

Today's RM Students & Their Attitudes

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Introduction

Curtin University continues to provide recordkeeping education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Enrolment numbers have remained steady over the past five years. The major change in enrolment has been a steady move from postgraduate diploma programs to coursework masters. In 2001 only one student graduated from the very new coursework masters program, by 2005 the number of graduates had risen to 17.

The earlier study reported in 2003¹ indicated that the typical Curtin graduate across both courses (Bachelor of Arts – Librarianship and Corporate Information Management; Graduate Diploma/Master of Information Management – Records Management and Archives) was likely to be female (69.1%), have some prior experience in the field of recordkeeping (43.6%), be aged between 20-30 years (36.4%), and prefer internal/on-campus (58.2%), full-time (38.2%) modes of study. The major difference between graduates at this time was that those from the undergraduate degree were far more likely to have prior experience in the field (59.1%) and were completing the degree in order to upgrade knowledge and skills and enhance career prospects, whereas the postgraduate level students were more usually doing the course in order to facilitate a career change or re-entry to the workforce after a period of child-rearing.

The 2006 survey indicates that the typical student is still likely to be female (80%), have some prior experience in recordkeeping (40%), be aged between 20-30 years (33.3%), but prefer external part-time study modes (43.3%). The preferred mode of study is significantly different to 2001 when internal and full-time were the preferred options. The major reasons for studying were focussed on the perceived better employment opportunities and career enhancement.

As well as assessing any changes in student study preferences, this current study aimed to capture student perceptions of recordkeeping and recordkeeping education. A particular focus of the study was the identification of any change in students' perceptions over the duration of the study program and over three-quarters of those students responding to the survey did note change. This change focussed largely on the diversity and complexity of the discipline.

The survey

After Curtin Ethics Committee approval² the survey instrument developed was circulated electronically to all students enrolled in a recordkeeping unit in the latter half of their study in Semester 2, 2006.

In order to encourage students to be as candid as possible the respondents were not required to identify themselves and questionnaires were not numbered or marked in any way. Although questionnaires were circulated electronically students were advised that the best way to preserve anonymity was to print out the survey and return by mail. After three email reminders thirty questionnaires were completed and returned by the requested date, a 48.4% response rate. Surveys were sent to students at the end of semester when final assignments were due and exams looming, not the ideal time from a student point of view.

By comparison the 2001 survey had a response rate of 60.4%. In this survey students were sent personally addressed surveys by mail rather than emails, and the survey was circulated in April rather than at the end of a semester. The more personal approach and the different timing may have resulted in the higher response rate.

The results below are based on an analysis of the data gathered from these surveys.

Survey instrument

The 2006 survey was modelled on the earlier survey in order to capture similar data. The survey was divided into four sections. The first section aimed to establish the demographics of the current student cohort, the second the nature of the course studied, the third student reasons for embarking on a study program in recordkeeping (records/archives) at the university level, and lastly a section on how student perceptions of recordkeeping and recordkeeping education may have changed over the duration of the course.

Demographics of student cohort

The 2001 survey did not ask students to identify their geographic location, simply whether or not they were external students. Of the students responding to the current survey almost two-thirds (63.3%) were located in Western Australia. For distribution of student respondents across all states see *Table 1*.

Geographic location	Frequency	Percent
Western Australia	19	63.3
New South Wales	2	6.7
Victoria	3	10
Queensland	3	10
Tasmania	1	3.3
Australian Capital Territory	1	3.3
International student	1	3.3
Total	30	100

Table 1: Geographic location of students responding to the survey

Mode of study

In the 2001 survey the internal mode of study was the preferred option with 58.2% of students. Over one-third (38.2%) of respondent students were enrolled full-time. All external students at this time studied on a part-time basis. Some students varied their enrolment on a part-time/full-time, external/internal basis to suit their particular circumstances each semester.

