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# York St. John Digital Repository: an ecological view of interactions and systems

YSJ DigiRep is a newly established digital archive at York St. John. Established to help manage learning resources and research outputs from a diverse range of subjects across the institution, YSJ DigiRep has now come to the end of its project funding. This case study examines its context, seeks to identify why it has integrated so successfully into institutional processes, and highlight potential tensions as it transitions to being an institutional service. The study draws on an ecologically influenced approach developed by the Repositories Research Team.

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## 1 Introduction

This case study examines a newly set-up digital archive at York St. John (YSJ) which is managing a diverse range of materials. The scope of its collections includes learning materials, research outputs, and a collaborative project to digitize Theatre Royal playbills. The study employs ecologically-influenced approaches to support the articulation and discussion of the critical issues YSJ DigiRep faces. The study builds on earlier work by the repositories research team examining the possible use of metaphors from ecology in modelling interactions and has been carried out in collaboration with the digital archive staff at York St. John.

From the archive’s webpage

(<http://www.yorks.ac.uk/library/resources/archive/about.aspx> )

“The aim of the project is to establish a repository of university published teaching and learning material, initially largely material already available in digital format, focussing on the output from our [Collaborating for Creativity \(C4C\) CETL](#) as a pilot project, but extending to other material, such as theses, exam papers, the Women's Voices project, special collections (Rees-Williams Victorian children’s books and Theatre Royal archive) and research output, including that from the Enquiry Based Learning and Research Informed Teaching project. This is intended to disseminate the information to as wide an audience as possible, including the wider community beyond higher education.”

## 2 Repository background

YSJ began to develop their digital archive as a way to store, manage, and begin to curate the range of digital materials in a variety of formats text, images, audio, and video produced by the Collaborating for Creativity CETL. The SUE strand of funding and opportunities for collaboration with other organisations in York allowed the identification of other target collections.

In scoping the project, YSJ realised that supporting the use of an open source repository platform would not be possible in their institutional context. Further to this, (and in part because YSJ share a library management system with City of York Council) the library catalogue is intended to be the key single point of access for all materials – consequently any repository solution would have to be able to integrate smoothly with SirsiDynix products. The project was originally intending to use a repository module developed by SirsiDynix but the module was cancelled and SirsiDynix brokered a deal to provide an alternate solution - with PTFS ArchivalWare.

One consequence of the choice of a commercial product is that much of the repository functionality works with minimal technical knowledge or programming ability required. Moreover as YSJ are one of the company's first European customers they have had very good support and have had an opportunity to co-present with the company at conference.

In the course of developing the case study it became clear that there are very few 'technical' interactions in the current ecosystem, YSJ DigiRep is a fairly self-contained digital archive which is only beginning to establish a user community and content collection. As a result nearly all the content in the archive has been directly deposited by the YSJ DigiRep team; as yet there hasn't been significant harvesting or other import of data from other local or remote systems. Alongside this it is not yet clear who might be harvesting the metadata or content or what other local systems might draw on the archive's content (for example as a tool to support: creating content feeds, journals, or website content).

## 3 Key questions

As the digital archive is still under development and working through the process of advocacy and embedding in the teaching and academic workflows at YSJ, many of the questions archive staff wished to explore and many of the pressing issues they face relate to institutional embedding and accruing content. As such the primary consideration of an ecosystem in this case study will look at interactions and entities within the institution.

1. Why are there such good cross 'domain' working relationships and institutional embedding?
2. How can this be built on as the archive seeks to engage more widely with academic staff?
3. Why has the focus of the project shifted to research outputs sooner than expected? And what are the implications of this?
4. What have been the key points of contact with academics thus far? And can any new ones be identified?
5. What have been the delays in gathering content/ making it public? Are any of these roadblocks ongoing and able to be remedied?

## 4 Species and entities

Some of the species (and entities) in the ecosystem include:

1. DigiRep archive staff (Helen and Lauren)
2. Library staff
3. Registry staff
4. Senior management
5. Research office staff (John)
6. E-learning staff (Mark)
7. Content providers
  - a. Academics
  - b. CETL
  - c. Enquiry-based learning initiative
8. Technical / systems staff (Gareth)

It is of note that the staff who are directly responsible for the digital archive (1) have other significant duties within the institution – although this may restrict the operations of the repository at this stage it also increases the degree to which it is embedded in the institution.

