

Tips for making your university's journal publishing program shine



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Technological University Dublin's publishing program is a runaway success

Since adopting Digital Commons, the TU Dublin institutional repository (ARROW) has gained global recognition. It now has more than 19,000 papers available online, with 14.2 million downloads reaching 237 countries around the world.

This global reach has been achieved through dynamic collaboration between the university's library and faculty teams.

TU Dublin's publishing program has been so successful, in fact, that it is one of the key factors behind the institution gaining university status in 2018. (It was previously known as the Dublin Institute of Technology.)

Arrow@TUDublin was started by Yvonne Desmond (now retired). Yvonne was instrumental in driving TU Dublin to fully embrace both open access journal publishing and Digital Commons as a platform.

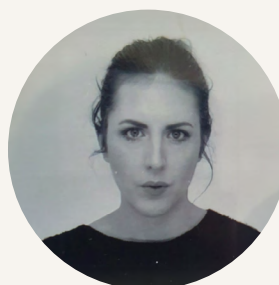
Yvonne was the first manager of TU Dublin's institutional repository — Arrow@TUDublin. Yvonne's "star pupil" — as she referred to him — is Dr Kevin Griffin, a lecturer in tourism and the editor of the International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage (IJRTP). Founded in 2013 with assistance and encouragement from Yvonne, the now Scopus-indexed open access journal has proven to be the jewel in TU Dublin's publishing crown. At its current 519 papers strong, the journal has accumulated more than 520,000 downloads.

Aisling Coyne, Open Scholarship Librarian at TU Dublin, took over as Arrow manager in 2021. Aisling inherited the fantastic work done by Yvonne and offers expert guidance to faculty members interested in publishing open access journals.

Aisling and Kevin recount some of the key lessons they've learned while building their journal publishing powerhouse, with previous thoughts from Yvonne.



Dr. Kevin A. Griffin
Senior Lecturer in
Tourism, TU Dublin



Aisling Coyne,
Open Scholarship
Librarian



DO: Foster collaboration between librarians and lecturers

Kevin was initially unsure about how to get the International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage up and running — and even whether or not it was worthwhile doing so. The support and encouragement from the TU Dublin library team — and Yvonne in particular — allowed Kevin to take the publishing plunge.

The roots of the journal stretch back to 2005 and Fátima, Portugal, where — unbeknown to Kevin — a meeting between a group of academics led to the publishing of a volume containing 13 papers on religious tourism. Kevin was introduced to this group at a 2007 conference and found himself swiftly installed as its chair. “I was ambushed!” he laughs.

“We needed to develop some kind of output,” says Kevin, “and so for their conferences in 2009, 2011 and 2012 the group published papers in a variety of journal special issues.”

Bitten by the journal-publishing bug, Kevin became preoccupied with the idea of an ongoing journal dedicated to religious tourism.

“In some sense, I knew what I wanted from the journal,” he recalls. “I wanted it to be online, to be free, to be open access and to be double-blind reviewed. It’d contain a range of academic and industry research papers, book reviews, and conference reports and announcements.

“But at the same time, I didn’t really know what I wanted. I didn’t know whether or not I wanted editorial control, for example.”

Collaborating with Yvonne helped focus Kevin’s thoughts and energy. “When I first came to her with the idea for a journal on religious tourism, I think she thought I was mad,” he laughs. “But we looked into it together and she graciously agreed to help publish the journal through the library, and we went from there.”

Yvonne provided both rousing encouragement and detailed practical guidance. “The librarians who manage the journal publishing process behind-the-scenes, they’re offering enthusiasm and they’re helping to keep editors sane, but they’re providing technical advice too,” says Kevin. “As an academic, I was completely oblivious about best-practice guidelines for journal publishing. Yvonne was a great adviser in this area and would send me guidelines and say, ‘It’d be good for the journal if we could have this, this and this,’ and I’d read through the document and then we’d figure out how to make those things happen.

