

Case study 2: University of Tasmania Library of Special and Rare Collections

www.utas.edu.au/library/research/special-and-rare-collections

Summary

This university library holds a significant collection of special and rare items, which it aims to make digitally accessible for researchers now and in the future. While it has gone some way to achieving this, it needs greater capacity, expert advice about best practice, and refinements to its technology in order to achieve this goal. These issues are being addressed and the library is poised to realise many of its ambitions.

Background

The primary aim of the University of Tasmania's Special and Rare Collections is to make its significant collections discoverable and accessible to all current researchers, while preserving these collections for all future researchers.

The collections are managed and housed in the Morris Miller Library on the Sandy Bay campus. The Special and Rare Collections is a set of legacy collections that has been donated and acquired over the years since the University's inception in 1890. In 2015 this collection was confirmed as nationally significant by a National Library of Australia significance assessment. The collection continues to grow by donations, but currently space is a constraint.

The overall management of these collections is the responsibility of a Senior Librarian (Collections), with a part-time Librarian and part-time Library Officer. The library aims to have volunteers to support the maintenance of the collections and is planning to start the volunteer program with tasks related to digitisation and transcribing handwritten documents.

Community

The Special and Rare Collections are open to the public and the library provides a reference enquiry service. Most rare materials are available for viewing and consultation in the secure Reading Room. Some materials require access permission prior to viewing. Increasingly there are more online visitors — over 100,000 views on the Library Open Repository were recorded from January to June 2016, from locations all over the world.

The changing needs of researchers has presented challenges with the expectation of researchers to be able to access quality content online thus the aim to make the Collections discoverable and accessible to researchers of all types, both globally and locally; and to preserve the collections.

Community engagement and partnerships

Special and Rare Collections staff have identified the need to establish stronger networks and more of a community of practice around digitisation and preservation. Special and Rare Collections staff can seek advice from the Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office (TAHO), part of LINC Tasmania, by referring questions to contacts and other networks, but there is no formal direction or policy. The library can seek information and ideas through networks with other university libraries and archives. Again, this relies on contacts rather than organised forums.

A community of practice has been established through project funding to investigate discovery platforms and select and implement an archival description and content management system which would position the Library to make globally discoverable its Special and Rare Collections, which represent unique cultural and historical primary research material.

The Library has been working with local cultural institutions, TAHO and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) to investigate systems and to consider the possibility of interoperability of systems between institutions in Tasmania. TMAG has recently engaged Gaia Resources, to work with them on The Tasmanian Collection — the Pilot Project, which will look at how to create a common, aggregated digital entry to Tasmania's cultural collections, and how this can encourage cultural tourism. The project will produce pilot web resource, as well as investigate how to move this into the future as a sustainable and useful resource for all museums and heritage collections across Tasmania.

Collection

The collection includes rare books and early manuscripts; journals; maps; university records of a non-business nature; and private papers and materials including diaries, letters, photographs, paintings and other collectable ephemera relating to Tasmania's cultural and social history. The Royal Society of Tasmania Library Collection is housed as part of a longstanding agreement.

The collection has more than 8,500 rare books and journal and houses the largest Quaker collection of books and private papers in the southern hemisphere. There are 500 private deposits including letters, diaries, papers, photographs. A significant donation of over 100,000 digital images detailing many aspects of Tasmania's cultural history has recently been accepted.



The Christ College Library. 'Christ College was founded by Lord and Lady Franklin in 1846 in Tasmania to provide a university style education.'

Photo credit: Heather Excell

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Photo credit: Heather Excell

Digital access

Discoverability and access to these materials is provided via various platforms and formats:

- Some of the material from the collections has been digitised and can be viewed in the Library Open Repository (ePrints) <http://eprints.utas.edu.au/view/collections/> Many of these items have been digitised in response to queries from researchers.
- Rare books and journals are catalogued via the traditional online library catalogue <http://millennium.lib.utas.edu.au/>
- The private deposits have been described, to differing levels, on paper indexes and these have been digitised — allowing discoverability by online researchers, for example http://eprints.utas.edu.au/11177/1/rs_25_Diaries_and_Letters_of_G_T_W_B_Boyes_1820-1853.pdf

The most significant parts of the collection are described in the manner outlined above but much more detailed descriptions of the private deposits would serve researchers well. Various minor collections have print inventories. It is estimated that 30%–59% of the collection is currently described or catalogued.

