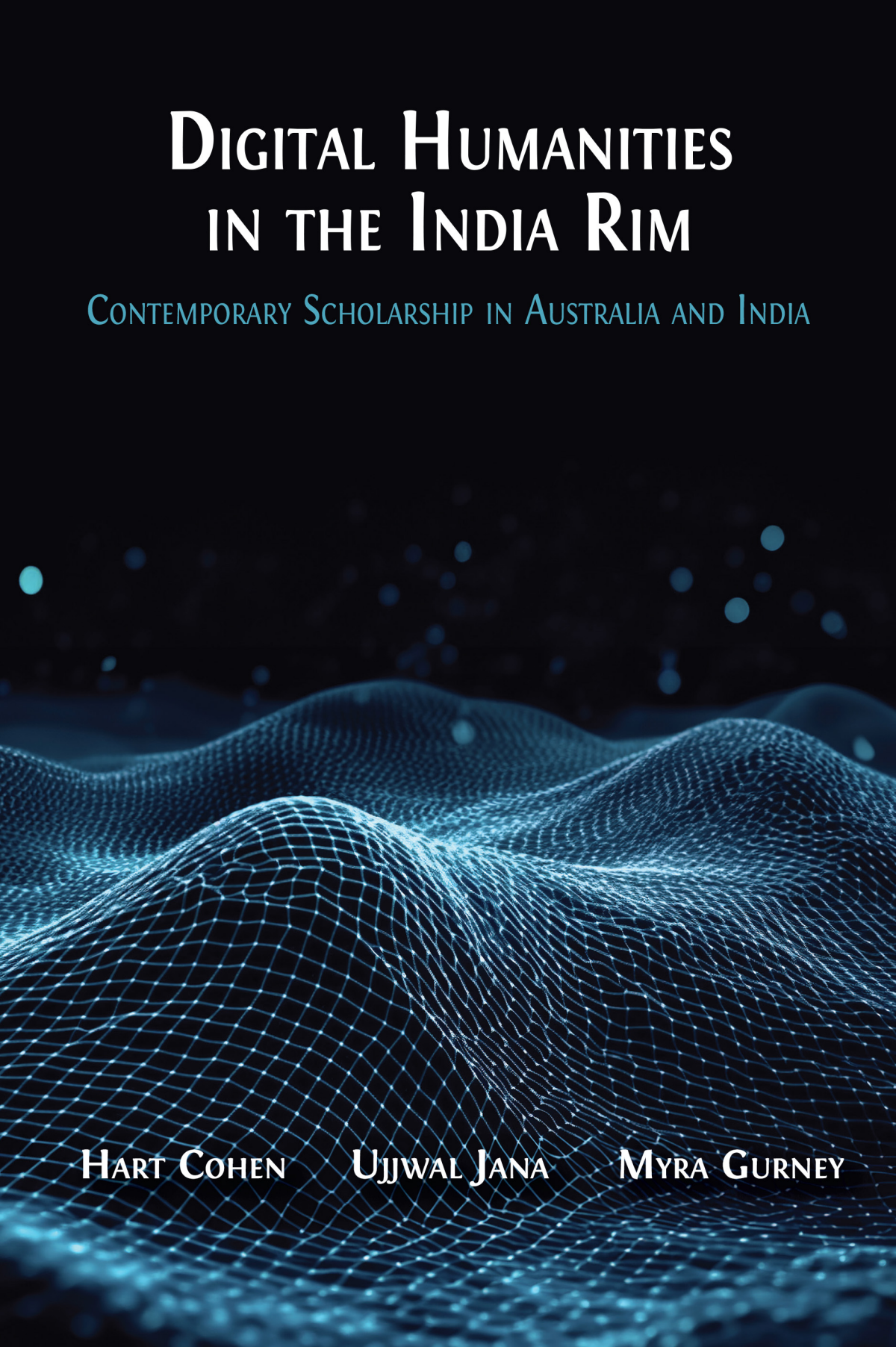
Digital Humanities in the India Rim

Contemporary Scholarship in Australia and India



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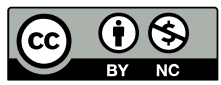

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2. Mapping Digital Humanities at Western Sydney University

Simon Burrows

Abstract

This chapter discusses efforts to build research capacity in Digital Humanities at Western Sydney University. Western Sydney University is a particularly appropriate subject for such a study because it was the site of the first Chair and earliest formally constituted research cluster in its field in Australia. The chapter charts the challenges, triumphs and disappointments of the university's Digital Humanities Research Group from formation to maturity, as the group has sought to establish financial stability whilst nurturing an emerging and diverse group of digitally empowered projects. In particular, it focuses on how the group's leadership has leveraged conferencing, training and networking to build trajectory, reputation and velocity, and has strategically targeted seed-corn funding to support emerging Digital Humanities scholars. It also explores how my own award-winning and, by the standards of the field, positively venerable, project on the 'French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe' has drawn on and developed the expertise and activities of colleagues, stakeholders and external collaborators, to bring training, research and funding opportunities to group members and students, and embed us in an ecosystem of 'like-minded projects'. In these ways, it is hoped that the Digital Humanities Research Group might be viewed as a living laboratory, and its experience serve

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as a guide to the perils and opportunities inherent in developing Digital Humanities.

Keywords

Digital Humanities; Western Sydney University; academic capacity building; research groups; academic networks.

Introduction

In recent years there has been growing interest and enthusiasm for Digital Humanities in the Indian Rim and other areas of the Global South. Whether we measure this interest in terms of practitioners, university course offerings, research centres dedicated to the field, regional associations, or affiliations to organisations like the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organisations (ADHO) or Centernet, it is clear that this is a growth area for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and one with significant potential for societal impact.