“So, having someone who can help you follow the correct procedures in order to ensure that your material is up to the required standard, that’s really invaluable. Grounded advice from your library team really helps to balance out the whole ‘crazy academic with an idea’ thing!”



DO: Let analytics help guide your editorial strategy

The Digital Commons dashboard offers detailed insights into the popularity and reach of published papers and journals. You can see when and where your journal content has been downloaded, and effortlessly track the popularity of publications, authors and specific areas of research.

“All of our authors get a monthly Digital Commons report that tells them how many downloads their material has received, and where those downloads are coming from,” notes Aisling. “Feedback, of course, is a hugely important thing for researchers. They always find the map visualizations particularly arresting. To be able to see those global download statistics and to zoom right in to see the specific institutions where those downloads have been made, that’s been hugely important to us in terms of strategizing our output.”

“It’s great knowing that you’re publishing material that people actually want to read, rather than simply publishing it and having no real idea whether it’s finding an audience.”

“...it’s great to be able to know for certain that your work is being picked up. You can see the fruits of your labor in one easy-to-access results dashboard. It’s really compelling....”

Kevin agrees: “In academia, we were previously living in a world of blind faith. You’d produce something, it went into print, it sat on a library shelf, and you would never really know if anybody ever read it. So, it’s great to be able to know for certain that your work is being picked up. You can see the fruits of your labor in one easy to access dashboard. It’s really compelling.”

Of course, not everything that’s published manages to connect with an audience. “And if it turns out that nobody in the entire world wants to read an author’s material,” observed Yvonne, “then I’m inclined to go and talk to them, to advise them that they should maybe think about changing tack.”





DO: Aim high and think big

When Kevin and his team were first putting together the IJRTP editorial board, they were unabashedly ambitious from the off.

“We were rather cheeky,” laughs Kevin. “We emailed everyone we knew whose work involved religious tourism and pilgrimage, asking for contributions. Renowned experts from around the world — all the heavy hitters. And, interestingly, not one of them said no. So, from the outset, we had a high-powered editorial board who’ve been very supportive.

“It’s all about forging networks of potential contributors, he explains, “and then not being shy about asking for their involvement. After all, academics generally want their ideas and research to be seen by as wide an audience as possible.

“We’ve developed an impressive list of contacts, connections and networks,” says Kevin. “In the first year of the journal, we’d shock people by turning up at conferences and saying, ‘We want to use you — you’re here to be used!’ Because nobody goes to a conference not wanting to publish.”



DO: Set out a template

To gain absolute clarity on their processes, Kevin and the IJRTP editorial board asked themselves a series of questions in order to create a steadfast template that could be referenced again and again when considering editorial strategy.

“We asked ourselves: How many reviewers do we want for each paper? Will they be blind reviewed? How long will we give reviewers to send over their evaluations? What categories of acceptance or rejection will we have? Will we allow people to resubmit rejected papers?”

“So, we set out that template and agreed everything upfront, and then we just went for it.” With a clear framework in place, Kevin and his collaborators could concentrate on sourcing, writing and reviewing quality content for the journal, without getting bogged down in dealing with issues on a case-by-case basis.

That’s not to say that you do this work once and never stray from it — on the contrary! “As each of our journals is entitled to a free re-design every year, I like to encourage Editors to review their templates, information and design,” said Aisling.



DON'T: Think that a journal is too niche to find an audience

Open Scholarship Librarian Aisling has been both surprised and delighted to discover that TU Dublin publications have such large international readerships.

“What we’ve found, even with journals that have a strong local focus, if you get them ‘out there,’ they can find a solid global readership.” In the crowded world of academic publishing, being tightly focused on one particular subject can, in fact, broaden a journal’s appeal. “You’re always up against commercial publishing competition, there’s no getting away from that,” says Aisling. “But if you make your journals niche enough then they stand a good chance of doing well. I would even go as far as to say the more niche, the better!”

