

# Alisa Miller

Interviewer Hello, and welcome to this Jisc podcast interview. In this series we're chatting to teams from projects being funded by Jisc's research data spring project to find out more about what they're developing. Today I'm speaking to Alisa from Guild HE. Hello Alisa.

Alisa Hello.

Interviewer Could you just introduce yourself quickly?

Alisa Miller Sure, my name's Alisa Miller, I work at Guild HE and I work also on the CREST research consortium, so it's a bit of policy, a bit of research, a bit of everything, and right now it's research data management systems.

Interviewer What do you do specifically on the research data spring project?

Alisa Miller I am essentially the liaison between the CREST research group which is comprised of 22 heads of research, so I'm essentially talking to them about what each individual institution is looking for in terms of research data management, what they're planning in terms of strategy, what they need to build, etc. and then I coordinate and communicate back and forth between the developers and the various project partners. Yes, I suppose that's a good summary.

Interviewer What's your project called and could you just tell us a little bit about what it's going to do?

Alisa Miller Sure. The project is called A Consortial Approach to Building an Integrated Research Data Management System. So we're very much looking at how can we build something that is accessible to smaller and specialist institutions where you don't necessarily have in-house developers, you don't have the massive research infrastructure, you don't necessarily have huge amounts of research funding either, so you're kind of doing all of this... It's absolutely important to achieve best practice to put these systems in place for your researchers to get people engaged with it, but you don't necessarily want to be duplicating, so people have pooled their resources and we're trying to see if we can build a system that could meet the needs of all of the members. I think for institutions and for other consortia beyond CREST this is of interest as well, because a lot of the systems that are available are quite big, they're either very, very bespoke for particular institutions and they're built in-house, or they're not specifically designed to meet the needs of a smaller institution. So we're just trying to streamline everything and make it a little bit more accessible.

Interviewer Who else has been working with you on the project team?

Alisa Miller It was really interesting, it started out as a number of individual projects, and we all went to the first research spring event that Jess [inaudible 0:02:22] did and kind of

formed this almost like Pangea group. So it's CREST and the 22 institutions within the network; University for the Creative Arts is leading on art and design as it relates to research data management, Leeds Trinity University was exploring how do you work with commercial partners and can they streamline their offers as well to provide an option for a smaller institution? Then also with ULCC and Arkivum who are working very much on the development side and designing workflows and trying to build integrations between for instance Eprints and Arkivum. So those are the project partners.

Interviewer Why did you choose to tackle the particular problem that you're looking to address? It sounds like you're tailoring what you're delivering for small and specialist institutions or departments within institutions; are you all from those kind of areas?

Alisa Miller Yes. So all of the CREST members... There are different skills: there's the University of Worcester, University of Winchester, University of Chichester, multi-faculty institutions who have really, really established and continually growing research profiles and research portfolios, and there are smaller institutions who do quite a bit of research but are not necessarily having to coordinate across a number of subjects, so we're kind of trying to meet the needs of these institutions but don't necessarily have huge amounts of funding to work specifically on for instance designing open access systems or whatever the case may be. They were very much aware that they have to meet the requirements of the funders, and they very much want to do this because they see it as best practice but they felt that the way they could do that is by working together instead of working individually, so that's very much... We were talking about open access, we had already built a shared open access repository around Eprints that's hosted by ULCC, so we had that experience, and we thought, well why not see if we can do something around research data management as well so that these institutions can have this in place for the next five/ten years? It's just a more sustainable option for them.

Interviewer What do you hope is going to change as a result of your project outputs?

Alisa Miller I think at the very least it's provided all the institutions who are participating with an opportunity to really focus on this issue and to share best practice and say, what am I doing about this? What are we doing about that? Particularly in art and design I think it's very interesting because what is research data in art and design? That's not necessarily even defined. So it's given the opportunity for institutions in the [Ardiva 0:05:00] Group, which includes University of the Arts London, Glasgow School of Art, Goldsmiths, University of Creative Arts as well as Royal College to talk about this as well and to think, okay what are we really going to need to do for the long term? We're kind of aware of what we need to have in place to support researchers but we need to thinking in the longer term.