At first sight, the progress of Digital Humanities appears to face extra hurdles in the Global South, especially on account of infrastructure and resources. However, on closer analysis, whilst practitioners in these regions may experience these issues in particularly acute form, their colleagues in the Global North often face similar challenges. In this chapter, therefore, I wish to explore how Digital Humanists at one Australian university, Western Sydney University, have sought across the past decade to build research capacity and trajectory, particularly in the face of declining university funding. It is hoped that documenting our experience will be useful to others contemplating an investment in Digital Humanities—whether personal or institutional—both in and beyond the India Rim.

The challenge of Digital Humanities

The prospectus for the ground-breaking global, online Building Digital Humanities symposium co-convened by Western Sydney University in November 2022, reflects thus on the novel challenges around work in the field:

> Digital Humanities has presented a set of novel issues and dilemmas for both Humanities scholars and their collaborators, partners and facilitators in venues as diverse as the classroom, the library, industry, IT, government agencies and university research offices.
>
> As Digital Humanities practices have increasingly challenged the lone scholar model of humanities research and embedded computational technologies at the heart of much cutting-edge scholarship, new challenges have arisen around infrastructures, collaborative models, approaches to scholarly attribution and accreditation, data-sharing, data-preservation, access to data, and appropriate training and career structures.
>
> The choices policy makers, administrators and individual researchers take in response to these challenges have real world consequences, shaping, facilitating, or impeding individual careers, research agendas, or institutional or national initiatives.[1]

These observations are worthy of reflection, because the digital space is one of the most complex, rapidly changing, transformative and least understood challenges in the modern university. Digital Humanities, though only one part of this puzzle, is a particularly difficult one, due to the interdisciplinary and evolving nature of the field, and the large and ever-changing number of stakeholders, each with varied perspectives and interests. As a result, institutional engagements with Digital Humanities are perhaps best seen as ongoing and evolving real-time experiments.

Western Sydney University's experiment with Digital Humanities offers a particularly apposite and mature subject for such a case study, because the university created Australasia's first Chair in Digital Humanities and is home to the earliest formally constituted research cluster in the field. This means we can take a decade-long view of how the Digital Humanities Research Group (DHRG) has confronted general and particular challenges such as those outlined above, building capacity within our own unique institutional context even as it struggled to establish a precarious financial independence whilst nurturing an emerging and diverse group of scholars.

In particular, the chapter focuses on how the DHRG has leveraged

1 The 'official' conference website for Building Digital Humanities was decommissioned later in 2023. Recordings of the event have been archived at: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/dhrg/digital_humanities/dh_downunder/past_events/dh_downunder_2022

conferencing, training and networking to build trajectory, reputation and velocity, and how it has strategically invested start-up funding to support emerging projects. It will also explore how my own long-term project on the 'French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe' (FBTEE), which I brought with me to Western Sydney in 2013, has drawn on and developed the expertise and activities of colleagues, stakeholders and external collaborators, to bring training, research and funding opportunities to group members and students, and embed us in an ecosystem of 'like-minded projects'. In these ways, it is hoped that the DHRG might be viewed as a living laboratory, and its experience serve as a guide to the challenges and opportunities inherent in developing Digital Humanities.

Developing the Digital Humanities experiment at Western Sydney has been demanding, but, as many chapters in this book show, it has ultimately been worthwhile. As I write, colleagues working in the newly renamed Digital Humanities Research Initiative (DHRI) are leading on projects on themes as varied as 'Netflix and International Politics';[2] 'Cultures of Repair in Western Sydney';[3] and promoting research and industry partnerships between Japan and Australia.[4] All of these projects have been incubated within the DHRG, and none of the lead researchers involved had prior experience of Digital Humanities work. Further, all these projects have significant real-world applications. In this sense, the DHRG can be seen as a successful incubator of new, innovative, and often cutting-edge digital research across a wide frontier.

International and local networks

Equally, the DHRG has developed a global profile, due to our engagements with, and birthing of, global networks in Digital Humanities. This approach dates back to the early days of the DHRG:

2 See Diane Colman's chapter on 'Netflix and the Shaping of Global Politics' in this volume.

3 On this project see: Abby Mellick Lopes and Alison Gill, 'Commoning Repair: Framing a Community Response to Transitioning Waste Economies', in Eleni Kalantidou, Guy Keulemens, Abby Mellick Lopes, Niklavs Rubenis and Alison Gill, eds, *Design/Repair*. Place, Practice & Community (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

4 To avoid confusion and for purposes of consistency, this chapter refers to the group throughout as the DHRG, except where the new name (DHRI) is significant to our story.

within months of his appointment as group leader, Professor Paul Arthur had secured us hosting rights to 'Digital Humanities 2015', the annual conference of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organisations (ADHO).[5] This was a major coup for the university and Digital Humanities in Australia, and the first time ADHO had held its conference outside Europe and North America. The event had a mobilising impact within the university, conferring prestige on the group and arousing curiosity about Digital Humanities as a field.

In addition, Paul Arthur plugged us into other important international networks, most notably the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) partnership, directed by Professor Ray Siemens at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, a leader in the field of Digital Humanities globally.[6] Ray Siemens was for several years an adjunct at Western Sydney, and has subsequently served as visiting Global Innovation Chair in Digital Humanities at the University of Newcastle (NSW), one of our close regional collaborators.

Western Sydney has been a partner on several INKE-related initiatives. In 2017 and 2018, in partnership with the University of Sydney's Digital Humanities Research Group and with Ray Siemens as facilitator, we funded and convened the workshops from which the Canadian Australian Partnership for Open Scholarship (CAPOS) emerged. CAPOS duly won funding from the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council.

The inaugural CAPOS meeting in 2019 was, as we shall see, a further turning point for Digital Humanities at Western Sydney.[7] The DHRG was also a named partner on a series of more ambitious INKE grant application, culminating in a successful application in 2019. This new funding covers the period 2020–2027. It commits Western Sydney to holding a major workshop each year in pursuit of the INKE agenda and establishes a funding stream to enable us to continue to send delegates to the annual INKE partnership gatherings in Canada. These exchanges have now been going on for almost ten years.

