Border security going digital
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THE Department of Immigration will build a giant database to store digital photographs, fingerprints and other biometric identifiers from visa applicants and immigration detainees as part of a multimillion-dollar upgrade to border security.

The move comes ahead of next week's launch of a biometrics capture lab that will allow the department to test the new technologies.

The development of the Identity Services Repository database is a major part of a $4.4 million project announced in this year's federal budget for the department to test biometric technology.

The budget announcement also contained $3.1 million for Customs to extend the trial of its SmartGate facial recognition system, and $2.2 million for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's biometric passports project.

The three projects are likely to be wrapped together to develop a seamless border control system.

The three departments will report on the success of their trials next year, when a final decision on funding will be made.

The ISR database will allow Immigration to digitally store and access photographs of visa applicants, as well as fingerprints and other biometric identifiers such as iris scans, facial geometry and height and weight details.

The data will be electronically compared with watch lists, and will be used to identify applicants at each stage of the visa process.

Most of the work on the database is expected to be done in-house.

Enabling legislation passed earlier this year allowing Immigration to take such identifiers from non-citizens will come into effect in August, and regulations covering their use are being drafted. Applicant acceptance is likely to be a factor, and fingerprinting is only likely to be conducted on those who come under some form of suspicion.

Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone said the legislation allowed for future developments.

"Through the use of the regulation-making power, the law allows for the use of new biometric technologies in a rapidly developing environment," she said.

"Included in these accepted amendments is a commitment to review the legislation in a number of years of operation and for the minister to report to parliament on the outcomes of the review."

Immigration at present plans only to digitise data already taken — such as photographs for permanent residency applicants — but the legislation allows additional biometric details to be taken.
The database is likely to fill up fast, with the department planning to trial a system of having Australian missions overseas, and doctors doing medical tests for visa applicants, filling in electronic applications and attaching digital photos.

Currently, photos are filed with overseas embassies and are not immediately accessible in Australia.

Another major project is digitising fingerprints taken from immigration detainees, and putting them into the database.

The biometrics capture lab will put various technologies through their paces, with Immigration staff posing as clients working their way through the process to see how long it will take, and what effect it will have on processing times.

While the US has taken to fingerprinting all visitors, Australia is unlikely to follow suit, given the cost and complexity of taking and storing the data.

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