

Skill Improvements versus Interface Designs for eResearchers

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eResearchNZ



Accelerating Research



A Backward's Glance: eResearchNZ 2011

The presentation to EResearchNZ 2011 claimed the computational and research resources of high performance clusters and parallel applications is less than optimal from the very research community who would benefit from it. Primarily due to a lack of familiarity on the requisite tools primarily due to changes in tacit knowledge in computer system operation.

At that stage the Victorian Partnership for Advanced Computing had just overhauled their tutorial programme to include the use of multiple learning style preferences, a high trainer-student ratio, and constant feedback and course revision. Initial results were positive.

It was also just before the retirement of the 'Tango' classic (in operation from 2007 to April 2013) and the introduction of the 'Trifid' cluster (started November 29, 2012); 40% allocated to RMIT, 40% to La Trobe University, 20% V3 Alliance (VPAC)

A Backward's Glance: eResearchNZ 2013



The Critical Dataset Challenge



Datasets are increasing in size (Hilbert, López, 2011) faster than processing improvements to personal computer systems with systems like the Square Kilometre Array planned to collect aggregate data on a daily basis greater than the rest of the world on a yearly basis (Barwick, 2011).

The necessary skillset is not common among researchers, leading to a sharp distinction between "scientific computing" with "high performance computing" (Wilson, 2008). Some attempt to bridge the computational skills gap through improving knowledge of basic tools (e.g., Software Carpentry (Wilson, 2006)). However scientific computing *should* be analogous to high performance computing.

