

## The value of international standards for records management: perspectives from education and training

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*The article reports the findings from research investigating the impact of international standards for records management. This is a significant issue for the record-keeping community given the significant resourcing devoted to the development of international standards. Previous attempts to measure impact have met with little success, so this research approached the problem area from a new angle, namely the indirect influence of standards on practice via their use in education and training. Data was collected from a global survey of educators and trainers. Findings demonstrate that the standards are being used extensively at undergraduate and postgraduate level as well as in vocational training. However, a number of barriers to use are identified. The research provides a strong foundation for further investigation of impact and use of the international standards.*

**Keywords:** education and training; impact assessment; international standards

A significant feature of the records management landscape is the energy and resources (in terms of people as well as financial) devoted to the development of international standards. The process of developing standards is one fraught with difficulty; the need to achieve consensus across a wide span of differing national views results in a negotiation process of significant complexity.<sup>1</sup> Ascertaining the value and effectiveness of the standards is a key concern therefore – is the effort being expended worthwhile?

One way of assessing the potential impact of records management standards on practice and disciplinary thinking is to examine how the standards are being taught in courses on records management. The purpose of this article is to present the findings from a survey of educators and trainers which set out to discover to what extent the international standards are being used in teaching and training programs. The survey was not designed to assess the relative value of specific content in individual standards,

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so the data provides a high-level snapshot of usage rather than a view of the relative merits of specific standards. Given the paucity of evidence of impact and use to date, the findings reported here should be considered as a foundation for further exploration. The article is structured as follows. It begins by establishing the background, briefly recounting the history of ISO standards development in the recordkeeping domain, and considers previous attempts to evaluate their impact. The survey findings are then presented, and discussed. The article concludes with suggestions for further research.

### **ISO recordkeeping standards**

The initial impetus for what might now be thought of as the records management standards industry began in Australia with the launch of the world's first recordkeeping standard in 1996: AS 4390. The enthusiastic response worldwide for the concept of a standard for records management seemed to make its adoption as an international standard a foregone conclusion. The international standard ISO 15489 was indeed based on AS 4390, but not without a lengthy negotiation process. The eventual standard consisted of two parts (general and guidelines) and was launched in 2001.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, other standards have been developed and issued, so that the recordkeeping community now has numerous standards to draw on for guidance.

The process of negotiating a standard is lengthy and requires significant resource investment from a number of countries around the world. The committee responsible for the recordkeeping standards (Technical Committee 46, Sub-Committee 11) meets at least annually in different locations for a meeting lasting several days; national member bodies wanting to contribute to the on-the-ground discussion and negotiation send one or more delegates to the meetings. At present, 28 countries are indicated as participating, with a further 15 with observer status.<sup>3</sup> In between face-to-face meetings, national member bodies are likely to have national mirror committees responsible for reviewing drafts and providing feedback. All in all, a large number of people spend a considerable amount of time and money attempting to codify best practice in records management, in a way that will be acceptable to frequently diametrically opposed theoretical perspectives.

Although a key feature of ISO 15489 stresses the need for evaluation and monitoring, it has proved very challenging to apply that requirement to the standards themselves. An early attempt to investigate uptake and implementation was carried out by researchers at the University of Northumbria.<sup>4</sup> The first phase of the research was carried out in 2002 and 2003, with a focus on initial reactions of UK records managers to ISO 15489 and plans for its use. Overall, responses were positive in that people appeared to be planning to implement ISO 15489<sup>5</sup> but at that stage it was too early to explore actual implementation.