The 2006 survey indicates a significant difference in student study modes in the five years since the previous survey. There has been a sharp decrease in the number of students studying completely internally: only 33.3% in 2006 compared with 58.2% in 2001. The number of students studying full-time has not changed significantly: 40% in 2006 compared with 38.2% in 2001. In the past, full-time students were usually internal but this is also changing. The preferred study mode is now external: 60% in 2006 compared with 29.1% in 2001. This is despite the overwhelming weighting (63.3%) of student responses to the current survey being from Western Australia where attendance at on-campus classes is geographically easier for metropolitan students. A significant change in the delivery of external study materials from traditional print and post to fully online is probably a major factor here.

Part-time external is the most common study option chosen with 43.3% studying in this mode. Both surveys had a small cohort of students who chose to vary their enrolment modes over the course of their study. For full details of student study modes see *Table 2*.

Study mode	2001		2006	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Internal full-time	21	38.2	7	23.3
Internal part-time	11	20	3	10
External full-time	0	0	5	16.7
External part-time	16	29.1	13	43.3
Combination internal/external/full-time/part-time	7	12.7	2	6.7
Total	55	100	30	100

Table 2: Respondent student study modes

Research indicates that students face many challenges when studying. A recent Curtin Student Guild (2006) survey³ of both undergraduate and postgraduate students found that 76% of students needed some form of paid employment in order to support themselves while studying. The average time worked was 16 hours per week. Even by engaging in paid work activities 49% of students reported that they had forgone food, 45% medical expenses, and 75% clothes. Students felt that working such hours impacted seriously on their study. For example, 66% reported that they did not have adequate time to study, 60% that they skipped classes, 45% that they were too tired to pay attention in lectures, and 44% handed in assignments late or at the last minute. Students also reported that they were unable to buy all the textbooks required for their study (60%). Surveys such as these indicate that students are time poor and may explain why so many elect to study online even when on-campus modes of study are available to them.

Gender

The 2001 survey indicated that the gender split was approximately one-third male to two-thirds female. In the 2006 survey the male/female split of student respondents was 20/80 (See *Table 3*). This gender split is closely mirrored in the overall student enrolment in recordkeeping units for 2006 (19% male). It is interesting to note that overall enrolment at the undergraduate level is predominantly female (only 16.2% male). At the postgraduate level male enrolment has increased to 27.8%.

Gender	2001		2006	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Male	17	30.9	6	20
Female	38	69.1	24	80
Total:	55	100	30	100

Table 3: Gender of respondent students

Age

The maturity of students is reflected in the age table. Few students study recordkeeping courses immediately after leaving school. In the 2001 study 36.4% of students were in their 20s, 29.1% in their 30s and 29.1% in their 40s. Only 5.4% began study in their 50s. The age picture changed little in the 2006 survey, except for a doubling of students in the over 50-years age range. For full details see *Table 4*.

Age range	2001		2006	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
20-30 years old	20	36.4	10	33.3
31-40 years old	16	29.1	8	26.7
41-50 years old	16	29.1	9	30
51-60 years old	3	5.4	3	10
Total	55	30	100	100

Table 4: Age range of respondent student

Course level

The student responses to the 2001 survey reflected a weighting of recordkeeping study at the postgraduate level. Courses offered have changed considerably since this survey. The separate undergraduate degrees in librarianship and records management were amalgamated into a single degree with a double major in librarianship and recordkeeping: the Bachelor of Arts (Librarianship and Corporate Information Management) in 2001. This means that all undergraduate students in the BA now enrol in recordkeeping units. This is demonstrated in the increased number of respondents at the undergraduate level in the 2006 survey (73.3%).

At the postgraduate level additional courses have been introduced at the certificate and masters levels, and many students choose to complete a masters' level degree rather than a certificate or graduate diploma. See *Table 5* for full details of course enrolment of respondent students.

