Early Contributions to IT in Australia,
from the Basser Department of Computer Science –
John Bennett’s SILLIAC years

B. de Ferranti
Barry Ferranti Associates®, Woollahra, Australia
bferranti@csu.oz.au

J. Deane
CSIRO Telecommunications and Industrial Physics
Radiophysics Laboratory
PO Box 76, Epping NSW 1710, Australia
jdeane@csiro.au

Some important beginnings of what became the Australian IT Industry can be found in the way the Basser group went about teaching those from government and industry the rudiments of automatic computation and data processing with ‘hands-on’ experience. The early contributions of John Bennett and his colleagues enabled many who attended courses, visited and used SILLIAC, to examine the potential of IT. Many went on to make decisions for their organisations which would have long-term benefit and impact on the growth of this country as an effective and efficient user of the emerging technology.

Keywords: SILLIAC, UK, US and Australian computing; emerging IT; commercial applications of computing.

1. BACKGROUND
The setting for IT in Australia
The first half of the twentieth century saw Australia well astride the sheep’s back but looking around for other industries on which to build a strong future. Information Technology (IT) had not yet appeared, but scientific computation and commercial data processing were in need of automation, and the campus of the University of Sydney became a centre of development (research and practice).

Data processing was done mainly by hand on calculators or through punch-card/tabulator installations. As with other capital equipment, the major source for such business or scientific equipment and associated application techniques, was the manufacturing industry of the UK. Few examples of US techniques were to be found in the regular government or industry contexts – that would come soon enough.