The second phase of the Northumbria research aimed to address that gap. One of the objectives of the second phase was to 'assess the extent to which a truly international and generic standard was relevant and valuable in a specific national context and in the electronic environment'.<sup>6</sup> Data was collected from over 50 organisations over a two-year period. Findings 'showed that the impact of ISO 15489 had not been huge and had been varied and particular to specific organisations. The standard had been used in different ways but generally not in great detail; it had had some influence on records professionals but little wider influence'.<sup>7</sup>

The concluding component of the McLeod and Childs study looked to the future of ISO 15489 rather than its past. A modified Delphi study was carried out involving

eight records management experts. One conclusion was that the standard was in danger of disappearing, thus there was a need to actively promote it, for instance by its inclusion in educational programs.<sup>8</sup>

Since the Northumbria research, it does not appear that any subsequent large-scale attempt has been made to evaluate the impact of the ISO records management standards. In his doctoral dissertation, Donald Force<sup>9</sup> examined the role played by record-keeping standards in helping organisations meet their legal obligations. His findings demonstrate that the standards do have a positive impact in supporting legal compliance, although in the Canadian juridical systems they do not seem to be adequately taken into consideration when it comes to assessing the admissibility of records as evidence in court. Another work that may be referenced in this context is Judith Ellis's 'Embedding Records Management in the Business'.<sup>10</sup> In her book chapter, Ellis discusses the relationship existing among relevant international standards (including the most recent ISO 30300 Management Systems for Records) and their benefits to records management in office practice.

Assessing impact is a very difficult thing to do as the influence of the standards may be more subtle and less explicit than may be assumed. The most obvious approach would seem to be to ask practitioners whether they have implemented the standards, and whether the standards have influenced their decision making and development of programs. There is an underlying assumption though in this case that implementation and influence is direct: for example, records manager X has a copy of relevant standards to hand and regularly consults in order to determine the 'right' way to do things. However, the standards are pitched at a high level and therefore focus on principles rather than provide a 'how to' level of guidance. We therefore decided to approach the problem area from another perspective, in an attempt to determine indirect influence of the standards. In other words, finding out whether the standards are being used in education and training programs would provide an indicator of the potential influence of standards on practice. Accordingly, we developed an online survey to determine whether the standards are being used in education and training, and, if so, to what extent.

### **The survey**

In 2014 an online survey<sup>11</sup> was developed to explore the usage of ISO standards in education and training for records management. We wanted to achieve international coverage, to encompass more than just those countries actively involved in negotiating and drafting standards, and an online survey was the most cost-efficient and effective way to achieve that global spread.

### ***Survey design***

In developing the survey, one of the first issues encountered was the need for sensitivity to the different educational terminology used in different countries. For instance, use of 'postgraduate' and 'graduate', different understandings of 'program' and 'course'. We tested a pilot by asking teaching colleagues not involved in the delivery of recordkeeping topics to take the survey, and their feedback assisted with refining the questions.

Invitations to respond were sent out worldwide via the main North American, British and Australasian mailing lists (Arcan-I, RECMGNT-L, Records-Management-UK, Archives and Records Australia Google Groups, Nzrecords) as well as the

International Council on Archives listserv (ICA-I), the Archives Professionals group on LinkedIn and our own professional networks. We were keen to achieve as broad a geographic coverage as possible in order to ensure that perspectives associated with both theoretical models underpinning practice (the records continuum and the lifecycle model) were represented.

The survey was structured to collect data relating to the use of seven named standards in three different educational settings: postgraduate (for example, Master's level), undergraduate (for example, Bachelor's degree) and training. The standards were:

- ISO 15489-1 Records management Part 1: General;
- ISO 15489-2 Records management Part 2: Guidelines;
- ISO 20381-1 Metadata for records Part 1: Principles;
- ISO 23081-2 Managing metadata for records Part 2: Conceptual and implementation issues;
- ISO 23081-3 Managing metadata for records Part 3: Self-assessment methods;
- ISO 30300 Management systems for records – Fundamentals and vocabulary;
- ISO 30301 Management systems for records – Requirements.

We restricted our coverage to the standards named above on the assumption that these were the most widely known and therefore could be considered to be those most likely used in records management teaching or training. However, the 23081 and 30300 families have not been the subject of any previous studies comparable to those undertaken by the Northumbria researchers.

We wanted to ensure that the survey was a manageable length to minimise the response time required from participants, so we limited questions to these core standards only. To compensate for this restricted scope, we did include a question which asked respondents to name any other standards they used in teaching or training.

