

News from HERON

HERON has been providing a copyright clearance and digitisation service for UK universities for over two and a half years. It has grown from its first hopeful pilot to a streamlined, fully - automated online service for over 40 UK universities. The membership is wide - ranging, from some of the oldest and largest universities to much newer and smaller institutions.

The year 2001 has been particularly important for the service with the creation of the new online HERON request management system; the establishment of the HERON Partnership and our work with a consultant to help us identify a permanent way forward for HERON.

HERONWEB

During 2001 HERON significantly improved its service through the introduction of the new request management system, HERONweb. This system has been created in-house and is founded on the accumulated expertise of HERON staff and the input and feedback from our many users. Every stage of the HERON service, from request to delivery, is now managed through this one system.

HERONweb is easier and more attractive for HERON members to use than the earlier system, and incorporates many features tailored specifically to their needs. They are able to view and check the progress of their requests at any stage thus allowing them to manage their requests quickly and efficiently. HERONweb also includes two further new features:

- a searchable catalogue which includes additional information on many of the items - whether or not HERON already holds a digitised copy of the item and an indication of probable costs wherever that information is available
- a help desk facility which filters queries directly to the appropriate member of the HERON team.

THE HERON PARTNERSHIP

Early in 2001 JISC agreed to give HERON an additional year's funding to allow time for the development of a full business plan for the future of the service. July 2001 therefore saw the termination of the original HERON Consortium (consisting of Stirling, Napier and South Bank Universities and Blackwell Retail Ltd) and its replacement with a legal partnership amongst the three universities only. (Blackwell Retail Ltd, who were part of the HERON Consortium in its first three years, were unable to extend their commitment for the fourth year.) The Partnership took over the running of HERON on 31 July 2001.

HERON AND THE FUTURE

Once the partnership had been established, the partners engaged a consultant to work with the HERON team to draw up a business plan for HERON's future. The consultant's report was completed in early November and provided an independent evaluation of HERON which underlined the value of the service and the importance of its continuation for the higher (and further) education communities. In particular, the report highlighted the increasingly fragmented nature of scholarly and educational publishing and the wide differences in publishers' policies and digital development. This indicates a future in which individual higher and further education institutions are likely to find it more rather than less difficult to deal with permissions internally and as a result HERON, as a specialist centre of expertise, is likely to play an increasingly, important role in supporting the use of digital material in learning and teaching.

With the report and its findings to support their efforts, HERON staff, and the university partners, are now involved in wide ranging discussions with suppliers, JISC and with possible future partners in order to ensure a long term future for the service.