Course studied	2001		2006	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Bachelor of Arts	24	43.6	22	73.3
Graduate Certificate Records Management	N/A	N/A	1	3.3
Graduate Diploma RM & Archives	33	56.4	2	6.7
Master of Information Management	N/A	N/A	5	16.7
Total	55	100	30	100

Table 5: Course enrolment of respondent students

Prior experience

Significant recordkeeping experience prior to commencement of study is apparent in students responding to both the 2001 and 2006 surveys. In both surveys approximately 40% of students had some prior recordkeeping experience in the workplace. The nature of this experience covers the whole gamut of recordkeeping practice in the public and private sector from specific records officer roles to the keeping of records as part of an administrative role. See *Table 6*.

Prior experience	2001		2006	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Yes	24	43.6	12	40
No	31	56.4	18	60
Total	55	100	30	100

Table 6: Prior experience in recordkeeping before commencement of study

Reasons for studying recordkeeping at the university level

This section of the questionnaire was quite open-ended in approach. Students were not offered any suggestions to prompt responses. They were simply asked to list their reasons for studying recordkeeping at the university level.

Over half (54.5%) the respondents in the 2001 survey indicated that they were studying recordkeeping at university for career enhancement and improved employment opportunities. Similarly, in 2006 over half the survey respondents (60.1%) indicated that they were studying recordkeeping to enhance their career prospects. These students identified a need to gain or upgrade their qualifications for career progression and credibility with employers, peers and customers. The good employment outlook and opportunities were noted by 36.7% of respondents. Over one-third (36.7%) of respondent students noted that were simply doing the records units as they were part of the course requirements. Only two (6.7%) of these students indicated that they would not consider a job in records, and four (13.4%) indicated that they had made a career change from librarianship to recordkeeping. Most students indicated that recordkeeping was not something they knew much about previously and it had opened up a whole new range of career options. For a full tabulation of responses see *Table 7*.

Reasons for studying	2001		2006	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Career enhancement	30	54.5	18	60.1
Employment opportunities	29	52.7	11	36.7
Course requirement	N/A	N/A	11	36.7
Total	55	100	30	100

Table 7: Respondents' reasons for studying recordkeeping at the university level

Student reasons for choosing Curtin University as their study institution ranged from the comprehensiveness of the courses offered, to a broadening of career options, to the reputation of the course and lecturers (all 66.7%), to the degree of flexibility of the course in terms of study mode (56.7%). The dual qualification in the undergraduate degree was noted by 23.3% of respondents, and the lack of a compulsory residential component was noted as a deciding factor by 20% of respondents. Professional recognition of the course was only noted as important by 6.7% of respondents (see *Table 8*). This particular question was not asked in the 2001 survey.

Reasons for studying at Curtin	Frequency	Percent
Comprehensive course	20	66.7
Broader career options	20	66.7
Reputation	20	66.7
Flexibility of course	17	56.7
Dual qualification	7	23.3
Lack of compulsory residential component	6	20
Course recognition	2	6.7
	30	100

Table 8: Respondents' reasons for studying recordkeeping at Curtin

Positive aspects of study

For almost three-quarters (70%) of the students responding to the 2006 survey, the most positive aspect of their study was the practical opportunities they were exposed to, such as the site visits, projects and practica. This was followed by the theoretical aspects at 56.7% and scope of the course (43.3%). Almost half (46.7) of the respondent students emphasised the importance and value of the networking they were exposed to through professional meetings, student inclusion on professional committees, guest speakers and site visits. The students also valued the personal friendly learning environment (30%), the flexible delivery (26.7%) which made it possible for them to undertake study regardless of geographic location, and the “real world experience” of lecturers (26.7%) and the way assignments were “tailored to the real world situation” (20%) rather than the usual essay and exam structure. Three students (10%) noted that they had “discovered a whole new world of archives” and an associated new career goal. In the 2001 survey the students identified similar positive aspects about their study but the theoretical aspects rated higher than the practical (see *Table 9*).

