



**RePAH:**  
Research Portals in the  
Arts and Humanities  
A user analysis project

**Appendix A6:**  
**Work-Package 3: First Focus Group Report**

**WP3 Report prepared by Jared Bryson**

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



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# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Contents .....  | 3  |
| A6.1 AIMS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH .....   | 5  |
| A6.2 RESPONSES .....  | 6  |
| A6.2.1 Purpose of Web-based Research and the Usefulness of Web Resources .....            | 6  |
| A6.2.2 Distinctive Research Practices within Subjects .....                               | 8  |
| A6.2.3 Awareness and Use of Portals.....  | 9  |
| A6.2.4 Strengths and Weaknesses of Portals.....   | 11 |
| A6.2.5 Desirable Features.....  | 13 |
| A6.2.6 Politics and Funding Issues.....   | 15 |
| A6.3 CONCLUSIONS.....   | 16 |
| Research Portals in Arts and Humanities (RePAH) Focus Group Questions<br>(FIGURE 1) ..... | 18 |

## **The RePAH Project**

In July 2005, the RePAH Project was commissioned to carry out a survey of user-needs for information portals in the Arts and Humanities by the AHRC ICT in Arts and Humanities Programme. It sought to understand how the arts and humanities research community finds and exploits the internet resources it needs.

In order to do this the RePAH project:

- Examined the existing literature on user needs with regard to web gateways and portals,
- Analysed the web-logs from the Arts and Humanities Data Service (AHDS) subject centres and the Resource Discovery Network's (RDN) humanities and arts web hubs (prior to July 2006 these were known as Humbul and Artifact, but now have been harmonised into Intute-Arts and Humanities)
- Conducted focus groups, interviews and a Delphi exercise with members of the arts and humanities community
- Developed and tested a paper-based demonstrator for a managed research environment to explore possible ways forward with regard to web-based research resources.

The project was carried out in 7 work packages:

- WP1 RePAH Online Questionnaire--this report examines an online survey of the Arts and Humanities Community's use of web resources.
- WP2 Web-Log Analysis--this report analyses web-logs from several of the Arts and Humanities Data Service subject centres as well as Humbul and Artifact of the Resource Discovery Network (now Intute).
- WP3 First Focus Group--this report studies the responses from a series of five focus groups conducted at the University of Sheffield and three interviews from DeMontfort University. Respondents discussed their use of web resources in general and portals in particular.
- WP4 Delphi Exercise--this report considers the results of a Delphi exercise conducted around the feasibility of various web-based tools.
- WP5 Demonstrator of a Managed Research Environment--this report is an exploration of a paper-based demonstrator of a variety of features that might be applied as portlets and used by the Arts and Humanities research community.
- WP6 Phase II User Trials of Portal Demonstrator--this report brought the paper-based demonstrator to scholars in eight subjects within the Arts and Humanities community and asked them to evaluate the features and functionality of possible portlet tools.
- WP7 Intute in Light of this Report--this report explores Intute-Arts and Humanities with reference to the features and functionality explored in the paper-based managed research environment demonstrator.

Additional appendices within the RePAH Project report include an overview of the Arts and Humanities research community [Appendix A2], and a review of the literature relevant to user requirements for digital resources and web-based research facilities [Appendix A3].

This appendix reports on Work Package 7 which examines Intute-Arts and Humanities with reference to the features and functionality explored in the paper-based managed research environment demonstrator, as well as some the data harvesting of the AHDS by Intute.

To see the full report and the other appendices see <http://repah.dmu.ac.uk/report>.

## SUMMARY

- Web use is ubiquitous and an integral part of a researcher's 'tool kit'
- Used primarily for accessing the increasing variety of primary and secondary sources specific to the researcher's needs
- Little use is made of WWW for any other purpose other than academic resources. Features such as web-based communication other than email were rarely referred to.
- Pushed news alerting for conferences and travel arrangements were used.
- Awareness of portals is mixed among researchers and rarely used when known.
- Google is preferred due to its comfort and ease of use and the volume of responses. However, the ability to validate and control the quality of search returns was considered a problem with most search engines.
- Institutional portals provided varying degrees of administrative control over non-research tasks.
- Controlling intellectual property and accessing the full array of literature were consistently raised as concerns across all disciplines

### A6.1 AIMS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The aim of the first set of focus groups was to capture qualitative data on the subjects indicated by the online questionnaire (A4) and the data log analysis (A5), a series of five focus groups and four one-to-one interviews were conducted among several of the AHRC subjects. The focus groups were drawn from the University of Sheffield departments of archaeology, history, biblical studies, music, and information studies. The interviews included scholars in the arts from DeMontfort University, including a lecturer in creative technology, music studies, digital imaging, visual arts and holographic applications.