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DON'T: Neglect readability

Just because a publication is aimed exclusively at an academic audience, it needn’t be difficult to read.

Paying close attention to a journal’s inherent readability will do wonders for its popularity and reputation.

Take TU Dublin’s IJRTP, now in the prestigious position of being indexed in Scopus, Elsevier’s abstract and citation database. Scopus’s acceptance of the journal had much to do with its audience-focused editorial standards.

“The report we received back from the Scopus evaluation team was glowing. The evaluators were really taken with the journal, and described it as being ‘superbly edited’ and ‘a really good read,’” noted Aisling.



DO: Automate repetitive publishing processes to save time

Aisling is a big advocate of using Digital Commons to automate some of the day-in-day-out tasks involved with journal publishing. “You can set up standardised actions,” she explains. “So, for example, your review letters can automatically be generated for you, as can your acceptance letters. Things like that are useful when you’re trying to save valuable time. All our editors are doing this work on top of their day jobs, so every bit of time saved is appreciated.”

You can also use Digital Commons to help you identify who the best person to work on a particular project might be. “You can add keywords onto the Digital Commons system that detail your contacts’ specialisms,” says Kevin. “Say you were looking for a very particular type of quantitative or qualitative researcher, or for someone who’s involved with using econometrics. You could find the relevant people and their contact details fairly swiftly.”



DO: Lean on Digital Commons – we’re here to help

“From the very beginning, the support and enthusiasm we’ve received from the Digital Commons team has been phenomenal,” says Kevin. “Without their support the International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage simply wouldn’t have happened.”

Kevin finds the Digital Commons team readily available to assist with issues both major and minor. “For example, an author might have changed their institution, and as a result they’ve now got two different email addresses on the system. I’d have no idea how to deal with this, so I contact the support team, and they get it sorted while remaining GDPR-compliant and so on. Whenever I am struggling with a problem, I know there is an expert available.”

Kevin and the library team have met up with members of the Digital Commons team a number of times. “And, you know, it was wonderful to have them ask us, ‘How do you think we should be looking to improve Digital Commons? What’s missing? What challenges are you facing that we could help to solve?’

“As a result of the feedback from users there are always changes and additions to Digital Commons happening. It’s been lovely to learn that there’s a human side to all this technical stuff. Digital Commons has been a great collaborative partner for our publishing journey.”



DO: Spend time honing keywords, titles and abstracts

You might have some amazing research to share with the world, but if it's not packaged up in a way that piques interest and excites the imagination, it's unfortunately not going to have much of an impact.

By looking at the statistical information provided by Digital Commons dashboard, Kevin has seen first-hand the impact that a paper or journal's presentation can have on its popularity.

"What you'll find," he says, "is that if an abstract isn't good, if the keywords aren't good, if the title isn't good, then papers are simply not going to be downloaded."

"The papers that are most downloaded very often have simple titles. These are all things that I teach my students: don't put in keywords that aren't relevant and make sure that your abstract whets people's appetites."



DON'T: Focus solely on your journal's first issue

When a lecturer/editor comes to Aisling with an idea for a potential journal, the key thing she wants to know is that they've thought beyond the first issue.

"I'll interrogate them," she says, "and I'll ask them what they've got planned for issue three — or for issue two, at least. When you're thinking about your first three issues before you've even started, you're more likely to be successful in the long run."

"Kevin came to Yvonne with his journal's first three issues already planned out. He was a star pupil! His dedication to keeping the content fresh and forward-thinking has been a key driver of the success that we've experienced."

"It's also crucial to remember that you can't do this alone. While we the library act as support, you need a good editorial team around you, too." Aisling has started a Community of Practice for the ARROW based journal editors, which meets twice a year in person. This is an opportunity for all of the editors to learn, share and grow with each other. "I hope that the Community of Practice encourages and inspires our editors to continue their success"



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in a virtual tour of the
Digital Commons platform,
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