I think a success in the longer term is if we can actually build something that really, really works for the institutions, we can then hopefully move into stage 3 of the project where it's very much about dissemination and take-up by the researchers and research students and all of the research administrators and such. So if we can do something that really, really works for the all the institutions, and it's not necessarily regardless of whether or not they're in the consortial research status system, they're still gaining from it because they can see the various options out there. They may choose to with a commercial partner but there'll be more competitive options for them.

Interviewer It sounds like you've been working with people that perhaps you haven't worked with before, has this been the first opportunity for a multidisciplinary group like yours to get together and share ideas?

Alisa Miller Well incidentally no actually, because CREST has been around now for about five years, so I think that's one of the things that actually made it possible for us to do this project, we have five or six meetings a year with all the heads of research, we have sub-networks, so we already had contacts of people working in libraries, people working in research administration, people curating data about research students, so we essentially already had those contacts, so when the research data spring call went out we kind of already knew that this was an issue for a number of institutions, that it was something they were really interested in taking forward, so we were able then to coalesce around this particular issue and to really, really be able to hit the ground running, if you know what I mean? So we weren't having to spend stage 1 getting everyone together, everyone was already in place and we already had some information, but then we could just really, really move quite quickly with it.

But that said, I will say in terms of the Ardeva Group, I think that's really been reinvigorated by the process, so again that focus on what is research data in art and design and what are the systems that we need to put in place to support those researchers and practice based researchers? That has been really, really welcome, to engage again with all those other institutions as well as the specialists within CREST.

Interviewer You've explained that you've been working quite quickly, how have you found the rest of the process to date?

Alisa Miller I have to say, and I hope this doesn't sound negative, at the beginning I was a little bit worried, because you always start out with an idea, and it was quite a quick call, we were at the research data spring event and we basically had a few days to essentially re-invent the project and put something together. But it's been really, really wonderful, particularly the partners have been fantastic, everyone's worked really, really quickly, every few weeks we have catch-up meetings to see where everyone is going, people are then contributing blogs. The heads of research were incredibly good, We had, I think now a 100% response rate to the survey that we put out about what they specifically wanted to do, really good attendance at all the events. So when you have that kind of engagement I think you have the information then to work with, and that just makes it ever so much easier, it's really, really encouraging. So that's been fantastic.

I've found the research data spring events themselves really, really useful as well to find out what other people are working on, because of course there are things that come up in the discussions and people say, oh wouldn't it be great if someone was doing something around, for instance, data as it relates to practice based research in sound, for instance, and there's someone working on that, so we can almost be right at the cutting edge in terms of what's being developed within the sector as well, and that's fantastic, it's really a good feeling.

Interviewer you've spoken a little about what you found particularly useful; what have you enjoyed most about being part of the research data spring project?

Alisa Miller For me personally, because I'm an active researcher and you don't necessarily always get the time to take a step back and think about the process and how you document it,

and so from a very, very personal perspective I've just found... I've always been really interested in digitization, I have a little bit of a background in that, at Oxford when I was finishing up my PhD I got to work on a Jisc-funded project that was around digitizing archives, so it really is about... I particularly enjoyed for instance talking about where you draw the line between research data and archiving, if you see what I mean, in the particular discipline. So it's just a fascinating area, there's so much that's going on.

The technical advances that are making some really, really interesting things possible in terms of visual and sound and such, just being able to find out more and more about that. I'm also quite, and I think a number of the people I work with were all, I'm really, really interested, I love neat and tidy systems, so seeing how things which are maybe a little bit dispersed within an institution and people are sometimes having to contact different departments and such, seeing how things could be organised in a way that really does streamline things for people, I think I really, really enjoyed that. I also really, really enjoyed working with the technical partners, because the expertise that they have is just incredible, and you always come to them and you think, this is going to be a really difficult question, and actually they say, no that's absolutely fine. So they're incredibly knowledgeable and very good about finding solutions.

Interviewer      What are you looking forward to most in what your project's going to do in future?