Each of the focus groups consisted of three to seven participants from among the full-time contract researchers and lecturing staff. One of the focus groups did invite post-graduates, who were able to contribute their experiences of web-based work required as part of their research curriculum. All were asked a range of open ended questions designed to take advantage of group dynamics in a conversational environment (See annex). The number of questions ranged from eight to seventeen depending on the development of the responses and the need for prompts. Most focus groups lasted no more than an hour. The quotes appearing below are given timings in order to indicate the location within the overall sequence of the conversation. The selected quotations are meant to be representative of overall findings.

The questions put to the participants were intended to capture the broad contours of web and portal use among arts and humanities scholars. The intention was for these first series of questions to shape the second phase of focus groups primarily involved the presentation of screenshots demonstrating a range of features that might benefit researchers. The choice of the focus groups among the discrete subject areas was meant to capture the disciplinary differences, picking up on the varying uses of the web for research and identifying any patterns in research vocabulary and culture.

In each focus group, the respondents were asked about their familiarity and use of the RDN portals and the AHDS sites respectively. Familiarity of the RDN portals was less in evidence than for the AHDS, though few members of the focus groups could recall precisely what the role of the AHDS was. No members of the focus groups actively used the RDN portals. No member of the focus groups had accessed a collection from the AHDS web-site.

## A6.2 RESPONSES

### A6.2.1 Purpose of Web-based Research and the Usefulness of Web Resources

Since the emergence of the World Wide Web as a ubiquitous tool of information access and communication researchers responded positively to its use. However, some frustration was admitted by some focus group participants particularly with the volume of information made available through search engines such as Google. Some respondents noted that their students found little difficulty adjusting to the rapidly changing web media, which may indicate a generation-based level of comfort with new technology. A few respondents considered themselves early adopters, especially those whose research focused on the use of the web such as information studies, music and biblical studies. However, the majority might be considered early or even late majority users of the technology within the framework first developed in Everett Rogers work on innovation (1995).

The first series of questions began by probing the researcher's web use habits, learning about what they use the web to do, how they did it and how well they thought it accomplished those tasks.

Responses to the following question often pointed to the near ubiquity of the web as a tool for researchers.

*When you're conducting your research what do you generally use the web to help you to do?*

*Oh millions of things. Just about everything nowadays... (Archaeology 00:23 minutes)*

*It's hard to reflect on how we use the internet because we... it's become something that we use all the time. It's become such an integral part of any work...(Archaeology 10:30 minutes)*

Three advantages of web-based research were frequently mentioned by all focus groups. First the **convenience** of accessing texts, images and artefacts within their particular subject specialty was a step-change over the need to travel to library collections—even if they were based at the researcher's own institution. The convenience of reviewing texts from a laptop computer nearly anywhere, and the efficiency of searching those texts by key words has made the web and digital resources a boon for research.

*It's used throughout the project. It makes all those things so much easier. (Information Studies 5:30 minutes)*

*I think that there's something that emerges from the convenience of the Web. It's the lazy person's way of getting access to information resources, whereas otherwise we would have to get off our backsides and go to the library. What it does allow is that organic movement from*

*subject to subject, following up hunches, chasing up ideas. There's a bit more free-wheeling component when you're using the web than when you're using paper-based resources (Information Studies 1:30 minutes)*

*The library now has this access to NAXOS website so students can do less listening in the library and more listening at home online. (Music 5:50 minutes)*

The second advantage related to the **timeliness** of the information that could be accessed. The printed works found in institutional libraries were often burdened with a time-lag not found to the same extent among the digital resources.

*The resources you'll find in the library are quite old, because of the print run time. So things may be more up to date if authors pre-disclose their papers online. (Information Studies 2:00 minutes)*

*If it's in paper it's out of date (Information Studies 9:00)*

The third advantage was the **discovery** of new or otherwise unknown information. Several times during the sessions researchers referred to using the Web as a tool that helped them think—clarifying ideas and discovering new ways of approaching various research problems. While it was primarily used to search for specific resources that might yield specific answers, 'browsing as a way of thinking', and 'fishing trips' emerged from serendipitously 'surfing' through subjects and following interesting links. Others used the web to explore the 'state of the art', seeking out the publication and biographical details of peers within their community of research.

