Certification of trustworthiness and robust practices in the archiving and dissemination of data

Australian Data Archive (ADA) adopts RDA Recommendation

"Under a project funded by the Australian National Data Services (ANDS) in 2016, the Australian Data Archive (ADA) undertook a self-evaluation audit of ADA systems and policies using the European Framework for Audit and Certification of Digital Repositories (EFAC) basic certification standard (the Data Seal of Approval) and implemented selected changes to ADA policies, procedures and IT systems which were required to achieve basic certification. The DSA was in the process of developing the Repository Audit And Certification DSA–WDS Partnership WG with ICSU-WDS and by the time the project was completed, the certification being undertaken had become the Core Trust Seal (CTS). The CTS was awarded to the ADA in February 2018."*

Heather Leasor, PhD, Archivist Australian Data Archive, Australia

The Challenge

The challenge was to utilize the newly minted and refined Common Procedures and Common Requirements to assess the ADA as a trusted digital repository while liaising with the developing board of the CTS who were members of the Repository Audit And Certification DSA–WDS Partnership WG.

The RDA added value

The European Framework for Audit and Certification is being used as the basis for the certification of service providers within CESSDA, the Consortium of European Social Science Data Archives[1]. CESSDA is a European network of social science data archives established in 1976, which has now become a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC) under EU Framework funding. In the process of becoming an ERIC, CESSDA has mandated that providers (the member archives) must demonstrate basic certification to the Data Seal of Approval (DSA) requirements. At the same time, there has been convergence among the certification bodies to develop a more coherent framework for certification. The DSA and the International Council for Science World Data System (ICSU-WDS) established the Repository Audit and Certification DSA–WDS Partnership Working Group within the Research Data Alliance, and the joint CoreTrustSea[2]l RDA/WDS Certification of Digital Repositories Interest Group[3]. Similarly, the European Framework for Audit and Certification of Digital Repositories has now been established[4], incorporating three levels of certification (with CTS as the basic level).

The adoption process

The ADA undertook a project with ANDS in 2016 and began the self-assessment process in November 2016 after being advised to wait for the Common Requirements document from the Working Group. The initial draft was submitted in April 2017 but, as all requirements were not detailed to the level they currently are, a few iterations with timelines of implementation and notes of clarification were required. Detailing how to provide information that was not in the public domain, and assessing requirements that included decision areas which were out of our direct control (as a unit within a larger institution) took some time and complex explanations. It was identified after assessment that the next steps for the ADA after full Dataverse implementation would be to finalize policy documents for collection policy, preservation policy, IT & Security policy, Governance & Continuity policy and these are still in process of development. The CoreTrustSeal was awarded in February 2018 and ICSU-WDS Regular Membership followed by midyear. We have now assisted in one review for the CTS and participated in a WDS meeting.

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The benefits of adopting the RDA output

By undergoing the process of self-assessment and peer review, the ADA aimed to better align its practices with international standards. ADA used the CTS evaluation process to identify areas for improvement in the archive. It is expected that the CTS will assist the user community of the ADA, as the CTS provides a certification of trustworthiness and robust practices in the archiving and dissemination of data.

Main Takeaways

The ADA is placed within a larger institution and for the certification process this showed a need for:

1. How this mandates some policies and justifies sustainability without explicit documentation;
2. The need to define and explain those areas which are out of the repositories' control;
3. The need to define a risk management strategy within the institutional context.

We feel, that over the course of the certification process:

1. Feedback given to the Repository Audit And Certification DSA–WDS Partnership WG during the assessment process was taken on board and is reflected in the version of guidelines which is now in circulation;
2. The board is receptive to feedback and encourages engagement with those undertaking the assessment;
3. Complex interplays in the archiving/repository realm which will always be difficult to cover fully with common requirements or procedures, but, allowing for this variation and complexity, the guidelines seem to encompass most facets well.

We would recommend data archives interested in undergoing the certification to:

1. Ensure your organization understands and can explain how it fits within institutions, national frameworks, funding frameworks and infrastructure frameworks and governance frameworks and how this can be justified if explicit detailed documentation is not in the public domain.
2. Get as many aspects as practical into the public domain prior to undertaking review so as to avoid how to cite items out of the public domain.

About the Australian Data Archive

The Australian Data Archive (ADA) was established in 1981 and provides a national service for the collection and preservation of digital research data. ADA disseminates this data for secondary analysis by academic researchers and other users. The Australian Data Archive holds over 6000 datasets from more than 1500 projects and studies from 1838 through until the present day.

The archive is based in the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods (CSRM) at the Australian National University (ANU).

The ADA stakeholder community

The ADA provides a national service for the collection and preservation of computer readable data relating to social, political and economic affairs and makes these data available for further analysis. The ADA acquires, documents, preserves and disseminates data online to a broad range of social science researchers in the university, government, and other sectors. The designated communities are reflected by the way the holdings are separated into a series of parent dataverses reflecting the nature of the data and/or major thematic divisions.

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1 http://cessda.net
2 https://www.icsu-wds.org/files/dsa-wds-certification-wg-case-statement.pdf
3 https://rd-alliance.org/groups/rdawds-certification-digital-repositories-ig.html
4 http://www.trusteddigitalrepository.eu/

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