

eResearch Coffee Network response to the Information Futures Commission Consultation Paper

Summary of the blogged discussion on March 18:

There has been much discussion within the eResearch network about researchers' responsibilities in relation to data management. There is varied understanding about what obligations exist (as imposed by the ARC and NHMRC and other bodies) and little knowledge about how to manage data or develop a data management plan. There has been discussion regarding at what level the University should provide guidance or policy on development of research data management plans. There is agreement that this should exist but there is no consensus about whether this should happen be done by at a University, Faculty or Department level.

There are many services that are offered elsewhere (gmail, Amazon web services, etc) that could be leveraged by the University rather than building from scratch.

There are some common collaborative services and infrastructure that are often built by researchers where centralised service provision could occur. These include data storage (across the university there will be an increase from the existing hundreds of terabytes of research data to hundreds of petabytes, over the next ten years), computational power, wikis, blogs, webpages and virtual organisations.

There is a recognition that even if physical infrastructure can be provided there is a dramatic shortage in expertise. Time and money needs to be spent on up-skilling people to provide the necessary support to research. There are pockets of expertise (examples given included experts in physics and neuropsychiatry) but it is felt that there is not an understanding or awareness of this expertise across the university.

It is felt that many research groups know what questions they need to ask in relation to their IT needs but not who within the University to ask. There is strong feeling amongst researchers that Information Services doesn't provide IT support for researchers. There is little confidence that this will change in the future.

[In subsequent discussions it was recognised that it has not been the role of Information Services to provide such research support. It was also acknowledged that HPC and eSRC provide support for researchers through IS.]

There are nominated individuals at Departmental and Faculty level for central offices such as the Risk Management Office and Environment, Health and Safety and a similar framework could exist for eResearch. This will allow better communication between local experts. The Melbourne Research and Innovation Office could be a central body for provision of information to researchers about resources and a coordinating point for a potential eResearch network, in conjunction with Information Services.

There is an unfulfilled expectation that visiting researchers can 'hit the ground running' upon starting research at the University. It is hoped that the current situation, where it takes some time for researchers to get access to appropriate resources, can be improved.

Melbourne –VeRSI eResearch Coffee Blog

http://blogs.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/eresearch_coffee/

Information Futures Consultation Paper

March 18th, 2008

The following are some notes of the discussion at the eResearch Coffee Network about the recently released consultation paper from the Information Futures Commission. Participants in the discussion include VeRSI staff, professional staff from Information Services and University Departments, and active researchers.

There were a range of statements made. Some people raised questions. Some made proposals for future activities/structures.

- IS doesn't currently provide IT support for research – except for the HPC centre.
- A restructure is underway in IS. The High Performance Computing group will report to Gavan McCarthy in the eSRC. This will result in HPC being more closely aligned with existing research support in IS.
- Into the future will IS endeavour to support research or will that responsibility remain with faculties/departments?
- IS currently provides passive support for research.
- Other Unis are playing a more active role in helping develop data management plans and scholarly activities.
- The question for the future is 'how does IS provide a vision for research support?'
- The consultation paper includes statements about what scholarly information is but not information about what services are needed.
- IS is redefining some of the boundaries about support provision.
- Will IS actually provide research support expertise? People suggest that this won't happen.
- Need to discuss how we can leverage services that exist elsewhere around the world (Gmail, Microsoft mail) rather than relying on supplying everything ourselves, which is not going to be an economical use of our resources.
- People have been developing platforms that are discipline specific – often in the Life Sciences.
- Services that support collaborative research should also be collaborative. Research support services need to acknowledge that they need to be part of a bigger collaboration.
- A lot of researchers know what questions they have (i.e. compute needs, software support etc) but need to have people who they can go to for answers.
- This is not about fixing IS but about the University as a whole having a plan for supporting research.

- It was propositioned that researchers expect IS to support them. This was challenged with anecdotal evidence that IS supports research – though this is limited.
- Should the training for researchers to use IT resources sit with IS or should it be with the Research Office?
- Researchers and technologists need to share the problem and the solution.
- It was noted with surprise that the Research Office is not mentioned in the document.
- We need people to support any technology developments and the money to fund these people needs to come from somewhere.
- Do we have a survival of the fittest scenario where research groups that can pay for expertise do so and other fall by the wayside or do we target specific research areas? Do we do this already?
- There are large communities of research support out there in the university community (often connected to international groups of others across the campus) but there is a disconnect between these smaller communities and the central body. It is felt that the University doesn't know the magnitude of what is being done already.
- There doesn't seem to be recognition of expertise such as Marco La Rosa (grid expert, previously with high energy physics) and Katherine Manson (Bioinformatics Research Fellow). Are these people professional staff or research staff? They have research expertise but also IT expertise. How do we support these staff?
- We could build a team of consultants with appropriate expertise – such as Marco and Katherine.
- For central offices (EHS, RMO etc) there are faculty and departmental contacts, who are nominated, with appropriate training. This could be done with eResearch. This way each faculty and department has a nominated person.
- Anyone who receives a grant should be made aware of their eResearch responsibilities/capabilities. This should form part of the grant process.
- What do we think of the consultation paper if we believe that this is what the University thinks?
- The consultation paper represents the views of people who were brought on board for the Information Futures Commission to build a framework for discussion.
- The consultation paper will be viewed as the University's perspective on our current status.
- The consultation paper will provoke discussion.
- We could do a gap-analysis to look at what is missing from the author's (Information Futures Commission's) understanding about the current status.
- What is missing to make MU a world class supporter of research?
 - data storage!

- There is a feeling that there hasn't been financial support for research, as a result of lack of funding of research support.
- Every research group is going to have different IT needs and it is hard to predict what they will be. Their questions include:
 - What sort of experts do we need?
 - What sort of technology do we need? This is a hard question to answer.
 - What sort of services do we need?
 - How do we make all these things agile?
- What are our obligations regarding the keeping of research data?
- There is a shortage of people with discipline knowledge and technology expertise.
 - We're all facing the same skill shortage.
 - We should be spending money on up-skilling people.
 - Should we target specific research areas that aren't able to fund the personnel to address their needs?
 - Will that result in fragmentation? Yes.
 - Do we have an environment where research can flourish and where people can help others in a sustainable way? Consensus is no. No researcher can 'hit the ground running'.
 - The University acknowledges that eResearch support is important but how do we fund this.
 - Goal: any researcher, anywhere in the world should be able to come to MU and participate in research with no barriers to that starting.
 - How does centralised vs decentralised systems affect the ongoing commitments to supporting eResearch?
 - We like the idea of MRIO as the starting point for provision of eResearch support and then engagement with an eResearch Committee that forms part of IS.
 - At the moment we can't do the basic stuff like setting up phonedlines, IT accounts etc. Is this a system problem or personnel problem?
 - There is a massive gap between what we need and what we provide.
 - Whose job is it at a high level to identify the infrastructure needed to undertake eResearch?
 - What modes of engagement will there be for feedback?
 - The end user is the visiting scholar and they see what the issues are in getting research underway and feed this back to their institution.
 - How do we get information that is not just anecdotal? Do we have any systems for measuring how long certain services take to be provided?
 - Lead times for activity are not agile and won't encourage research.