

« Change we can believe in »

Open Access and Institutional Repositories in Belgium

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- what have we done ?

The Open Access movement gained a rather early following in Belgium. The first Institutional Repository went in production at Ghent University. It is still the most achieved and richest in content.

In the French speaking part of Belgium, our consortium started in 2003 the BICTEL project, implementing 9 repositories for electronic thesis, searchable by institution or through a common interface. Today BICTEL contains more than a thousand dissertations and is present in the NDLTD catalogue and on the DART-Europe portal.

BICTEL was also tested for other digital material but showed up unsatisfactory also in comparison with new tools becoming available. That's why, in a second phase new institutional repositories were planned and implemented. The first one to go live several days ago was Liège University with its repository called ORBI based on DSpace.

For UCL and its partners of the Academie Louvain, the DIAL repository based on VITAL and the underlying FEDORA software is almost in production. Well promising tests with services as DRIVER (we heard about yesterday) and the NEREUS network were already achieved.

In a further development, those same repositories will also be used for hosting the digitized printed material of our libraries.

So far for the infrastructure, but it's not enough to set up a repository, you need also content. What about politics ? On initiative of DRIVER-Belgium, all Belgian universities and the two national funding bodies signed the Berlin Declaration. This was an important first step, but it

doesn't compel you a lot. Nevertheless it shows the growing awareness of the academic authorities.

All experiences show that institutional repositories are successful only if the deposit is mandatory. Pioneered by the rector Rentier of Liege university, initiator also of the EurOpenScholarship initiative, most of our universities are on this way now, under the formula immediate deposit / optional access. This is a very encouraging situation even if there are still a lot of pending issues. I will not go into the problems, they are the same as everywhere concerning copyright and evaluation issues. Most of those issues are linked to the traditional publication scheme that has to be modified if we want to make bigger steps forward to generalized open access

- *why we have done it*

- journal prices

As everywhere in the library world, probably, the starting point was the price increase for traditional journals (more than 275 % since 93, while the general price index rose only by about 30%).

But it's not only the increase. It's also the conviction that the value added by traditional publishers to the "raw material" they got for nothing and for exclusive use from the researcher, most often, is not worth the price asked for it.

The problem than is the exclusivity and the monopolistic character of each scientific publication. If you need a particular journal for your research you cannot just buy another one, as you could buy a less fancy car when you don't have the money for a Ferrari. You or your institution have to pay the price that is asked for it, market rules are not applying.

So what we are doing when we are lobbying for open access, is not fighting against publishers : they did a great job in times when there was no alternative to traditional publishing, printing and distribution. This is not a job for scientists or librarians. We were glad they did it for us and were willing to pay a reasonable amount of money for it. And we are still ready to do so if the added value is worth the price. But we can not accept that traditional publishing, in place of sustaining research, becomes more and more a brake to research because researchers, due to high price policies, are unable to have easy access to the information they need, or because

too much of the money available for research goes into publishing. So what we do when we promote open access, is just trying to bring in an alternative and let decide the user what price he is ready to pay for what added value.

- archiving issues

Another reason for us to set up Institutional Repositories (and here I insist more on the Institutional in IR), is more a library thing. Our mission is to perpetuate access to scientific information. But how can we fulfil our mission in a more and more e-only environment where we no longer own the information but only give access to it ? What will happen to it if it has no longer any market value ? Will our epoch become the Middle Ages of the electronic era known only through some rare and obscure electronic manuscripts ? Of course there are agreements, mechanisms and tools coming in place to warrantee the conservation and archiving. But is the own institution not the first, natural place to archive the information it produces, as part of its scientific capital, and is this not the only way to stay in control of it ?

- changing paradigm of scholarly communication

There is a third reason that makes us setting up our repositories : it is the consideration that the traditional form of scholarly communication is dictated by the possibilities (and limits) of print publishing. In an electronic environment, there is no reason to stick to the traditional scheme of journals and articles. Journals can consist in overlay journals, build by bringing virtually together the best papers in a domain which have been contributed to repositories all over the world ; articles can be released as soon as they are accepted and peer reviewed, without waiting for the “volume” to be complete ; more and more papers are published together with the initial datasets, allowing other scientist to verify, discuss and bounce off from what is already collected ; texts are no longer static items, fixed once for ever, they change to work in progress, integrating remarks, and new considerations without ever reaching a “final version”. Scholars are communicating through domain specific networks and grids, reducing the traditional paper to registry and archiving issues.

We think that progressive, well designed repositories in open access are the best way to accompany those changes, facilitating the scholarly communication by maintaining and making available to everybody the raw material of scientific discourse