

DARC -2: Distributed Africana Repositories Community follow-up project

Management Summary

1.1 Aim

The objectives of DARC-2 are twofold:

Firstly, DARC-2 will serve as a test-bed for DARE developments. The introduction of a 'digital author identifier' as a means to identify researchers/authors of scientific publications in a unique fashion will be implemented in Connecting-Africa, to demonstrate feasibility and usefulness. This will be done in close cooperation with the library of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences that operates the Dutch Research Database (NOD). In addition, the DARC-2 project will develop selective OAI-PMH harvesting criteria to identify relevant African Studies materials in university repositories.

The second objective of the DARC-2 project is to encourage researchers to submit relevant publications, and scientific and teaching materials to their institutional repositories. Lecturers at universities and research centres in Amsterdam, Groningen, Leiden and Wageningen, working together on developing course materials for the proposed Research Masters Programme in African Studies, will be encouraged to use relevant materials stored in academic repositories. To this end, existing digital learning environments in use at universities will be linked to the DARE infrastructure.

1.2 End result

The DARC-2 project will deliver:

- guidelines for the implementation and use of a 'digital author identifier' (as part of a DARE work package);
- selective OAI-PMH harvesting criteria to identify relevant African Studies materials from university repositories (by 31-12-2005);
- submissions of relevant publications and scientific materials to DARE repositories by 25% of Africanists at Dutch universities and research centres (by 28-02-2006); and
- a pilot scheme for the proposed African Research Masters, linking existing digital learning environments to the DARE repositories in Amsterdam, Groningen, Leiden and Wageningen (by 28-02-2006).

1.3 Project period

September 2004 - February 2006

The project begins on 1st September 2004.

The project duration is 18 months.

The project ends the 28th February 2006, or eighteen months after the start of the project.

1.4 Costs

Total project costs: €267,400

Subsidy from SURF: €140,000

1.5 Tender criteria

DARC-2 builds on DARC-1

DARC is an initiative of the African Studies Centre (ASC) in Leiden to make Africanist research material and information accessible through a community portal on the Internet. As a result of a previous grant from the SURF Foundation allocated to the DARC-1 project (August 2003 - March 2004), a pilot service for African Studies in the Netherlands, Connecting-Africa, was launched in April 2004. The service provides details of researchers on Africa affiliated to Dutch universities and research institutes – who is doing what, their area of expertise, research interests and recent publications. A full list of titles published by the African Studies Centre in Leiden is accessible via the repository of Leiden University. DARC-2 builds on the results and findings of DARC-1.

A challenging approach

Like the DARE programme, the DARC project is challenging because it builds on structures that are still at the developmental stage and are often of an experimental nature. The DARC-1 project showed that a rapid extension of the service Connecting-Africa at a national level is not possible. Therefore the preconditions are not (yet) achievable because DARE repositories have developed at different rates and there are no criteria for selective OAI-PMH harvesting of relevant African Studies materials from university repositories. Most repositories lack access controls and not all university departments have yet developed submission procedures for digital materials. DARC-2 proposes to expand the Connecting-Africa service gradually, wherever the preconditions are most favourable.

DARC-2 is cooperating with the ORION project (one of the other projects within the DARE programme) and the Dutch initiative for a Research Masters Programme in African Studies. DARC-2 wants to harvest well stocked and good, working repositories such as the repositories of Amsterdam and Wageningen Universities, which are both participating in DARC-2 and where the Dutch Africanist community is well represented (making up more than 10% of the total Africanist community in the Netherlands). The project is experimental in character and all activities will take place in test-bed and pilot-scheme environments.

Organizational and technical project orientation

Project DARC-2 is technically and organizationally oriented. An important organizational aspect is related to the question of how researchers can be unambiguously identified at a national level. DARE has recognized the importance of an unequivocal identification of authors. The Netherlands Institute for Scientific Information Services (NIWI) is now developing a central thesaurus containing authors' names and a central service for the distribution and administration of Digital Author Identifiers (DAI). Connecting-Africa is a 'virtual community' where researchers are at the centre, unlike bibliographic databases where publications are central. Whenever an Africanist joins the community, the portal should ideally retrieve the researcher's personal data and his/her publications from databases and repositories using his/her unique identification number. With this model in mind, DARC-2 will examine the possibilities of retrieving personal data and publications from the Dutch Research Database (NOD) and DARE repositories.