*It's a way of thinking, isn't it? Just browsing is thinking. (Information Studies 1:00 minutes)*

*Somebody had said that if the web had really been developed in Britain rather than in California, instead of surfing, we would 'potter'. And I actually do quite a lot of creative pottering around—following links and suddenly discovering something I never really knew this realm of discourse that might help with my research. But not quite knowing what I'm looking for, and hoping to stumble upon things. (Biblical Studies 00.45 minutes)*

*Being old fashioned I look for things I already know that are there....it would be a combination of bibliographical resources and some collections online. (History 00. 30 minutes)*

*I use it in two ways, one is "fishing trips": I don't know if the material is there but I'll want to see if there's anything; and then specific "validation exercises", where you know there's going to be some material but you want to find out if you've got the detail correct in your head or whether the publication data is correct or whether this person is still at X university or whatever (History 00.56 minutes)*

*If it's academically validated it's really useful, but there's tons of erroneous rubbish out there, but then you've got to learn how to find your way around it. (Music 4:53 minutes)*

*To find out what's already been written (Information Studies 00.23 minutes)*

Comments such as the following highlight the change in research culture. Previously one's time planning access to a library's resources occupied a substantial portion of a researcher's work, but currently, the **immediate access** to digital resources through the web has enabled work to be conducted far more rapidly and efficiently.

*I've started to use online resources such as JSTOR and e-books. It does change the way you do research and allows immediate access to a big range of particular subjects (History 3:55 minutes)*

*That's just extraordinary to have these printed resources available at your desktop at home where you might be working. It just changes the whole way I might be doing research (History 6:20 minutes)*

*It's the first place you look for anything. It's the easiest thing to do to just type it in where you're sitting. Even to stand up to go to the bookshelf takes a lot longer. (Archaeology 1:23 Archaeology)*

*The ability to search made it so swift that I was able to do in a month what would have taken, oh, several months any other archive. And then you can archive it and go back to it. So I think to have primary source material online, and PDF-able would be fantastic. I know it's an enormous task but it's astounding what a fantastic research tool it really is, much much more powerful than I thought. (Music 8:40 minutes)*

Internet-based **communications** now facilitate instant dialogue with colleagues and specialist subject hubs even help to set up conferences.

*I think sharing data is a huge thing. I mean the ability to share image data, images of anything. Images of microstructures or artefacts you can move those in huge volumes compared to what you used to, and that definitely enhances the quality of the work, the discuss-ability of the work (Archaeology 10:20 minutes)*

*...their program allows you to take [conference] proposals and allows you to process them...you used to have to get all of the emails and send them around yourself. Now it's just all done from the website. You don't even have to say your proposal is accepted or rejected that's done automatically. (Biblical Studies 3:20 minutes)*

### **A6.2.2 Distinctive Research Practices within Subjects**

Since the RePAH remit sought to establish trends in researcher's use of the Internet and web-based portals, there was a concern that the breadth of subjects in the humanities might prove problematic. Each subject area does possess a research culture with its own vocabulary and concerns. To identify where those boundaries might exist the focus groups were asked:

*Can you think of any ways in which your discipline affects your use of the Web? In other words how does the fact that you're a/an (insert discipline) affect how you use the Web?*

Several of the individual researchers indicated that they might work across disciplinary boundaries, but collaborative work even among scholars within the same field was less common. However, there may be an interest in using the same types of data sets. It was as likely for an archaeologist as it was for a lecturer in biblical studies to need access to geographical information system (GIS) data, maps or aerial photographs. Some general boundaries could be identified with regard to the emphasis placed on data among the five subject areas examined: musicians were concerned with audio data; archaeologists worked with three-dimensional artefacts; and information studies, historians and biblical studies dealt with texts (though information studies was likely to work with unprocessed data or be concerned with various organisation systems for all manner of information).

