives?]*
  - how does this fit with the institution's commitments under the Scottish Declaration on Open Access?  
*[Is there concern at the institutional level about any difficulties meeting these commitments? Any plans for things to change?]*

### Access to full text

- How common is it, for the full text of items listed on the repository to be directly available eg to download as a PDF?
- Can items not directly available be accessed through the repository?  
How?  
*[eg Are there embargoes in place? Must access be requested?]*

### Searching the repository

- What facilities are there for searching and browsing the repository?
- Can the contents be searched by subject? How well does this work?  
*[eg How specific a search can you perform? Are searches based on metadata or full text?]*

### RSS feeds

- Are RSS feeds available from the repository? What feeds are available?
- Are feeds available to subscribe to from personalised search results?

### Other

- Is there anything else you think we should consider, to help us make the research produced at this institution accessible via SSKS?
- In particular, are there other ways that the institution is working towards open access to its research outputs (particularly those research outputs relevant to the social services workforce)?
- Is there anything more general you think we should consider, to help us make more research freely available to social services workers?
- Is there anyone else you think we should be talking to about this?

Thank you very much for your help.