

Universities join forces to manage their libraries

Victoria, Otago, Waikato and AUT set up system for digitally stored information

Stephen Ballantyne

Anyone who has visited a university lately may have observed that "reading" for a degree in arts or sciences these days involves poring over a lot more digitally-stored information and correspondingly less paper.

The drawers of library file cards that once catalogued university library holdings are now digitised – but so is much of the source data itself.

To deal with this four of the country's universities have set up the Library Consortium of New Zealand (LCoNZ), a project aimed at unifying the data storage strategies of their libraries.

LCoNZ general manager Jean Ballantyne, based at Victoria University, said the company was set up for three main reasons.

"First, to implement a shared library management



JEAN BALLANTYNE: Wants to sell the service to more institutions in the future

system for all four of the universities, a need which came up in 2004 for all of them.

"Second was to enhance that system by adding other types of products, such as

federated searching and link resolvers.

"And third was to manage support for storage and access to locally created digital objects.

"The first two aspects have been completed now, and we're working on the third part, which we're doing by creating a shared multi-institutional research repository.

"This is a big thing concerning universities at the moment – how to provide access to their research. Generally it's done by setting up institutional repositories, but sharing such data is actually quite a big task.

"There's a whole lot of issues around rights management. And often things are published in journals, so there are copyright issues to be resolved and so on."

Presumably metadata has to be attached to flag these issues?

"Metadata is a big issue, in terms of how the original data is accessed and stored and in terms of long-term preservation.

"We're not doing this just for the short-term – we have to have an eye to the future and select formats that will last. How easy will it be to read a Word 6 document in 50 years' time, for example? How will it be preserved over time?"

"Our prime issue is to get open access for research and to make that research as widely available as possible, and to preserve it for the long term.

"Harvesters are being set up to go through all these repositories so there's one access point. The National Library is currently working on that."

As yet the consortium isn't actually digitising existing paper holdings – it has its hands full with the constant avalanche of digital data pouring out of the universities, all of it already in digital form.

"The process of putting in anything that is born digital is under way, but retrospective digitisation is a task for the future."

So how is it there isn't a single system for every university in the country?

"In the late 1990s a report by the vice-chancellors' group of university libraries suggested that all the universities should work together, and that is what LCoNZ was born out of.

"But Auckland University [which has set up its own "digital commons"] was not willing to join in – it wanted its own system."

"Lincoln and Canterbury weren't in a position to replace their library management system at the time [LCoNZ was set up] and Lincoln has subsequently done something different; Canterbury may yet join the consortium, and I understand that Massey doesn't have the money to replace its library management system yet and so it's hanging on to what it's got.

"But we now have a customer. In addition to the shareholding universities, the system as it is now is also suitable for polytechnics, and Wintech [Waikato Institute of Technology] has come in to the organisation as a customer.

"The specialist requirements of tertiary libraries, and possibly crown research libraries, mean we can negotiate the supply of the service on a per-search basis.

"In the long term we should be able to sell our hosted institutional repository, with more institutions added as they come on board."

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STEPHEN BALLANTYNE

Service packs for Vista – and XP

Microsoft has announced plans for a Vista Service Pack, which was always inevitable. Although Microsoft does a heroic job of pre-testing new Windows releases, even it can't try out everything. I believe SP1 is Microsoft's way of fixing the most egregious stuff it missed, presumably based on feedback from customers. Later there'll be SP2, which – if Windows XP is any guide – will be when users will start to feel really comfortable with Vista. The official Vista SP1 release is scheduled for the first quarter of next year, but in the meantime Microsoft says it will be sending a beta SP1 out to 10,000-15,000 testers. Something of a surprise to me is Microsoft's announcement of Windows XP SP3. I thought XP SP2 was about as perfect as Windows could be, but Microsoft has other ideas. XP SP3 will include all previous updates plus "a small number of new updates" and will appear in the first half of next year. Good to see Microsoft continuing to tweak XP, even though it would probably prefer it of everyone ditched it for Vista. But there are still many who prefer XP and won't switch yet.

When better is next to useless

Unfortunately I have switched to Vista and I wish I had done so differently. In particular I wish I'd set up a dual-boot system, so I could start up in Vista or XP at will, but I was too impatient. Also I was too cheap: I put another 1GB of Ram into my PC, added a 500GB drive and a new graphics card, because everyone said Vista required more powerful hardware, but it wasn't enough. I should have bought a new processor and motherboard as well – in other words, a completely new computer. Under XP, my PC was a sprightly young athlete, quick and responsive; under Vista, it's gone all middle-aged. Microsoft has a hardware performance scoring system, mainly for games. My PC's performance score is 3.2 out of five. The minimum requirement for playing Solitaire is two, and that works fine. Halo 2 wants a three machine, which means mine will barely do. And as for proper software – well, speech recognition with XP and Office XP worked well enough to be useful (especially if you put on an American accent). Speech recognition with Vista and Office 2007 is obviously more accurate, has a much improved user interface and understands English English – but it's much, much slower than my typing and therefore useless.

XP is nearly dead, long live XP

Elsewhere I work some days in an office that boldly installed Vista everywhere, but on PCs each with only 1GB of Ram. Two or three times a day the software I use there fogs over, which is Vista's way of telling it has stopped running. Then Vista will announce it is attempting to fix the problem, even though it never succeeds. Frequent use of control-S is standard operating procedure. So to be happy with Vista, my experience suggests you should buy as much hardware as you can afford. But there's plenty of other Vista-isms I don't much care for, particularly the Aero user interface, which looks pretty but doesn't actually do much. Somebody told me it "looks like a Mac," but as a Mac user I disagree – and it certainly doesn't work like a Mac. Actually, I still run XP virtualised on my Mac notebook, using Parallels Desktop, and compared with Vista it feels great. For some things it even seems to be quicker than the native Mac OS – that'll get me drummed out of the fanclub. But for many things XP is still great. Long may it flourish.

Windows Server 2008 slated for February

Microsoft also announced it will be releasing Windows Server 2008 in the first quarter of next year. In this case that means a joint global roll-out of Windows Server 2008, Visual Studio 2008 and Microsoft SQL Server 2008 at the end of February.

LeftClick converts the masses

LeftClick Labs of Christchurch, which operates from the Canterbury Innovation Incubator, says its post-click conversion business has doubled in size and turnover in the past year and it expects it to double in size again over the next year. "Post-click conversion?" That's marketing geek talk for making people buy stuff from websites – which LeftClick does with web analysis and usability techniques (monitoring what website visitors do, then modifying the site to make it more attractive) and claims to be able to increase "sales conversion rates" by more than 50%. There's quite a lot of business out there to be done – LeftClick claims New Zealanders are now spending more than \$1.5 billion a year on the web and that the expenditure is growing fast. This is good news mainly for Trade Me, I suspect, but it isn't unreasonable to expect 5% of retail to eventually take place online.

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