Another point of note is that John (5), who is heavily involved in managing the institutional research profile, ran a repository in a former post. He is a willing supporter of YSJ DigiRep and advocate for it within the institution – not all research officers are knowledgeable about or supporters of repositories.

## 5 Interactions

Some of the interactions present in the system include:

1. Advocacy
2. Support
3. Policy development
4. Requirements gathering
5. Planning
6. Cataloguing
7. Sharing

## 6 Environmental factors

Some of the environmental factors affecting the YSJ DigiRep ecosystem include:

1. the high degree of support from PTFS ArchivalWare
2. preparation for the future Research Excellence Framework with its focus on statistics
3. an institutional commitment to preserve and disseminate CETL's outputs
4. the recession and limited budget for the repository [->use of existing staff/ processes integration from the outset (and compromise)]
5. metadata compatibility with external services (Integration of catalogue with City of York Council libraries and involvement in Playbills project with other organisations).

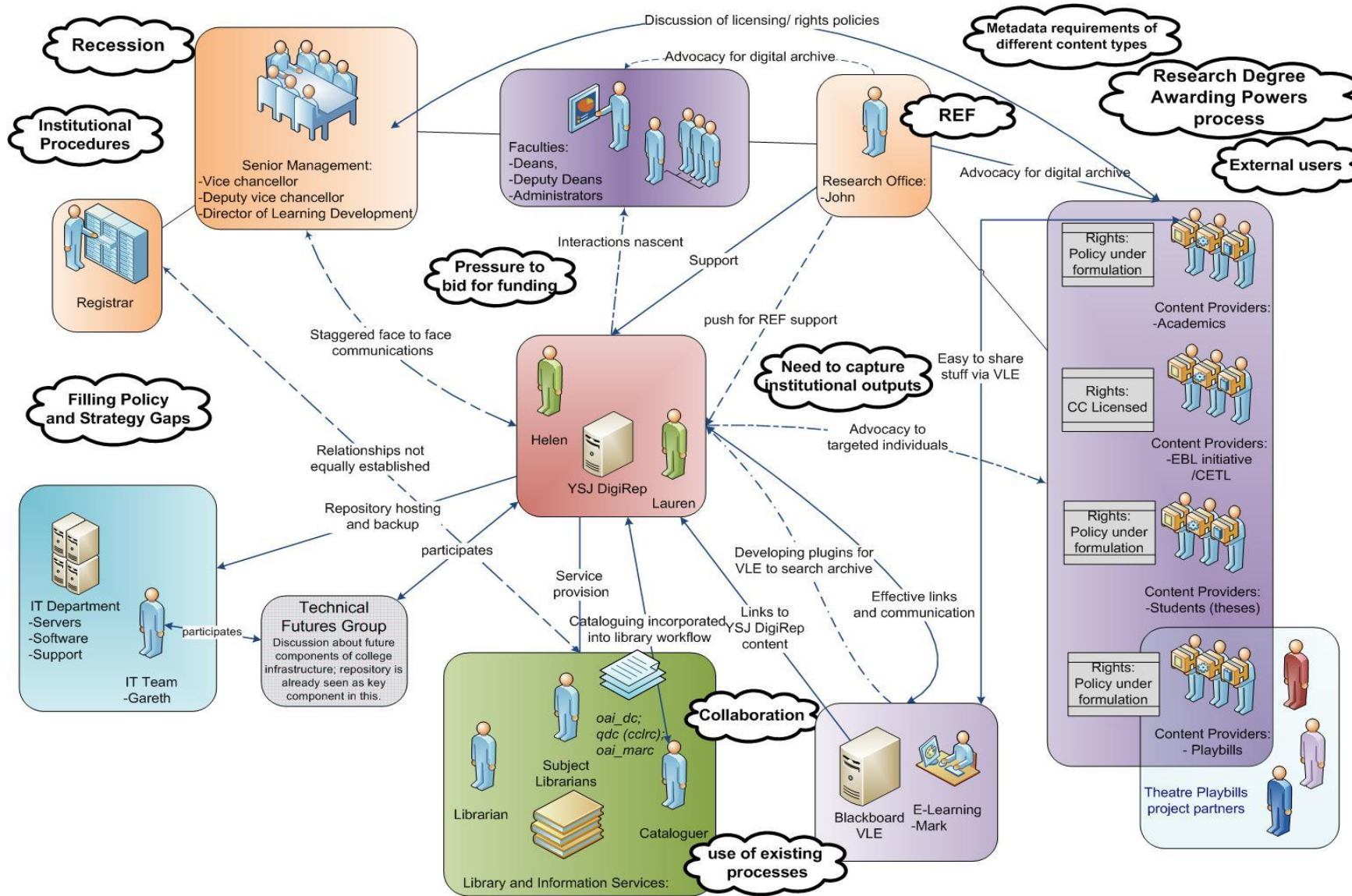


Figure 1 Ecosystem of DigiRep within YSJ

## 7 Wider environment

Although the identified primary ecosystem of YSJ DigiRep is its immediate environment within YSJ, as the repository matures and begins to interact with external services the wider environment of users, related services, and external organisations will grow in prominence. Some of the interactions that currently exist on this level can be sketched briefly as follows:

