AustLit, The University of Queensland

Submission

2016 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap Capability Issues Paper

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Introduction

This submission is concerned with two of the capabilities: *Understanding Cultures and Communities* and *Data for Research and Discoverability*. It also responds to some of the specific questions.

The opportunity to comment on the 2016 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap Capability Issues Paper is appreciated by the National Advisory Board of the AustLit resource and database (www.austlit.edu.au), the key element of research infrastructure for the study of Australian literature and storytelling in all its forms. The AustLit Advisory Board is comprised of senior members of the professoriate and academic researchers in relevant Humanities disciplines across Australia and our work is strongly informed by Digital Humanities principles and practices. The AustLit consortium of universities, which has been operating since 2000, has received a significant amount of infrastructure development funding over the past 17 years from both government and university schemes and has developed a robust operating model and business plan that is centred on its role as research and information infrastructure for the disciplines with which it intersects. It has remained a vital, well-used resource since its establishment in 2000 with a growing range of audiences and users globally.

AustLit is used throughout the Australian research sector in the humanities and arts to underpin research in Australian culture. It is regularly integrated into both funded and independent research projects relating to the ways Australians have told and thought about the art of story. It has been used as infrastructure to underpin research activities and to disseminate the results of research in the following fields: literature, theatre, film and television, Indigenous cultures, publishing, media history, Australian literature education. AustLit provides access to data, information, and curated content that underpins understandings of Australian culture and communities of the past and present. It is unique in the world in its near-comprehensive record of a nation's literary history and is used as an information resource, and source of data, throughout Australia via a network of libraries, schools, and cultural institutions, and internationally at key research institutions. It is a significant cultural resource for Indigenous Australians as it is the most comprehensive record of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing and storytelling available. AustLit services tens of thousands of search requests each year, leading to hundreds of thousands of page views. It has a crucial role in publishing the data-driven results of research and conversion of historical works of literature and scholarship.

We are in agreement with the submission made by the **Australian Academy of the Humanities** and support their proposal for a vast expansion of the national digitisation agenda relating to Australia's cultural heritage, and the development of a new national platform to enable and support existing, emerging, and yet-to-emerge research practices.

Some of the key points in the two capabilities addressed here relate to researcher capabilities and skills, access, collaboration, sustainability, interoperability, and storage.

Question 5:   Should research workforce skills be considered a research infrastructure issue?

Yes. The rapidly growing volume of digitised content and research relevant data in the areas related to the UCC Capability requires appropriately skilled personnel to enable the take-up of digitally informed research. There is a lack of ongoing research training and skills acquisition opportunities for academic staff in the humanities and social sciences. There is also a lack of stable career paths for personnel who participate in research, analysis, tools development, and the curation of research material and results in HASS where digital techniques are fundamental. The recognition of the 'Alternative Academic' role in contemporary research should be enhanced in Australia. The #Alt-ac movement in the USA is building awareness of the role of specialists in digital humanities research work and making pathways for careers. Disciplinary specialists around the world are increasingly undertaking collaborative work that relies on the knowledge and technical skills of computer scientists, data managers, web developers and specialists in algorithmic culture. The Humanities and Social Sciences require more opportunities for skills development in the research sector and greater knowledge of the opportunities available for collaborative work with data specialists, computer scientists, and with digital communication practices.

Question 6:   How can national research infrastructure assist in training and skills development?

In the humanities a central form of national research infrastructure takes is cultural collections available in physical or digital form. There is a need for a continuous skilling program for HASS researchers in numerical and computational research methods to take proper advantage of the affordances of cultural infrastructure and improve the quality, reproducibility and communication of research. Successful instances of institution based internships and bursaries where students and scholars are given opportunities to work within collections and on digital humanities projects with appropriate support and professional development allow them to acquire skills and knowledge in contemporary and future research practices. A diverse national program is required that would support wider engagement with the digital future of cultural research in Australia.

Question 8:   What principles should be applied for access to national research infrastructure, and are there situations when these should not apply?

There is a need for a coordinated approach to access and sustain nationally significant data sets in the HASS sector. Knowledge based research infrastructure such as databases containing various types of content, digital collections, and the tools to use them, should be available by direct open access or through a network of access points; for example, through libraries and relevant cultural institutions. Such a strategy, however, would need to ensure that accessible research infrastructure is not allowed to degrade due to institutional inability to maintain or sustain the resource. A national plan for archiving cultural heritage in digital form needs to be established that goes beyond the

current work undertaken by the National Library .au domain archive, Pandora. A national register of databases and infrastructure and a method of maintaining access and utility is necessary. This would require ongoing funding.

Question 24:   Are the identified emerging directions and research infrastructure capabilities for Understanding Cultures and Communities right? Are there any missing or additional needed?

University based research capabilities are not clearly enough identified in the draft and while the capability is relatively general in nature there needs to be better recognition of the long-standing resources, databases, and project that underpin HASS research in the university sector.

Question 25:   Are there any international research infrastructure collaborations or emerging projects that Australia should engage in over the next ten years and beyond?

The Digital Public Library of America (DPLA – https://dp.la/) is moving in the right direction and Australia would do well to emulate some of the strategies it is deploying in its managing of access and digitisation of American cultural assets.

Question 32:   Is there anything else that needs to be included or considered in the 2016 Roadmap for the Underpinning Research Infrastructure capability area?

Storage and computation issues are increasingly crucial to HaSS sector activities. NeCTAR and other government initiatives in data storage (cloud based or otherwise) have not worked well for our sector. AustLit, for example, is required to purchase and maintain our own server in order to achieve the storage and speed necessary for our 24/7 service delivery model. None of the currently available services suit our needs and, seemingly, cannot adapt to meet them.

Humanities and social science researchers are increasingly dealing with storage-intensive data collections (e.g. multimedia, geospatial, and sensor data) and computer-intensive data analysis, therefore dedicated technical infrastructure for HASS projects would be appropriate. Alongside storage, software tools used in analysis should be seen as an aspect of the infrastructure for research activities.

Interoperability between related content across the country is a significant challenge. A strategy to address the need to link and make diverse but related resources speak to each other would be a valuable outcome. There are no successful instances of this occurring in the present landscape. The platform proposed by the Australian Academy of the Humanities might provide that solution.

Sustainability of existing elements of humanities research infrastructure beyond the short term funding cycles that enable development, establishment, and initial take-up. There have been too many examples of well-funded projects that had excellent aims and successful initial outcomes that have failed in the long-term because there is no system or business case in place to ensure their continued utility to researchers and others in the Australian community. For example, it has been necessary for AustLit to retain a subscription-based access model in order to generate a level of sustaining income and achieve incremental improvement of service delivery. Recognising important research infrastructure and information assets in the HASS section and ensuring there are mechanisms in place to support them into the future is crucial.

We would be happy to elaborate further on this feedback or consult further regarding the road map for Australian research infrastructure.

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