Promoting Records Management and Archives Research in Australia

Introduction

In his keynote address to the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia Professor Ian Frazer, Australian of the Year 2006, described succinctly the nexus between researchers and practitioners. He deplored a situation where, in his world of medical research, clinicians and teachers were becoming decoupled from medical researchers by externally imposed funding models. He acknowledged the fact that, without a team consisting of practitioners, researchers and administrators, the now-patented cervical cancer therapy would have remained a fantastic dream, never a reality.

What has this to do with the readers of *Informaa Quarterly*? Many of you are practitioners and users of research outcomes but, more importantly, you are the hotbed of new ideas and directions for professional research. Why is it important that you understand how the Australian research funding model works? There are two main reasons. The first is that you are all taxpayers and funding research is how some of your tax dollars are spent. The second is that knowledge of how the system works enables the profession to support the research it wishes to see promoted.

Research Quality Framework

In 2004, as part of the '*Backing Australia's Ability*' (http://backingaus.innovation.gov.au) initiative, the Prime Minister announced that publicly funded research was to be made more accessible to all Australians and that the quality of the research was to be measured in a way that was meaningful to all Australians. This announcement will culminate in 2008 in the first round of what is known as the Research Quality Framework (RQF) grants for universities and government-funded bodies such as the CSIRO.

The RQF provides Australian society with a method of assessing how, when, why and by whom tax payer research dollars will be spent. The RQF will take into account research quality (a quantitative measure) and research impact (a qualitative measure).The RQF assessment will provide the basis for university/government research funding for 2009–2015.

At present the funding for research, particularly at universities, comes from two sources:

1.   competitive grants, for example, Australian Research Council (ARC) and National Health & Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) grants; and

2.   university block grants based on 'quantitative measures (i.e. numbers of publications, external research income and Higher Degree by Research (HDR) student load and completions) that have been used as proxies for quality' (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006).

The RQF will provide a system which is, on the surface, fair and equitable to all since all participants will be measured by the same key performance indicators (KPIs).

RQF basics

Each institution applying for grants will put forward a number of research teams for assessment. Each research team will provide a research portfolio to the appropriate

Assessment Panel. There are thirteen Assessment Panels which span the broad categories of research funded by ARC and NH&MRC, such as creative arts, law, and biological sciences.

Archives and records management would be included in Assessment Panel number 11—Law, Education and Professional Practice. The panel will have 12 members including a chair, with three of the members being 'end-users' or practitioners and three members being international. The end-users are extremely important members of the panel, since they will be pivotal in the assessment of research impact.

A research team must show that the research they have conducted between 1 January 2001 and 31 December 2006 has been of high quality (measured on a scale 1 to 5) and has had a significant impact (measured on a qualitative scale A to E) on the 'end-users in the wider community regionally, nationally and/or internationally' (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006).

Research Quality

Research quality is an attempt to measure research outcomes based on assessments made by academic peers and fellow researchers. Although it is intended to be a guide to quality it depends upon a series of quantitative measures which are assumed to also imply an assessment of quality. It will include metrics such as

- outputs of research activity (e.g. numbers of refereed publications;
- citation data (recognition by peers); and
- grant income (success at winning nationally competitive grants).

When discussing the background to the RQF we stated that the scheme commenced as part of the initiative '*Backing Australia's Ability'* which was developed via the science and education portfolio. The RQF has always had a science/medicine leaning and so the benchmarks that have often been cited as the best for research quality are the ISI citation indices (e.g., Social Science Citation Index SSCI) and ISI Journal Citation Report (JCR), but the JCR does not include many of the journals we as a profession consider as quality. To address this issue the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) is allowing Assessment Panels to use other benchmarks where such exist. The Archives and Records Management profession should be moving to produce such a benchmark, which is why the authors have conducted a survey into professional reading.

