Challenges and opportunities for virtual archaeological data stewardship

Moving the SEADDA COST Action online

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The SEADDA COST Action

Saving European Archaeology from the Digital Dark Age (SEADDA) is a COST Action funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme of the European Union. SEADDA is an international community of archaeologists and digital specialists working together to secure the future of archaeological data across Europe and beyond. It is comprised of four working groups focussed on understanding the current state-of-the-art, the development of common understandings around international best practice for the preservation, dissemination, and re-use of archaeological data, and establishing the field as a priority area for future research. SEADDA has over 100 members representing 34 COST countries and five International Partner Countries (SEADDA, 2021).

Fig. 1. SEADDA Management Committee meets for the first time in Brussels in 2019. (Image by Holly Wright).

The purpose of COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Actions is to fund research and innovation networks. The stated purpose of COST is to "help connect research initiatives

across Europe and beyond and enable researchers and innovators to grow their ideas in any science and technology field by sharing them with their peers. COST Actions are bottom-up networks with a duration of four years that boost research, innovation and careers" (COST, 2020). The primary mechanisms for implementing these connections have traditionally been in-person meetings, Short-Term Scientific Missions (STSMs) where researchers spend extended periods undertaking research with partners, in-person workshops and training sessions, and other types of collaborative knowledge exchange. SEADDA started as a traditional Action, with the first Management Committee meeting taking place in March 2019 at the COST offices in Brussels, followed by second Management Committee and Working Group meeting, held over three days in July 2019, kindly hosted by SEADDA partners in Zagreb, Croatia.

Fig. 2. The Management Committee of COST Action SEADDA at the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, Croatia in June 2019.

After the meeting in Croatia, SEADDA partners began their work. The call for applicants for Short Term Scientific Missions was advertised, and planning began for the individual Exploratory Workshops each of the four Working Groups would need to undertake during the first year of the Action. The Exploratory Workshop for Working Group 1: *Stewardship of Archaeological Data* took place in Gothenburg, Sweden in November 2019, followed by Working Group 2: *Planning for* Archiving in Vienna, Austria in December. Plans were in place for the Working Group 3: *Preservation and Dissemination Best Practice* Exploratory Workshop to take place in March 2020 in The Hague, Netherlands, followed by Working Group 4: *Use and Re-Use of Archaeological Data* in April in York, UK. When COVID-19 reached Europe, every aspect of life changed, and the SEADDA COST Action had to change as well.

The Challenge

The Working Group 3 Exploratory Workshop in The Hague, which was scheduled to begin on Monday, 16 March, 2020, was cancelled days before SEADDA members were due to travel, as much of Europe finally grasped the reality of the situation and shut down. The Workshop organisers scrambled to deal with chaos and cancellations, but the workshop was able to be moved quickly online, albeit in a shorter one-day format rather than the two days originally scheduled. It was difficult but the partner consensus was that it was largely successful, if not ideal.

Buoyed by this success, the organisers of the Working Group 4 Exploratory Workshop decided to go ahead as scheduled with the Exploratory Workshop scheduled in April as well, keeping the three-day format but shortening the amount of contact time each day and including longer breaks. It was already apparent by April that "Zoom fatigue" was a real phenomenon, and the concentrated form of in-person meeting or workshop SEADDA members were used to was no longer appropriate. In the early days of the pandemic, parents were dealing with particularly difficult challenges; working while undertaking childcare and in some instances providing instruction for their school-age children, all while being unable to leave a home that was never designed to be a workspace. Patience and understanding suddenly overtook professionalism as the key requirements for successful online collaboration, and this was not necessarily a bad thing. The Working Group 4 Workshop was also successful and showed that with a little bit of time to organise, and some experience and creativity, moving these collaborative experiences online could be done effectively. It also showed potential opportunities that should be incorporated in our knowledge transfer work going forward.

The Opportunities

This paper will discuss these opportunities, and how they have changed the SEADDA COST Action as members attempt to run a research and innovation network meant to be undertaken almost entirely in person. In some instances, the focus turned to more ambitious open access publications, and in the case of Working Group 1, and entire themed issue based on the outcomes of the Exploratory Workshop was published (Richards et al., 2021). In addition to the more obvious opportunities, such as greater access to a wider range of members who would not normally have their travel costs covered (International members from non-COST countries largely outside of Europe) to more subtle and unexpected opportunities, such as allowing more targeted access for knowledge exchange with people who are connected to SEADDA members, not just the members themselves. As originally envisioned, only one or two individuals from a particular institution, or even country, would be eligible for travel costs to attend a COST Action workshop or meeting.

With travel costs no longer an issue, members became extended networks, who could put forward a range of people who might benefit from the experience. Members of the SEADDA Management Committee and their alternates who were eligible for SEADDA travel funding, tend to be more senior researchers or practitioners and typically more involved at a policy level. At the same time, they have students or colleagues who would benefit from the more practical and technical knowledge sharing within SEADDA, but could not be included in any in-person meetings or training. The move to online working meant access could be thrown open to any person nominated by a member, which was found to be incredibly popular and useful. Suddenly, the more senior researchers were no longer conduits for knowledge transfer within SEADDA, but their students and colleagues were able to participate directly, according to their areas of interest and expertise, thereby broadening and more deeply embedding the collaboration SEADDA was meant to facilitate.

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Please list the contributions of the project participants here, according to the CRediT system. See specific descriptions of the role here: (http://credit.niso.org/). You can omit non-applicable roles.

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