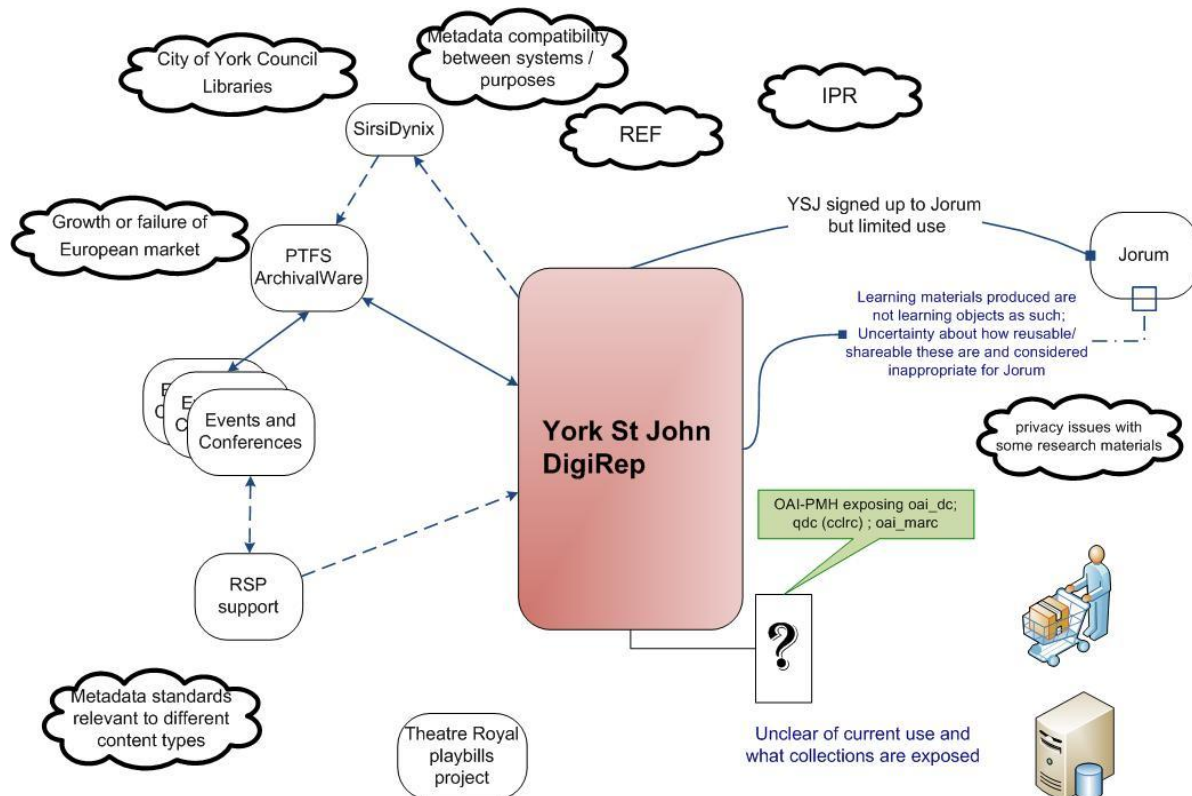


Figure 2 YSJ DigiRep in a wider ecosystem



## 8 Emerging issues

### 1. Managing materials from the CETL and Jorum

Although materials produced by the CETLs are intended for wider dissemination and long-term preservation through Jorum (as well as by the CETLs' host institutions), YSJ has thus far found that the type of materials being produced by their CETL and the type of materials that Jorum appears to be set up to ingest, manage, and make available do not entirely match up. YSJ DigiRep is managing these materials itself and making them available. As Jorum becomes OpenJorum, however, and as it adapts to accommodate content from the Open Educational Resources programme (<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/oer.aspx>) it is likely that YSJ may be able to make their content available through Jorum as well.

### 2. Support from PTFS ArchivalWare

As one of their first European customers, YSJ has enjoyed very good support from their software vendors. This has certainly helped offset the current absence of a 'local' community of others implementing the software (as is enjoyed to a degree by users of the more prevalent types of repository software). It is unclear, however, if this level of support will remain sustainable. Whether it turns out that PTFS's European market does not develop and they reduce support in this region or it turns out that their market develops well and the available support is diluted among other implementers; YSJ should note that future support may not be guaranteed at its current level.

### 3. Staff dependency

The repository has integrated well with existing workflows at YSJ and established workflows across a number of library staff. This degree of embedding is a strength of the digital archive and provides a more sustainable approach to its development. Given the relatively low FTE staffing assigned to the digital archive (in terms of how much of any person's post involves working on it), however, these workflows are quite dependent on the flexibility and skills of all the staff involved.

On a related note as the volume of deposited content in the archive has remained relatively low many of these workflows have not yet been 'stress-tested'. With any future use of YSJ in connection to REF reporting, workload for all concerned is likely to increase significantly at particular points in time.

### 4. Focus on REF

YSJ DigiRep began with an intended focus on a diverse range of materials, particularly focusing on audiovisual materials produced by the university such as instructional video, recordings of performances, and representations of artwork. As the project has progressed it has, to an extent, struggled to acquire such content. Thankfully many of the administrative issues connected to acquiring, managing, and making such content available have been identified and addressed by the YSJ DigiRep team and university administration. The project has also received a lot of support from the university's research office – the incumbent research officer was formerly involved in running an institutional repository. This support has perhaps also raised the profile of the digital archive as a solution to managing the university's research output.