INKE proved a particularly rich choice of partner for international

5 Records of this conference are archived at http://dh2015.org/

6 The INKE partnership website is at https://inke.ca/

7 For details of CAPOS work, see https://inke.ca/canadian-australian-partnership-for-open-scholarship/

knowledge exchange for two reasons. Firstly, due to shared post-colonial contexts as former British dominions, it has empowered rich dialogues around indigenous knowledge and heritage issues. Secondly, it has allowed Western Sydney University to engage more closely with Victoria University's Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI), the largest Digital Humanities training event in the Americas.[8]

Inspired by the DHSI model, in 2016, Associate Professor Rachel Hendery, who lectures in Digital Humanities, and Dr Jason Ensor, the DHRG's Research and Technical Development Manager, convened the inaugural Digital Humanities Downunder Summer School at Western Sydney. This event rapidly became the premier Digital Humanities training event in Australasia, drawing up to 100 delegates each year. The DHSI model leverages the collegiality of the national Digital Humanities community, who volunteer their time to train others in key approaches, techniques and platforms.

But DH Downunder's success has also depended on the efforts of Rachel Hendery, who has been instrumental in driving the event. This was not the original vision: Australia is a large country and so it was hoped that the event would circulate around the major cities. Circumstances dictated otherwise, however, and to date every event has been hosted in Sydney, except in 2019 when DH Downunder was hosted at the (relatively) nearby University of Newcastle.[9] Whilst this has helped to build local capacity and cement Western Sydney University's leadership in the field, long-term we hope the vision of a low-cost, circulating event will prevail.[10]

Besides CAPOS and DH Downunder, the DHRG has played a key role in establishing two further international networks. In 2016, with financial support from the Australian Research Council-funded 'Mapping Print, Charting Enlightenment' (MPCE) grant and my professorial 'establishment funds', the DHRG hosted the first Digitizing

8 The DHSI website is at https://dhsi.org/

9 The 2017 event was held at and co-hosted by the University of Sydney's DHRG, but the 2016, 2018, 2020 and 2021 events were hosted in person or, during the COVID-19 pandemic, online by Western Sydney alone.

10 As this book went to press, we were delighted to learn that DH Downunder 2024 will be hosted in Canberra at the Australian National University and the 2025 event will be held at the University of Melbourne.

Enlightenment symposium.[11] This was followed by a symposium at Radboud University (2017), and subsequent events at Oxford, Edinburgh and, following a break during the COVID-19 pandemic, Montpellier. Six years later, Western Sydney University hosted the aforementioned global, online Building Digital Humanities symposium, which we co-convened with the University of Pondicherry and corporate sponsors Gale. All of these initiatives provided opportunities for Western researchers and helped to build capacity. So, too, did the DHRG's participation from 2013 to 2018 in the annual 'Around the World Digital Symposium', an innovative 24-hour global event, organised by the University of Alberta, in which panels from over a dozen universities showcased their work in lightening presentations.[12]

In its early years, the DHRG was also connected to global networks through generous expenditure on visiting positions. In particular, we benefitted from extended annual visits by Professors Willard McCarty and Harold Short from Kings College, London. Recognised as being among the global founders and leading thinkers in the field, McCarty and Short advised on the initial business proposal for the DHRG and were instrumental in shaping our successful 'Digital Humanities 2015' bid. With such collaborations, the success of 'Digital Humanities 2015' and the launch of DH Downunder, Digital Humanities at Western Sydney University was making a mark internationally and within Australia, and generating excitement inside the university. By the time Paul Arthur left to take up a position at Edith Cowan University in September 2016, the group boasted over 60 members from across the university, including many of its leading researchers.

11 Most of the papers at the first Digitizing Enlightenment symposium were published in Burrows & Roe (2020). The 'Mapping Print, Charting Enlightenment' website is at https://int-heuristweb-prod.intersect.org.au/heurist/?db=MPCE_Mapping_Print_Charting_Enlightenment&website&

12 See https://aroundtheworld.ualberta.ca/category/archive/ for archived podcasts of all six 'Around the World' symposia. A publication to which a group of Western Sydney University academics contributed was led by University of Alberta 'Around the World' leaders. See H. Cohen, F. Sidoti, A. Gill, A. M. Lopes, M. Hatfield and J. Allen, 'Sustainability, Living Labs and Repair: Approaches to Climate Change Mitigation' in Chelsea Miya, Oliver Rossier and Geoffrey Rockwell, eds, *Right Research: Modelling Sustainable Research Practices in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021), https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0213

The composition of the DHRG

Many members of the group, however, were dipping their toes into unfamiliar waters. Their membership expressed a curiosity to know more, rather than a deep knowledge and engagement. Others saw Digital Humanities as a means of contextualising existing work. Most of these members brought energy and commitment, but the DHRG's ability to pursue key goals set by the university remained relatively limited—particularly when it came to growing research income from major competitive grants. The problem here was not success rates but underlying human capacity.[13]

At the heart of the DHRG were a small kernel of regular grant winners, several of whom were 'core' members for whom the DHRG was their institutional base. Prominent among them was linguist Rachel Hendery, in 2013 still an early career researcher. She soon won a series of major grants, culminating in her ambitious 'Waves of Words' project, which attempts to reconcile the linguistic, anthropological, and archaeological records relating to Australia's contacts with the wider world in the millennia preceding British colonisation. Also important was Professor David Tait whose work on the virtual courtroom in partnership with various jurisdictions internationally also involved multiple academic and corporate collaborations. Jason Ensor likewise played an important role. He was an investigator on my MPCE project as well as some of those run by Paul Arthur, and won Australian National Data Service funding for his own book-trade-related project, the 'Angus & Robertson Collection for Humanities and Education Research' (ARCHivER). Likewise, Dr Camellia Webb-Gannon participated in various projects relating to social media, including a study of 'Music, Mobile Phones and Community Justice in Melanesia'. Finally, Paul Arthur's involvements included the multi-partner DomeLab project and a collaboration with the Huygens Institute on Dutch-Australian cultural heritage and identities entitled 'Migrating People, Migrating Data'.[14]

Beyond these core members of group lay an outer kernel. Professor

13 The DHRG success rate in competitive grant applications submitted between 2013 and 2020 was around 50%. We had similar success rates when applying for other sources of funding.

