

AUSTRALIAN eRESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE COUNCIL (AeRIC)

AeRIC Meeting - Thursday, 29 May 2008

AGENDA ITEM 5: ICI/ARCS BUSINESS PLAN

Paper: The ARCS Annual Business Plan was circulated to AeRIC members on 21 May 2008.

Purpose

To provide AeRIC with a summary of the NCRIS Team's assessment of the ARCS Annual Business Plan for 2008/09.

Background

The ARCS Executive Director submitted the 2008/9 Annual Business Plan (ABP) for the Interoperation and Collaboration Infrastructure (ICI) Project on 30 April 2008.

The ARCS ABP for 2008/09 is the first business plan required under the ICI NCRIS Funding Agreement. Previous plans submitted by ARCS have included the ICI Project Plan (as attached to the original NCRIS agreement), an Establishment Plan and an Implementation Plan.

In assessing the Annual Business Plan, the NCRIS team gives particular consideration to:

- *the required content for the Plan, as specified in the funding agreement;*
- *the alignment with the capability investment plan as approved by NCRIS; and*
- *the degree to which any variations might represent a change requiring re-appraisal by NCRIS.*

Alignment with the PfC Investment Plan

The ABP reflects close alignment with the ICI component as described in the NCRIS Investment Plan for the Platforms for Collaboration (PfC) capability. Clear progress has been demonstrated to date, and future activities described, which are relevant to the ICI activity as originally envisaged.

ICI references extracted from the PfC Investment Plan, against which the assessment was considered, are as follows:

- *This investment creates an Australia-wide inter-operation platform linking expertise and compute and data support systems across regional and national service providers into a day-to-day operational activity.*
- *The ICI component should install, configure and operate servers and services that allow grid like workflows to use resources anywhere in the country, subject to suitable authorisation.*
- *The proposed initial activities of the Interoperation and Collaboration Services component will need to include:*
 - *A middleware operations function that can support several middleware and portal flavours operating over an integrated resource allocation and authorisation system*
 - *A job submission fabric that allows the automatic unattended submission of jobs and workflows on any system within the fabric*
 - *A data movement fabric that allows the automatic unattended transfer of data including effective large bulk transfers between any systems within the fabric*

- *A set of easy to use virtual organisation services, including AAF integrated collaboration workspaces*
- *The day-to-day operations management for the above services*
- *A small activity responding to requests for help and tackling requests through to expertise groups and services and their response.*
- *Investment into these services will need to include the provision of systems and servers, software and software environments, and the management means to ensure they are reliably configured and regularly tested for compliance and operational status.*

Summary

The ABP communicates to DIISR, AeRIC, NCRIS and the ARCS members, common agreement about governing principles as well as future activities and directions.

This ABP signals a shift in the transformation from the APAC activity to the ARCS Collaboration. The document indicates that by the end of July ARCS will undertake activities to indicate that it is clearly “open for business”. The Business Plan contains a commitment to more closely engage with CAUDIT and other stakeholders, both domestic and overseas, in the coming year and to also address user requirements and quality of service issues.

Following acceptance by DIISR of this Annual Business Plan, the Authorisation and Collaboration Services components of the plan will be formalised as contractual arrangements through NCRIS.

Activities and services

The ABP reports on the progress of the current services and also describes planned activities. In relation to the three main ARCS service types - Collaboration, Data and Systems services - the document states that efforts is required to bring the services up to the production level by developing packaging, deploying, testing and monitoring processes.

Under the Data Services component the ARCS Data Fabric has progressed and will provide basic data fabric tools and services, while members of ARCS will work with other data storage providers to bring their storage facilities in to the fabric in an accessible way.

This period will also see an expansion of the newly created Collaboration Services component and the initiation of an Authorisation Services activity.

NeAT

The ABP contains an update on the proto-Neat projects and related user support activities that had been carried out during the first year of ICI funding, in anticipation of the first round of NeAT project funding.

The first round of NeAT projects have been proposed and described in an attachment to the ABP. The agreed projects reflect the deliberations of the NeAT committee and will be subject to AeRIC endorsement, as part of the consideration of this business plan.

Principles for governance and administration of NeAT projects have also been provided, as agreed between ARCS and the ANDS Establishment Project. These principles note that ARCS could be the vehicle for contractual arrangements with external entities should they be needed while the development phase of ANDS continues.

Authorisation services

An Authorisation Services component has been proposed which will see ARCS positioned as a source of best practice and leading-edge knowledge and expertise in Authorisation Services, tasked with spreading expertise throughout ARCS, ANDS and other eResearch service providers.

Following discussions between DIISR and ARCS, the ABP proposes that the Authorisation Services will be delivered via a new NCRIS funding agreement between DIISR and ARCS, which will be signed by ARCS through its designated lead agent.

