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International Comparators:
How does Australia compare internationally?

A research report contributing to the
Digital Access to Collections initiative

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Executive summary

This report, produced by Dr Katherine Howard and commissioned by the GLAM Peak Bodies, is based on desk research carried out over the period of April to June 2017.

Dr Howard was asked to investigate national strategies for digital access to collections in other parts of the world, identify themes within them, and provide recommendations as to how they might inform digital access strategies at the state, territory and federal level in Australia. It is part of the first stage of the Catalyst-funded Digital Access to Collections project 2016-2017.

Key findings

Strategies analysed came from Europe (28 in total), Canada and New Zealand. Surprisingly, there was little variation identified in the strategies from Europe. The Canadian and New Zealand strategies, although being of a later date than the European ones, also did not provide much variation.

The key findings also form the basis of the recommendations. The key findings are:

- National strategies for digitisation and preservation are created in response to cultural policies set by Ministers of Culture
- Use of a Secretariat
- Competence Centres
- Preservation of digital materials as a high priority
- The existence (or development) of a national register of digitisation projects
- Developing Public-private partnerships (PPPs) for funding

2. Background

In May 2016, GLAM Peak (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) received funding from the Australian Government through a Catalyst grant, the Australian Arts and Culture Fund, managed by the Ministry for the Arts, to support a national initiative designed to progress digital access to collections.

Outputs from this funding include the Digital Access to Collections draft national framework and toolkit, (www.digitalcollections.org.au), the Stage 1 Project Report and this review of digital strategies for cultural collections internationally.

2.1 Project Brief

In order to progress the Digital Access to Collections project, the brief for the current project “International Comparators” was to carry out an investigation into national strategies for digital access to collections in other parts of the world. This investigation was to include a review of national digital access strategies and frameworks, followed by an analysis and comparison which would lead to recommendations on state, territory and national levels regarding the development of digital access to collections strategies in Australia.

2.2 Methodology

As this was desk-based research, the following search strategies were employed in order to gather the required evidence:

- “digital access” glam OR archives OR museum OR library OR records “national framework”
- National strategy digitis[z]ation access culture
- National digitis[z]ation strategy
- municipal strategy digital access “memory institutions”

These search strategies along with the examples provided in the Project Brief yielded more than enough resources for analysis and comparison. The Europeana websites and associated documentation available also proved to be an invaluable source of information regarding national strategies.

Any current Australian state, territory and local government digital access strategies, along with individual organisational strategies, were outside the scope of this project.

2.3 Timing

From the time the researcher was advised of the successful EoI to the due date of the report was just over 2 months. Literature was sourced when time permitted for the first 2 months, with the analysis, comparison and report writing being conducted over a 7-day period.

3. Overview of identified strategies and their content

A varied geographical representation was considered to be a suitable approach for this research. As such, the national strategies and frameworks that were consulted fall into the following regions: Europe, North America (Canada) and Australasia (specifically New Zealand).

There was surprisingly little variation identified in the strategies. That is to say that those strategies or frameworks that might be implemented in Australia all referred to and contained similar themes. Thus, while an analysis of these themes has certainly taken place, there is very little difference between strategies to allow a comparison.

3.1 Europe

The strength and presence of Europeana meant that a wealth of information was available in the European region. A series of national progress reports¹ submitted to Europeana covering the period of 2013 – 2015 provided extremely useful high-level information on EU Member States. This had the added advantage of being in a standard format with the same questions being asked. These reports more often than not provided names and/or links to the relevant policies and strategies of the country in question. These documents could then be consulted in order to gain deeper understanding of the strategy within that country's overall approach to their cultural heritage collections.

Limitations

Despite these reports providing names of various policies and strategies that informed the digitisation of cultural heritage collections, often times these policies and strategies were not available in English; English translations were not of the entire strategy and therefore not comprehensive (Norway) or in some cases not available at all. However, it was still possible to gain some understanding of the structure and positioning of cultural heritage in each country.

A second limitation is the timeliness of the national progress reports. These reports were submitted to Europeana administration in 2015, so are already 2 years old at the time of writing. The associated strategies however were often medium-term planning documents that extended up to 2020 in some instances. Despite the date range, it was still possible to gather information regarding frameworks and overarching structures of digitisation of cultural heritage.

