Next generation careers in and from Digital Humanities

Third discussion paper of the UK-Ireland DH Network

Author(s)	Beatrice Cannelli (University of London) Jane Winters (University of London) Arianna Ciula (King's College London) Paul Gooding (University of Glasgow) Justin Tonra (NUI Galway) Charlotte Tupman (University of Exeter) Michelle Doran (Trinity College Dublin) Jennifer Edmond (Trinity College Dublin) Lorna Hughes (University of Glasgow) Órla Murphy (University College Cork) James Smithies (King's College London)
Reviewer(s)	
Date	November 2021
Project title	UK-Ireland Digital Humanities Network: A Network for Research Capacity Enhancement
Funder & scheme	AHRC/IRC
Grant reference	AH/V002163/1 – IRC/V002163/1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

Description

This discussion paper, produced by the UK-Ireland Digital Humanities Network in consultation with the wider Digital Humanities (DH) community in the two countries and beyond, summarises the findings of the third workshop organised by the network.

The UK-Ireland DH Network

The UK-Ireland Digital Humanities Network is an AHRC/IRC-funded project (2020-21) to undertake research and consultation towards the implementation of a permanent DH association for the UK and Ireland. The project is led by the Irish and UK PIs, Dr Michelle Doran (Trinity College Dublin) and Professor Jane Winters (School of Advanced Study, University of London, UK); the full list of project members and participating institutions can be found on the Network's website (https://dhnetwork.org/team).

As part of the Network's programme of activities a series of workshops, discussions, surveys and consultations have been conducted in order to formulate recommendations that will inform the future development of a UK-Ireland DH Association. The overall aims and objectives of the Network project can be consulted at https://dhnetwork.org/about/, but the purpose of this document is to present the Network's recommendations on career development in DH in UK and Ireland (part V, below).

The workshop and discussions

The third event of the AHRC-funded UK-Ireland DH Network, on *Next generation careers in and from Digital Humanities*, was organised by University College Cork, NUI Galway and the University of London. Co-located with the 10th Oxford Digital Humanities Summer School,[1] it was held online (via Zoom) on 15 July 2021.

A total of 436 people registered for the event on Eventbrite. The number of participants on the Zoom call reached a maximum of 212.

The programme of the workshop can be found in the 'Workshop overview' (part III, below) and on the project website (https://dhnetwork.org/events/event-3/). For the discussion of the workshop's main themes, see 'Workshop and highlights' (part IV, below).

The discussion paper

The draft discussion paper was open for comments to the wider community via the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/) platform from XXX to XXX. The preprint (XXX) was downloaded XX times and received XX user comments. All the comments were considered for the final revision of the paper.

Methodology

---

[1] The organisers of the workshop are grateful to Megan Gooch and David de Roure for allowing them to co-locate the workshop with the Oxford Digital Humanities Summer School and for help with planning and delivery; and to Clem Hadfield for her support on the day of the event.

In the drafting of the report, the authors used: ideas and opinions expressed by the presenters at the workshop; information included in the presenters' slides (to be deposited in the Open Research Exeter Repository at the end of the project); contemporaneous notes taken by members of the project team; transcripts of live chat discussions during the workshop; and responses to questions posed during the workshop using Mentimeter.

II.   ISSUES

The objective of the event was to contribute to the development of a UK–Ireland DH Network by stimulating discussion, exchanging experiences and best practice, and developing recommendations to:

- support the **growth** of individuals and research groups, as well as the **acquisition of new and transferable skills** at all levels in the UK and Ireland;
- address the question of **career development** in Digital Humanities and the options that are available to postgraduate students, early career researchers and aspiring research software engineers (RSEs);
- **harness the experience** of Digital Humanists who have gone on to a wide variety of careers, from academia to the creative industries, cultural heritage and the technology sector.

III. WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

Link to workshop page: https://dhnetwork.org/events/event-3/

14.00 – 14:05 Welcome to participants

Justin Tonra (NUI Galway, Ireland)

14:05 – 15:35 Session 1: Career stories

Karolina Badzmierowska (Noho Ltd.)
Emma Clarke (ADAPT, Science Foundation Ireland Research Centre)
Christina Kamposiori (Research Libraries UK)
Ernesto Priego (City, University of London)
Francesca Sobande (Cardiff University)
Elizabeth Stewart (Harrison Group Environmental Ltd.)