14 For a list of DHRG projects see: https://logincms.westernsydney.edu.au/dhrg/digital_humanities/about_us

Hart Cohen worked with the group to publish, maintain and further develop his interactive site 'Journey to Horseshoe Bend'. In 2017 Hart joined the DHRG executive and became the group's deputy leader, overseeing development of an exciting MA programme. Likewise, two colleagues from Computing, Dr Tomas Trescak and Dr Anton Bogdanovych, devoted considerable efforts to Virtual Reality projects on 'Aboriginal Parramatta' and the impressive 'Uruk 3000 B.C.', which used insights from the genetic and behavioural sciences to 'breed' a population of avatars and model their behaviours. Tomas also contributed around a million lines of code as an investigator-developer to FBTEE, the project I brought with me from Leeds to Western Sydney, where initially I, too, was a member of this outer kernel. Supported originally by a British Arts and Humanities Research Council grant, FBTEE was already being recognised as a significant contribution to Digital Humanities by the time we transferred it to Western Sydney in 2013. One reviewer went so far as to assert that FBTEE did 'quite a lot' to bring the 'historical profession into the age of interactive digital technologies and GIS technology' (Caradonna, 2013). In 2015, FBTEE won further funding from the Australian Research Council, followed by the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies digital resource prize in 2017. This, as we shall see, was success we could leverage.

Challenges for the DHRG

Expanding this small group of stalwart grant-winners became an important goal. By 2016, when I was appointed DHRG Leader, it was already clear that this would be a major challenge. There were structural reasons for this. The first stemmed from the nature of the Australian grant landscape, which places significant emphasis on track record. Because this takes time to accumulate, upskilling researchers' digital skills and building research trajectory was always going to be a five- to ten-year project. This timescale was problematic in a research culture where the main government-mandated research assessment, the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), took place every three years.

The second challenge stemmed from the internal structures of the university. Put simply, we lacked the resources to attract existing big-hitting established grant winners to submit their grants through the

DHRG. These researchers had existing relations with the university's research institutes and tended to submit their applications through them. These research institutes had been set up to concentrate research strength and underpin a rapid transformation of the university's research culture and international rankings.

By the time the DHRG was formed, the institutes were empowering Western Sydney's rapid rise up the Australian and global university research rankings. Their full-time members included many of the university's leading researchers, often on research-driven contracts. The research institutes also granted membership to 'school-based' members, regular teaching academics who, subject to performance, were accorded modest financial resources and, more importantly, significant administrational and academic support with grant applications.

The DHRG could not compete with these incentives, particularly because, as matters of principle, it operated an open membership and dispensed advice and support freely on grant ideation. It thus had a largely invisible input into several successful projects from which it did not derive direct benefit in university metrics. To be sure, this was not entirely one-way traffic. A number of institute members, particularly from the Institute for Culture and Society, have played leading roles in many DHRG initiatives. Nevertheless, these structural factors shaped our parameters of action.

The search for self-sufficiency

In addition, by 2016 the university was signalling that the DHRG needed to stand on its own two feet financially. This was part of the group's initial design. From its inception, there was an explicit expectation that the DHRG would become, at the level of operating expenses, increasingly self-supporting over time. As a result, funding from the university's Research Infrastructure Funding (RIF) would be progressively withdrawn.

The group had several potential routes towards financial self-sufficiency. The most attractive from an economic point of view was through consultancy, since this might provide a relatively stable income stream. To incentivise consultancy activity, the university generously proposed that, in addition to any profits, the DHRG would keep the

16% matching funding offered by the Commonwealth government of Australia. A second route, theoretically, was through non-Commonwealth grant income. Like consultancy, this income carries matching funding, but such funding was not made available to the grant-winning unit. This was unfortunate for the DHRG, which has had significant successes in overseas grant capture. Other possibilities for raising funds included commercial partnerships, philanthropic donations or securing competitive internal grant funding. Finally, many of our conference and workshop activities could also be supported through sponsorships and registration income. The DHRG has tried most of these pathways, with varying degrees of success, and now finds itself in a sustainable position, but at the expense of having scaled back organisationally. The story of how we have achieved this, playing to our strengths and gradually focusing on core capacity, may provide pointers for other groups, especially those who are working with limited resources.

From the university's point of view, consultancy was for a while considered the priority route. A periodic review of the DHRG released in late 2016 called for the group to explore consultancy opportunities, and suggested we look at the Humanities Research Institute (HRI) at the University of Sheffield as a potential model. This model involved providing digital development support to other institutions. Unfortunately, our benchmarking exercise and further research suggested that the Sheffield HRI model was not suitable for the DHRG for three reasons. The first was financial. Outsourcing projects is more economically viable under Britain's Full Economic Cost (FEC) funding model, which provides host institutions with generous overheads, whereas universities have to match Australian Research Council (ARC) awards with significant cash and in-kind contributions. The second reason was capacity. The Sheffield HRI is a considerable operation which employs several academic technologists and has an impressive track record of digitising massive archives, making them accessible through text searching and metadata tools.[15] In contrast, the

15 The HRI's projects include the award-winning Old Bailey Online and successor projects, which are arguably, from a public engagement perspective, the biggest Digital Humanities projects undertaken anywhere. These projects can be consulted at https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/; https://www.londonlives.org/; https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/

DHRG lacked a specialism or track record and employed a single academic technologist, whose position as Research and Technical Development Manager also incorporated the roles of project management, group administrator, and active researcher. To operate as a viable consultancy, we would need to hire several more staff in an untested market. Finally, there was already a major competitor providing digital research services, Intersect Australia. Intersect is a not-for-profit organisation established by a consortium of universities in which Western Sydney University is a financial stakeholder.[16] Whilst not specifically focused on the Humanities, Intersect has worked on several Digital Humanities initiatives. Realising that it would struggle to compete in Intersect's space, the DHRG began to explore alternative consultancy possibilities with the University.

