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Managing Access Rights for the Repositories of U.Porto

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Matos Fernandes, Maria Eugénia (1); Ribeiro, Cristina (2)

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Submitted by: **Prof. Cristina Ribeiro (FEUP, PT)**, ID: 1269

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Abstract

Digital repositories are replacing traditional archives, and their functions largely exceed those of their ancestors. In a higher education institution, where multiple activities take place motivated by its teaching, research, community engagement and cultural missions, repositories may become endowed with a spectrum of functionalities that range from the support for teaching resources, the registry of academic publication, the management of research data, the preservation of heritage materials and the dissemination of timely news.

In this paper we are looking at the repository structure of U.Porto from the point of view of access rights and access restrictions. The experience at U.Porto has shown that an institutional repository does require considerable effort in the identification of the materials to be incorporated, and that a substantial part of that effort has to be devoted to the management of the access conditions.

We consider a set of case studies from U.Porto documents and analyze the processes required to make them available. The cases cover scientific papers, research data and administrative documents, and are just a sample of the many situations the university is facing in its mission of preserving the institutional memory and making resources available to a large audience in and outside the university.

For the scientific production, it is well known that authors are often not aware of their rights and, even in publications allowing them to have copies in the institutional repositories, they do not take the initiative to provide them. But even the internal process of publishing theses and dissertations, where a steady flow into the repository is expected, can take a long time to establish. Despite the existence of a common information system for almost 10 years now [1], U.Porto has a large diversity of practices and the process of thesis deposit is hindered by the fact that authors are allowed by general law to prevent the publication.

The recently created experimental data repository [2] provides the opportunity for researchers to preserve valuable datasets, sharing them within their community and even providing open access to data. The main issue in this area, as we have observed so far, is the lack of experience with data publication. If the possibility of publishing the data is not taken into account at the time researchers collect the data, it may become impracticable for them to obtain the required permissions at a later time, as this would involve new contacts with human subjects or extra conditions in existing contracts.

A significant number of administrative documents have been digitized and are organized as part of the institutional repository (currently over 15.000 records). The access conditions for materials such as student processes and staff contracts have been objected even in the presence of a conservative publication policy. Portuguese law is very strict with respect to the publication of personal data, and therefore the inclusion of documents on past staff contracts, for instance, even when expurgated from components related to health, family, opinions and work evaluations, has required the consultation with the national authorities for administrative data access. The minutes of various university committees are considered public, but they can only be published after their decisions have been validated and even so they may include personal information for which access may not be granted.

The long history of U.Porto has amassed many valuable historic materials such as the files of former students, minutes of sessions of management bodies, architecture projects, legacies from former professors and students and donations from other, possibly extinct, bodies, with which U.Porto had institutional relations. These materials also raise specific access issues, which have to be considered individually.

Overall, the experience with U.Porto repositories has shown that managing the access rights of repository documents is a time consuming tasks requiring ingenuity on the part of the repository managers to avoid getting trapped in complex and even contradictory legal conditions. The details of a large collection of cases for access rights can provide other repository managers with a realistic evaluation of the problems that arise when the institutional repositories go beyond the scientific production to expose the administrative processes and the miscellaneous documents resulting from the multiple activities of the university.

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[2] U.Porto Experimental Data Repository. <http://sciencedata.up.pt/>

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