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The Department of Digital Humanities (DDH) at King's College London: Cementing Its Status as an Academic Department

Case Study Update 2011

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In 2009, the Department of Digital Humanities (DDH) – formerly known as the Centre for Computing in the Humanities (CCH) – presented the model of a successful cross-disciplinary collective of digital practitioners engaged in teaching and research, with knowledge-transfer activities and a significant number of research grants contributing to its ongoing revenue plan. Support from King's College London to create the department was to be phased out after the results of the government's 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which was expected to become a major source of support for the department. Two years later, the DDH revenue model has been challenged by reduced government spending, leading to budget cuts at the college, a revised RAE funding model that reduced the level of expected support, and a difficult market for consulting clients. This update will examine how DDH has weathered the challenge of reduced revenues in 2010-2011 and how its leaders have responded by re-focusing on their reputation as an academic department conducting first-rate research.

The Department of Digital Humanities (DDH), known until April 2011 as the Centre for Computing in the Humanities, is an academic department at King's College London focusing on the advancement of the digital humanities.[1] The department engages in collaborative research projects nationally and internationally with scholars in the humanities and social sciences. While the starting point for DDH projects are research questions, the creation of scholarly digital resources as outcomes of that research is a major element of the department's collaborations. In the past, according to

Simon Tanner, Director, King's Digital Consultancy Service, 'the user requirements taken into account were largely focused on academic users. Over the past few years in particular, the emphasis of funders, including the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), on "impact" has meant that increasing attention is now paid to the needs of a much wider range of potential users'. This shift, the department surmises, will better position DDH to 'address the impact case studies required for the forthcoming RAE than many other humanities departments.'[2]

As of May 2011, DDH has 70 research projects in progress or completed, compared with 58 projects two years earlier. DDH faculty teaches digital humanities courses at the undergraduate level, and offers three MA degrees: Digital Humanities; Digital Culture and Society (jointly with the Centre for Culture, Media and Creative Industries); and Digital Asset Management (jointly with the Centre for e-Research). DDH also runs a PhD programme in Digital Humanities.

Original sustainability model (2009)

As an academic department, DDH employs a sustainability model more commonly found in the sciences: revenue is derived from government and institutional funding for research and teaching; a significant number of research grants; and monies generated through 'knowledge-transfer' activities, which include consulting and training offered to the outside community through the King's Digital Consultancy Service. From its early years, DDH received a subsidy from King's College London to cover 35% to 40% of its costs, with the assumption that should the quality of research done by DDH staff be deemed of international significance in the 2008 National Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), this would provide the department with a research-funding allocation and solidify its position as an academic department. In

1 Unlike most of our case studies, DDH is itself the object of study here, not the digital projects its scholars help to produce. See, K. Kirby Smith, 'Centre for Computing in the Humanities: Leveraging Shared Infrastructure and Expertise to Develop Digital Projects in an Academic Department' (New York: Ithaka S+R, 2009), **www.ithaka.org/ithaka-s-r/research/ithaka-case-studies-in-sustainability/case-studies/SCA_BMS_CaseStudy_CCH.pdf**

2 Anthea Lipsett, 'Universities Braced for Heavier Research Burden', guardian.co.uk, 1 March 2011, available here: **www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/mar/01/research-excellence-framework-academics**

In 2009, Ithaka S+R published twelve detailed case studies of online digital resources, exploring the strategies project leaders were using to sustain those projects for the long term. All of the case studies have been updated in 2011, to revisit the original sustainability models and see how they have fared over the past two years. To read the original case studies, please visit: **www.ithaka.org/ithaka-s-r/research/ithaka-case-studies-in-sustainability**

addition, department staff regularly develop projects that are grant funded, which also serves to support department overheads.[3]

Still, according to Tanner, the DDH strategy is to 'never rely on one source in income', and indeed DDH has several other avenues of funding. As noted above, embedded within the DDH is the King's Digital Consulting Service (KDCS), which offers consulting services, workshops and training programmes related to the creation and management of digital resources, as well as the King's Visualisation Laboratory (KVL), which leverages its expertise in visualisation techniques on behalf of museums, theatre companies, archaeological projects and others.

At the time of the original case study, the department was awaiting news about the outcome of the RAE, as this was considered a critical element of its funding strategy. Among the strengths of the model at the time were the ever-stronger ties the department was forging with King's College and its success in securing grant funding for its projects. Some concerns included the extent to which the centre could support the projects in the long term, particularly those with the potential to continue beyond the duration of the grant. And preservations issues were generally left for the project leaders to resolve. While DDH's policy is to preserve research outputs for at least ten years, this was in part because former director Harold Short felt that a national infrastructure for the preservation of born-digital research would be in place by then. When the Arts and Humanities Data Service (AHDS) closed down in 2008, it was unclear what community-based solution might emerge.