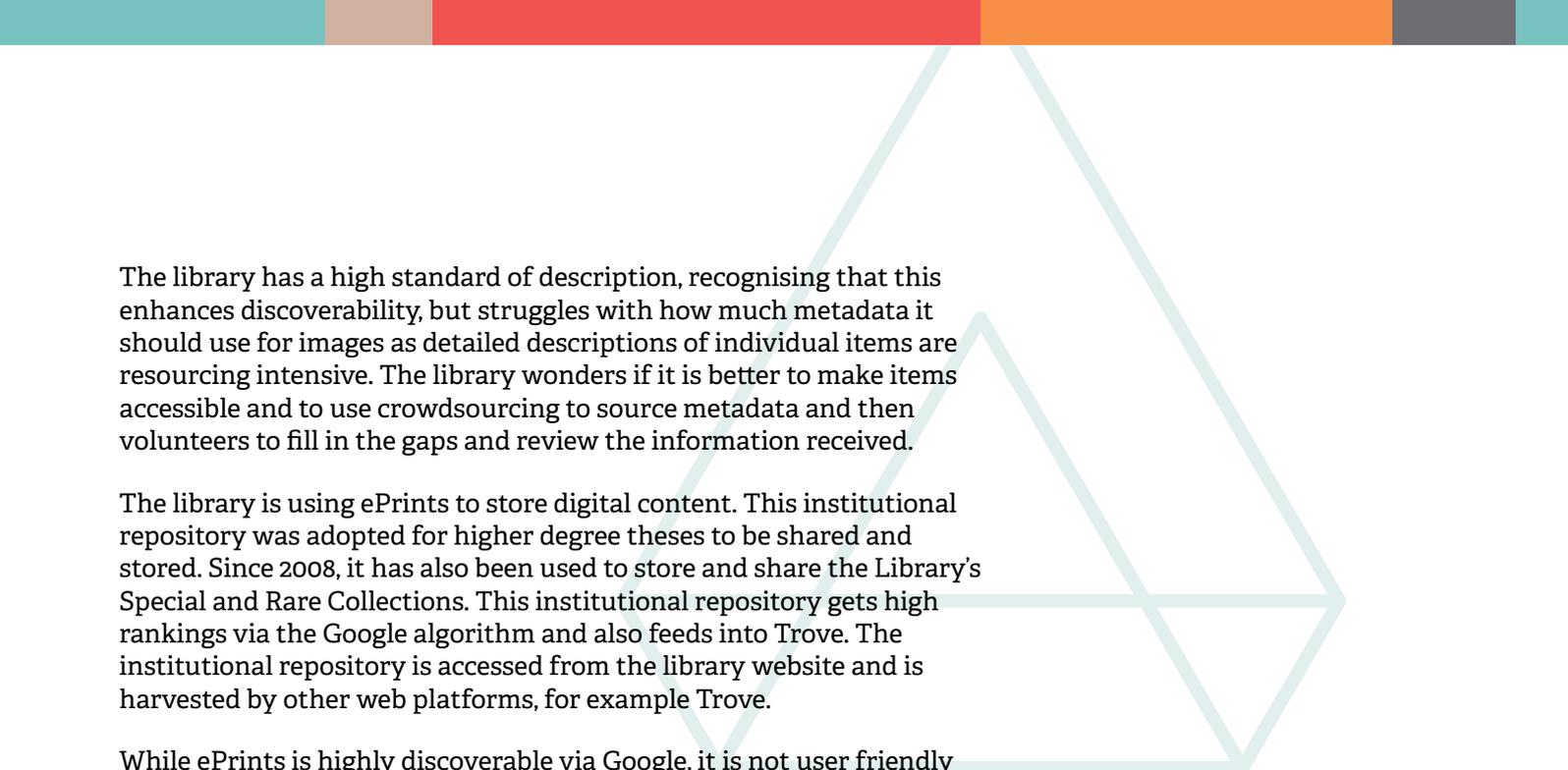
Challenges

Resourcing to prioritise and plan the digitisation and preservation of the various collections, plus provision of description and metadata to make content discoverable are difficult to sustain. Added to this there is a need for digital collections to be curated and researched, to turn content into meaningful packages, exhibitions and narratives for users. Special and Rare Collections staff regularly apply for and have received grants to assist with various projects, but in the long term this is no substitute for recurrent operational funding.