Research Impact

This is the 'qualitative' side of the equation. Research impact is defined in the RQF 'as the social, economic, environmental, and/or cultural benefit of research to end-users in the wider community regionally, nationally, and/or internationally'. This statement has nothing to do with assessment by the academic peers of the research group, but rather attempts to asses the 'flow on' effects of the impact of the research upon the wider community. An impact statement of up to ten pages, which includes the following, will be required:

- verifiable, evidence-based claims against specific impact criteria;
- up to four case studies that illustrate examples of those claims; and
- details of end-users (other than practitioners) who can be contacted as referees.

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The Assessment Panel will judge impact on a scale A-E.

Once again, the profession can be of assistance to researchers since you provide the evidence base, the impact of our research. You provide our case studies and new directions for research. You are our referees. Professor Frazer (2006) was correct when he stated that without practitioners, researchers are blind. More than ever before, researchers and practitioners need to work as a professional team.

Importance of research to the profession

Is recordkeeping a profession? What do you think? From the various definitions that abound in the literature, a list can be developed to illustrate the identifying criteria of a profession:

- shared social values and paradigm;

- social relevance and public recognition as a profession;

- domain-specific body of knowledge, theory, principles, expertise;

- professional education at the university level;

- research and theory development agenda; and

- professional subculture which includes a professional association.

In the Anglo-American paradigm professions do not emerge fully developed. The professionalisation of an occupation is an evolutionary process (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977; Neal & Morgan, 2000) in which the 'occupation' may eventually become a high status, socially recognised 'profession'. This includes the formation of a strong professional association and the establishment of academic routes to qualifications, with the profession overseeing the qualification criteria for admittance to the profession. Continuing professional development (CPD) becomes part of the rules of association, as does a strong sense of ethical behaviour. The professionalisation of recordkeeping is following this 'bottom up' developmental process.

One of the major problems to be overcome as a profession is the invisibility of the recordkeeping discipline to society at large. When surveyed, 85% of the Australian public had no understanding of terms such as records, recordkeeping or archives (Pember, 2006). Recognised professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers provide services readily identifiable to the public; recordkeepers do not, as recordkeeping is largely an internal support role in government and business organisations. Given the continuing instances of recordkeeping failure reported in the media, it should not be difficult to articulate and publicise the social values of recordkeeping such as the public service aspect, particularly if the two leading associations in the recordkeeping field (contemporary records management and archives) can demonstrate a more active, unified agenda.

Another indicator of professional evolvement is the establishment of a strong research base (Couture, 1997; Pedersen, 1994). Although fledgling, research into recordkeeping issues is growing through national and international funding initiatives as the role of recordkeeping in organizations continues to be highlighted in the media. Biggs (1991) and Williamson, Burstein, & McKemmish (2002) stressed the nexus between practitioners and researchers—new problems posed in practice should be

communicated to researchers and so feed the iterative cycle between the two and enhance both theory and practice. Cox (1990) asserted that research which attempts to solve problems is required in any profession. Ellis (1996: 323) noted that the "role of theory in any professional pursuit … serves not only to systematise the current state of knowledge and to provide a common language of discourse, but to indicate lacunae where fruitful future experimentation and empirical research may add to the body of knowledge". Pemberton (1992: 48) also advocated the need for research, maintaining that "without theoretical foundations there can be no meaningful research effort, and without research we have only hearsay, conjecture, anecdote, and possibly propaganda. Given sound methodology and a little patience, research can provide answers to specific problems".

What research is being done in the profession

There has been an identifiable research agenda for recordkeeping since at least 1988, when Cox and Samuels (1988) presented their agenda to improve the identification and retention of records of enduring value and Dowler (1988) his research agenda for the availability and use of records. As Piggott commented in his framework for research (1998: 346), "evidence-rich records do not just fall off trees; … a considerable amount of thinking has been done since the early 1990s to identify the tactics, functional requirements and factors conducive to good record-keeping in organisations". Research agendas have been regularly updated over the years (Pederson, 1994; Piggott, 1998; Shepherd, 1998; An & Cook, 2003; McKemmish, Gilliland-Swetland, & Ketelaar, 2005). Such agendas are intended to focus and guide, but not restrict, research.