For each of the educational environments (postgraduate, undergraduate and training), participants were asked to indicate the following for the named standards by selecting an appropriate response from a Likert scale:

- the extent to which the standard is used in teaching or training (possible responses ranged from 'extensively' to 'not at all');
- the utility of the standard (possible responses ranged from 'extremely useful' to 'not useful');
- the importance of the standard for curriculum design (for example, helps determine the scope of the program, course, module or unit. Possible responses ranged from 'extremely important' to 'not at all important').

## **Findings**

We received a total of 172 responses from educators and trainers around the world. All questions were optional, so the total population used to calculate the percentages for each question varied. We asked respondents to indicate where their education or training programs were being delivered (rather than their nationality). The 148 participants who answered this question indicated the regions in which they were educating or training (see Figure 1).

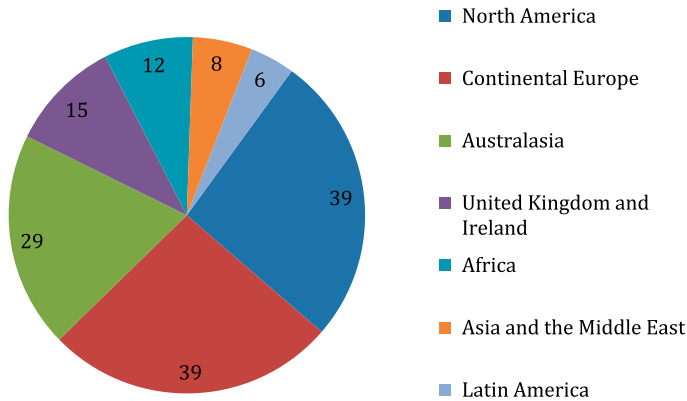


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of education and training activities of respondents.

We asked respondents about the countries they were providing training or education as we wanted to know where the records management standards had the potential to influence practice. However, as one respondent pointed out, it was not possible to indicate more than one place – and it is of course entirely possible that individuals may be delivering education or training in multiple locations. The data shown in Figure 1 therefore should be considered as an indicator of areas of activity, rather than a definitive picture of where our participants were delivering education and training.

**The postgraduate educators**

Eighty-one respondents were involved in providing education for records management as part of a postgraduate program, such as a Master’s degree. Most people used ISO 15489 (parts one and two), with only two individuals saying they did not use part one at all, and four saying they did not use part two at all. The remaining standards were used to a lesser extent (see Figure 2).

As shown in Figure 3, the postgraduate educators were generally very positive about the usefulness of the standards, particularly ISO 15489. The largest number of

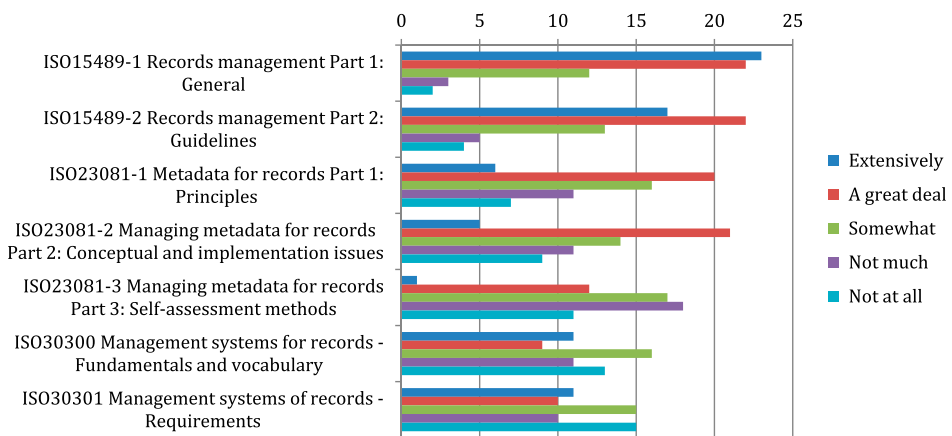


Figure 2. Use of the standards in postgraduate education.