How the model has fared

The past few years have brought both good news and bad for DDH. Results of the RAE 2008 were very positive: it ranked DDH either first or second in its sector, depending on the measure used to derive the ranking; 35% of DDH's research was found to be 'world-leading' and 65% was judged to be 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent'.[4] However, since the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) had recently developed a new funding model for its quality-related research grants, the actual amount of the research funding awarded was 45% less than had been anticipated, according to calculations based on HEFCE's old funding formula.

The number of grants awarded to DDH decreased in 2009-2010. This may have been due in part to an extensive reorganisation within the AHRC, which funds various DDH projects, and in part to a reduction in the number of grant proposals DDH staff submitted as the department went through the process of reducing its staff complement.

But perhaps most dramatic were changes implemented by the university, which in 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 required 15% cost reductions in all departments across the university.[5] This led DDH to cut back their staff by 6.5 full-time employees in 2008-2009, including 2 full-time professors and 3.5 administrative staff, and to cut staff again by 2.5 full-time employees in 2009-2010, including 1.3 full-time professors. The strategy of King's College London, says Short, now Director Emeritus of DDH, was 'maximum pain now, so we are better placed for later'. However, the significant research grants announced in the second half of 2010 and the early part of 2011 have resulted in the restoration of at least two of the DDH posts that had been cut, albeit on the basis of renewable one-year contracts.

According to Tanner, the single biggest change recently has been the increased unpredictability of the rhythms of revenue flow: 'We have gone from an environment of steady work and growth, where it is fairly reliable that more is coming, and even having to prioritise opportunities, to an environment that we predict in 2011 will be somewhat more uncertain for research; and for knowledge transfer and consultancy, "feast or famine" over shorter cycles.' While the KDCS had an uptick in consulting contracts in 2010, the consultancy used to have six to eight months of committed work at any point in time; since December 2010, that horizon has shrunk to one month, with fewer apparent opportunities to bid for new contracts.

Even the department's annual five-day training event, Digital Futures, had a difficult year. Its workshop in Australia was not well attended and is not slated to run again until 2012. The April 2010 London session, which was initially over-subscribed, also suffered from an unexpected drop in enrolment, although this was due to factors beyond the control of DDH: out-of-town delegates found themselves unable to reach London due to the ash cloud from the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull, which halted all airline travel for several days.[6]

New directions and initiatives

With less predictability in revenue streams since 2008, DDH has focused on enhancing its value to King's College London, and on looking for ways to strengthen and communicate this value to administrators and students:

- *The new Department of Digital Humanities*: In April 2011, the Centre was officially re-named the 'Department of Digital Humanities', which according to Tanner was a strategy intended to more clearly identify it as an academic department, rather than a service centre. The department was in fact given full academic status in 2002, but as Short pointed out, 'the decision at the time was to retain CCH for

Sustainability dashboard

	2009 Case Study*	2011 Update**	What's Changed?
Content	58 research projects completed or under way	70 research projects completed or under way	12 new projects undertaken
Functionality	(Not relevant for this case study, which focuses on the department as a whole)		
Sustainability Model	■ Research grants ■ Host institution support ■ Consulting	■ Research grants ■ Host institution support ■ Consulting ■ RAE funding	Both Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and host support were lower than anticipated
Costs	(Not disclosed)	(Not disclosed)	Cost base is lower, due to positions lost
Revenues	■ £17 million in research grants generated over seven years	■ £2 million+ additional grants secured in 2011 ■ 15% cut in host institution support (2010) ■ Funding council (HEFCE) revenue 45% lower than expectations	Shortfall in government and university under-funding somewhat mitigated by strong showing in grants awarded in 2010 and 2011
Impact	■ High rating in 2008 governmental RAE 2008	■ A new MA programme in Digital Asset Management draws new students to the department.	■ High rating in RAE 2008 validated the quality of the department's research, but government funding based on RAE fell short of expectations ■ 188% increase in income from MA and PhD students
Sustainability Bottom Line	King's College London provided start-up subsidy, supplemented by other revenue streams	Despite shortfall due to revised RAE model and challenges to the consulting business, department has persevered thanks to many successful research proposals for grants and ongoing support of its host institution	

* These costs and revenues numbers reflect DDH's 2007-08 fiscal year.