According to the European Commission's report², a total of 9 Member States^a employ national strategies or plans (p. 11). If a national strategy is not in place, decisions on digitisation occur at lower levels, mostly at domain specific, institutional level.^b Interestingly, stakeholders from all cultural sectors and federal states in Germany did consider a national strategy³, but decided against implementing what it saw as a 'top-down' process. However, the same stakeholders did agree that "there is a need for more coordination and networking between the separate players to achieve a better overview of ongoing projects" (p. 3).

^a The States are: Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Romania and Slovakia

^b Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Netherlands

Of the 9 Member States employing a national strategy, common themes were evident. Those themes were:

- Each strategy fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture (MoC) (Poland's ministerial title is Culture and National Heritage), and is directly linked to the country's cultural policy
- Many had an agency/council (often formed by the MoC) that acts as a Secretariat to oversee and coordinate the implementation of the strategy
- Preservation of digital materials as a high priority
- Coordinated selection of content to be digitised
- The existence (or development) of a national register of digitisation projects
- Public-private partnerships
- The existence of Competence Centres
- The need to use and adhere to Standards
- The need for staff training in digital skills
- Lobbying for copyright reform, and awareness of current copyright legislation

While some of this may not be unusual to an Australian audience, perhaps the most significant ones are the use of a Secretariat and the existence of Competence Centres. These two themes are discussed in more detail below, which will also demonstrate how other themes are connected to them. Further themes to be discussed include: preservation of digital materials as a high priority; the existence (or development) of a national register of digitisation projects; and Public-private partnerships.

Use of a Secretariat

The term 'secretariat' is being used here for ease of terminology, as sometimes this function is referred to as a State Agency (Latvia), Council (Lithuania) or indeed Secretariat (Sweden). Regardless of the label, the function is comparable, and that is to oversee and to help solve issues related to accessibility of digital content and preservation of cultural heritage. It is here that the themes of copyright, use of standards, and selection policies can be related to accessibility issues; and standards and policies can impact the implementation of preservation activities.

Perhaps the best and most evolved example of a secretariat is Digisam (<http://www.digisam.se>). The Swedish Government established this secretariat at the Swedish National Archives as a point of contact for the coordination of digitisation, digital preservation and digital access to cultural heritage. Digisam's main task is to assist cultural institutions in their work with plans for digitisation and to coordinate that work with the national digital strategy. Digisam does this in the following ways:

- Being a point of contact for knowledge and competence;
- Present recommendations for coordinated digital information management of collections and holdings;
- Develop proposals for cost-effective long-term digital preservation of collections and holdings;
- Define roles and responsibilities for the work on aggregation, access and preservation of digital cultural heritage information.

The remit of Digisam is perhaps broader than other secretariats – in some ways it appears to take on the role of a Competence Centre, discussed below. Currently there are six people working for Digisam.

Competence Centres

The idea of a Competence Centre is that various institutions become centres of excellence in one or more aspects of the digitisation and/or preservation activities. For example, the Moravian Library in Brno developed a method of digitising vinyl records and worked on metadata standards for long-term preservation of sound recordings. By doing so, the library established itself as a centre for excellence in dealing with various audio formats. It now cooperates with the National Museum, the Czech Radio, and the National Technical Museum in building expertise around the sound documents held in various collections throughout the Czech Republic⁴.

In terms of a national strategy, the idea is to create a network of these Competence Centres. Estonia⁵ for example has established five digitisation competence centres for different types of heritage: the National Library is the competence centre for printed heritage; the National Archives for archival material, photography and video material; the Conservation and Digitisation Centre Kanut is a centre for artefacts, art and photography; while the Estonian Literary Museum specialises in manuscripts.

Finland's⁶ National Library/Centre for Preservation and Digitisation is a member in the European digitisation Competence Centre, IMPACT, as is Poland's⁷ Poznań Supercomputing-Networking Centre. The development of other Competence Centres in Poland were funded on the following specialisations:

- National Library: library materials
- National Audiovisual Institute: audiovisual materials
- The National Digital Archives: historical archives
- National Institute for Museums and Public Collections: museum objects
- National Heritage Institute: monuments.