We were not without ideas. Jason Ensor had already pioneered an innovative and economical academic publishing model, and generously suggested we adopt it to develop a press with the university's imprimatur. The success of the university's Writing and Society Research Centre at sponsoring Giramondo Press suggested this might be viable.[17] We also explored commercialising Journal Finder, a tool developed by Jason and his partners in the Western Sydney University library to help researchers find appropriate, high-prestige publishing outlets. The former idea foundered on profit margins, the latter on Jason's pre-existing commitments to share Journal Finder as open source.

Our final and most successful proposal was to develop the DHRG's Experiential and Immersion Research Lab (EIRL), headed by Kate Richards. Kate had considerable experience of VR technologies and content creation before entering academia, and under her guidance the Lab attracted a couple of five-figure contracts. EIRL was also shortlisted, alone or in partnership, for three much bigger projects, including developing VR and XR content for the refurbished Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney and Villers-Bretonneaux war memorial site in France. Alas, none of these bids was successful. Eventually, it became clear that we would not be able to attract enough prestigious, specialised or cutting-edge, research-driven projects to maintain the income flow we required. Conversely, if we chose to focus on more mundane content-creation

16 For details on Intersect Australia and its services, see https://intersect.org.au/

17 See https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/ and https://giramondopublishing.com/about/

assignments, it would not be viable to 'scale up' operations. The reason was simple. Creative salaries in Australia are substantially lower than university pay rates. It would thus be almost impossible to offer a competitive service.[18]

At this point, the DHRG was forced to face a brutal truth: we were not short of skilled scholars, but our strength lay in diversity, interdisciplinarity, and a shared commitment to digital approaches. What we lacked was a critical mass of individuals with shared skills or expertise in specific methods or technologies. Without such shared competencies, we were likely to struggle to operate a successful consultancy operation. However, this same diversity opened avenues to interesting research collaborations, and these too might provide opportunities, particularly if we could upskill some new entrants to Digital Humanities. From 2016, this became a major focus for DHRG's new leadership.

Building human capacity

A symptom and result of this shift was a revised strategy for building human capacity. This was reflected in the adoption of a more egalitarian leadership style through the formation of an executive committee (initially comprising Rachel Hendery, Jason Ensor, and me), regular member meetings, and a new budget formula. From 2016, one third of our resources were devoted to the personal development of core staff (that is, members formally assigned to the group, including research assistants), and another third to start-up grants. The final third went on general costs including commitments to overseas partnerships, such as INKE.

One positive side-effect of this new member-centred approach was a gradual increase in attendance at DHRG seminars. The DHRG has run seminar series throughout most of its existence, but as with other seminars at Western Sydney, it was a struggle to build regular attendance from a highly interdisciplinary group in a multi-campus university. At first, attendances were often barely a handful. However, from 2016, average attendances grew rapidly, to between ten and twenty at most

18 For creative salary data during this period (as of 4 June 2018), see https://www.payscale.com

seminars, abetted by the efforts of successive convenors: FBTEE post-doc Laure Philip, Michael Falk, and finally Hart Cohen. Further, Hart's 'The Artist and the Algorithm' seminar series successfully trialled a thematic approach, with the aim of publication. Other initiatives proved equally popular.

The start-up grant scheme proved a particular success and a key plank in the group's evolution, running annually from 2017 to 2020. The idea grew from Paul Arthur's decision after 'Digital Humanities 2015' to plough the small operating profit from the conference into a one-off competition in which members could apply for start-up money for their projects. This original call attracted several applications and not all could be funded. In 2017, the new executive committee decided to run a similar scheme every year, an idea members supported enthusiastically. The funding was limited: from around $8,000 per annum, we usually funded four or five projects. However, the DHRG also provided start-up-funding holders with in-kind support and advice. This allowed us to facilitate projects as required but without always granting the full sums requested. By this means the judging panel never rejected an application, though we did remodel some budgets. To make the grants as flexible as possible, our project eligibility requirements were deliberately loose: applicants had to be academic staff and members of the group, and projects had to fit broadly under the Digital Humanities umbrella. By this means, conference-type activities were eligible alongside projects requiring digital support or specialist equipment. We also asked for an (unenforceable) moral commitment to put any related grants through the DHRG, if not encumbered by previous collaborative obligations.

Projects funded by our start-up grants scheme included a 'Social Robotics' symposium, speaker expenses for conferences and, more often, funding for equipment, training, software or websites for emerging projects led by early career researchers. Several researchers accessed multiple grants as their projects evolved. This helped make the DHRG more cohesive and allowed the group leadership to become increasingly invested in their colleagues' work. The most significant start-up projects feature in this book.

Moreover, because we were always looking for cost-effective solutions, the DHRG increasingly advised applicants on open-source resources, above all the Heurist platform used by many of the projects discussed

in this book.[19] Although Heurist presented at Western Sydney's first Digital Humanities event, the inaugural 'Around the World' symposium in May 2013, the DHRG's engagement with Heurist came much later, initially through two projects of much greater magnitude (Around the World, 2013). The first of these projects was my Australian-Research-Council-funded MPCE project, which built upon my work with FBTEE.[20] The second was the British AHRC-funded 'Libraries, Reading Communities and Cultural Formation' project, led by Mark Towsey of the University of Liverpool, on which the DHRG is a partner with special responsibility for digital development. Intersect Australia is also a partner on delivering this project. Neither of these projects began life as a Heurist project. Indeed, the original FBTEE database was published in June 2012. This was seven years before I met Heurist's developer, Ian Johnson, and promptly adopted Heurist.