This session featured short presentations from the six panellists about their own career trajectories and the importance of digital skills. The discussion that followed was chaired by Justin Tonra.

15:50 – 16:50 Session 2: Effective support for career development in Digital Humanities

Shawn Day (University College Cork)
Jennifer Edmond (Trinity College London)

James Smithies (King's Digital Lab)

This session featured an overview of different approaches to supporting career development in and from Digital Humanities, including engagement with industry.

IV. WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS

This section outlines the common themes that emerged in the workshop presentations and discussions. These themes inform our thinking and the recommendations that follow about career development in DH in the UK and Ireland (see Part V, below).

1. Diversity of pathways

1.1 The panellists in the first session of the afternoon highlighted the wide range of backgrounds, interests and experiences that characterise researchers who either formally study Digital Humanities or engage in digital scholarship more broadly. This can make it hard to specialise, which may be disadvantageous in some contexts, but conversely it opens up opportunities for working across sectors and disciplines – for being, as Karolina Badzmierowska described it, 'a bridge'.

1.2 Most panellists came from Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences backgrounds (e.g., archaeology, museum and archival studies, literature, linguistics, sociology and political studies). From this starting point, Ernesto Priego noted, it is usually a previous interest in the digital world or the need to find innovative solutions to unexpected problems that leads researchers to approach DH methods. This heterogeneity of backgrounds was portrayed by panellists as a key element in their careers as it allowed them to move easily across different sectors, bringing unique perspectives.

1.3 From the workshop discussions and participants' answers to questions posed via Mentimeter at the beginning of the event, it emerged that DH practitioners and researchers at different stages of their careers had a clear interest in seeking further clarity about the potential pathways available to them. Moreover, most of the responses on Mentimeter were from participants who were looking for alternative routes in to academic careers from what might be viewed as 'traditional' pathways. It is worth noting that similar concerns related to the need to identify "alternative or complementary routes to the academic path" (Gooding *et al.*, 2021) were also raised during the second event of the UK-Ireland DH Network entitled "Digital Humanities and Advocacy: communicating the value and impact of DH in teaching, research, and infrastructure development".[2]

2. Diversity of destinations

2.1 A key point that emerged from the discussion in the first panel was the diversity of career trajectories that can be opened up by exposure to and engagement with Digital Humanities. Different backgrounds and experiences lead to different destinations, including the private sector. Panellists pointed out that although academia or the GLAM sector appear to offer the most obvious career prospects for DH researchers, these are not the only options available. For instance, Karolina Badzmierowska illustrated how her varied and rich background led her to her current job in the private sector as a Heritage Account Manager, a role which she described as summarising her life in terms of career.

---

[2] A full account of the findings and recommendations emerged from the second UK-IR DH Network workshop is available at: https://zenodo.org/record/5643727#.YYLPrhynzmF

2.2 Panellists generally agreed that the wide range of DH knowledge and skills acquired during the course of their careers played a fundamental role in obtaining the job they wanted. Elizabeth Stewart, for example, spoke of her job as a Data Management Technician in a company that offers site investigations, emphasising the importance of the skills and tools she learned while completing her PhD in landscape history. These included DH skills such as 3D GIS, palaeography to decipher handwriting, and CAD drawing.

2.3 One participant from the audience pointed out the challenges represented by the potentially endless adaptability of DH skills and methods and how this lack of disciplinary boundaries might prove particularly daunting for early career researchers looking into entering the DH field. Speakers acknowledged these issues, but also noted the importance of networking and collaborating on different projects to help define a pathway that would suit an individual's skills and specific interests.

3. Continuing professional development: 'never stop learning'

3.1 The diverse backgrounds outlined by each speaker in the first panel demonstrated how a 'never stop learning' attitude is essential to develop specific career pathways in DH. In particular, Christina Kamposiori noted that continual development of digital skills and engagement with new tools could unlock new opportunities throughout an individual's working cycle.

3.2 The discussion session in the first panel highlighted how individuals seeking a career in the Digital Humanities are looking for guidance and support to progress further. The interdisciplinarity that characterises DH, which in many instances is an advantage, also raises concerns. For instance, some people find it difficult to explain how their disciplinary background and humanities coding skills might fit within a company that has a team of computer scientists; or to understand the level of technical proficiency that employers might require. Elizabeth Stewart noted that she had had the opportunity to slowly adjust to a job that required her to use DH skills and tools in a different context and would continue to learn and develop her skills through applying them outside academia.