Competence Centres as institutions in Poland are subordinate to the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

In 2016 Latvia⁸ was developing the architecture and regulatory framework for their competence centres. Lithuania's⁹ Competence Centres also coordinate the digitisation activities in cultural heritage institutions, making their Competence Centres a hybrid Secretariat. It should be highlighted that Lithuania had created a network of digitisation centres with the necessary infrastructure and human resources by 2013.

Preservation of digital materials as a high priority

Perhaps one of the most unexpected revelations this research uncovered is that while digital preservation is mentioned in several national strategies as having high importance, only Slovakia¹⁰ mentions anything that could be considered 'standard' in the field of digital curation – they accepted the OAIS model standard as their national standard in June 2013.

A very popular approach to digital preservation is the Digital Curation Centre's Lifecycle Model¹¹. This approach, as with others such as Digital Preservation Europe (DPE) (now managed by the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute of the University of Glasgow¹²) advocates for digital preservation activities to start before the data is ingested into the digital repository. This may seem a little backwards: in the analogue world, the preservation function comes at the end of a document's lifecycle. But if we leave the preservation function of digital material until the end of a digitisation process, it may be that we are already too late. Authors in this field are unanimous¹³ – digital preservation activities must be some of the first policies and plans put into place.

Ironically, none of the national strategies that refer to digital preservation seem to have addressed this need for preservation functions to be an early consideration in the digitisation process, although it is noted that this may just be an omission of text, rather than an error in judgment. Estonia for example simply states that “the strategy for long-term preservation is an important part of the Operational Programme for Digitisation 2016-2020”¹⁴ (p. 13). Latvia notes that “digitally created cultural heritage is accumulating, creating a necessity for new policy for preservation of such heritage and ensuring its accessibility”¹⁵ (p. 8). However, The National Library of Latvia did join the Open Preservation Foundation¹⁶ in 2015 to enhance its expertise in digital preservation. Other EU Member States are in the process of developing a national system for the long-term preservation of digital cultural heritage – Lithuania is one such example – but again, there is no mention of any of the existing and established digital preservation strategies or approaches.

The existence (or development) of a national register of digitisation projects

The concept of a national register of digitisation projects has many benefits. Firstly, it is a straightforward way to see what has been digitised, what is currently being digitised and what is scheduled for the future, in each of the cultural heritage institutions that contribute to it. Not only does this act as a tracking tool, but it can also act as a support to any digitisation selection decisions, and serve to avoid any duplication of effort.

Some of the Member States use such a database simply for registering completion reports of digitisation projects (e.g. Croatia¹⁷), others use it as a complete management tool to support selection decisions, cooperation and to assist in identifying where the appropriate expertise may be in terms of Competence Centres (e.g. Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Poland, Lithuania, Italy¹⁸ and Greece¹⁹).

Public-private partnerships

Europeana encourages Member States to investigate and where suitable, enter into Public-private partnerships (PPPs). According to the European Commission's report²⁰, 13 Member States (out of 28) have at least one PPP. The private companies include Google, ProQuest and FamilySearch.

Some examples include three Romanian museums in partnership with Google Art Project²¹; the Czech Republic and the Google Digitisation Centre for mass digitisation of historic and rare materials; and the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library of Malta²² with FamilySearch.

It is acknowledged that there may be limited instances where a PPP may be a good fit, given the commercialised nature of the private organisations and the often more traditional practices of cultural heritage institutions. However, as per the examples just given, it is not an impossibility and worthy of being explored further.

3.2 Canada

In 2014, the Royal Society of Canada highlighted the need for a planned and funded digitisation programme in cooperation with memory institutions across the country. The current National Heritage Digitisation Strategy, devised by Library and Archives Canada (LAC) is in response to this call, and draws on international best practice, including Europeana and previous national initiatives (e.g. the Our Canada Project²³). The strategy is dated from June, 2016 and is intended to be in use for 10 years.

The objectives are not dissimilar to those outlined in many of the Member States of the European Union above: a focus of efforts of memory institutions in digitisation, access and preservation; share knowledge and experience amongst partner institutions; avoid duplication and increase knowledge of funding opportunities and potential partnerships.