Positive aspects of course	2001		2006	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Practical aspects of course	30	54.6	21	70
Theoretical aspects learned	32	58.2	17	56.7

Networking	12	21.6	14	46.7
Scope course content	21	38.2	13	43.3
Personal learning environment	6	10.9	9	30
Flexible delivery	15	27.3	8	26.7
Experience lecturers	4	7.2	8	26.7
Nature of assignments	3	5.5	6	20
Exposure to archiving	3	5.5	3	10
	55	100	30	100

Table 9: Most positive aspects of course for respondent students

Positive outcomes of study

Perceived career enhancement rated as the most positive outcome of their course of study for 70% of respondent students in the 2006 survey. A growth in theoretical understanding was rated as an important study outcome by 60% of students, and 63.3% noted improved practical skills such as the operational aspects of records management and skills such as writing business reports. A growth in confidence about personal knowledge and ability in recordkeeping was also noted by 43.3% of respondents. Networking also rated as an important outcome by 36.7% of students. Only 6.7% of students rated professional recognition as an important outcome of study. Again similar outcomes were identified in the 2001 survey. Career enhancement also rated as the greatest study outcome in this survey. And comments such as “development of personal and professional confidence”, “feelings of self-fulfilment”, “empowerment”, etc. were common (see *Table 10*).

Positive outcomes of course	2001		2006	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Career enhancement	33	60	21	70
Improved practical skills	14	25.4	19	63.3
Growth theoretical understanding	21	38.1	18	60
Growth confidence in own knowledge & ability	21	38.1	13	43.3
Establishment of networking contacts	6	10.8	11	36.7
Professional recognition	4	7.2	2	6.7
	55	100	30	100

Table 10: Most positive outcomes of course for respondent students

Over half the respondent students (53.3%) in the current survey said they would not do anything differently if they had the opportunity over again. Most changes mooted by students revolved around personal issues such as allocating more time to studying, and getting more hands-on experience earlier in the form of part-time or volunteer work. Two students noted that issues such as time release should be investigated as they had not been aware that options such as this were available to them.

Membership of information industry associations

One of the final questions in the survey related to student membership of information industry associations. It is interesting to note that over one-quarter (26.6%) of the respondent students were members of the Records Management Association of Australasia (RMAA), and the majority of this membership was at the personal level. This is probably as a result of the introductory membership offer made to students by the RMAA⁴. An analysis of RMAA membership figures at 30 June 2005 indicated that Western Australia has a higher proportion of student numbers than any other state (38.89% of the total student membership). It may also be indicative of the existence of two university-level recordkeeping courses in Western Australia and the persistent lobbying of the profession and professional issues by university staff and the close and supportive working relationships between the WA Branch Committee and university lecturers.

The next highest student membership was of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) at 23.4%. Most of this membership is at the corporate level. This is not surprising given that the undergraduate course consists of a double major in librarianship and corporate information management. Furthermore, more than half those entering the undergraduate degree already have a TAFE diploma in library studies and many are already working in a library position albeit not at a professional level. A few students were also members of the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA), the Institute for Information Management (IIM), or another information related association such as the Western Australian Public Libraries Group. For the full tabulation of information industry membership see *Table 11*.

Association membership	Corporate		Personal		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
RMAA	1	3.3	7	23.3	8	26.6
ASA	0	0	2	6.7	2	6.7
IIM	1	3.3	1	3.3	2	6.7
ALIA	5	16.7	2	6.7	7	23.4
Other	2	6.7	0	0	2	6.7
	30	100	30	100	30	100

Table 11: Respondent student membership of information industry associations

Perceptions of recordkeeping

Although 40% of respondents indicated some degree of experience in recordkeeping prior to enrolment (refer back to *Table 6*), 80% stated they had little or no knowledge of recordkeeping. Furthermore 36.7% admitted their original perception of recordkeeping as an occupation was

that it was “boring”. Some thought that it was a challenging and enjoyable profession (10%) with good employment opportunities (13.3%) and one respondent even commented that recordkeeping was “much undervalued” as a profession, but positive comments were not common. These perceptions are listed in *Table 12*. This particular question was not asked in the 2001 survey.