In an effort to come to terms with the challenges inherent in the management of the electronic record, significant research has occurred and is still occurring around the world, particularly since September 11 (Cox *et al*., 2001). Researchers are involved worldwide in projects to better identify electronic evidence and preserve it long-term (Bearman, 1994; Cook, 1994; Cunningham, 1997; Hedstrom, 1991). One example is the Pittsburgh project into the Functional Requirements for Evidence in Recordkeeping, and the associated Business Acceptable Communications Model that establishes a framework for metadata specifications in the recordkeeping environment. Another is the International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES), which is a collaborative, worldwide project that aims to develop the theoretical and methodological knowledge essential to the long-term preservation of authentic records created and/or maintained in digital format.

The challenges of the management of contemporaneous electronic records have spurred research in other areas. For example, Duranti (1989) resurrected the old science of diplomatics "to test the validity of its principles and methods for modern and contemporary documents". Diplomatics is the study of official medieval documents such as charters and acts, particularly papal and imperial, having legal status, in order to prove their authenticity. New research at the University of British Columbia has applied aspects of diplomatics to electronic records formats to challenge old concepts and formulate new concepts to determine the requirements for complete, reliable and authentic records. Considerable research is also being conducted into the long-term preservation of electronic data in digital repositories (e.g. Australian Partnership for Digital Repositories-Australian National University ANU) and metadata (e.g. the SPIRT Project and the AIIM Project). Also of interest is the Australasian Digital Recordkeeping Initiative (ADRI). This is a collaborative

initiative between all ten national, State and Territory public record institutions in Australia and New Zealand. As noted on the ADRI website (www.adri.gov.au)

> "the primary objective of ADRI is to pool resources and expertise to find better ways to ensure that digital records are preserved and made accessible for the future… ADRI focuses attention on the importance of archival institutions and government agencies working together to preserve digital records. The Initiative promotes a single Australasian approach to digital public recordkeeping across all jurisdictions and provides a space for communication and information sharing between the members. The collaboration ensures the best possible strategic use of limited collective resources and maximises the wider awareness and impact of the agreed approach to addressing the challenge of digital records.

Research in recordkeeping has multiplied around the world in the past two decades. Elkin (1999) and Danbury (1999) both noted that, for the first time in the United Kingdom, records management is explicitly identified in the scope of the Library and Information Management Panel's subject areas for research funding from 2001 (www.hero.ac.uk/rae/). This is a major advance in research opportunity for the discipline. Danbury (1999) also comments on the more collaborative, often international, approach to research opportunities and notes that funding has already been secured for research of international significance such as electronic records (Northumbria University and colleagues in Holland, Finland and Germany). Hare and McLeod (1999) of the University of Northumbria were instrumental in the development of a strategy to increase the research profile of records management in the United Kingdom. They were creative in respect of funding opportunities other than the traditional library sources. Another facet of their strategy was high level involvement in professional associations, standards committees, lead bodies and the editorship of the *Records Management Journal*. All these activities resulted in both recordkeeping and the researchers becoming far more visible in the European research environment (Hare, McLeod, & King, 1996; King, Hare, McLeod, 1996).

A research project subsidised by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada sought to establish the general tendencies of education and research in archival science (Couture, 2001). Responses were received from educational and archival institutions and researchers in over 70 different countries, indicating a strong interest in archival research. The project identified a "community of ideas" (p. 176). One group identified a small number of priorities (9); a second group acknowledged a wider range of research interests or themes (30). Both groups recognised the primacy of research into electronic records.

