

DASSH Submission to Discussion Paper for 2011 Strategic Roadmap for Australian Research Infrastructure, DIISR, Australian government.

This response is related to Chapter 5 “Understanding Cultures and Communities Expert Working Group” which discusses a possible distributed national eResearch facility to underpin transformational Australian research that will advance our understanding of cultures and communities.

5.A.1 Key future research directions

DASSH agrees that researchers in the arts social sciences and humanities are increasingly contributing to global and social issues in health, the environment, climate change, sustainability and regionalism, and as such the research directions listed on page 46 bring together the collaborative and cross-disciplinary research in the arts and social sciences disciplines particularly well.

5.A.2 Prioritising research areas

We believe the priorities are social cohesion, diversity and equity, along with strengthening global engagement. From these two, an eResearch facility is most likely to achieve the inherent communication, sharing, learning, global understanding and new knowledge and practice that will achieve the sustainability, adaptation, connection and transformation of the other research areas.

5.B Infrastructure Capability areas

DASSH understands that much data now exists in individual repositories and in different formats. We believe it is critical to find the means for all repositories to be linked, maintained to a requisite standard, and for research content to be digitised. An eResearch infrastructure must have the capability to accommodate the range of methods and approaches within the humanities and creative arts disciplines. This is crucial to the successful development of an eResearch facility. Non text-based forms of data, such as sound and visual/image based research must be included in the capability requirements.

5.C.1 Current investments

The existing funded facilities are too disciplinary focussed. Collaborative research requires databases that are linked, accessible to diverse researchers, interconnected globally, and adequately funded for maximum research outcomes in the arts, humanities and social sciences.

5D eResearch infrastructure needs

The question of whether the eResearch infrastructure identified will ably support future eResearch infrastructure needs is a difficult one to address, as the vision and scope are not clear. Perhaps this in itself reflects the complexity of this Capability area.

The need for a ‘purpose-designed’ eResearch facility is a consistent theme flowing through the Cultures and Communities Capability chapter. The need for standards - taken here to mean rich metadata, preservation and format standards - is recognised. And the requirement for information architecture that supports interoperability and complex data sets is also identified. Given the acknowledgement of these critical issues and the breadth of the research areas of significance put forward, then a network of member repositories with nodes of excellence is a model that would fit with the concept of an eResearch facility for Cultures and Communities. ‘Purpose-designed’ may then be interpreted as standards compliant rather than one approach for all. DARIAH, Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities, is a European model from which we may learn.

The establishment of institutional research repositories for the purposes of the Excellence in Research for Australia Initiative has strengthened each institution’s understanding of the technical issues that accompany repositories. The issues of interoperability, metadata standards, persistent

URLs and IP management apply equally to description of research outputs and description of research data. Further, the inclusion of the Creative Arts in the ERA assessment has meant that institutions have experience in providing access to large data files in the form of moving and still images. Most institutions have operationalised workflows to support their institutional research repositories.

However as researchers embrace best practice approaches to research data management and accessibility, as being tested through ANDS, then the capacity of each institution to support researchers in this transition is of considerable concern. It is worrying that the discussion paper refers to the need for fine-grained metadata by the social and cultural research sector, beyond the collection-level catalogue entry provided by ANDS. This infers the creation of rich metadata requiring levels of intervention and expertise beyond the current capacity of most institutions. This statement is also somewhat misleading in suggesting that ANDS creates metadata; ANDS harvests metadata created by the researcher and the 'owning' institution. The only sustainable model is one that requires the least intervention from 1) the point of describing the file upon creation to 2) the description of the file being harvested for optimal discovery and use by local institutional repositories, national and international discipline repositories and by ANDS.

Collections, as suggested, are distributed across cultural institutions and university libraries, maintained by public sector agencies and organisations, and located within local communities. Digitisation of collections has in the past been project-driven with funding rarely allowing for a whole of collection approach. Knowledge of digitisation activities is often confined to the owning institution. Locating and accessing digitised collections are problematic. For example, collections supporting historical and political studies of the South Pacific are in part held in digitised form and in part held in print form, and are distributed across a number of Australian universities. Trove, the National Library of Australia's powerful discovery service, is a key component of the nation's eResearch infrastructure and assists in identifying library collections distributed across the nation and described in the National Bibliographic Database (NBD). At the same time, the NBD does not comprehensively capture all collections of value to researchers.

Digitisation has been seriously underdeveloped within the context of research funding. The ARC Linkage Infrastructure and Equipment Fund (LIEF) has provided limited support for research projects that have a digitisation component. And yet, for the Cultures and Communities Capability, the need for digitisation activities is inescapable. It is suggested in the discussion paper that: "In some areas digitisation will be called for to keep abreast of global developments and progress. In other areas data may need to be collected to fill gaps . . ." A body of work will be needed simply to locate and identify key collections, and parts of key collections, that match future research directions. An assessment of the 'readiness' of key collections for sharing and making them accessible would be integral to this work, including issues around copyright and IP.

The NLA's Australian Newspapers Digitisation program should be included in any list of exemplary digital projects supporting research.

E Cross-disciplinary needs

While we agree that a deficiency of funding in the arts, social sciences and humanities may have contributed to cross-capability integration, the establishment of eResearch facilities will significantly increase engagement of researchers in health, science, business and law in the values and capability of the humanities and arts in shared solutions for their global issues. The lack of engagement is most likely driven by lack of awareness and lack of knowledge of our disciplines. Priority, again, is the interconnectness of databases, and their accessibility for all researchers.

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F Current developments

DASSH applauds the selection of example projects that have infrastructure support for research in the humanities, arts and social sciences. As well as investing in Australia our complementary and accessible research infrastructure, it is important that we do not, in a globally connected environment, duplicate such databases. Too often Australian funded agencies seek and copy international projects, without due understanding of our own capacity to deliver, or of the networking opportunities for our own research infrastructure.

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to the Research Infrastructure Roadmap Strategy.



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President of DASSH
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