** These costs and revenues numbers reflect DDH's 2010-11 fiscal year.

"brand recognition" purposes'. This re-naming coincided with a major shift in governance, as former director Short retired in the autumn of 2010. Professor Andrew Prescott has recently been named to this post, and will take up his position as head of department later in 2011. Going forward, the structure will resemble that of a standard academic department, with the directorship rotating every three to five years, a change which will devolve more decision-making to the senior-manager level. The expectation is that each time a new head is appointed, there will be minimal change in the strategic direction of the department.

■ *Continued focus on securing grant funding for new projects*: Since the summer of 2010, the department has secured three of the four AHRC grants it applied for, totalling £2 million, and has also received grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for a Ben Johnson digital edition and from the European Union for a digital palaeography project. These are multi-year grants, so this revenue stream will be steady for the next few years.

■ *New Masters programmes*: In September 2010, DDH launched a new Masters programme in Digital Asset Management in collaboration with the college's Centre for e-Research, drawing six new students to the department. While the newly mandated system of 'administrative hubs', a cost-savings measure that requires departments to share administrative staff, has not always been easy, there have been some silver linings: the pairing of DDH with the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries has led to a redefinition of that department's existing MA in Digital Culture and Technology as a jointly taught MA in Digital Culture and Society.

Finally, the issue of digital preservation has not yet been resolved. Although no community solution has yet replaced AHDS, DDH has a leading role in the UK's Network of Centres of Excellence, of which Prescott is the current chair. This network is active in seeking funding and developing activities that were previously within the purview of the AHDS, in particular in relation to technical standards, sustainability and long-term preservation. According to Tanner, while 'there are no immediate "solutions" in prospect, there are clear indications that funders and institutions are coming to understand the need to develop a range of approaches, and the Network has a clear and significant role in taking this work forward'.

Sustainability outlook

In today's economic times, DDH's relationship with its host institution has proven to be a vital source of support, as research funding cycles have proven unreliable. DDH's other revenue streams have helped to buffer the department in the face of difficult times, allowing it to spread its financial risk across several activities. Still, the greatest accomplishment for the former Centre for Computing in the Humanities is to have further cemented its status as an academic department – the Department of Digital Humanities – at King's College London.

'Looking ahead, the landscape for funding is somewhat uncertain'.

Looking ahead, the landscape for funding is somewhat uncertain. While the department will receive research funding, it is not immediately clear what will bridge the gap between the level of funding it first expected and what it will receive. The department's additional revenue sources have also been affected by the economic crisis, so it is not safe to depend on them. Focusing on core values, including the strength of the scholarship produced, and obtaining project grants with collaborators will continue to be the most important paths to follow.

Lessons learnt over the past two years

- Host institution support can be vital, particularly when other less reliable revenue streams are at risk

- Since we cannot all expect to be Google, naming the project or unit in a way that clearly expresses what it does is an important first step in communicating with key audiences and stakeholders

- Diversity of revenue streams in itself does not guarantee financial stability; however, experimentation with different models may help to identify which are the strongest and should be built and strengthened

Interviewees

Harold Short, Director Emeritus, Centre for Computing in the Humanities, King's College London, 25 January 2011

Simon Tanner, Director, King's Digital Consultancy Service, Centre for Computing in the Humanities, King's College London, 9 March 2011

This case study update was researched and written by Nancy L. Maron as part of the Ithaka Case Studies in Sustainability project.

Summary of revenues and costs

	2007-08	2010-11	Comments
Total revenue			
External research grants	45-50%	50%	
Institutional funding	35–40%	0%	Institutional subsidies are no longer available
HEFC research funding		25%	Government research funding, resulting from RAE 2008 results
Teaching funds	5%	15%	Increase due to increase in department's teaching responsibilities
Knowledge-transfer activities	10–15%	10%	
Total costs			
Personnel costs	85–90%	Over 90%	About 70% of staff are lecturers, researchers and contract staff
Non-personnel costs	~15%	Less than 10%	
Number of staff	33–43 FTE	26–35 FTE	Approximately 20% decline in total staff
In-kind/volunteer contributions	**n/a**	**n/a**	

Explanatory note

The information presented in this table is intended as a broad picture of revenues and budgeted costs associated with the project, not as a detailed financial report. It does not include in-kind contributions or other unbudgeted items, though these are described where they are known. The financial data, which are presented in the currency in which the project reported the information, were compiled as part of the interview process with project leaders and staff, and in some cases were supplemented with publicly available documents, such as annual reports. Many of the figures are rounded or best estimates. Some leaders preferred not to offer figures at all, but suggested percentages instead. Because of the variability in the way each institution estimated the various categories of revenues and costs, the information presented in the table is of limited value for detailed cross-project comparisons.