

eResearch Australasia 2008, Melbourne

Overseas Travel Report Summary

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Position: Science and Research Coordinator, ESR

Business Group: Science and Research

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What benefits do you expect ESR will get as a result of your travel?:

The conference was well attended (over 400 people) by mainly university personnel (IT and library staff, eResearch directors, researchers) and assorted others such as representatives from IT companies (IBM, CISCO). This gave me the opportunity to hear presentations from a range of presenters outside my normal sphere of work. I had hoped to meet staff from other research offices, but there were very few present.

My aim was to attend the conference to find out more about eResearch, since becoming involved in the ESR REANNZ KAREN Institutional Capability Build Fund project about 6 months ago. I was particularly interested to attend any presentations that related to similar research to that being undertaken at ESR and learn about the type of systems researchers had used for ensuring security of data (relevant for health and forensic research).

How effective was the course/workshop/conference/lab visit in assisting you to achieve the desired objective?:

The conference was (unsurprisingly) Australian focused and very heavily weighted to talks on Australian infrastructure. Although, this did make me appreciate the simplicity of NZ where we do not have the complexity of national and federal systems. I also had not realised the 'size' of Australian research e.g. 3,000-4,000 health researchers in the state of Victoria alone.

The plenary sessions were excellent and covered a variety of topics from using digital technologies in archaeology (Michael Fulford, University of Reading, UK) to developing new science communities in geochemistry (Kerstin Lehnert, Columbia University, USA). The latter speaker described a 180° turn by researchers in the geochemical community from not sharing data (and a lot never being published) to a willingness to do this when they realised the benefits of having access to larger datasets (better publications), plus researchers from outside the geochemistry community now have access to the data.

The change in attitude is for a variety of reasons, but includes large data volumes, the difficulty and expense of obtaining data and an increase in data complexity – this type of comment on data was echoed by a number of speakers through out the conference. Some of the other plenary sessions were not particularly relevant to me either because they were focused on Australian infrastructure or were out of my sphere of knowledge e.g. cloud computing. However, it was good to attend these sessions to obtain an idea of current issues.

The 'Birds of a feather' session on 'Raising awareness and increasing the uptake of eResearch' was a panel and audience discussion. One of the interesting points raised was relating to where eResearch will be in 5 or 10 years time and whether this type of conference will still be in existence. One perspective is that eResearch is under discussion because it is a new way of doing research and in the future will become 'the norm'. This probably also reflects some of the uncertainty in the discussion of what eResearch really means. George Slim, MoRST, in his talk on 'Developing a sustainable e-Research framework in NZ' also thought that in 5-6 years eResearch will become part of mainstream funding.

Other common themes were communication/ collaboration/ communities which came through in many talks e.g. Wayne Goss, IBM referred to 'collaboratories' and others picked up on this term. Underlying this was sustainability, although this term referred to a variety of meanings from minimising travel through to preservation of data in a readable/ useable form for the future.

The human side of eResearch was deemed to be important e.g. Peter Elford, CISCO referred to the need for maintaining human interactions even though travel might be reduced. Gavin Jennings, Victorian Minister for Education, saw the need for 'increasing human software capability' along with the money going into the Australian (Victorian) hardware (\$50m for a lifesciences computer and \$3.6m for computing capability for the synchrotron, announced that morning) and these sentiments were echoed by Justin Zoebel from the Victorian Life Science Computing Initiative.

Ethics and intellectual property issues were two additional areas I was interested to see how other organisations had dealt with, but there was little mention of either. I suspect this is because these are contentious areas and issues have not been resolved, or if they have been, are on a smaller scale. One panel member (Paul Taylor) in the Birds of a feather discussion was head of an ethics committee, he was mainly concerned about storage systems for data/ repositories for information but also potential release of data online. Graham Cameron, EBI (European Bioinformatics Institute), which holds massive genomic datasets said there was no consensus worldwide on how to deal with ethics for this type of data – a rules based system is favoured in the UK whereas an ethics committee making the decision is favoured by the US. Marianne Hibbert, BioGrid, in her talk on 'BioGrid Australia – Life science e-research outcomes' discussed a project in Victoria where datasets (genetic, clinical, treatment, outcomes) relating to diseases such as diabetes, epilepsy, some cancers are pooled. For this to happen, a number of partners have agreed to ethics, IP etc but it was a 'huge amount of work'.

A trip to the Australian Synchrotron was organised by Julie Watson from REANNZ. This turned out to be a taxivan full of kiwis, but we were given a 2 ½ hour tour of the facilities from Richard Farnsworth, Head of Controls and IT. The planning and forethought that went into the design is incredible and there is plenty of space to add extra facilities as money becomes available. It will be really interesting to see the research that comes from this facility. Although I had to cancel one of my workshops to attend this, I realised that I may never have another opportunity for such a tour.

What actions do you plan to take to ensure those benefits are realised?:

The numbers of staff from Research Offices were very low, I met Felix Tan (Director of the Research Office, AUT), Victoria Bradley and Craig Manning (Massey University Research Office). I have known Victoria for a few years. I did make contact with Grahame Pearson, University of New England, Armidale. Grahame was similarly surprised at the lack of Research Office staff at the conference. He has been championing eResearch at his university for the last 3 years. Grahame is planning to travel to NZ and I hope to meet him when he comes through Wellington. Victoria Bradley talked to Grahame and I about trying to run a stream on eResearch at the ARMS (Australasian Research Management Conference) to be held in Christchurch next year, I hope to become involved in this.

I will distribute specific details from presentations about related research projects/ useful contacts that are relevant to individual ESR staff or teams to those people.

I have collected information/ brochures that will be of relevance to IT and library staff and will distribute these appropriately.

Outcome:

I have a better understanding of how different groups and organisations are using eResearch, although not many answers to the specific questions I had. However, I think this reflects the level that eResearch has got to and the more difficult questions will be tackled in time.

Thanks to REANNZ for providing the travel funds that enabled me to attend this conference.