*What we do overlaps with some many others: reading texts, history, politics, or whatever... It's an interdisciplinary exercise. Other than reading some texts in Greek or Hebrew I'm not sure there is anything we would do that others would not. (Biblical Studies 6:40)*

*We bring together aspects of other, especially in archaeology, because it crosses disciplines, we bring together other aspects of things that people have done and then present them in a new way. (Archaeology 26:40 minutes)*



*...EEBO and EECCO which is the Eighteenth-Century equivalent--it's quite extraordinary to have all these printed sources available at home...it changes the whole way I think about doing research. (History 5:50)*

*[Information] is what we're studying and what we're studying with. Part of studying the Internet is studying communication...there are fundamentals to communication and the principles underpinning them go well before the Internet... the factors that motivate people to look for information were there before the Internet was around and they're still there. Those are also factors that probably contributed to the Internet becoming the success that it is. Whether to do with what it means to be human, psychology of humanity and ways of exchanging ideas, all those things are fundamental to humanity and not to the technology. (Information Studies 9:30)*

Several subjects blurred the boundaries between humanities and the social sciences. The use made of the web by various elements of society was not only an issue of interest for those in information studies but also among those disciplines such as biblical studies:

*...There's a level at which the internet becomes one of the sources and the targets of the search in a certain kind of biblical studies. (Biblical studies 9:30)*

The role of 'resource discovery' as a primary task for scholars within the humanities appeared to be relatively ubiquitous across the humanities disciplines, with the value-added factors derived from the analysis and complex interpretation put upon the various texts and 'artefacts' retrieved in digital form. The musicians' use of digital audio file stood out from the others in terms of capacity and quality of data transfer. It was noted that as the quality of performances increased as technology advanced, and many within the field were helping to push the boundaries of the discipline.

*A typical project for a student might be one gigabyte and that might be one project for one module. There are none of the bog standard systems that give them that kind of space. As the quality is going up and up and up, the sizes are going up and up...it's about 10 megabytes a stereo-minute...that's 4-8 gig in one project. (Music 19:00 minutes)*

*There are a number of radio stations that do broadcast in 5.1 (surround sound) but it would be quite easy to get that streaming capability from the University website. (Music 18:00 minutes)*

It might be expected that any advances in the infrastructure that enabled these large, high-quality audio transfers would also be beneficial to scholars across the breadth of the Arts and Humanities.

### **A6.2.3 Awareness and Use of Portals**

With the advent of powerful search engines such as Google, the role of the portal seems to have diminished considerably. The simplicity of Google's search field made it easy to use and therefore contributed to its nearly universal choice as an entry point to the Web.

*I don't use them a lot, because I usually find things much faster if I Google, and I get straight on to what I need. And because I've done it a lot I see immediately from the little thing you get whether this would be relevant or not. Portals are a waste of time." (Biblical Studies 13.5 minutes)*

*I've used them in the distant past, but not recently. Usually I just use Google and go straight to whatever I want. (Archaeology 18:35 minutes)*

*For me the virtual environment that a portal offers...I don't like the self-contained, access to all but it's not really access to all. You know the easiest portal for me is Google. (Music 24:54 minutes)*

*Google. (History 7:30 minutes)*

Another form of information distribution, the web log, was identified by a respondent in information studies as a type of portal. An acknowledgement of this and the characteristics of web logs used as portals may have ramifications for the development of more traditional portals.

*A weblog can act as a portal...(Information Studies 48:50 minutes)*

The ubiquity and usefulness of search engines as a means to access the World Wide Web make portals seem old fashioned and thus somewhat confusing. We asked:

*Do you ever use portals in your research?*

*The definition of a portal is not so clear. (Information Studies 15:20 minutes)*

*Not for research. (History 7:50 minutes)*

When portals are known and used the respondents suggested that their broad-based content was more useful in the initial, formative stages of research or when beginning a review of the literature on a general topic.

*Good at the beginning of a search for the general overview of materials. (History 13:50 minutes)*

*The systematic searching, the kind you do on Humbul is the kind you'd do at the beginning of a project, and I never seem to be at the beginning of a project. I'm always deeply into a project, and at that point you tend to think you know what's out there, you know what you need to know. You know where the material is. You may not have had time to look at it all but you know where it is, and so you don't feel that you want to that kind of comprehensive search for sources or bibliography that you might do at the beginning of a project. So it seems to me that a portal is most useful at the beginning of a project. (History 13:40 minutes)*

However, there was some discrepancy as to whether a portal offered specialist or generalist information, as seen in the following examples:

*A lot of people use a search engine to find a specialist tool which is often a portal. (Information Studies 15:10 minutes)*

*I've used British History online, but I don't know about the classic use of a portal because I've been targeting particular resources I know that are there. (History 7:40 minutes)*

The mediating role that portals play between extraneous and useful information was acknowledged by some participants.