Leveraging success

Further, from 2012 to 2019, the DHRG helped to leverage FBTEE's reputation as a path-breaking project in Enlightenment studies and a model for other historical bibliometric projects. This included, as we have seen, the launch of the Digitizing Enlightenment symposium series, which grew out of conversations with Stanford University's celebrated 'Mapping the Republic of Letters' (MtRoL) project and MIT's 'Comédie française Registers Project'. Digitizing Enlightenment aimed to establish a collaborative network and conversation between digital projects treating the Enlightenment era.[21] As part of this initiative, Stanford's Dan Edelstein served as an external investigator on MPCE, and as a result Jason Ensor, Rachel Hendery and I all visited Stanford to work with the MtRoL team.

Equally, I became involved in a network of 'library historians' organised by Mark Towsey, and I attended their workshop on digital research in library history in Chicago in 2015 (Burrows, 2015). This led

19 For details of Heurist, see https://heuristnetwork.org/

20 The 'Mapping Print, Charting Enlightenment' online database interface is at https://int-heuristweb-prod.intersect.org.au/heurist/?db=MPCE_Mapping_Print_Charting_Enlightenment&website&

21 On MtRoL and CFRP see the project websites at http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/; https://www.comedie-francaise.fr/en/daily-registers#

to an invitation for Western Sydney University to take the lead on the digital development for Towsey's 'Libraries, Reading Communities, and Cultural Formation' project. This 1,000,000 GBP project involved 18 university and 'impact' partners across Europe, North America and Australia. It also helped build collaboration among DHRG researchers, as the project included innovative plans for incorporating weighted corpus linguistics tools, and this involved the collaboration of Rachel Hendery and another colleague, Robert Mailhammer.

FBTEE also developed collaborations with other leading book history projects, most notably two large European-Research-Council-funded initiatives. Alicia Montoya's 'MEDIATE' project, based at Radboud University in the Netherlands, looks at private library holdings across Europe in the long 18th century, whilst Damien Tricoire's 'Pamphlets and Patrons' project (PaPa), based at the University of Trier, examines networks of political patronage. FBTEE researchers advised on both projects in the pre-award stage and participated in knowledge and staff exchanges with both projects subsequently. In this way, FBTEE has embedded Western Sydney University researchers in an extensive network of like-minded projects. In the case of PaPa this collaboration extends to a unique database-sharing arrangement.

Engagement with Heurist

The decision to migrate FBTEE resources to Heurist was thus a momentous one for both parties, particularly as, by then, the FBTEE team was developing a suite of successor resources under the auspices of the MPCE project. The end goal of MPCE had always been to create a single database containing all these resources, organised around a single event-based data model. However, by dint of a series of unfortunately timed staffing changes, drip-fed funding, and development issues, none of the daughter-resources quite mapped onto the original data model, whilst the original FBTEE data would require significant remodelling prior to integration into a combined resource.

By late 2019 it was also becoming clear that ARC funding and the university could not indefinitely support bespoke development for FBTEE resources. So, when Ian Johnson gave a presentation on the newly upgraded Heurist at the 2019 CAPOS conference, I seized

the chance to test a system which promised flexibility and an almost unlimited capacity to restructure my database myself without needing any programming skills. Heurist proved to be as good as it sounded.

Within a day, following our first meeting, Ian Johnson and his developer, Artem Osmakov, built a demonstration database, uploaded the FBTEE data, and built an interactive website. In the months that followed, I designed a separate database for the MPCE data, along the lines of our original data model, and remodelled the FBTEE and MPCE data accordingly. Meanwhile, Ian and I identified areas where Heurist's existing functionality did not yet meet my requirements and worked with a succession of Professional Experience (PX) student computing teams at Western Sydney University to create the new tools I needed. To date, we have worked with over 20 students to develop new functionalities. These have then been rolled out to the wider Heurist community. Several of these students have been offered positions with Heurist, and one is currently employed with them.[22]

Essentially, Heurist is, as it boasts, a free, open-source 'research-driven data management system' that allows users 'to design, populate, explore and publish [...] richly structured database(s) [...] through a simple web interface, without the need for programmers or consultants'.[23] For Western Sydney University researchers, its key attractions have been flexibility, intuitive ease of use, and the in-built website creation tool and templates. Increasingly, as a user community, we have been able to support each other, too, assisting in database design. For efficiency reasons, wherever possible we have paid Heurist to design our websites. This is far cheaper than using a commercial website designer and saves researchers from significant time investment in learning a one-off task.

Heurist's flexibility and ease of use is perhaps best exemplified by the 'boot camp' Ian Johnson and I led for the post-docs on Mark Towsey's project in February 2020. The post-docs arrived with limited knowledge of how to construct a research database or the computational thinking involved, yet within two weeks they had designed their project

22 The work of the various PX team members is documented, along with the work of the rest of the project team, at https://int-heuristweb-prod.intersect.org.au/heurist/?db=MPCE_Mapping_Print_Charting_Enlightenment&website&id=117630&pageid=117628

23 https://heuristnetwork.org/

database.[24] This was all the more impressive because we needed to align their project with MPCE and a dump of newly-cleaned English Short Title Catalogue data brought to us under licence by Mikko Tolonen from the University of Helsinki's 'Computational History Group'.[25] In contrast, developing a bespoke tool would have taken months of a software engineer's time and cost tens of thousands of dollars.

