AIATSIS supports the thrust of the discussion in the Understanding Cultures and Communities Expert Working Group. In particular it supports the call for support to create an eResearch facility that can accommodate Australian scholarly interactions and facilitate research of dispirit data sets. The collections of multiple Australian agencies could vastly support such research if there was provision to open up access through digital means. AIATSIS could provide a major Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collection hub to any Australian facility. The cases below are submitted as examples of the kinds of collection activity that would contribute to the proposed eResearch facility. However it should be noted that AIATSIS has received special funding in past years to commence collection digitisation activity and that this funding ceases in June 2011. AIATSIS would welcome the use of research infrastructure grants to facilitate the development of an Understanding Cultures and Communities eResearch facility in the manner outlined in the Discussion Paper.

Digitisation at AIATSIS

AIATSIS is legislated to maintain the nation’s largest and most valuable public collection of Indigenous heritage materials relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The AIATSIS digitisation program is a major strategy for making the Canberra-based collections available to the Australian, and world, research communities. Such original materials inform research debates about key questions of Australian history and cultures. Enhancements of Australia’s broadband networks will ultimately allow real-time interactivity between AIATSIS and distributed users.

Using the digitised material AIATSIS has developed online exhibitions and digital publications that are valuable research tools for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They include topics like languages, family history and major historical events such as the Stolen Generations, treaty, the Freedom Ride of 1965, the 1967 Referendum and the 2008 Apology. The online exhibitions have been very popular, receiving 12.5 million web hits since 2005.

The program has also made materials available and returned them to individuals and communities. AIATSIS receives approximately 500 individual and community requests for return of audiovisual archive materials per year. Fifty-four per cent of these are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or community organisations, 16 percent from researchers, and nine per cent from publishers and broadcasters. Some requests from community archives are for major returns of all materials relating to a particular locale. The AIATSIS Return of Materials to Indigenous Communities (ROMTIC) Program has resulted in nearly 11,000 photographs, sound and video recordings of languages, songs, ceremonies and oral histories being returned to Indigenous communities.
Fees are in force for the general public and specific users such as publishers and film makers. Income from this source is very low. AIATSIS does not generally charge Indigenous people for return of materials unless they are resourced through another program.

The AIATSIS Digitisation Program has focussed on the ongoing development and refinement of its processes in the use of its digitisation infrastructure to transfer magnetic analogue audio, video tapes, and motion picture film to the digital medium. This has involved continual increases in capacity to digitise through modifications of software and hardware systems. AIATSIS is now at the leading edge of setting standards for digital metadata production that facilitates searching of collections and in software development for archival quality digitisation. Maintenance of equipment by AIATSIS engineers and technicians has allowed the digital transfer of older formats even though these formats are now considered obsolete by the original manufacturers.

**At risk collections**

Once considered safely preserved, many of these materials are now internationally considered at risk of irretrievable loss because of ongoing deterioration and changes in technology. In the opinion of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and other major heritage bodies, magnetic media including audio tape, videotape, and the sound stripe of motion picture film do not have a lifespan beyond 2025. The analogue media equipment on which some of these collections were created and played is now obsolete. The majority of these records are unique and cannot be reproduced in the present.

For a small organisation the audiovisual materials in the collection are relatively very large. The audio collection, which is most at risk, is the same size as that of the National Library of Australia. The collection material includes records of ceremony, art, music, languages, and oral history where the original producers are now deceased, as well as records of contact history from missions and government settlements.

AIATSIS currently has a digitisation program to preserve collections at risk that is funded as a non-ongoing program until June 2011. The focus for preservation has been the need to prioritise the digitisation of deteriorating collections. Even though these Commonwealth collections are kept in the highest quality storage facilities, the conditions do not stop the deterioration process for these particular media. The materials disintegrate progressively over time. At first this makes them unplayable and unable to be copied and later the materials fragment completely. The AIATSIS program was established in line with technical opinion from prestigious organisations like the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) and the Council on Library and Information Resources (US). It follows the principles outlined in the UNESCO Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage.

The need to continue digitisation of the AIATSIS collections is to preserve the world’s largest and most comprehensive record of unique materials relating to Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander peoples. Ninety-eight percent of AIATSIS at risk materials are not shared by other Australian cultural organisations. Digitisation also consolidates AIATSIS as the major content provider to the developing network of Indigenous community based keeping places and archives and to the Australian research community. The return of these collections to Indigenous communities is a commitment to the process of reconciliation by ‘bringing culture back home’ in order to mitigate further loss of the many Indigenous languages, knowledge and cultures. The volume of requests received by AIATSIS for materials from Indigenous communities has steadily increased over the last ten years. This has arisen because of their increasing awareness of our collections through language revitalisation, native title and members of the Stolen Generation researching their family history.

Present Closing the Gap initiatives do not explicitly relate to the preservation or promotion of Indigenous knowledge. However, digital media and archive organisations are a developing area of Indigenous education and employment. In particular, young Indigenous people are highly motivated to engage with the new technologies and skills that add value to these collections. In a number of states, regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community digital archives are formally supported through the library network specifically to enhance Indigenous literacy. With the introduction of the National Broadband Network (NBN) greater amounts of digitised material including film and audio will become readily available to remote regional communities via the web. Access to these history and culture materials enhance a sense of purpose in communities and helps to create new employment opportunities in media production, tourism and the arts. For example, Goolarri Media in Broome maintains an archive and runs television and radio broadcasts, supports graphic design and advertising activities, and uses the media for training services. The Wiradjuri Condobilin Cultural Centre in New South Wales uses collection displays to provide cultural heritage training programs to local mine workers, supports a Wiradjuri language hub, and supports local arts development and sales.

Delivery of such materials via broadband will also support the university based research sector and regional research activity in a multitude of areas including health, education, governance, land and water management, and associated policy development.

The Institute’s collections are particularly rich in language material: AIATSIS holds the only audio recordings in existence of some languages which are no longer spoken. This is vital to support Indigenous communities’ efforts at language revitalisation. In 2009 the Australian Government announced *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach*. The new national approach is intended to guide urgent action to preserve the nation’s critically endangered languages.

**Facilitation of digital research - AUSTLANG**

As an example of how priorities for digitisation might be derived, AIATSIS has worked with university based linguists to design AUSTLANG a database relating to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages (see: [http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/](http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/)). This database is available over the web to all researchers. It sorts all written references to these languages, is
a repository for statistical information such as numbers of speakers, levels of language endangerment, and identifies collections available for support of research of a particular language. The database has a map interface with the most correct information on the geographic distribution of particular language groups.

The database was developed in conjunction with programmers from the Australian Partnership for Sustainable Repositories, ANU, a relationship facilitated through the Research School of Humanities and the Arts at ANU. AIATSIS also provides information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to government through the Department of Arts and Culture. AIATSIS has recently been contracted to conduct a national survey of the current state of these languages and to provide advice on the effects of funding support programs in order to support policy formulation within that department.

An appropriate enhancement of Australian research excellence in the linguistics field might be to digitise all analogue recordings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and make them available to the research community. Tools like AUSTLANG could also be part of this research effort. This is circumscribed, rather than open ended activity, that would have a clearly defined start and end point that could form a single milestone within a broader national Understanding Cultures and Communities digitisation schedule. Similarly other important Australian collections could be brought into connection with Australian researchers to enhance research efforts in different Understanding Cultures and Communities disciplines.