Alisa Miller      I think because I'm working in an institution as well, so it's just almost that moment when we can say it's in place and we can really start to use it. Also really we can start to talk about it with the researchers, because I think researchers, whenever they hear about a new system they worry that that's exactly what it is, another new system that they're going to have to find time in their day to engage with, but once you start to explain to them that these systems are actually really important, they make it much more likely that your research and research processes are going to be preserved, that they are really, really excited about, and particularly the potential to be able to push some of this data out almost to different platforms, and thinking about that and just having those conversations and being able to say to people, this is actually going to make your life a lot easier, as well as being best practice, as well as making research more open to the public. I think that's what I'm really looking forward to. Of course you have to do a lot of work behind the scenes to get to that point, and I think I'd be really pleased at the end if that's where we are.

Interviewer      Could you talk a little bit more about the specific point of the project you're at at the moment and what your next step is in the third phase of the project?

Alisa Miller      Sure. We've generated a number of reports that are essentially the context, and we've been talking to a number of potential partners around for instance open source grid systems and such, but really the focus of the problem right now is essentially setting on particular workflows, and the technical partners are now actually... Our design case are actually designing updates for instance to Eprints and really talking with Arkivum and with ULCC about how this can all be integrated. So at the moment it's very much a kind of... It is about building things and seeing how it actually works behind the scenes and trying to get it really, really streamlined, and then we'll move into the stage of consultation again with the heads of research and with their various colleagues so that they can essentially be critiquing the systems as we go forwards. So that's kind of where we are right now.

It's a little bit quiet on my end because although we've got all the future meetings and the future points at which we're going to test things in place, really it's about the technical development at the moment, of which I know what they're doing but I don't know how they're doing it. So, it's very impressive to me, and then they'll come back with a number of options and we'll again start critiquing what they've built.

Interviewer How have you found working with Jisc?

Alisa Miller I think Jisc is great. As I said, I mentioned when I was just finishing up my PhD I worked on a Jisc-funded project which was about First World War poetry and digitizing archival materials, and I have to say I was a very, very traditional kind of historian, I spent a lot of time in archives, I really didn't necessarily see what digitization or what anything apart from emails had to do with me, and all of a sudden this world of potential and using... Being able to work with different partners, we worked with teachers, we worked with students, we thought about how they could use these particular resources, that kind of work around engagement with different audiences, that really, really appealed to me and just made that possible, and now I see this as another kind of aspect of it. This is a different audience, it's a group of institutions that doesn't necessarily always get to specifically engage in these big discussions, really important discussions about the future of research data, and at the same time be building something that they see as being really, really useful but also potentially a good example for other institutions who might be working in consortia in this way.

Interviewer Do you think there's been a similar turning point in your work in this project?

Alisa Miller Hmm, I guess even when I was doing my PhD it's kind of a number of starting points. I think probably just... Well this is probably going to sound very obvious but I think when we got the second stage funding, or maybe it was even just when we put everything up online and we saw what we had gotten through and took a moment and said, okay we now actually have all this incredible information that we have such great engagement we can really, really do something with it now, it's not just an idea, it's something that we can build. That was a bit of a turning point. I'm sure there will be others as well.

Interviewer Do you think any nicknames have sprung up as you've been working together on the project?

Alisa Miller Not so much a nickname as we think we may have invented a word; I don't think consortial is actually a word; I think actually we've had a Shakespearean moment. So it's either that, or we sometimes call it the Pangea Project, just because it was all these... It's almost a reverse Pangea, it's all the different projects coming together; hopefully they're not going to then break apart, so that's maybe the wrong image that we want in people's minds but those are a few things that have made everyone laugh a little bit about it.

Interviewer And finally, if I can ask you a really silly question, if your project was an animal, what would it be?

Alisa Miller I think maybe, off the top of my head, something like a spider, because you've got all these different tentacles, or maybe an octopus I suppose, a spider or an octopus, because you've got all these different tentacles and people have different expertise, they're working with different networks, they have different ways of approaching the

issue of research data management, but we're all kind of linked, and so everyone is kind of moving around in their own space but then we all come together and are trying to solve a common problem. So maybe that's something I'd go with.

Interviewer

That was Alisa Miller from Guild HE talking about a consortial approach to building an integrated RDM system, one of the projects being funded by Jisc's research data spring project. If you'd like to find out more all the information is on Jisc's website, just search for research data spring to find the project pages.

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