*I like the idea of portals, because diversity of information on the internet is sometimes too much. Portals help us to focus on a specific subject or a few related specific subjects. So portals give us a lot about a little, rather than a little about a lot. So when you are looking at portals you feel like you have a sort of control on the information. You don't feel lost. You feel like somebody else has already collected the relevant information so the job is much easier to you. And this feeling is very enjoyable for me. (Information Studies 13:40 minutes)*

*It's more authoritative than typing something into Google. You need some system of peer review and quality control. (Information Studies 23:48 minutes)*

*Hit overload. And you give up after about 20 reviews and you say this is an impossible task and I haven't got time to do more than this, I've got the sense of what there might be, but you haven't really done a systematic job. (History 10:50 minutes)*

For one user of the Humbul site even the mediating role was not enough to weed out superfluous materials:

*In Humbul—where is it?! I actually had to go back to Google and look at the cached entry...Humbul had just rendered itself a page of links, and that's not a criticism, because it's still useful I suppose, but you're still overawed by the amount of stuff on the portal itself, and you have to Google just to get through the front page!...and when you think about what that portal should be doing it's just a bit crazy. (Archaeology 32:00 minutes)*

The awareness of portals for the Arts and Humanities researcher was mixed. If they were known their use was considered limited.

*I like the idea of it but I don't use it. (Information Studies 34:50 minutes)*

*I don't know as much about them as I'd like to. (History 10:10 minutes)*

*Portals miss the point. (Information Studies 17:57 minutes)*

*It's funny the way that I've used Humbul is through Google, searching for something else. (Archaeology 17:10 minutes)*

*Portals for some reason miss the point...part of it is knowing that they exist...(Information Studies 18:20 minutes)*

For respondents the mediating role of subject portals in selecting resources was considered too limiting. Several researchers worried that they felt like they might be missing something if they relied on a portal, especially when the information they needed was readily available through a series of searches on Google.

*There is a sort of claustrophobia about portals. I never thought if them in this way before...there are loads of things I could find out better ways elsewhere so why bother...if I were looking for things in my research area I'd be just a bit worried that that portal is only as good as the people controlling it. If you're doing research then you should be at the cutting edge of whatever you're doing and you should be defining whatever it is you're using. It seems that they are just too self-contained. (Music 26:00 minutes)*

Institutional portals were used primarily for administrative purposes, or for accessing the library catalogue and presenting teaching materials.

*I suppose we use the university portal all the time... (Archaeology 18:15 minutes)*

#### **A6.2.4 Strengths and Weaknesses of Portals**

Linked to issues of awareness are the strengths and weaknesses of portals. For the respondents the portal did not offer any clear advantages over search engines. The mediation could be seen as too controlling and the majority of specific resources were only the lower grade open access type. A prominent concern was over access to the entirety of literature

within the field. The organisation of the subject portals were considered too primitive to be of much use and instead acted as a hindrance to their use. However, the ability to control the quality of initial web searches concerned many of the focus group participants. The trustworthiness of data was an issue, and yet the majority respondents were reluctant to use the mediated sources provided through the humanities subject portals.

Portals can be designed for specific research communities; however this can pose a problem for ease of use and accessibility.

*It's just assumed that we know what we're doing...and they're not straightforward to use.*  
(History 11: 40 minutes)

The quality of the materials available from portals was mentioned several times.

*Portals such as Humbul catalogue open access materials, but what we've focussed on is those that that are only available on a subscription basis which by definition cannot be readily catalogued by these sorts of people because that's where the added value lies. So one of the problems with portals is that they tend to catalogue lower grade materials and the refined portals are those which are costing the institution something.* (History 13:00 minutes)

*One of the problems with portals is that they tend to catalogue low grade materials and the refined portals are those which are costing institutions.* (History 13:20 minutes)

*As real specialist I wonder whether a portal is good for us, because we're good at seeking out...we don't look at every aspect of archaeology...and we're good at seeking out the specialist information that we need, and filtering ourselves, so you'd need a hundred experts on the different aspects of archaeology to be there to provide the right stuff from a portal*  
(Archaeology 12:45 minutes)

Since one of the value added advantages of portals is their role in mediating the vastness of the web, several participants wondered about the nature of the 'gate keepers' and the type of information being selected for viewing.

