Digitising research collections

Opening the door to collections – extending reach and enhancing meaning
Our goal

The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) is committed to exponentially broadening access to research collections in Australian universities through a digitisation program that will provide inspirational resources for learning and teaching, expose raw materials for ground-breaking research and engage communities of scholars and the educated public. The program will safeguard resources for future generations, facilitate a multi-disciplinary approach, encourage collaboration, and foster an integrated approach across institutions.

Overseas experience

Australia is well behind other countries in digitising the wealth of material held within universities. In the UK, for example, over the past 20 years through government support including the Higher Education Funding Councils, the Joint Information Systems Committee (Jisc) has championed the use of digital technologies in UK education and research. Through 15 co-ordinated programs involving 191 major projects across many disciplines and formats, an investment in excess of £28.9M since 2004 has resulted in digitisation of five centuries of unique resources for learning, teaching and research. The aims of the Jisc Content and Digitisation Program include:

Bringing collections out of the dark
- Enabling the use of difficult to access physical collections for the benefit of teaching, learning and research.
- Allowing for universities to exploit the full richness of their special collections, whilst easing the management of physical collections, helping preserve precious material and easing the pressures on space.

Meeting and advancing research needs
- Building a critical mass of content, thus providing for new methodologies, uncovering previously hidden evidence and opening up new areas of research.
- Helping meet teaching needs by using digital resources for innovative pedagogies, the gap between teaching and research, and inspiring teaching and learning in different spaces and scenarios.

Stimulating the economy, underpinning competitiveness and developing skills
- Establishing new business models for digital content and developing the appropriate skills in creating, describing, delivering and marketing digital content for HE and beyond.
- Working with the private sector to achieve commercial success and public good, reducing environmental impact, and opening up public sector content for re-use.

Reaching out and building communities
- Using innovative techniques and technologies, such as crowdsourcing, to create new forms of social inclusion and help create economically sustainable digitisation.
- Harnessing communities of users within scholarly groups and from the broader public to allow for the two-way transfer of knowledge and help address concerns over the sustainability and usability of digital content.

As well as the creation of ‘transformational content’, the Content and Digitisation Program works to improve digital literacy and build skills around the creation and consumption of these resources. At the same time, embedding and sustaining these resources is a challenge that the program constantly confronts and funds a range of projects to explore these areas.

An Australian program

- CAUL will co-ordinate a digitisation program across Australian university libraries to create high quality collections to support learning, teaching, research and engagement.
- Through consultation within the sector and other national bodies CAUL will define guiding criteria to inform prioritisation and selection of collections for digitisation.
- Work with funders and key stakeholders nationally to co-ordinate digitisation policy and investment and ensure that overlap in digitisation programs can be minimised to achieve a nationally cohesive vision/program.
- Lead the sector in defining standards and best practices for digital capture, description and preservation.
- Utilise digitisation as a tool to preserve collections and make valuable information available without jeopardising its integrity.
- Maximise access and use so that researchers will have optimal access to digital collections and showcase Australian content to the world.
- Support growth in organisational capability, skills and knowledge by sharing best practice and infrastructure.

Digital technology offers unprecedented means to transmit and store information. Documents and data in digital form are important for science, education, culture and economic and social development, but assuring their continuity over time is a far from resolved problem... Closer collaboration in managing these resources will be beneficial for all.

Source: UNESCO/UBC Vancouver Declaration September 2012
A Digitisation Infrastructure capability is required to build Australia’s capacity to enable large collections of artefacts, images, sound recordings, documents, films, animals, insects, plants and geological samples to be accessible in digitised form.

Many collections of national and international significance in the natural sciences, humanities, arts and social sciences are currently available only to researchers who can physically visit their repositories.

Significant productivity gains will be realised by unlocking collections of research material held across the country. Access to digitised and connected collections will have significant time and cost benefits.


Source: Professor Joseph Lo Bianco AM FAHA, President, Australian Academy of Humanities. July 2011
Case Studies

Charles Darwin University – digitisation of indigenous collections

Rich resources created in bilingual school programs in the NT are being digitised to create the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages.

Northern Territory Historical Photographs Collection is being progressively digitised.

The AraDA project funded by the Australian Research Council digitised significant East Timor material Collection that is out of copyright.

Curtin University Library – enabling access to digital content via collaboration


Developing and digitising the JCPML collection involved collaboration with a number of archival institutions including the National Archives of Australia, National Library of Australia, Noel Butlin Archives, State Library of WA and the MacArthur Memorial Library, as well as individual and organisational donors, stakeholders and copyright holders (e.g. the Australian Labor Party and members of the John Curtin family).

University of New England – early adopters

The UNE Heritage Centre has digitised research material since 2004. This has protected original documentary material and provided access to researchers unable to visit the Centre.

The initial digitisation project undertaken by the UNE Heritage Centre was through the ACR LIEF project 2002 ‘Unlocking Regional Memory’. This involved regional university archives from Newcastle, Wollongong, New England, and Charles Sturt. Following this pilot UNE has continued to digitise records to support research in conjunction with volunteers from the NSW National Trust, academics from Newcastle University and the Dalwood Restoration Society. Members of the public also volunteer to be part of individual digitisation projects within the UNE Heritage Centre. In one case the donor of the material also volunteered as part of the digitisation team.

University of Melbourne – Middle Eastern Manuscripts

The University of Melbourne Library holds almost 200 Middle Eastern manuscripts, dating from the 12th to the 20th century. The collection was built by Reverend Professor John Bowman, head of the semitic studies department at the University between 1959 and 1975. The collection was digitised in 2012 to support heightened interest from researchers, students and the general public. It supported the major Love and Devotion exhibition at the State Library of Victoria which included items from this collection, the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the State Library. It was the first major exhibition of Persian manuscripts to be held in Australia.

University of the Sunshine Coast – diverse and distinct collections

Over 10,000 plant specimens have been collected from local regions for more than 50 years. The records have been made available in USC’s institutional repository, USC Research Bank.

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