Advice on best management practice for the full range of the library collections is difficult to identify, as many institutions are dealing with, for example, different platforms and systems.

The library wants to provide a high quality user experiences but has found limitations in available software and systems. It is also experiencing issues in managing copyright, particularly with unpublished content such as personal diaries and letters. Investigating copyright is time consuming and often leads to inconclusive resolutions.

The library makes available high quality images to reduce handling and staff time, but is aware that many institutions sell high quality images. Clarity is needed around the display of low and high resolution images. Resourcing to set this up would be ideal.



The library has a high standard of description, recognising that this enhances discoverability, but struggles with how much metadata it should use for images as detailed descriptions of individual items are resourcing intensive. The library wonders if it is better to make items accessible and to use crowdsourcing to source metadata and then volunteers to fill in the gaps and review the information received.

The library is using ePrints to store digital content. This institutional repository was adopted for higher degree theses to be shared and stored. Since 2008, it has also been used to store and share the Library's Special and Rare Collections. This institutional repository gets high rankings via the Google algorithm and also feeds into Trove. The institutional repository is accessed from the library website and is harvested by other web platforms, for example Trove.

While ePrints is highly discoverable via Google, it is not user friendly because each item file needs to be opened individually. There is no browsing capacity to scroll through images. There are also limits with the way metadata is displayed and limits to the overall structure of the database. As referred to previously, the Library is currently investigating platforms to address the user access issue and also to maximise the discoverability of its collections.

To help establish access to the collection the library has spoken to various vendors, providers and companies including: Gaia Resources, Artefactual (who supply AtoM, and Archivematica) Gale, Innovative, Omeka, eHive, Archive Space and Adlib.

The library is strongly supportive of any integrated national infrastructure initiatives such as Trove, but requires more information about how Trove could potentially reduce duplication of activities.

Opportunities

The library aims to have all its Special and Rare Collections discoverable and accessible online and to the same level of access as if the researcher were to visit the collection in person. It also views digital collections access as having potential to add value where the collection can be researched and navigated by themes and topics, provenance information and linkages to other collections and data. The library would also like to transcribe handwritten text. It aims to have complete metadata to aid discoverability. The Library also sees great opportunities for using digital collection access to enhance and develop its exhibition capacity. It also sees potential for online materials to facilitate a richly layered user experience and assist the preservation of fragile materials where three dimensional objects can be viewed from all angles and with zoom functionality; also where pages can be turned as easily as holding and turning the original copy.

As a result of project funding previously referred to, the Library is currently implementing Artefactual's Access to Memory (AtoM), an open-source archival description and workflow tool; along with Omeka/Ozmeke as a discovery tool overlaying AtoM, as well as investigating a geo-mapping tool. Omeka will have the potential to interoperate with the systems used by other Tasmanian cultural collections to provide a single point of discovery for all.

Conclusion

The library is ambitious and making steady progress in both digitisation and digital access. More resourcing is needed to achieve its ambitions: to make its significant collections discoverable and accessible to all current researchers, while preserving these collections for all future researchers.

The library is poised to realise many of its ambitions with new platforms and software currently being installed, though interoperability of the diverse array of digital platforms is an issue and with the desired functionality of systems not yet developed.

It needs advice on how to prioritise digitisation of its collection and whether it should progress detailed documentation first or simply make the collection accessible and crowd source information.

The library is grappling with issues of copyright and storage of high resolution images.

It supports aggregated databases like Trove and sees digital collections access as a means to provide a high level of researcher access and online experiences that engage with the collection, such as exhibitions and storytelling.