*What a portal is doing is encouraging you to browse through a more restricted range of documents or whatever, which might reflect a more official view of what you should be reading on a subject.* (Archaeology 22:30 minutes)

*I think the important thing in a portal is who is the gatekeeper? Who selects what's authoritative? Are you as a researcher, willing to trust that person X in that nameless office that you can't see is selecting the authoritative sources that you can rely on?* (Information Studies 25:30 minutes)

Portals were considered to lack an awareness of user search techniques. Unless the portal site took this into account it would be dismissed by researchers and simply not used.

*The way people do research has not caught up with the possibilities of the Internet.* (History 18:00 minutes)

*You develop quite a feel...I think we all have an intuition in the way that we find this stuff, so that when someone from France says can you give me a bibliography on X, I'll sort of know that Humbul isn't going to help me on that, that it's just too specialised, it's just not going to work. Whereas I might get something from Historical Abstracts, and I'll go straight to that. Of course I might have been wrong, but that's the judgement call that one makes, and those judgement calls are sort of intuitive. So the first impression that you have of a site is very*

*important, because it feeds almost immediately through to how you use it thereafter. (History 14:30 minutes)*

*The problem with things that are automated is that they cannot discriminate in any way the same as the human eye. So although you can to some extent find some useful stuff by having an automated crawler go and pull it in for you, it's going to pull in stuff that is totally inappropriate, and more the point stuff that is irrelevant. So you're going to suffer from information overload unless you can understand how to limit the stuff that comes in your direction (Information Studies 23:20 minutes)*

*I think a portal is a low-level activity. It's basically collecting things together that are useful, but it's actually not analysing anything and that's what research is about....knowing that those resources are there is part of your expertise. (Information Studies 33:00 minutes)*

Some participants wondered what advantage a portal offered that wasn't already being built into web browsers or desktop applications.

*What does a portal do that my favourites list can't do? (Information Studies 23:30 minutes)*

However, in response one of the participants suggested that a portal was still useful for providing opportunities for new discoveries—the core task of researchers using the web.

*I feel capable of distinguishing between good and bad things myself. A portal doesn't have to do that completely. If some of the things that it produces are relevant and I didn't see them before, that might be where it scores over your book mark. It might throw up things that you might not have thought that were there before. (Information Studies 25:50 minutes)*

One participant from the music focus group picked up on a weakness among institutional portals:

*The university's bog standard package doesn't deal with a lot of the formats that we would use, so we have to find another way of doing things that almost by-passes the University's standards. (Music 13:00 minutes)*

*They have gone too much down the marketing route without paying attention to the fact that the departments have requirements, specific requirements. (Music 15:40 minutes)*

The generic nature of institutional portals for this participant meant that the huge audio files needed for working digitally could not be accommodated and thus significantly hindered teaching and research.

### **A6.2.5 Desirable Features**

If portals were to be improved or additional features put in place, respondents requested that the applications not simply duplicate existing features. Instead they should offer something new, be readily accessible, comfortable and easy to use. Portal features would certainly need to take into account their target users in order to avoid trying to be a 'jack-of-all-trades', and good at none.

*You need to determine how deep and how broad, other wise your portal will be enormous. So you have to make a decision of who is the user. If there are specialists in an area they need deeper information, more specialised information. If there are intermediate users then they might need broader coverage. (Information Studies 25:00 minutes)*

The ability to search with a greater degree of confidence, control and with a finer granularity was also mentioned, as was the ability to search across multiple databases simultaneously and remember past searches. A single authentication feature was mentioned by a few researchers concerned that accessing multiple publishers was difficult and could better be cleared through a single sign-in.

*I would like to have a search function which I could customise so that I could tick do I want to search British History Online and Humbul and search a lot of different sources...I find that I'm going to different sources and conducting the same search, which is very time consuming, and then you got the job of homologating all the results...if Athens could be placed on the institutional portal, the MUSE portal, and then you could search within all those resources. (History 26:30 minutes)*

*Very elementary search engines don't allow you to be very specific about what you're searching for. It seems that web designs are moving to a simpler and simpler search box, when in fact what you need...when you want to, you need to be able to be a lot more specific about what you're looking for. (History 11:20 minutes)*

*It's not that Google has too much, it's a matter of how it's prioritised... I get the sense that it's more for general things and it's the specific things that are a problem. (Archaeology 19:30 minutes)*

Researchers used the web primarily to access literature within their community; therefore access to the entire breath of literature was a frequent request.