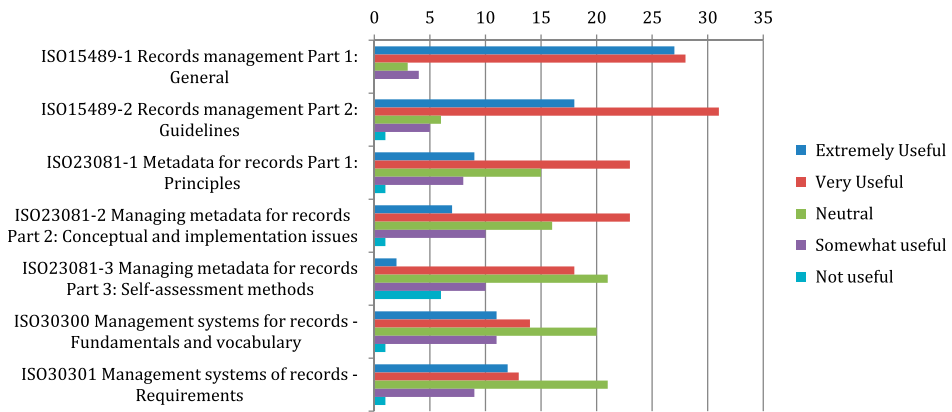


Figure 3. Postgraduate educators' assessment of the usefulness of the standards.

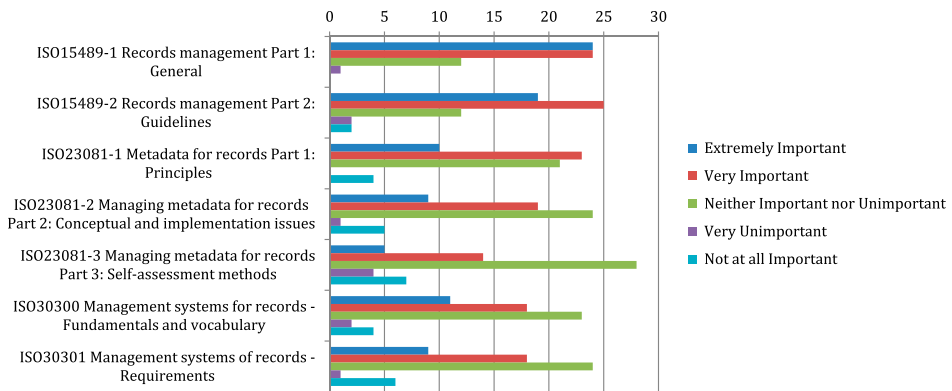


Figure 4. Importance of the standards in curriculum design at postgraduate level.

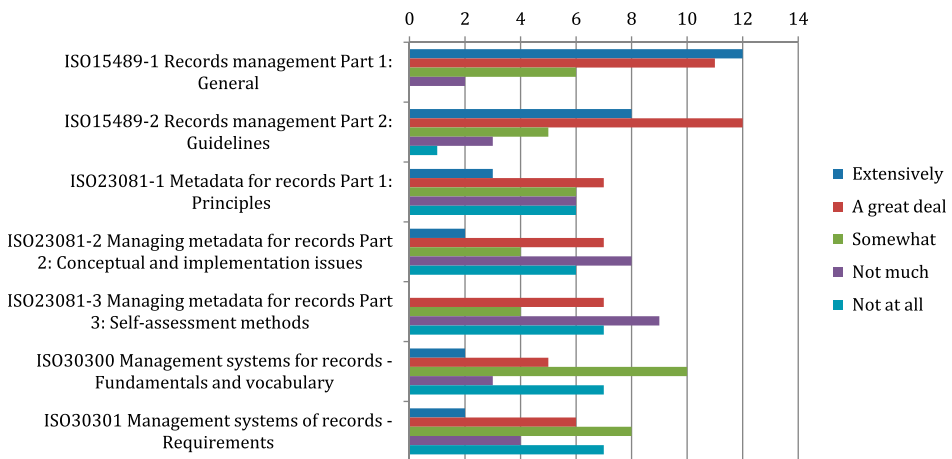


Figure 5. Use of the standards in undergraduate-level education.

respondents indicating a standard was not useful was six, and the standard in question was ISO 23081-3 Managing metadata for records Part 3: Self-assessment methods.