Reasons for studying	Frequency	Percent
Little or no knowledge of recordkeeping	24	80
Boring profession	11	36.7
Challenging & enjoyable	4	13.3
Employment opportunities	3	10
Undervalued profession	1	3.3
	30	100

Table 12: Respondents' original perceptions of recordkeeping

Perceptions after studying recordkeeping

Well over three-quarters (83.3%) of respondent students noted a positive change in perceptions of recordkeeping after studying at the university level. Some 90% noted that recordkeeping was a very diverse area incorporating issues such as record and information assets and their management, evidence, accountability, governance, and standards, etc., and was a far more complex discipline than originally supposed (73.3%). Over half the respondents (56.7%) indicated that they found recordkeeping to be a profession with interesting challenges, especially in areas such as electronic recordkeeping and metadata (see *Table 13*).

Perceptions after study	Frequency	Percent
Change in perceptions	25	83.3
Diversity of discipline	27	90
Complexity of discipline	22	73.3
Interesting challenges	17	56.7
	30	100

Table 13: Respondents' perceptions of recordkeeping after university level study

Conclusion

Students in both surveys were very open about their experiences and perceptions of the courses. The overall satisfaction level in both surveys reflects a perceived correlation by the students between the knowledge and skills acquired from the course studied and those required in the workplace. As noted, 83.3% of students responding to the current survey identified a positive change in their perception of recordkeeping over the course of their study. Comments such as

recordkeeping is a “diverse”, “vitaly interesting”, “challenging” “stimulating” profession were common. Some noted that they as an outcome of their study they had gained a “greater respect for and appreciation of the value and importance of recordkeeping” and even noted that they were surprised at how much they had enjoyed studying the discipline.

In a series of surveys conducted during 2004-2005 all stakeholders surveyed (employers, regulators, consultants, etc.), saw a clear division between two levels of recordkeeping practitioners: basic level operational/processing staff and higher strategic level staff. Requirements for a professional education in recordkeeping were linked to these levels of practice. Comments such as “all senior position must be filled by qualified staff” and “the higher the position the more important it [an educational qualification] is” were common⁵.

There is no doubt that there is a serious shortage of recordkeeping practitioners⁶ able to operate at the more strategic levels of recordkeeping. As more positions become available at the higher levels the problem is exacerbated. It will only be through a rigorous educational programme that practitioners will be able to demonstrate that their practical experience is reinforced by a sound theoretical knowledge base. Such practitioners are and will continue to be in high demand.

Endnotes

¹ Pember, M. (2003). A decade of recordkeeping education at Curtin University of Technology: Flux and flexibility. *Australian Library Journal*, 53(1): 65-79.

² This study was approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, October 2006 (Approval MSC-35-06).

³ The survey was conducted by the Curtin Student Guild in 2006 but is as yet unpublished. Further information is available from the Curtin Student Guild (Colette Swindells educationvp@guild.curtin.edu.au)

⁴ The Records Management Association of Australasia (RMAA) offers students free membership for the first 12 months and reduced membership after this time. For full details see the RMAA website <http://www.rmaa.com.au>

⁵ PhD thesis, M Pember, 2006.

⁶ See Evans, J. (2002). Serious lack of skilled and qualified records professionals in NSW. *Informaa Quarterly*, 18(4): 16-20; Evans, J. (2003). Records profession skills weakness exposed by NSW records compliance audit. *Informaa Quarterly*, 19(1): 8-11; Murphy, G. (2003). *Where have all the records practitioners gone: A view from the west coast*. ARES Forum, Melbourne, June 2003. Retrieved 24 November 2006. <http://www.archivists.org.au/events/ARES2003/index.html>