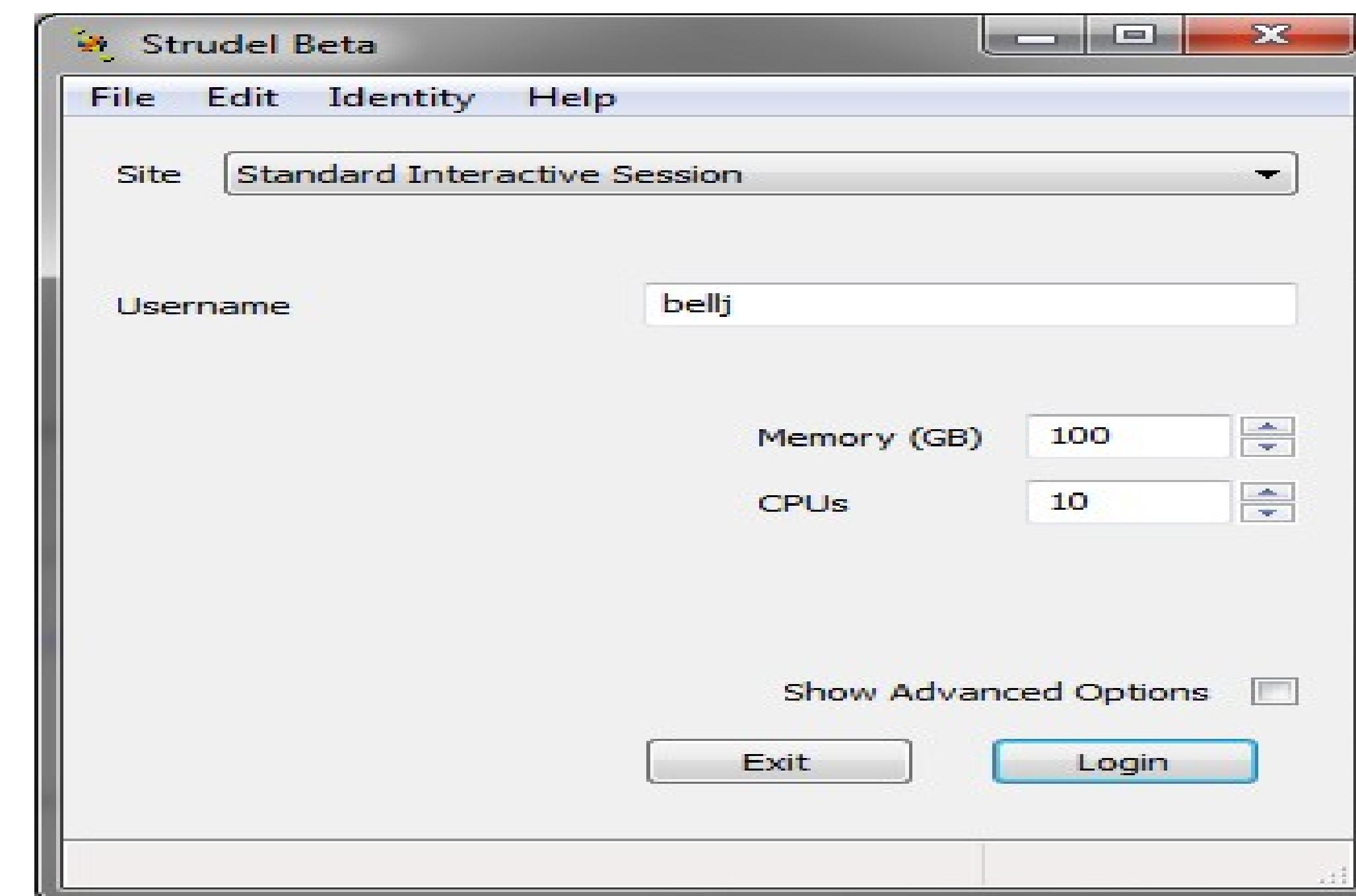
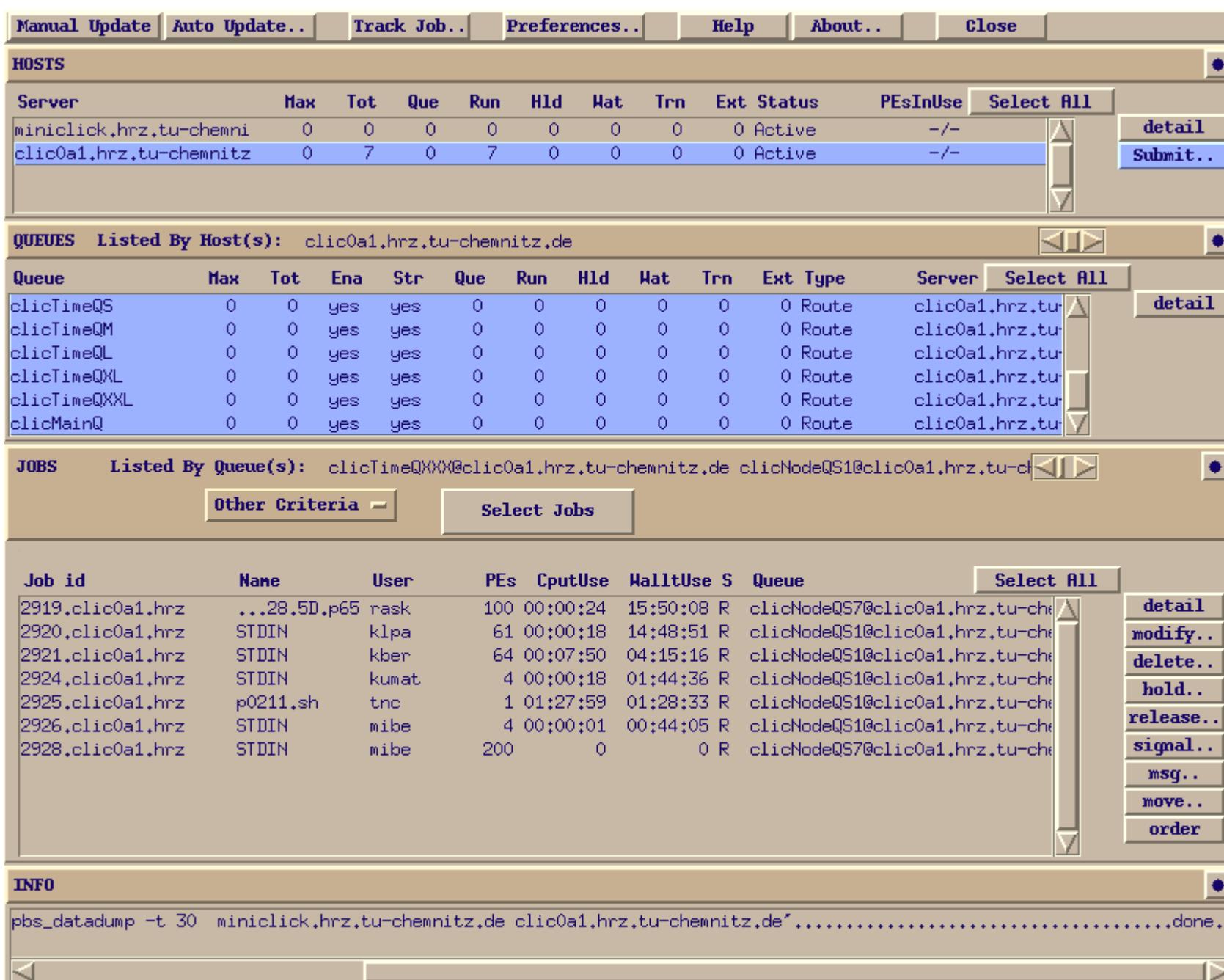
Existing research shows a very strong correlation between provision and research output and the provision of HPC systems (Apon et. al, 2010), which can be expected to increase.