Australian researchers have secured major research grants for recordkeeping topics. For example, McKemmish of Monash University (with other Monash academics, the Public Records Office Victoria (PROV) and Koorie recordkeepers) secured an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Grant (2003–2006) to investigate Building Archival Systems for Indigenous Oral Memory. McKemmish secured an additional ARC Linkage Grant (2003–2005) with the National Archives of Australia (NAA), State Records NSW and the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA), to investigate metadata in e-business processes in networked environments. The impact of this research on Australian society will become known via the RQF if the McKemmish group is part of the Monash University research application to the RQF in 2008.

Role of professional publications

The professional literature provides a mechanism for practitioners to keep abreast of research and practice in the field. These publications provide a forum for refereed research debate and scholarly communication. They also provide a record of the development of professional thought over time, and help identify new avenues and opportunities for research (Danbury, 1999). Both the major recordkeeping industry bodies in Australia—the Records Management Association of Australasia (RMAA) and the ASA—publish refereed journals. Until recently, only one of these journals, *Archives & Manuscripts*, published by the ASA, was considered a scholarly publication. Consequently, most recordkeeping research in Australia was published in international recordkeeping journals or in library journals, such as the *Australian Library Journal* and *Australian Academic & Research Libraries.*

In a recent survey (2007) of Australian and New Zealand recordkeepers carried out by the authors, almost one quarter of the respondents published work in refereed scholarly journals. Detailed results of this survey will be published soon.

A major contribution in the research area would be the development of more refereed Australasian publications in recordkeeping. We feel that the RMAA is now at the stage of professionalisation (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977; Neal & Morgan 2000) where the association can support both 'newsy' type articles and serious academic research papers.

Scholarly vs trade publications

Ulrich's Periodical Directory™ 'is a bibliographic database providing detailed, comprehensive and authoritative information on serials published throughout the world'. It is a free service to publishers of periodicals provided by CSA, Cambridge Information Group Family, and information held in the database can be updated online 24 hours per day 7 days per week. The publisher supplies Ulrich's with information on publication title (with subtitle), title changes, ISSN, publisher details, frequency of issue, subscription rates, readership. The publisher chooses to tell Ulrich's whether the journal is refereed or not, whether the journal is indexed and by which database, and whether the publication is a trade magazine, an academic/scholarly journal, or an annual.

Academics are measured by the quality and quantity of their research output. Ulrich's is one tool used to measure the quality of publications by the DEST and therefore the universities. In 2006 *Informaa Quarterly* (IQ) was listed in Ulrich's as a trade magazine and as a consequence, an article written in IQ would not have been considered research quality whereas the same article published in *Archives and Manuscripts* would. This was simply because the RMAA (the publisher) had indicated to Ulrich's that IQ was a trade magazine rather than an academic/scholarly journal. This fact was bought to the attention of the RMAA by Pember and by simply submitting a new form to Ulrich's, the RMAA has changed the status of IQ to a vehicle in which academics can now publish and gain kudos from the university and DEST. At the same time, research can reach practitioners in the vehicle they are most likely to read. The recent survey into professional reading by the authors indicated that 84.1% of respondents read *Informaa Quarterly,* although only 55.7% were members of the RMAA.

How can the profession impact research?

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Many researchers (Biggs, 1991; Ellis, 1996; Pemberton, 1992; Williamson, Burstein & McKemmish, 2002) have stressed the nexus between practitioners and researchers—new problems in practice can be communicated to researchers and so feed the iterative cycle between the two and enhance both theory and practice. Academics, individual students or teams of students can work together with experienced practitioners to investigate problems in practice. From this type of activity one can develop a collaborative and iterative research environment, thus furthering the professionalisation of recordkeeping.

Practitioners can also help build the core body of professional knowledge through support of initiatives such as the RQF and collaboration in research projects with academic colleagues, and subsequent publication of the results in refereed journals.

Both the RMAA and the ASA offer research grants to members of their associations. Why not consider becoming involved in research in your profession? You can make a difference!

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