3.3 Although the sheer range of skills and experiences evident in DH may be perceived as a challenge when trying to develop a specific career path, speakers emphasised that the diversity of knowledge and backgrounds that distinguishes DH should be considered a strength, which brings new insights and innovation. Ernesto Priego highlighted the importance of being able to communicate the value and importance of Digital Humanities skills during job interviews. All speakers agreed that there is a need to advocate for the value and flexibility of Digital Humanities within sectors other than higher education and cultural heritage.

4. 'Either you're a professor or a failure': challenging perceptions and having confidence in your abilities

4.1 Jennifer Edmond illustrated the difficulties and the assumptions often associated with careers that are alternative to 'traditional' academic pathways. Edmond argued that the widely diffused idea that 'either you are a professor, or you are a failure' should be abandoned in favour of a more open attitude towards the 'in between', that is. A diverse set of careers within and outside universities.

4.2 Edmond noted that although MA programmes are largely designed to facilitate career development in general, these mostly lead towards either academic research or the GLAM sector. She argued that the wide range of job roles available within universities should be acknowledged, including those involving policy-making, marketing and research communication. Moreover, Edmond noted that people with a background in the humanities have the human skill set - the communication, imagination, and project management capacities - necessary to add value and empathy to technical environments.

4.3 The interdisciplinarity that characterises Digital Humanities facilitates career moves such as those described by Edmond, whose own career ranged from digital officer, to research officer and then director of a research institute. The multi-faceted nature of the field is what allows DH researchers and practitioners to become 'a bridge' or translator, as mentioned in section 1.1 - an intermediary able to communicate with experts from different backgrounds and guide them towards the same objective. To achieve this fluidity in career pathways in DH it is necessary to create environments that help build confidence in the abilities that DH graduates have acquired. Panellists agreed on the essential role played by mentors and universities in making graduates aware of the full range of job opportunities available to them, facilitating their entry into the job market (more about this point in section 7).

5. 'What do employers like?': key digital skills

5.1 Shawn Day noted that DH students tend to be hired because there is an expectation among employers that they will have a computer science background. Consequently, they are mostly employed as developers. This assumption is usually superseded by the realisation that DH students can integrate technical expertise with critical opinions regarding multiple aspects of the projects they are involved in. For instance, one of the companies hosting work placements for University College Cork decided to include DH students in sales meetings, having recognised their role as digital advocates who could add a unique cultural perspective.

5.2 A key point that emerged from discussions in the first panel was the importance of soft skills. Speakers argued that digital skills, knowledge of professional tools and DH methods, as much as they are central for careers in Digital Humanities, may be also acquired while working on the job. Conversely, speakers noted that interpersonal and intercultural skills, as well as respect for colleagues' diverse backgrounds, can sometimes prove to be more valuable in a work environment than digital capabilities.

5.3 Examples of key digital skills and tools mentioned by some of the panellists were Python, HTML, CSS and similar coding languages. While most of the time these kinds of skills are acquired while working on projects, Priego noted that they are often self-taught. Following a participant's question regarding free resources available online to learn these tools, speakers recommended the Programming Historian,[3] the DARIAH EU marketplace[4] and MIT's 'introduction to computer science and programming in python'.[5]

5.4 Both sessions highlighted the difficulties of explaining effectively to employers precisely what DH is and what skills DH graduates might be expected to have. This was particularly the case for companies outside the cultural heritage and academic sectors. Edmond noted that students should be taught how to communicate the skills they develop throughout their Digital Humanities studies. Similarly, James Smithies stressed the importance of providing students with the ability to explain what DH is and the value that they can bring to industry. Since this is a challenge that students are likely to face during interviews, DH programmes should provide support for graduates and early career researchers to help them answer questions about the value of their skills and experiences.