In the months following the bootcamp, one by one the DHRG start-up-funding projects shifted to Heurist. At the same time, our corporate life was revivified following COVID-19 lockdowns by developments elsewhere, notably the 'Digital Humanities in the Indian Rim' project launched by Hart Cohen, Rachel Hendery, Michael Falk and Helen Bones in partnership with Professor Ujjwal Jana of the University of Pondicherry. This project and partnership remained funded throughout the pandemic and culminated in an online seminar series convened by Professors Hart Cohen and Ujjwal Jana involving Western Sydney University researchers and staff and students in Pondicherry, and Pondicherry partnered with us on hosting the Building Digital Humanities Symposium. Most of the chapters in this volume were first presented during the seminar series and showcase the development, diversity and richness of work taking place at this moment, particularly the Heurist projects.

The migration of Western Sydney DHRG projects to Heurist was timely, as it helped to compensate for the loss of internal development capacity. This progressive downsizing happened between 2017 and late 2019, following the resignation of Jason Ensor, who subsequently took up another position within the university. He was eventually replaced by Michael Falk on an *ad hoc* part-time basis. From mid 2018 to late 2019, Michael's position was supported by a combination of existing projects and a contribution from the School of Humanities. The role was

24 The online interface website for the project, constructed much later in the project with the assistance of Michael Falk, is at c18librariesonline.org

25 The ESTC can be consulted at: http://estc.bl.uk/F/?func=file&file_name=login-bl-estc. On the use by the Helsinki Computational History Group of cleaned ESTC data, see Mark J.Hill, Ville Vaara, Tanja Säily, Leo Lahti and Mikko Tolonen, 'Reconstructing intellectual networks: from the ESTC's bibliographic metadata to historical material', in *Digital Humanities in the Nordic Countries: Proceedings of the Digital Humanities in the Nordic Countries 4th Conference*, ed. by Costanza Navarretta, Manex Agirrezabal and Bente Maegaard (Aachen: CEUR-WS, 2019), pp. 201–19 at https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-2364/19_paper.pdf

discontinued altogether when Michael took up a lectureship in Britain at the end of 2019. However, by dint of fortune, he returned to Australia in 2021, where he took a position at Heurist that involved supporting several projects with which he was already familiar from his time at Western Sydney.

Retrenchment and rebuilding

As COVID-19 began to impact university finances, Western Sydney University, like other Australian institutions, sought financial retrenchments. Research units were a particular target. The DHRG thus lost its central Research Infrastructure Funding a year earlier than previously expected. Outwardly, the most immediate impact of this was a change in the Group's name, since the term 'Research Group' was reserved for RIF-funded units: we now became a Research Initiative. Internally, the main impact was the loss of our remaining RIF funding and a 30% time allowance for the group leader. Both cuts could be weathered. The lion's share of the leader's time allowance had hitherto been spent preparing reports and attending meetings and key committees. These tasks were now no longer required, as the group ceased to be a university cost centre. This had collateral benefits, especially as the group leader could now return to the classroom. The funding cut also galvanised us to win a competitive internal grant offered by our school. The 'Building the Digital Humanities' grant secured funding for five discrete projects, all of which had benefited from the DHRG start-up funding scheme. To give it cohesion, the grant programme was tied together with a mentoring package and an end-of-grant symposium.[26] The project's results are visible in this book and in recordings from the Building Digital Humanities symposium.[27]

The projects funded by this grant are bearing fruit in multiple ways. The DHRG's new 'stars' are making significant contributions to their disciplines or fields of practice, as well as tangible differences to society in

26 The mentors on the project were Simon Burrows, Hart Cohen, Rachel Hendery, David Tait and Tanya Notley, a long-term member of the DHRG with research interests in social media and communications.

27 At time of writing, we are expecting to publish two volumes arising from the Building Digital Humanities symposium with Radboud University Press.

Western Sydney. They have also become adept at building the trajectory of a project. A case in point is Dr Diane Colman's aforementioned project on 'Netflix and Global Politics'.[28] This project has leveraged financial support from a variety of university sources including DHRG start-up funding, a grant for women researchers, and several summer student scholarships, a total package worth around $A 50,000. More significantly, perhaps, Diane Colman argues that Digital Humanities projects such as hers offer a means to marry traditional International Relations approaches with emerging research on soft power, which has hitherto been difficult to integrate into the empirical and realist frameworks favoured by International Relations specialists.

Over time, many DHRG projects have become more applied and socially transformative in their ambitions. In some ways, this had always been the case. For example, one of the DHRG's original core members, David Tait, was assigned to the group due to his innovative work with international partners on cyber-justice and the virtual courtroom. The importance of this work became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many jurisdictions explored moving their courts online. More recently, engagement with Digital Humanities fed into Dr Alison Gill's project on repair cultures in Western Sydney and led Dr Peter Mauch and his partners at the Australia-Japan Foundation to envisage a database of fundable projects to promote Australian-Japanese research and business collaborations. Further, DHRG projects have become prolific users of the university's Summer Scholarships scheme. They have provided paid summer research internships to around a dozen students and provided a pipeline of future research students. For example, the summer research students I employed in 2020–21 and 2021–22 are now enrolled for PhD and Master of Research degrees respectively.

Diane Colman, Peter Mauch and Alison Gill's aforementioned projects were all among those supported by the Building Digital Humanities grant. The others were Dr Navin Doloswala's research on fire performance and the next iteration of Hart Cohen's mature project on 'Journey to Horseshoe Bend'. This project offers an interactive narration of the death-journey of celebrated Australian anthropologist and linguist Carl Strehlow across central Australia in 1922. All these

28 See Diane Colman's chapter on 'Netflix and the shaping of global politics' in this volume.

projects, with the exception of Horseshoe Bend, were showcased to a global audience in a 'special session' on the final day of the 'Building Digital Humanities' symposium on 23 November 2023, together with a further Heurist-supported project developed by Dr Katrina Sandbach.[29] Bringing together scholars with backgrounds in International Relations, History, Design, Communications and Anthropology, collectively these projects show the full diversity of the DHRG's work. As the finishing point of both the Building Digital Humanities grant project and the symposium, this seems an appropriate point to reflect on the past and future directions of the Western Sydney University DHRI.