*The first thing it needs is access to every journal in that subject Because if you go to a portal and you think that you're missing out just by using that you're just going to go back to Google—because it's so powerful you can get most stuff. I don't know what the purpose of filtering is, unless you already get everything and it saves you a step. (Archaeology 27:50 minutes)*

*Research momentum stops there and then...it ruins your organisation for the day. If they could set up the finances somehow so that...couldn't they just have access to all journals and have it on a pay per view? ...So that the research process is never stifled. And for the sake of humanity that's a very good thing to do and if it creates more research, more intellectual endeavour they are morally obliged to do. And portals could allow that if the pay to view thing was worked out. (Archaeology 29:10 minutes)*

Pushed alerts, perhaps via RSS news feeds was a notable feature. This was to afford access to the latest additions to bibliographical databases, notification of conferences and calls for papers, and most importantly news of funding announcements.

*News I suppose...professional newsgroups...in terms of conferences and a useful review section (History 19:00 minutes)*

*Calls for paper and calls for research funding and pushes it my way...instead of me having to trawl through all the funding bodies all the time. (Information Studies 27:00 minutes)*

*News feeds stimulates your interest to look at other things. (Archaeology 30:30 minutes)*

Some measure of control over quality was mentioned on several occasions. The volume of returns from search engines such as Google, and the validity of those results needed to have some means of being controlled or filtered.

*For me in research terms I want a portal to be credible and rigorous, and specialised, because that's what you're taught to believe when you're using these things. It's more authoritative than typing it into Google. You need some system of peer review and quality control if you're using it terms of research. (Information Studies 24:00 minutes)*

It was also suggested that the returns that are valuable to a researcher should be able to be catalogued and bookmarked in a more sophisticated way. Since web sites are sometimes not sustainable over long periods, moving the discovered data to one's bookmarks or desktop simple shifts the problem of storing and indexing from the web to the individual's own computer. The ability to more centrally and sustainably access information was also raised as an issue.

*I'd like to be able to bookmark resources or link part of a resource...so you wouldn't have to fish it out from that original source...I'm finding more stuff downloaded to the hard disk, which is transferring a problem from one big domain to another big domain. And it's a big domain which has even more rudimentary search facilities than is available on the internet. (History 30:30 minutes)*

Since the primary use researchers put to the web was accessing the literature within their field most wanted even more depth and breadth of digitised texts. For the subject specialists such as archaeologists and musician working with large image or sound files the ability to move large datasets, such as maps or music performances was also a concern.

The web was understood to be increasingly useful for professional networking and sharing information with colleagues, whether through official peer-reviewed journals online or more informal posts on weblogs.

*A portal which directed you at that sort of living conversation (peer-review-type open for comment) is probably more useful to than a researcher...(Information Studies 42:10)*

*Evaluating stuff... You get a request to evaluate a research proposal and you tend to go increasingly on to the web to see what the context is, just to have a feel for how robust this proposal is. (History 19:30 minutes)*

*Just to find out about people in the profession. (History 21:20 minutes)*

One other issue that some focus group participants raise centred on aspects of intellectual property and ownership of web-based resources. Tools that facilitated the process of securing permissions we welcomed.

*Copyright is a major deterrent to academic freedom. (Biblical Studies 28:00 minutes)*

### **A6.2.6 Politics and Funding Issues**

The tenor of most focus group respondents was negative about an additional portal tool if it held the possibility of duplicating any existing web or software applications. Most were worried that funding for such a programme could be better spent elsewhere.

*I'm not sure that pumping a lot of money into this will really help because businesses already see their own interests in funding this. (Biblical Studies 27:00 minutes)*

*The funding that they give is limited to a certain amount of money over certain periods so they can't really improve any projects their funding because they're not renewable. (Biblical Studies 35:00 minutes)*

*Finances are tight for just about everything, so unless there were funding forthcoming, I suspect it would not be high on the agenda. (Information Studies 28:20 minutes)*

*I don't want to pay any more money for something that I already have access to that makes it easier. To be perfectly honest I find that quite offensive. What I don't want to do is give in to people who are a bit lazy, and yes it might be difficult, but that's part of learning. You can't expect everything to just be there. It's not about saving time, it's actually about providing something new and useful. So what I would like to see anything you're going to spend money on giving us something new and not an interface to something we've already got. It would be about new subscriptions...if we've got new sources of information then I think that's the only thing we should be spending money on...equipment and information. (Archaeology 33:20 minutes)*

Raising the profile of the existing services would be the best way to see an increase in portal usage. As seen above, awareness was relatively low and use even lower. This was due primarily to the more powerful and useful tool offered by Google and other web search engines.