A list of potential digitisation projects is provided:

- 90% of all published heritage before 1917 and 50% of all monographs published before 1940
- All scientific journals published by and theses accepted by Canadian universities before 2000
- All microfilm from memory institutions
- Selected audio and audio-visual recordings
- Selected archival fonds and finding aids
- All historical maps
- All archival material of genealogical interest

The Canadian strategy also states that it will create a cross-institutional National Steering Committee which will set direction, organize projects, develop funding models and digitisation initiatives. There is a clear link to Sweden's Digisam, and this is acknowledged in the strategy, also referring to the Committee as a secretariat. Reference is also made to creating "an inventory of existing digitisation projects and systems to identify gaps²⁴" (p. 7). Funding opportunities are also covered, with suggestions that mirror the PPP of the EU Member States: collaboration with the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors and philanthropic organisations, along with investigations into crowd-funding and pooling of resources with other cultural heritage institutions.

3.3 New Zealand

The National Digital Forum²⁵ (NDF) is the main focal point of digital cultural heritage in New Zealand (NZ), and very much embedded in the landscape in terms of enabling cross-institutional knowledge sharing and collaborative activities. The NDF was founded by the National Library of New Zealand (NLNZ), Archives New Zealand (ANZ) and Te Papa.

The NDF “is a network of people and organisations working together to enhance New Zealand’s digital interaction with culture and heritage” (NDF²⁶). They offer professional development activities, an annual conference, and local events. A unique offering is the Skill-share Loans, where you can “borrow” someone with the expertise that your organisation may need. The list is not currently extensive (see endnote²⁷), but it is certainly an interesting concept, and reflective of the Competence Centres as discussed above.

DigitalNZ is the result of two initiatives that were presented to the NZ government in 2006: New Zealand Online and Foundations for Access. Together they became DigitalNZ and became part of the Government’s Digital Content Strategy in September, 2007. Led by the National Library of NZ, DigitalNZ has more than 30 million digital items from content partners Te Papa, the Alexander Turnbull Library, Te Ara, Canterbury Museum, and Christchurch Art Gallery, to name a few. In this way it can be likened to the National Library of Australia’s Trove and Victorian Collections which is managed by Museum Victoria and Museums Galleries Australia (Vic Branch).

In June 2009, DigitalNZ launched the Make it Digital²⁸ part of their website. This could be termed a digital Competence Centre – it was billed as a one-stop-shop for questions and advice relating to creating digital content. It now also includes information regarding digital preservation.

While the NZ Government has released a document ‘called “Building a Digital Nation²⁹” this does not mention any plans or strategies for digitising cultural heritage. The only digitisation strategy document found in the current research was the National Library of NZ Digitisation Strategy 2014 – 2017³⁰, and while it does advise that the library has entered a strategic partnership with Archives NZ and will deliver shared outcomes where possible, there is no mention of collaboration or cooperation with any of NZ’s museums.

4. Recommendations

Based on the research that has been undertaken, the following recommendations are made for how these findings might inform the development of digital access strategies at the state, territory and federal level in Australia.

Recommendation 1:

That Australian digital access to cultural collection state and territory strategies include consideration of appropriate agencies to oversee the delivery of the plans and to work together to co-ordinate a national approach.

Recommendation 2:

That state, territory and national strategies include high level guidance regarding the topics and type of material to be digitised.

Recommendation 3:

That consideration be given to creating a register of digitisation projects Australia-wide – refer Section 3.2 Canada.

Recommendation 4:

That state, territory and national strategies include consideration of the potential for PPPs in order to assist in the costs associated with extensive digitisation projects.

Recommendation 5:

That state, territory and national strategies include consideration of the establishment of Competence Centres (or Centres of Excellence) in various aspects of the digitisation and preservation processes and procedures.

The recommendations are independent of each other.

5. Conclusion

With unprecedented levels of collaboration, exemplified in the GLAM Peak Bodies initiative, Australia is in a unique position to take advantage of the trials and errors already experienced by our international colleagues. While the scale of applying the recommendations to Australia is significant in comparison to smaller European nations, we can be assured that a strategy which largely reflects the recommendations provided is already in place in Canada – a nation of similar size. Further, more specific research would enhance the ability to bring these recommendations to life.

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