The organizational aspects are complex because a number of parties are involved in data processing: university faculties providing data entry, the central registration service (ORION), the repositories and the data provider (Connecting-Africa). Not all data are relevant for all parties. 'Who enters what?' and 'who administrates what' are important questions in this context.

DARC-2 will set up a test-bed to examine possible small-scale solutions, thus providing insight into better organizational aspects. Methods and techniques to exchange personal data will follow the OAI approach and be based on a metadata format that is easy to retrieve via OAI-MHP. DARC-2 is looking for scalable and generic solutions that can be implemented at a national level.

The question of how to harvest selectively came up during the realization of the DARC-1 project. Although the harvesting functionality is implemented in the Connecting-Africa service, it does not appear possible to identify and harvest exclusively African Studies materials from university repositories. It is not possible to harvest on the basis of metadata field, only on the basis of collections of metadata records, so-called 'sets'. The DARE community has not yet agreed on criteria and best practices for creating sets. The solution for creating sets on the basis of disciplines of virtual communities is probably not generic and not scalable. DARC-2 will try to find solutions which are scalable and generic, in an organizational and technical sense, and will test the probable solutions on the basis of African Studies material from DARE repositories.

Stimulating researchers

DARC-1 examined the willingness of Dutch Africanists to join the DARC initiative. There is enough support to continue but researchers still have reservations about 'open access'. DARC-2 will cooperate with the proposed national Research Masters Programme in African Studies in order to stimulate Africanists to make use of the DARE infrastructure for the storage and the distribution of their research and teaching materials. For this purpose, DARC-2 aims to enrich the repositories with basic texts and source materials (material form archives, audio-visual materials, etc.).

DARC-2 will not only stimulate Africanists at participating faculties to deposit materials in DARE repositories, but all Africanists attached to the participating universities. Special attention will be paid to research institutes to which a number of Africanists are attached, such as the ASSR (Amsterdam School for Social Science Research) and CNWS (Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies). DARC-2 is aiming to encourage 25% of Africanists to make use of the repositories.

A distributed learning environment: the 'killer application'?

A digital learning environment could be an important aid in the organization of the Research Masters Programme in African Studies and should make communication between lecturers and students as effective and efficient as possible. In this way, one can reduce the problems that might arise from having lecturers and students of the Research Masters Programme in African Studies spread over the whole of the Netherlands, and even abroad.

DARC-2 is thus examining the possibility of linking existing digital learning environments already in use at universities to the DARE infrastructure. Such a link would lay the foundations for a distributed learning environment. The re-use of material from the repositories and the submission of new material will be stimulated in this way.

A number of DARE repositories will participate in the development of the 'DARC pilot learning environment'. There is a good chance that the chosen solution will be generic and can be expanded to other repositories – which is a requirement for the further expansion of the pilot project. DARC-2 seeks to establish a distributed interoperable environment. DARC-2 will not only investigate technical links; organizational, educational and legal questions will also be considered.

Special attention will be paid to questions of copyright and access management. Our objective is to win the researchers' confidence and to be able to give guarantees.

Multidisciplinary and multi-institutional

DARC-2 is a multidisciplinary and multi-institutional project and researchers/lecturers and librarians attached to six different institutions are participating in the initiative: the African Studies Centre, the Netherlands Institute for Scientific Information Services, Leiden University, Wageningen University, Amsterdam University and Groningen University.

Information transfer and dissemination

The more general DARC activities (the DLE link and the use of a DAI), which are significant for the whole DARE community and the further development of the DARE infrastructure, will take place in work packages under the direction of the SURF Foundation.

Dissemination will be mainly directed to the Connecting-Africa 'community'. Researchers, lecturers and students will be informed about the development of the DARC pilot learning environment. DARC-2 will keep all participants in the Research Masters Programme who are not participating in the DARC project informed about the programme and its possible applications.