---

[3] Full details regarding the Programming Historian project are available at:
https://programminghistorian.org/
[4] The DARIAH EU marketplace is currently available in its beta version (final release coming December 2021) at: https://marketplace.sshopencloud.eu/
[5] Full details about the introduction to computer science and programming in python programming available on the website: https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/electrical-engineering-and-computer-science/6-0001-introduction-to-computer-science-and-programming-in-python-fall-2016/

6. Engaging with industry (and doing it early)

6.1 Panellists noted the importance of work placements and collaboration with industry partners, especially at the early stages of researchers' careers. In the second session of the workshop, Shawn Day illustrated the BA in Digital Humanities at University College Cork, and the central role that work placements play within the programme. Day noted that placements have proven to be crucial for students' formation. He explained that placements are accompanied by a series of activities aimed at preparing students for their careers, including conveying during job interviews the value of DH methods and skills and what digital humanists can offer to society. While work placements are a unique opportunity for students to test and choose career pathways, they also present an opportunity to raise awareness among employers about the potential value that DH skills and methods may bring to their companies.

6.2 Work placements represent the best way for students to gain confidence in the critical abilities developed during DH programmes. Such experiences allow students to start figuring out where DH programmes might take them once they graduate, and help them to realise the full breadth of work opportunities available beyond academia. Day noted that some of the companies partnering with UCC in its work placement programme soon realised that DH students could do a lot more than coding: thanks to their strong background in research and humanities they could be digital advocates, offering a critical perspective on products and projects.

6.3 Day noted that an important part of the placement process at UCC is the discussion that students have among themselves about their work experience once it has ended. The programme allowed DH students to demonstrate that they were well rounded and could adapt to different work environments, ranging from the GLAM sector to system design, platform engineering and marketing. Finally, Day observed that work placements allowed students to find their self-worth and explore their full potential.

7. Networking, mentoring and collaboration

7.1 Panellists recognised the value of establishing collaborations with colleagues across sectors and disciplines. The skills required to collaborate effectively need to be cultivated early in a career, alongside more obvious digital skills. Badzmierowska emphasised the importance of being proactive: she explained that digital humanists, thanks to their varied backgrounds and skills, can easily adapt, bringing new perspectives across different sectors.

7.2 All speakers stressed the importance of participating in different projects while completing a DH programme, making the most of opportunities for networking and collaboration. Being open to working on other projects and with other teams of people would help DH students to clarify their interests and develop critical skills. Badzmierowska noted that most students have a limited vision of the career destinations available to them, and of how the knowledge acquired during their studies might be applied to particular jobs. This could be remedied by connecting and collaborating with diverse projects and researchers, thereby expanding horizons and opening up opportunities.

8. Developing and embedding formal career pathways

8.1 Panellists noted that it is essential to work on the creation and development of formal career pathways in the Digital Humanities. Speaking about the need for value of the well-rounded technologist, Smithies argued that technical career paths in the Digital Humanities, in particular, are not sufficiently well supported. He underlined the need for clearer policies, more permanent contracts for technical careers and the establishment of clear pathways for the provision of general career scaffolding. Programmes tend to guide DH students toward careers in the GLAM sector, often excluding a whole range of career opportunities in different sectors, such as software engineering. Smithies argued that DH programmes should "take a

more holistic approach that delivers skills and confidence in history and critical interpretation of technology", rather than focusing on skills and special add-ons.

8.2 Smithies observed that the increasingly abstract nature of product development and the importance of technology analysis suggest that DH graduates will be increasingly sought after in the next decade. It is therefore more crucial than ever to develop undergraduate and postgraduate programmes that offer broader career perspectives and provide the appropriate career scaffolding.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines recommendations to the UK-Ireland DH Network for supporting career development in DH in the UK and Ireland, based on the workshop highlights noted above.

1. The Network should collect examples of good practice across the UK and Ireland concerned with developing partnerships between DH and industry, with a focus on student and ECR placements.

2. The Network should benchmark the skills that employers can expect DH students and researchers to possess, and document the value that those researchers can bring to different sectors.

3. The Network should commission and publish case studies indicating the range of careers open to DH students and researchers. The case studies should reflect both technical and non-technical career paths.

4. The Network should highlight the diversity of pathways into and from Digital Humanities, and champion this diversity as a key characteristic of the field.

5. The Network should engage with a range of partners to define models for particular career pathways in and from DH.[6]

6. The Network should consider co-organising career development workshops annually, in order to address the rapidly changing employment landscape and to ensure that new entrants to the field have access to the most up-to-date guidance.

7. The Network should consider mechanisms for helping mid-career academics to undertake industry placements, in order to ensure that they are well placed to design DH training programmes which reflect the current employment landscape.

---

[6] See, for example, the work of King's Digital Lab in relation to Research Software Engineering https://kdl.kcl.ac.uk/blog/rse-career-development/.