HPC Interface Tools

The increased need for HPC can be achieved by either (i) modifying the HPC environment to suit the existing skillset or (ii) develop the skillset to match the HPC environment. Whilst most development has been in the latter attempts to implement a GIU alternative or 'skin' have been less than successful. This is generally because HPC systems require an understanding of the process, rather than an intuitive response, and is not particularly prone to increase simplicity.

An interesting alternative and counter-example is STRUDEL (Bell, Hines, 2014). A default configuration was established that allow for such applications to run in an interactive mode, in addition to significant automation in connectivity. This level of automation allows users to have a transitional stage between the desktop application and the HPC application as structured knowledge and also as an opportunity to witness the improvements in job speed.

HPC Interface Tools



HPC User Education

The eResearch community requires use of andragogical techniques. Postgraduates especially tend towards more voluntaristic engagement, are more self-motivated , and have a greater range of experiential resources. They participate because they have specific relevant problems. The learner is autonomous and usually self-determining with internal rather than external motivations.

Content is provided in a structured manner embedding knowledge in organised context with other knowledge, adding to learner self-efficacy (a type of formative assessment).

The delivery of the material makes use of and interactive and connectivist disciplinary learning style, whilst providing options for preferences . Material is partially provided in interactive lecture form, and with a wide opportunity for connectivist hands-on activity with proximal development, and a hardcopy for reference.

Results 2012-2014



V3 Alliance has concentrated on the HPC User education side path. Since the breakpoint of 2012 there has been very significant increase overall in cluster usage...

Trifid Usage (CPU Hours) to December 31st 2014

Year	RMIT	La Trobe	Cluster
2012	1,729,837h	1,719,554h	Tango
2013	8,108,695h	3,301,052h	Trifid
2014	9,760,919h	4,964,297h	Trifid

Results 2012-2014



... but even more so for those who participated in the training courses.

Trifid Course Enrolments to December 31st 2014

RMIT enrolments: 229 (62.74%)

La Trobe enrolments: 29 (7.96%)

University of Melbourne 38 (10.41%)

DEPI/DPI 28 (7.67%)

Swinburne University 16 (4.38%)

Deakin University 15 (4.11%)

Victorian Univeristy 7 (1.92%)

Commercial 3 (0.82%)

Total enrolments: 365

Conclusions

The common path of providing "user friendly" interfaces for eResearchers may be an expensive tangent that does not improve research productivity. Improved user interfaces are helpful when the interface can be reduced to an intuitive action and when a complex process can be automated. Task sequence, software artifacts, network connectivity must be evaluated (Holtzblatt, K., Beyer, H.R. (2014) along with user reviews.

The alternative path of improving the skill-set of users, even in processes which are complex and require deeper understanding, will be successful when applied to groups which are known for 'determined intelligence' and where it is lack of familiarity that is preventing current use. In the case of eResearchers, andragogical principles must be applied which recognise the capacity and status of the learner, along with new learning environments which combine proximal development with connectivism.

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