

Peer Review of Digital Resources for the Arts and Humanities

The mechanisms for the peer review and evaluation of the traditional print outputs of scholarly research in the Arts and Humanities are well established, but no equivalent exists for assessing the value of digital resources and of the scholarly work which leads to their creation. If digital resources are genuinely to contribute to the research profile of UK Higher Education Institutions and form part of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), it is essential that a framework for evaluating digital resources, and ensuring quality control, be established. A consistently-applied system of peer review (of both the intellectual content and the technical architecture) will serve to reassure academics and their host institutions of the worth of time spent in the creation of digital resources, establish those types of resource which are of most use and interest to the academic community, contribute to the development of common standards and guidelines for accessibility and usability, and inform proposals to ensure the sustainability and preservation of high-quality scholarly material.

Our ICT Strategy project, which ran from October 2005 to September 2006, surveyed the current position with regard to peer review and suggested a framework for evaluating the quality, sustainability and impact over time of digital resources for the arts and humanities. The project concentrated on History, in its broadest sense, but also brought in colleagues from Archaeology and Classics, to ensure that discipline-specific practices and concerns were fully acknowledged.

The project identified a number of barriers to successful peer review, including training, institutional priorities, cultural preference for print, and the difficulties of assessing collaborative research. Its recommendations, which will be outlined in this presentation, sought to address and remedy these problems, and to lay the foundations for a system of peer review for digital resources which might be implemented at the national level. In so doing it sought to strike a balance between the need to establish common and widely recognised standards and the requirement to maintain the inherent subjectivity of the peer review process.