



Digitisation Paper for Information Futures Commission

Digitisation: a tool for the future management and dissemination of University scholarly, cultural, research and corporate assets

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A PAPER FROM INFORMATION SERVICES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The necessity for digitisation of Library holdings is canvassed in the IS Futures Commission Consultation Paper (p. 9) and in the "Investing in the Library of the Future" paper (p. 13), so this paper will not seek to make the case for digitisation as such, rather take it as a given that the University must 'do' digitisation. Given that assumption, the University must do digitisation properly – and this paper gives a vision of how digitisation should be done here in ten years time and what mechanisms should be put in place to ensure the best outcomes.

For an institution as complex as the University of Melbourne, digitisation is a broad topic – far broader than a conceptualisation based on access to scholarly materials alone would suggest. The University must embrace digitisation as a means of managing corporate and research records, cultural collections treasures and myriad scholarly materials. Appropriate digital capture across these categories will vary in complexity, technological requirements, standards and levels of required expertise depending on the purpose for the specific digitisation project or the outcomes required. Who is in a position to provide advice? Where are the accepted institutional standards? Where is the governance framework? Where is the financial commitment to excellence in digitisation?

Because digitisation at the University has grown up as an uncoordinated and under-resourced series of ad hoc efforts, this paper's vision for digitisation has Information Services playing the multi-focussed role of coordination, advice, promulgation of standards, and provision of some specialised capture services both within and beyond the Library. To provide digitisation services, IS must establish a centre of excellence equipped to provide digitisation and other services at three levels:

1. establishment and promotion throughout the University of standards for digitisation at every level
2. provision of specialised high-end digitisation services to capture Cultural Collections items to recognised digital preservation standards
3. provision of specialised high-volume scanning services to capture research, scholarly and corporate records materials to promote access and compliance with statutory obligations.

There is much work to be done if the University is to take full advantage of the benefits which digitisation offers. There are so many ways to get it wrong! Mostly, we need an approach to digitisation which covers off on three critical areas: Governance Framework, Financial Commitment and Technology. (These are the three key areas identified by the RLG/OCLC and are characterised as being co-dependant).



PRESENT STATE

The present state of digitisation at the University of Melbourne can be seen in relation to the three critical elements – Governance Framework, Financial Commitment and Technology. It is the contention of this paper that the University's present performance in relation to these elements is fragmentary and ranges from poor to good – but is in need of an overarching vision and strategic direction.

Governance Framework

There is currently no overall governance framework for digitisation. There are a number of policies and procedures which could form the basis of a digitisation governance framework, however there are gaps including the lack of an overarching electronic repository policy/strategy. Other existing policies like the Cultural Collections policies will impact on a digitisation governance framework. Additional work will be required to formulate or adapt digital standards appropriate for the full range of digitisation which presently exists and is necessary in an institution of this complexity.

Financial Commitment

This paper contends that funding and procurement would be better done in conjunction with a governance framework. Many digitisation projects are funded from grants or other one-off allocations – because there is no other way of procuring funding. Funding for digitisation is therefore currently ad hoc and often found from one-off, unsustainable sources. For example, a scanner presently performing daily imaging services in support of a vital university administrative function was purchased with a one-off allocation over four years ago. In the absence of a mechanism to ensure a timely and planned replacement, this service has been placed at risk. Ultimately, it is likely to be replaced by the unsatisfactory method of trimming operational budgets to find a large lump sum. This example is reflective of the way funding occurs for digitisation – an alternative will be suggested later in this paper.

There is presently no accountability for how equipment which is purchased in this ad hoc manner might best be used for future projects, so project grant-funded equipment can potentially languish under-utilised once its initial project is complete, or even continue to be used on another project which has not been granted particular priority, where a broader view may yield better value for the institution. This paper intends to point no fingers, or attach any blame for this state of affairs – it is simply the result of people doing what they can with what they have and then trying to persist with what they have because there is no alternative.

Technology

Digitisation technology (various scanners and cameras) abounds in various corners of the University as a result of the ad hoc, project or service specific purchasing model which has developed in the absence of governance and guidelines.

