

Australian repository activity

The notion of an institutional repository — a digital storage place for the data and research outputs of an educational institution — has been around for several years, but a combination of government policy and changes in technology have brought them to the forefront of many institutions' thinking. Australia has been leading the way in many areas of repository development in recent years, and as a result we are witnessing a real expansion in the uptake of this technology.

The slow but inexorable growth of the institutional repository and its role in higher education in this country can, I believe, be traced back to the idea that universities were giving much of their intellectual property away to commercial publishers and were then being forced to buy it back at increasingly expensive rates. My own first exposure to this idea came at a keynote address at Information Online in 2001, when Stevan Harnad, then of the University of Southampton, spoke on the How and Why to Free the Give Away Research Literature.¹ The idea seemed compelling, particularly to Australian libraries then burdened with not only increasing journal prices, but a rapidly declining dollar.² This driver is still important, but other factors have more recently come into play as well.

Over the next few years there were a number of public statements³ and other attempts to facilitate the basic idea that if research outputs were made freely available online, then the return on research would be increased, as more people were able to read it. It was soon recognised that this would require specialised software, and, as a result, ePrints was developed at the University of Southampton.⁴

During this time the Australian Government Department of Education Science and Technology (DEST) has been a key driver of the development and uptake of repository technology, through two key initiatives. The Strategic Infrastructure Initiative (SII) program⁵ has funded a number of projects in the repository space in recent years, including Australian Research Repositories Online to the World (ARROW)⁶; Australian Partnership for Sustainable Repositories (APSR)⁷, and; Regional Universities Building Repository Infrastructure Collaboratively (RUBRIC)⁸. These projects have helped to establish a pool of knowledge in the sector, and to establish repositories at a number of locations.

One of the persistent problems with repositories has been less to do with software, and more to do with how to fill them. Past efforts at outreach and voluntary projects have been less successful than had been hoped. However the second DEST initiative, the Research Quality Framework (RQF)⁹ and the related Accessibility Framework, are expected to drive large numbers of research publications into Australian repositories in the next 12 months. The RQF is a program designed to assess the quality and impact of Australian research. As a part of the program, research outputs (such as journal articles, books, conference papers, performance, art etc.) will be assessed online.

Similar research exercises in the UK and New Zealand have been largely paper-based — the research outputs were printed and delivered to assessors. DEST has mandated that here they are stored in each institution's repository for this purpose. While a proportion of them will need to be restricted to conform to copyright or other requirements, many previously hidden outputs will be exposed to the world. In this way DEST hopes

to progress the Accessibility Framework (which seeks to make Australia's government-funded research more widely available) as well.

As the RQF will form a critical part of future higher education funding formulas, the sector has been taking up repositories rapidly, with the result that only a few universities do not have one. DEST has not mandated a particular software for this purpose, so there are different products in use — primarily VITAL (co-developed by ARROW and VTLS)¹⁰, ePrints, DSpace¹¹, Fez¹² and Digital Commons. This covers a wide range of options — vendor supported (VITAL, Digital Commons)¹³; Open Source (ePrints, DSpace, Fez); hosted (Digital Commons) and locally developed (Fez). All are required to meet the technical specifications of DEST's system.

As more institutions engage with repositories the potential uses for them have also grown. The original idea that a repository was for author copies of journal articles is still valid and widely embraced — but the potential is so much larger. Not only can data types such as pictures, music and film be stored and made available, but the data that was the basis of an article can also be made accessible so that other researchers can use it. DEST has chosen to build on the work already done by moving beyond projects and into a sustainable service model that exist in a larger eResearch framework. By doing so it hopes to leverage the work of a number of SII projects to enable new concepts in Australian research. This will no doubt result in many new uses for the repository.

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Notes

1. <http://conferences.alia.org.au/online2001/>
2. On the day that Harnad spoke at Information Online the Australian dollar was worth 55 US cents, down from 66 cents one year before. <http://www.oanda.com/convert/fxhistory>
3. See for instance the Budapest Initiative : <http://www.soros.org/openaccess/read.shtml>
4. <http://www.eprints.org/>
5. http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/research/sys_research.htm
6. <http://www.arrow.edu.au/>
7. <http://www.apsr.edu.au/>
8. <http://www.rubric.edu.au/>
9. http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research_sector/policies_issues_reviews/key_issues/research_quality_framework/
10. <http://www.vtls.com/Products/vital.shtml>
11. <http://www.dspace.org/>
12. <http://sourceforge.net/projects/fez>
13. http://www.umi.com/products_umi/digitalcommons/



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