



## RePAH: Research Portals in the Arts and Humanities

A knowledge-gathering project under the AHRC ICT in the Arts and Humanities Programme

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### **Objectives**

Our brief was to discover user-behaviour and user-needs of researchers in the Arts and Humanities in respect of portals. We set out to discover four kinds of information:-

1. Information about users' information discovery strategies and internet usage
2. Information about users' awareness and attitudes with respect to currently available online services and tools, including such gateways and portals as currently exist.
3. Information about patterns of recent user-activity in relation to the RDN subject hubs and the AHDS
4. Information about users' responses to what future portal developments can deliver.

### **Conclusions**

Our initial analysis of the community's research behaviour was substantially confirmed as non-homogeneous, institutionally diverse and variegated. Our 'road-map' of their activities indicated a core and penumbra of activities which are both individual and group-based. Not all these activities are currently served by the current information resource-discovery channels.

#### **1. Users' information discovery strategies and internet usage**

Researchers believe that digital resources have fundamentally altered the way in which they conduct research. It has not yet affected the way in which Arts and Humanities publication is conceived or fed through into personal data archiving or means of scholarly communication. Researchers emphasised that their agendas were flexible, open-ended, multiple, and on a predominantly personal basis. They were practical-minded and instrumental in their resource-discovery strategies. The patterns were quite discipline specific. Pre-structured knowledge was not greatly appreciated. The need for assurance about the authority of a particular resource was in tension with the assumption that an individual scholar has specialist skills with which to assess its authority and a suspicion about who is undertaking the authentication. Individual resource discovery predominated, with a relative lack of 'mutual dependence' among Arts and Humanities researchers. There is a perception among arts and humanities scholars that within their

fields there is little or no collaboration, The reality is, however, substantially different, because while strong collaborative cultures may not exist, weak ones do and take the form of citations of colleagues' works, routine email correspondence, interactions at conferences, etc.

## **2. Information about users' awareness and attitudes with respect to currently available online services, tools and gateways**

We encountered a high and growing level of expectation. Two issues predominated in our study: access to digital content, and interoperability

## **3. Information about patterns of recent user-activity in relation to the RDN (Resource Discovery Network) subject hubs and AHDS.**

We investigated the profile of the services available in the research community.

## **4. Information about users' responses to what future portal developments can deliver**

Users recognized that the current situation with respect to functionality was not sustainable in the longer-term. The importance of interoperability in users' minds was a measure of that realization. The exponential growth in data volume, combined with increasingly complex multilayered information, will make it more necessary to use resources in a complementary way, and also harder to do so. Our users responded positively to the possibilities of a personally-managed research environment. There were specific realizable functionalities that they identified as of direct use to them in carrying forward their research agendas: workflow management tools, and resource discovery tools. Researchers wanted greater personal control over digital resources. They readily perceived the advantages of tools which enabled them to integrate searching the web with searching their own hard-drive. They saw benefits to more developed bookmarking features, personal editing features, and an automated copyright management system. They wanted to be able to filter the quality of hit returns, and search distributed databases. They responded positively to a web-based news-feed feature and like the idea of RSS feeds. They were less excited about tools to enable communication and collaboration. Real-time communication media were not very appealing to this community.

## **Ways Forward**

The project recommended a number of ways forward, based upon its analysis of the distinctive research culture in the Arts and Humanities. These recommendations were institutional, technical (particularly in respect of data-harvesting), and also cultural. We laid out what we discerned as the determining characteristics of the resulting environment over the coming decade and delineated what we describe in the report as a 'managed research environment'. The features of such an environment were scoped out in a 'demonstrator'. This provides a long video-clip which outlines the possible functionality of such a personally-managed research environment.

Full report is available at:

<http://repah.dmu.ac.uk/report>

The demonstrator is available at:

[http://rpah.dmu.ac.uk/Demo/Repah\\_Demo.html](http://rpah.dmu.ac.uk/Demo/Repah_Demo.html)