Governance

The ARCS Collaboration Agreement was enacted in November 2007 and these governance arrangements have now been reflected in the ABP for 2008/09. Significant progress has been made in relation to governance, including recent resolutions made as a result of particular challenges and issues confronted by the collaboration for the first time. These resolutions should make engagement with ARCS much simpler for external stakeholders.

Budget

A full budget is provided which details the names and locations of ARCS funded staff and consists primarily of funds for ARCS personnel. It satisfies the requirements of the ABP budget required under the NCRIS funding agreement.

While the operations fund for the coming year will be almost fully expended, there will be a carry-over of unexpended NeAT funds through this period to 2009/10.

Conclusion

As required by the NCRIS Assessment Guidelines for the Annual Business Plan:

- The ABP outlines the expected progress with the project in the coming year;
- No material variations from the PfC Project Plan are proposed;
- Key risk factors for the project have been identified, including that the services should adequately reflect user requirements and be delivered in alignment with expectations regarding quality of service. Strategies to address these issues have been adequately described;
- The content of the Plan complies with Attachment C of the funding agreement and other requirements for ABPs under the NCRIS agreement;
- The ABP aligns with the ICI activity described in the PfC Investment Plan as approved by NCRIS.

Issues

The ARCS ABP has been developed in close consultation with DIISR. During the development stage, a number of the Department's queries and issues were addressed and these have been rectified in the final document.

Action

- That AeRIC note the assessment of the ARCS Business Plan by the NCRIS Team against the requirements under the NCRIS Funding Agreement.

NCRIS Team
May 2008

AGENDA ITEM 5: Continued

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Purpose

To provide AeRIC with the Executive Director's comments to DIISR on the additional PfC issues for Annual Business Plans, namely:

- Q1 The degree to which the PfC infrastructure and services are being tailored to meet the needs of NCRIS researchers as well as participants in other research activities*
- Q2 The extent to which the PfC infrastructure and services are being utilised across NCRIS capabilities and other research activities*
- Q3 Evidence that common services can be and are being used to harness resources and expertise to achieve research goals not otherwise attainable.*

Overall the ARCS/ICI ABP closely follows the developments identified in the PfC Investment Plan, with extensions to include authorisation services.

It is also 'early days' and the PfC criteria might well need to be assessed by the demonstration of annual improvements rather than in absolute terms.

NeAT activities inherently address the PfC criteria, and self evidently address Q1. The extent to which the operational services also do so is not very clear in the ABP. It will be desirable in future ABPs to ensure the operational services are encapsulated with at least the same degree of user focus and business rationale as has been applied in the NeAT projects.

Overall, improvements in the ABP will depend on the development of performance measures and metrics that assist ARCS focus on and demonstrate success against these PfC criteria.

Performance metrics are acknowledged in the ABP, which indicates that ARCS will review its performance on a service-by-service basis, using measures that will establish:

- Growth of user base by absolute number
- Distribution of user base by discipline/community
- User satisfaction
- User participation and engagement with ARCS.

While the above constitutes a preliminary list of metrics, they are not necessarily strategic in intent and, for instance, are phrased in absolute terms rather than market share or comparative terms. An extended set of metrics that captures the goals of PfC will help.

The ICI NCRIS Funding Agreement proposes some generic Key Performance Indicators (at Attachment F to the Agreement, and repeated below) for agreement. Each progress report required under the ICI NCRIS Funding Agreement (the first for ARCS is due in September this year) will be required to report on "Performance against **agreed** performance indicators."

Action

- Consideration should be given to the nature of desirable performance metrics and an agreement reached with ARCS to apply and report on metrics related to the PfC criteria.

Executive Director
May 2008

Attachment A – Extract of “Performance Indicators” from ICI NCRIS Funding Agreement

A set of indicators are to be developed for use in monitoring annual performance across the capability. It would be expected that these indicators address the following areas:

Providing Research Infrastructure

- Growth in the number of facilities and e-research institutions connected.

Meeting Researcher Needs

- Number, type and location of users for each ICI service
 - User types are university, publicly funded research agencies, industry, other
 - User location is institution
- Percentage utilisation of facilities
 - Based on growth in accesses over time
 - Based on available capacity for data movement and collaboration services
- Measures of user satisfaction

Quality of Research Infrastructure

- Benchmark against other Australian and overseas infrastructure. Benchmarking methods may include:
 - Independent reviews

Collaborative Infrastructure Provision

- Extent and duration of collaborative agreements / relationships established for managing and developing research infrastructure
 - Include type of agreement and parties involved
 - Number of ICI Partners and Affiliates

Fostering Collaborative and World-class Research

- Number and nature of Australian research collaborations that involve use of NCRIS infrastructure
 - Include type of collaborative activity and parties involved
- Number and nature of international collaborative research activities supported by NCRIS infrastructure
 - Include type of collaborative activity and parties involved