

Information Futures Commission – Consultation Document

"Scholarly Information in a Digital Age: choices for the University of Melbourne."

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The title of the consultation document ("Scholarly Information in A Digital Age - Choices for the University of Melbourne) makes it clear that in the view of the authors "scholarly information for the foreseeable future is tied to digital resources." In the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies Australia (NCEIS) we have no fundamental disagreement with this hypothesis. Indeed, we are in the forefront at the University of Melbourne in using digital scholarly information because our whole *raison d'être* is based upon the digitisation, in one form or another, of scholarly knowledge

The National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies Australia (NCEIS) is a partnership between the University of Melbourne, Griffith University in Brisbane and the University of Western Sydney. It was set up to pool resources and students in order to provide a centre for collaborative research and, most importantly, for teaching across our campuses using media technology and distance learning. Teaching of subjects, online, began this year. Subject are taught with lectures, reading and visual material made available online with small group teaching on a tutorial basis going on at each of the participating institutions

We are consequently committed to the use of digital scholarly material. Indeed were are actively seeking expertise to expand it by investigating such methods of online teaching as that used by The Early Modern Texts Forum jointly run by the Universities of Warwick, Hull and East Anglia, in Britain and funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee of the UK Higher Education Funding Council and the British Academy. (See <http://www.earlymoderntexts.org/index.html>) This has three strands:

- A collaboratively taught MA Programme in the History of Political Discourse
- The Early Modern Virtual Research Group
- A pilot e-Texts Project

It is in this context that we find some of the proposals in the consultation paper so exciting. As scholars our research already makes heavy use of

digitally published information to inform our work; as teachers we create a huge quantity of digital material for use in our subjects and we make available the product of our research in digital form. One example of this was the 2005-6 ARC project "A Web-Based Humanities Image Database and Descriptive Catalogue for Academic, Industry and Community Application, in which one of our staff-members, Assoc-Prof Richard (School of Historical Studies) held jointly with participants at the University of Western Australia and Monash University and industry partner. This produced a web-sharing software that was used in major project undertaken by Melbourne with the participation of the Baillieu Library and the library of Alakhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco. This is a collection of digitised images of pre 1860 Islamic Landscapes, which is now available on the web

We have laboured this point in order to make it quite clear that we are fully in favour of the proposals in the Consultation Document to expand the use and the methodologies of use (which are not the same thing) of digital materials and processes.

We do, however, have some real reservations about some of the apparent underlying assumptions of the Consultation Document. The most important of these is that it fails to recognise, among other things the nature of the material with which we deal.

The most important characteristic of our work is that it relies heavily on non-European foreign languages. While our output in research is predominantly in English and in teaching is absolutely so, that is not true of the sources on which we have to draw. The digital revolution so clearly described in the Consultation Document is an overwhelmingly Anglophone one, but our source materials are to a large extent in Arabic and to a lesser extent Persian. These are not sources which ever been digitised, and almost certainly never will be. They are not available in many, and in some cases any, university libraries in Australia and if they are not preserved and added to a vital resource will be denied to researchers not only in our university but also more widely in the country. If they are not included in our plans for future expansion then the loss will be permanent and will undermine our own and Australia's research strength in an area of national priority

A second factor is the nature of these resources. In Islamic studies the basic texts and commentaries on them are just that, basic. They include large collections (in Arabic, usually) of such things as the Traditions of the Prophet, early Islamic chronicles, early and later commentaries on religious texts, encyclopaedic works in Arabic and Persian and so on. These resources are normally published in many volumes and take up considerable space on the shelves. But they cannot be removed from the

shelves and relegated to off-site, closed stack storage without very serious consequences for research. Another aspect of this problem is that of single volume works in non-European languages. There is no reasonable hope that these ever be catalogued to the level that would allow them to be identified as useful for a particular piece of research. For them, and the multi-volume collections browsability is vital.

Finally much of the research in our field is published in multi-volume form. A very recent example of this is the four-volume collection edited by the NCEIS's Deputy Director, Assoc-Prof Shahram Akbarzadeh *Islam & Globalization, Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies*, Routledge, 2006. Such a book is unlikely to be published on line because of the copyright difficulties and the peer-review questions associated with it. The questions are so cumbersome that it is most unlikely that there will be a full move to digital publishing in the near future. And much previous publishing has taken this form, which will not now be changed.

In short, the absence in the Consultation Document of any clear proposal about housing these collections in an accessible fashion is very disturbing. We would not deny that much material could - and should be stored off site provided that it is easily retrieved - although there is no clear reference even to that. But we need to have accessible access to multi-volume and non-European Language material on a long term and consistent basis. This does not have to be lavish - the use of compactus storage, provided it is usable by researchers and follows catalogue-order - would be perfectly acceptable. But it must exist.

A final worry that we have is the absence of reference to library staffing. Libraries have always provided access to material, and digitisation is simply a way of changing how that provision is made. But libraries have also always employed specialist librarians to assist students and researchers. These librarians have simultaneously to know how to manage the material and to understand its contents. That will not change if the material is digitised. Indeed it will become more important to have trained librarians able to assist readers from a position of experience and knowledge. The digitisation of knowledge still requires humans to use it and interpret it.