Forty-eight (59%) of the postgraduate educators indicated that ISO 15489-1 was either extremely important or very important in terms of curriculum design. Other standards were less influential, but overall responses showed that all seven of the standards identified in this survey are being used at postgraduate level to determine the scope and content of teaching materials (see Figure 4).

**The undergraduate educators**

Thirty-seven respondents were providing education at undergraduate level. The usage pattern of the standards though was very similar to that at postgraduate level (see Figure 5).

Similarly, Figure 6 shows that the standards were highly ranked in terms of usefulness, particularly those that might be considered the core – ISO 15489 parts 1 and 2, and ISO 23081-1.

The undergraduate educators were slightly more circumspect than the postgraduate educators about the importance of the named standards in curriculum design but nevertheless responses were positive (see Figure 7).

**The trainers**

Seventy respondents were providing records management training not for academic credit settings, for instance in short courses or workshops. A very similar pattern of standards usage was evident in their responses (see Figure 8).

However, Figure 9 shows that trainers were slightly less positive than the educators in their assessment of the usefulness of the named standards.

As with the postgraduate and undergraduate educators, trainers also use the standards in curriculum design (see Figure 10).

In all three education environments, ISO 15489-1 is being used to a greater or lesser extent. Only three individuals (two at postgraduate level and one trainer) indicated that

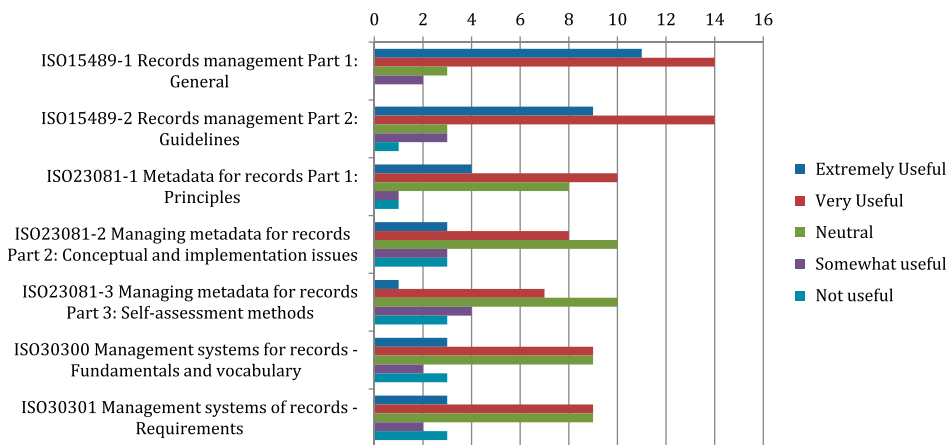


Figure 6. Undergraduate educators’ assessment of the usefulness of the standards.

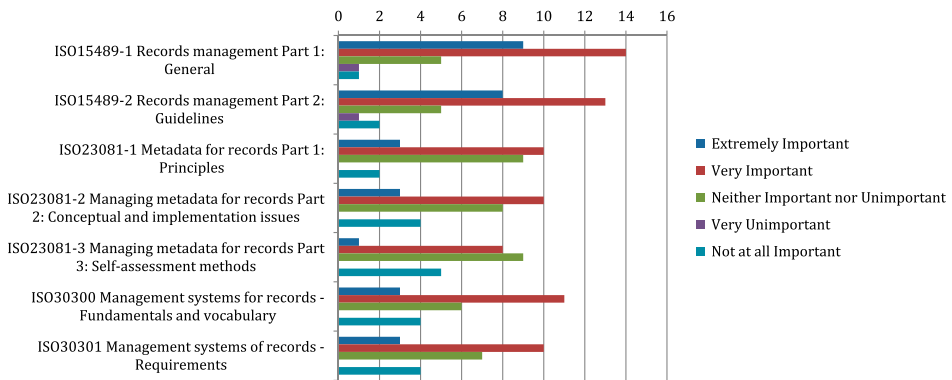


Figure 7. Importance of the standards in curriculum design at undergraduate level.