An attempt has been made to create a greater capability on a more centralised service model equipped for higher-volume corporate document digitisation which could potentially grow to serve the research and scholarly community, but to realise any significant impact, the scale and resourcing would need to be considerably expanded.



TEN YEAR VISION

In ten years, the University's digitisation needs will continue to be met by a variety of service or capture points. These will range from individual desktop capture devices, to more centralised services like high-end digital preservation services for Cultural Collections items and high volume scanners capturing research, scholarly and corporate materials. These services will be offered in a properly governed, financially sustainable and technically well-resourced Centre of Excellence. These necessarily disparate, University-wide digitisation efforts will be coordinated by an overarching network of governance, standards and proactive advice which will ensure that no matter where digitisation occurs in the institution, image quality can be guaranteed, appropriate metadata is created to facilitate access, statutory obligations met and support and advice are easily found.

This vision does not seek to 'take over' digitisation university-wide, but it does aim to introduce a coherent structure which will promote the role of a governance framework to oversee the larger efforts and ensure the University is getting the best value for its investment.

How will we get there?

The success and sustainability of this vision depends on strength in the three key areas of Governance, Finance and Technology.

Governance Framework

A ten year vision for digitisation should include a strong governance model. This could include:

- a digitisation policy
- preservation guidelines
- standards
- decision-making trees

An effective governance framework will help with the decision-making processes to guide subsequent financial and technological decision-making as identified by RLG/OCLC.

Financial Commitment

In ten years, digitisation should be financially well supported. The University should be prepared to invest in digitisation in a way which is both substantial and sustained in order to get on the cutting edge of digitisation service provision – and to stay there.

The University must seriously consider following the wisdom and experience of many cultural institutions who are heavily involved in digitisation (e.g. SLV & NGV). Realising that high-end digital capture devices are rapidly overtaken by technological advances, these institutions are no longer investing large amounts of money every so often to purchase equipment which can slide so readily off the cutting edge of reproduction capability or production efficiency. Rather, they are turning to rental agreements whereby for a fixed and predictable budgetary commitment, equipment can be procured and used for a fixed term and then upgraded at the end of the term. This avoids the problems of disposing of outdated technology, the temptation to use outdated technology, and the lottery of seeking funding support for large capital purchases just to stay abreast of technology. These rental agreements allow for the item to be purchased outright at the end of the agreed term for a tiny fraction of the original purchase price – very useful if there is a continuing need for that item.



Technology

The cornerstone of this vision is the Centre of Excellence. It is conceived as providing:

- the practical arm of the governance framework implementing/overseeing its rollout
- delivering standards advice for use by anyone doing digitisation at the University
- practical advice to departments on such topics as equipment purchases, etc. (not precluding departments from making appropriate purchases)
- a space for specialised equipment and expertise to deliver specialised digital capture services like digital preservation or high-volume scanning for major projects – under the auspices of the governance framework.

Key dependencies

- **Institutional repositories** – without fully resourced and supported institutional repositories, the digital content created at this institution will continue to reside in a series of data silos, of varying quality, capacity, accessibility and levels of support.
- **DAM (Digital Asset Management) System** – A proper DAM is a vital interface between institutional repositories and users, managing access and providing a single, seamless interface between users and (possibly many) repositories.



CONCLUSION

The value to the University of doing digitisation properly is both reputation and practical. All three elements (governance framework, financial commitment and technology) must be seen as co-dependant and failure to treat any one as vital, will likely result in another flawed digitisation effort. Simultaneous progress on digitisation's key dependencies like adequate institutional repositories and a DAM system are likewise vital.

The IS Futures Commission has been characterised as 'our one chance to get this right' – this goes as much for digitisation as any other aspect of Library and IT services. Realising this vision will require a substantial and ongoing commitment. We must either learn from our history or be doomed to repeat it. With so much about our brand which begs for a coherent and comprehensive approach to digitisation (like research data and unique scholarly and cultural collections), in the digital age, can the University of Melbourne afford to miss the boat?



Document control

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