The symposium itself marked another milestone for Digital Humanities at Western Sydney. The most ambitious event we had hosted since 'Digital Humanities 2015', and by registrations even larger, it marked a return to the outward-looking approach taken under Paul Arthur and revived by the India Rim project. This time, however, our networking is aimed outwards at promoting Digital Humanities to the wider global community. This approach aligns with the university's own priorities, which culminated in the award of the coveted number one world ranking for promoting UNESCO Human Development goals by the *Times Higher* in both 2022 and 2023.

Connections between Digital Humanities and development became increasingly clear as we planned the event, and for two main reasons. Firstly, many of the problems tackled by Digital Humanities, as well as the infrastructural challenges it faces, are in fact human development issues. This is particularly visible in the regions collectively known as the Global South, which includes most of the Indian Rim, but in different ways they affect universities and societies in the Global North also. The enthusiasm with which participants in the Global South embraced the opportunity to engage in, and frequently lead, our global conversation, was testimony to the need to discuss these challenges together. For example, 'minimal computing' has its attractions for researchers and citizens in rich societies, even as it is essential in the lands of the Global South. Secondly, it was obvious that a desire to engage in the sorts of conversations that took place at Building Digital Humanities was widespread. At Western Sydney, we originally wished to discuss

29 The special session can be watched at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSy-Z-sYAGU

how to empower digital work in humanistic fields to inform our local discussions, but in fact similar challenges exist universally among practitioners. Thus, our symposium struck a chord internationally.

Future prospects

As I write, the future shape of Digital Humanities at Western Sydney remains to be determined. Certainly, we will be developing international initiatives from the Building Digital Humanities agenda. One aspect of that will involve a traditional print and online publication from the symposium sessions, and at the time of writing we have just lined up a publisher. In keeping with the globally transformative aims of the symposium, commitments made to delegates, and our own group's commitments to Open Scholarship, we have negotiated for the book to be diamond open access—that is to say, free of charge without upfront fees for authors or a paywall for readers.[30]

Another aspect of this work will be developing networks, initiatives and global and local partnerships to support Digital Humanities in emerging spaces. These emerging spaces include the Global South, but they also exist within post-colonial societies such as Australia, most notably around the digital sharing and preservation of indigenous knowledges and wisdom. The historic abuse and continuing misuse of such material, even by sometimes well-meaning parties, means that this issue requires sensitive, informed and respectful dialogue. Whilst such issues are particularly pressing for post-colonial settler societies such as Australia, they are also important for the former colonial powers of Europe.

Finally, there will doubtless be further 'Building the Digital Humanities' events, particularly if we can find supporters as generous as Gale, Australia and New Zealand, who provided substantial cash and in-kind support for the inaugural event. This included the use of their license to the Cvent platform to organise the conference and the loan of a staff member, Damian Almeida, Training and Digital Communications Executive, who created the webpages and registration system and posted

30 Our expected publisher for these two volumes is Radboud University Press, contract pending.

session recordings. Blessed by this partnership, the event attracted over 140 (invited) speakers, 700 registered delegates, and several significant nominal sponsors, including ADHO.

The DHRI will continue to exist within the university as a funded entity. Its current INKE commitments—and a related income stream—remain active until 2027. Equally, collaborations around publishing, including this book, but also two volumes arising out of the Building Digital Humanities symposium, will keep group members active. Beyond these research activities, the DHRI is looking towards building possible teaching activities, and continues to attract research students.

Thus, if the group eventually ceases to exist, it will probably be because its original *raison d'être* has been overtaken by events. As digital methods become more mainstream in the humanistic disciplines, the services the group has hitherto provided may migrate elsewhere or become obsolete as knowledge is generalised. But to date there is no sign that the Digital Humanities are about to 'wither away'. Indeed, the case for including a robust training in—or at the very least encounter with—Digital Humanities in the undergraduate curriculum appears to grow stronger by the year.

What general lessons, then, can we take from the Western Sydney experiment? Especially in light of our setbacks around consultancy, it is important to understand your human capital, and how best to build upon it. At Western, once we identified the challenges we faced, we sought to build human capital by a combination of training events, start-up funding, strategic mentoring, high-visibility international partnerships and conference-style events and workshops. The university supercharged the group's initial development by strategic appointments, but developing existing talent has been a long-term process.

As our knowledge base and experience have grown, the DHRG leadership has become more creative, weathering cuts to central funding in ways that have had little impact on our capacity. At the same time, we have put ourselves at the heart of national and international networks and training events, culminating with our creative partnership with the University of Pondicherry and the Building Digital Humanities initiative.

Encouragingly for others, particularly in the Global South, the networks in which we are embedded are generally open, collaborative

ones, and the digital platforms we have embraced have been open source with active user communities. They thus offer a model for groups in other institutional settings wishing to build capacity in similar ways. Finally, hosting repeated or one-off events has allowed us to build links with regular sponsors, including local partners like Intersect Australia and the Australian Research Data Commons, as well as international corporations, most notably Gale. By these means our workshops, symposia and summer school have become increasingly independent of our university financially.

Thus, whilst never generating the income that both we and the university would ideally have liked, we have realised and exceeded the university's founding vision for Digital Humanities research in other ways. Against a background of diminishing resources, we have learned to 'stand on our own two feet' financially, developed emerging talent, provided professional or research experiences to several cohorts of computing and summer scholarship students, and continued to play a significant leadership role in the development of the field at home and internationally. The experiment is far from over.

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