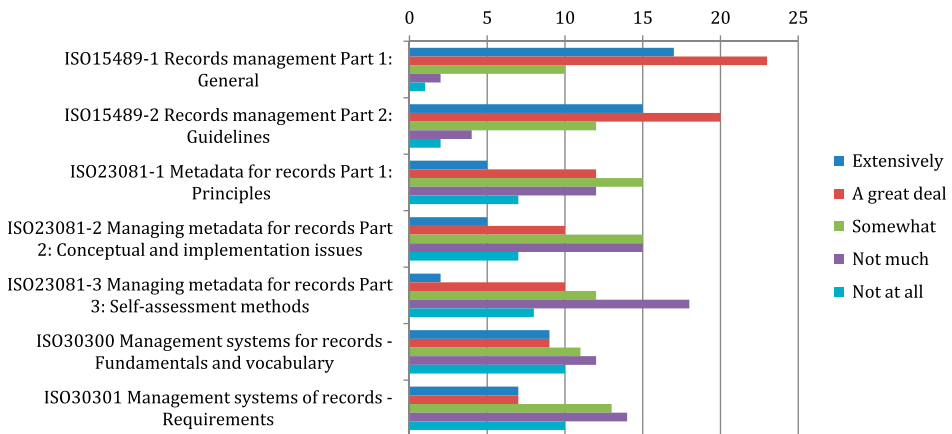


Figure 8. Use of the standards in training.

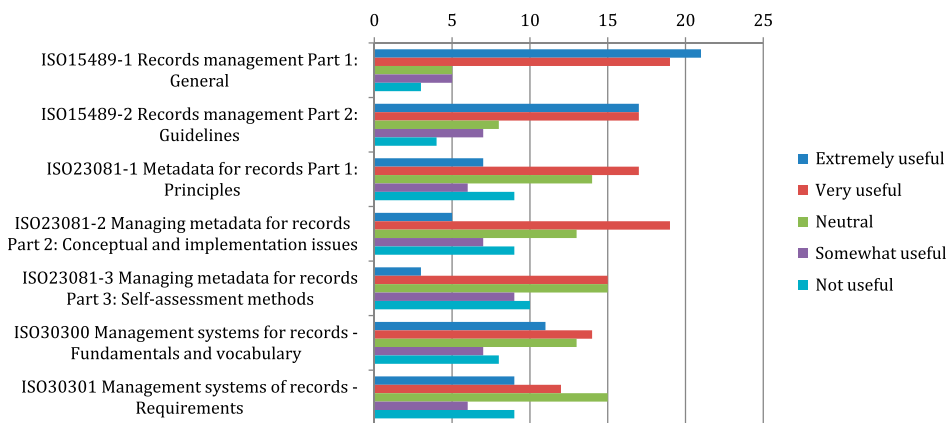


Figure 9. Trainers' assessment of the usefulness of the standards.



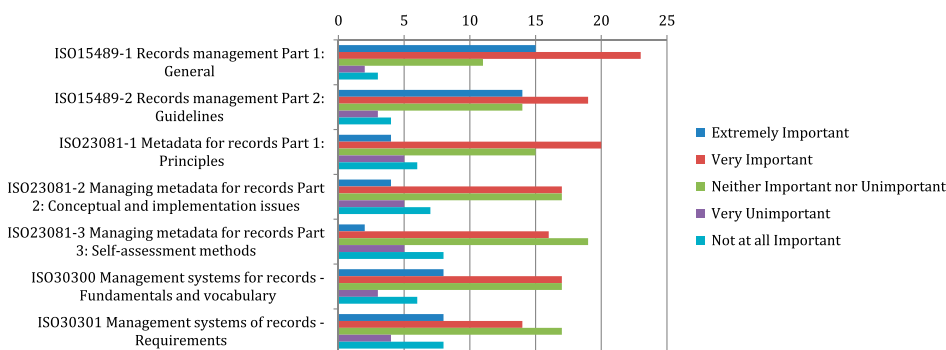


Figure 10. Importance of the standards in curriculum design for training courses.

it is not being used at all. Similarly, ISO 15489-2 is also well used, with only four individuals (one at postgraduate, one at undergraduate level and two trainers) reporting non-use.