*...they need to make a much more rigorous effort to get them out there, if they want them to be more widely used. And that's the only way they'll know if they're truly valuable or not. I think it is an issue of awareness in the first instance...because I still use the ones I was told about...(Information Studies 47:40 minutes)*

Additional or improved features should emerge from the researchers' needs rather than being developed simply because they can. Access to the largest number of high-quality texts and artefacts that drive research was given as a priority by most focus group participants. Therefore, portal tools should secure greater access to journals and other outlets of peer-reviewed research, and simultaneously preserve intellectual property rights and satisfy copyright demands would better serve existing researcher's web use.

Any effort by portal providers that were simply making use of technology for technology's sake when other issues were a priority would be frowned upon by all disciplines participating in the focus groups. However, there was also awareness that many of the efforts to improve service might not be readily apparent or have measurable outcomes.

*A lot of sites (departmental resources) are there just as an intention of good will...ticking boxes. So ticking-box portals...there's a lot of that stuff around. Everybody doing useful links pages which they haven't really put much thought into. (History 38:30 minutes)*

*When you spend money on a portal you cannot get any money back. It's very useful to bring more control over the chaotic situation on the internet...but if a company or a department spend money how can you see the result? (Information Studies 29:30 minutes)*

### **A6.3 CONCLUSIONS**

The web is now a ubiquitous tool for researchers within the arts and humanities, used primarily for accessing a growing corpus of digital texts, images, audio and video resources. However, portals do not play an important or useful role among respondents in this series of focus groups. Most were satisfied with their existing applications, though would prefer greater access to their subject's literature. The Google search engine was the preferred



application for accessing the Web, primarily for its simplicity and ease of use. However, the quality and quantity of search returns was a serious problem. Therefore, what was wanted were even greater refinements in searching and controlling Web information. For those in the music and archaeology focus groups, the size of storage and the ability to move large files through email or across the Net was a serious infrastructural concern, as was the institutional support for ICT related issues.

The issue of copyright and the issue of intellectual property rights were also seen as a growing concern. With greater and greater access being given to resources, the need to use materials for teaching or research meant that proprietary control was a major concern for researchers. Any technologies that might facilitate use of these resources should be a priority.

Since customisation, choice and the personal ability to control access to resources were vital qualities for respondents, and new tool that failed to offer these features would be likely to fail and find little return for investment.

## Research Portals in Arts and Humanities (RePAH) Focus Group Questions (FIGURE 1)

Discipline: \_\_\_\_\_ Group Size: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Moderator: \_\_\_\_\_ Recorder: \_\_\_\_\_

| Question Category  | Guide Questions & Prompts   |
|--|---|
|  | 1. When you're conducting your research, what do you generally use the web to help you to do?<br><i>PROMPT: list of possible tasks from e-questionnaire</i>   |
| Usefulness   | 2. How well does the web help you to achieve that?  |
| Distinctiveness of the Discipline                              | 3. Can you think of any ways in which your discipline affects your use of the Web? In other words, how does the fact that you're a/an <u>(insert discipline)</u> affect how you use the Web?  |
| Portal Awareness   | 4. Do you ever use portals in your research?<br>a. Which one(s) are used for your field of research?<br>b. How frequently?<br>c. If you don't use portals, why not? What might encourage you to use them?   |
| Portal Usefulness<br>Portal Strengths<br>Portal weaknesses     | 5. What do you think about the usefulness of these portals?<br>a. What do you <u>like</u> about the portals that you use?<br>b. What do you <u>not like</u> about portals?<br><i>PROMPT: define a portal and give an example for the subject's discipline—list from Humbul/Artifact?</i>  |
| Desirable tools & Research Needs                               | 6. If you could have a web-tool that could assist you in your research, what features would it have?<br>a. What information do you need to do your research that could be accessed electronically?<br><br><i>PROMPT: give an example of various tools that could assist various aspects of the research cycle</i>   |
| Politics & Funding   | 7. How would this department be able to support a portal-based web tool?<br>a. Financially—if you had to subscribe to a service<br>b. Pedagogically—if you had to learn a new skill<br>c. Politically—if you needed the service in the face of Administrative reluctance<br><br><i>ALTERNATIVELY: What would this tool have to offer in order to be supported by this Department?</i> |
| Contribution (gets at capabilities of support A&H informatics) | 8. What could your department contribute to a portal service?   |