Setting a focus – creating a research database one-stop-shop through cross divisional collaboration

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The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) research assessment exercise finally occurred in 2010 with the results being released in January 2011. It occurred after years of planning, and a change of government which resulted in the exercise being changed from the Research Quality Framework to ERA. The results of this exercise are likely to change the research landscape in Australia. Universities are focusing on employing research intensive staff, performance funding is changing to reward quality instead of quantity and the Government is starting to incorporate funding using ERA.

In order to be eligible for a larger portion of the Sustainable Research Excellence (SRE) funding Universities must have participated in ERA 2010 and the ERA trial. Universities are now expected to explain their ERA results in their compact statement in terms of their research strategy. This research strategy includes building areas of research strength and either improving or discontinuing areas that are performing poorly (see http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Policy/Documents/FinalCompactTemplate.pdf). It is anticipated that the Government will also over time use the results more widely so as to further build research concentration in areas of quality. This is especially so if University funding is going to be restricted due to the after effects of the global financial crisis.

During this exercise universities have focused on a wider range of research outputs such as creative works to allow the more comprehensive assessment of research in the humanities and creative areas. The inclusion of 'nontraditional outputs' has encouraged and in some cases incensed researchers in the creative arts, who though glad that their work was to be recognized and included in the audit, would have preferred that their work was considered another type of traditional or mainstream output.

The idea of research belonging to an institution has been challenged, as the concept of Census authors as a measure of the research potential of an institution has been accepted. The imperfect tools that were used for benchmarking has proved what we already knew, that there really is no single way of comprehensively accounting for the impact of publicly funded research.

New tools have been created by the process, such as the ranked journals list, and a rudimentary ranked conference list in areas where conferences are deemed to be important. Existing tools have been extended, such as the research classification scheme.

The lasting impact of the ERA may be that all of the Universities across Australia now have research repositories, that even if they do not provide as much open access to publicly funded research as the Government would wish, they do provide a dark archive for the research publications of their institution, and a 'living', linked road map to where the published version may be found. As the impact of open access to research publications is becoming better understood and more open access journals and repository friendly publisher policies are being offered it is likely that much of a Universities research output will eventually become publicly available through these repositories as initially hoped.

 It would be good to think that the new relationships that have been forged in many Universities will also continue. At the CAIRSS meeting in December 2009 it was obvious that many achieved solutions to meet the challenges through collaboration with colleagues within their institutions.

The challenge of the RQF/ERA exercise at Deakin University brought together three University divisions Information Technology Services, Research Services and the Library to work with the Faculties and researchers to create a repository to meet the Research Quality Framework which became the Excellence in Research for Australia audit. It is unlikely that any one area of a University would have had the capabilities to successful complete this exercise.

What motivated this collaboration was an understanding that implications of failing to meet the RQF milestones established by DEST were significant. The outcome however was the establishment of a Research Repository which met the ERA requirements, the annual HERDC requirements, a place for researchers to store their work, and, subsequently, an Open Research Repository to showcase research at Deakin University and to engender collaboration within and outside of the University. Deakin Research Online is now truly a one-stop shop that feeds all the research needs for publication information. The business rules required have meant that more information is required than is necessary for an open access repository, but the acceptance of the repository as the mandatory University research database repository ensure its growth and comprehensiveness. Likewise the availability of links and widgets have ensured a greater use of library subscribed services which has made it quicker and more efficient to get to the exact published version. The repository provides for the peer review of the 20 % best items in those areas assessed by peer review and stores the evidence for the HERDC collection. At Deakin the research office extracts the citation data for the HERDC collection with links to the real articles in the libraries repository.

Ongoing developments will support the repository as a reference point for research data sets, for the deposit, storage and preservation of e-only theses and a place to conserve many other research related material, such as photographic archives and public lectures.

A less obvious outcome is the greater cohesiveness of the University, across Divisions and Faculties.

At a formal level, the original partnership with ITSD project support, Research Services Research and Planning Unit, and the Library continues.

- ITSD have continued to support the partnership at a project level through expanding its Steering Committee to the ongoing development of systems and services to research. This includes a new administrative system for Research Services, interlinked with the repository, and will also encompass the challenges ahead relating to research data.

- Research Services has agreed to position the repository to be the front end of its reporting system, redirecting the work of Faculty administrators and support staff to the repository, Deakin Research Online (DRO). Then ingesting the input, building in their business rules in the process. The Library in turn works with Research Services staff to provide quality control and support to the Faculties and the DVCR for reporting requirements. New links are being formed between the Research Services staff and the Library to support e-theses, and author information for central research administrative support for researchers.

- The Library has taken on board the promotion of open access and other value added services for researchers, employing Research Librarians, Liaison Librarians and HDR research support officers to spread the word. Library staff works closely with the Copyright Officer in the University's Knowledge Media Division in regard to interpreting publisher's copyright agreements and ensuring support for an author's copyright and moral rights.

In the process a better understanding of the capability and knowledge of professionals in different areas has engendered greater respect. This respect and shared knowledge has enabled the use of a much wider range of tools and better selection of options for tasks. The development of strong project management support during the lifetime of the project enabled great speed towards the end of the ERA project, though there were many mishaps before this happy outcome eventuated.

Each Division has gained skills and reflected on weaknesses in its service delivery.

This presentation covers some of the challenges and rewards that we discovered whilst working collaboratively, including avoiding political minefields, speaking the same language within the joint team and using communication effectively to others, supporting and encouraging each other, and presenting a united front. It also includes an honest reflection of some of the reasons why the last project manager finally managed to get us "over the line" just in time for ERA!

Finally it covers why staff at universities will need this collaboration more in the future and why we can't all continue to make our own profession's 'secret brew'.