As the archive moves from project funding to institutional funding there will naturally be a greater focus on the concerns of senior university administrators that YSJ DigiRep is able to support the management of the university's research outputs for the upcoming REF – whatever the details of its criteria are. This change in focus, however, may, in the short term, limit the resources available for the ongoing management of learning resources and complex audio-visual research outputs.



## 9 Reflections on process

After completing this case study, we discussed what had been gained through the process, how useful it had been for YSJ, and considered any difficulties which the process or model had presented.

The YSJ DigiRep team found the process of creating this case study valuable, noting that an external observer coming in and asking questions forces you to reconsider your project in a different light and provides perspective on your local context, assumptions, and practice.

Considering the 'ecologically-influenced approach' specifically, they noted that the approach and resultant diagrams capture a helpful overview of the involved communities, their interactions, and their priorities. These diagrams help provide perspective and could form an important part of project planning – as, for example, they clearly identify stakeholders.

In terms of this specific case study, the team found that the approach provided a recognisable snapshot of the project but one that, post-project, had already changed. This highlighted a positive aspect of the approach in that the team felt that the ecology metaphor had an inherent dynamism.

The YSJ DigiRep team did note, however, that the process is time consuming (especially for the synthesiser) and is currently reliant on external expertise. With the current documentation, it would be challenging for someone caught up in the business of a project to find time to understand the approach and do this sort of synthesis themselves. As the diagram ages over time this reliance on external help or dense documentation (the report) may prove to be problematic.

To more successfully inform the planning process of a project this ecological approach needs to become part of the planning cycle and thus more integrated with the project. Iterative changes to the diagram could then form part of the evaluation process.

Overall YSJ found the approach, though reliant on an external consultant, to provide a good way to capture a snapshot of their context and the outputs of the approach to be useful for advocacy and to communicate their context to senior management.