

Background and Context

Regional universities often face different challenges to larger institutions in developing information management infrastructure. Key difficulties include:

- reduced capacity for risk-taking with experimental or immature technologies
- limited infrastructure resources
- limited staffing resources which can be caused by
 - challenges in attracting high-calibre technical staff to regional areas
 - smaller tenured staff numbers reducing flexibility for project work
 - difficulties in back-filling key staff when conducting significant projects
- lower percentage of research-active staff

At the same time, these smaller universities may have some advantages over larger institutions. Key advantages include:

- greater agility for adopting innovations with less bureaucracy
- well integrated intra-institutional infrastructure which facilitates the delivery of projects that require a range of skills from different departments
- processes which can facilitate cross-institutional infrastructure development
- close links between research, learning and teaching as the practical application and dissemination of research is of major importance to regional universities
- research activities tend to be focused and well integrated with local and regional government, business and community interests and activities.

The RUBRIC partners recognize the need to keep pace with larger institutions in building appropriate infrastructure to support research and allied educational processes. Research ideas are primarily communicated “through collaboration, publication and presentation. Institutional repositories facilitate these activities by using technology to capture, store, expose and promote research output”[1]. When significant research output is now “born digital” universities of all types have a pressing need to develop and maintain open access repositories capable of managing research output to ensure ongoing accessibility of that research. The resources are important, but the impetus provided by accessible, high quality research outputs is essential to ongoing development. If smaller institutions are unable to keep pace, Australia will see an ever-widening digital divide between those conducting and maintaining scholarly research and those who will be increasingly unable to participate.

Repository infrastructure becomes a core mechanism to support a University’s research mission. It brings a responsibility to manage levels of access management, a scrutiny of content retained for the purpose of establishing collection development policies, retrieval, re-use and federation of objects and to explore links between repository content and full text sources. For smaller organizations these are significant areas of specialty where a collaborative approach is of considerable benefit, if not strategically vital.

RUBRIC will build directly on the excellent work already done in the first round demonstrator projects commonly known as FRODO (which address many of the key elements needed for building technical information infrastructure at the institutional level) and will pursue working relationships with new projects funded under SII 2005 (collectively referred to as MERRI).

The evolving DEST/ JISC e-Framework for Education and Research (the e-Framework) extends the ELF framework to the research domain. Its primary goal is to produce an evolving and sustainable, open standards based service oriented technical framework to support the education and research communities.

The processes for developing the framework will provide opportunities in a wider context to document, disseminate, provide guidance and implementation support for key infrastructure development outcomes of strategic initiatives such as the FRODO and MERRI projects.

USQ will act as a conduit for information and support between other regional universities and lead institutions such as Monash University for the ARROW Project, the Australian National University for APSR and Macquarie University for MAMS. Coordinating and collaborating with other regional universities in the deployment of FRODO outcomes contributes to the up-take and sustainability of these government funded projects and makes better use of scarce expertise ensuring that the research output of smaller institutions is managed and utilized locally in such a way that it can provide meaningful access to the content, participate in national and international initiatives such as harvesting into national search engines and contribute to collaborative scholarship. RUBRIC will hasten the process of deployment in those smaller organizations and provide specialist support and tools beyond that which would be provided by the existing FRODO projects. This will in turn provide a better return on investment for government funding of these infrastructure initiatives.

In the first instance the focus of activity would be at USQ but collaboration with other partners would be essential in achieving the desired objectives. Contributing partners will be the focus of the assisted take-up phase. The partnership with Massey University in New Zealand offers the opportunity to explore the same issues with an international perspective.

[1] Cathrine Harboe-Ree “Managing Australian Research Output for Increased Return on Investment: the Role of Open Access Institutional Repositories” Discussion paper available online as of May 10 2005 at <http://www.arrow.edu.au/docs/files/transforming-scholarly-communication.pdf> (216K PDF)