### Use of other standards

Sixty-nine respondents indicated that they used other national or international standards in their teaching or training. Responses could be divided into two categories. The first category includes standards, policies and guidelines issued by national or state bodies or professional associations which are based on or influenced by the ISO standards named in the survey. For instance, Archives New Zealand Standards, State Records NSW Guidelines or the Association of Records Managers and Administrators Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles.

The second category includes those standards not explicitly linked to the ones covered in the survey, for instance ISO 15801 Document management – Information stored electronically – Recommendations for trustworthiness and reliability; ISO 16175 Principles and Functional Requirements for Records in Electronic Office Environments; the ISO 2700 information security series and ISO 26122 Work process analysis for records.

Many of the responses were very detailed, and taken collectively indicate a very high interest in the standards domain by educators and trainers.

### Other comments

The final question provided a free text box for respondents to make any other comments about their use of standards in records management education or training. Forty-one respondents used this as an opportunity not just to comment on how important the standards are, but also to suggest improvements. For instance:

Standards are good however some of these standards do not take into consideration environmental and other factors in developed vs developing countries. We in developing countries also need to be consulted/involved in developing the standards.

It might be good for better understanding if the ISO standards could be followed up with implementation guidance and cases or best practice.

ISO 15489 is too paper based, and thus it is losing its credibility in an electronic world.

A significant barrier to use which was commented on by six (15%) respondents relates to the publication model for the ISO standards, and the consequent requirement to purchase the standards from the International Organization for Standardization.

We would probably use the standards more if the participants didn't have to buy them. We refer [to] them and incorporate their guidance in the training, and ideally we would encourage their use, but the fact that their organisations have to buy them and they have to be able to justify that purchase to the holders of the purse-strings means that we don't 'enthusiastically' recommend them.

Would be much easier to use international and national standards if they were available as free open access.

Accessibility of international standards is an issue. If the university does not subscribe to international rather than national standards then access is limited. In this case, if the educator is forced to purchase the standard they cannot share it with their students.

It would be great if standard-organisations (ISO, NEN in the Netherlands, DIN in Germany, BSI in the UK, etc) would supply several to the point (information, records and archives management) standards for free-use in education.

The cost of ISO standards is just about prohibitive for many would-be users.

... you have to buy standards officially before you can use them. It is crazy but even for educational use you have no free access to it. We work with illegal examples ...

Some respondents (educators and trainers) reflected on accessibility from the perspective of language and style, and a perceived lack of practical guidance:

Course evaluations show that most students find standards 'dry' and 'hardly accessible'. Students also think that standards will not be of great help to them as future practitioners, because they are too high-level and somehow unsuitable for many work environments.

It might be good for better understanding [if] the ISO standards could be followed up with implementation guidance and cases or best practice.

The problem with the standards is that end users ... cannot see the connection between the standard and their methodology.

Standards tend to be written in abstract and technical language, which requires considerable 'interpretation' to be intelligible to general staff ... in a working environment rather than a specialised RM [records management] degree course, they work better as authorities rather than immediate educational tools.

ISO 30300 series are pretty new and unimplemented in practice, it means they are sort of hard to use for education and training.

Others pointed to contrasting views of the importance of standards to education. On the one hand, one respondent reported offering 'an option based solely on standards and their application within records management'. Another stated:

We think that the use of standards is very important for records management education, but is also mandatory in a framework where normalisation is the core of the 'product' that a records manager sells.

On the other hand,

They do not guide our teaching of RM. RM theory and methods as developed over time internationally and discussed in the scholarly literature guide our teaching.

## **Discussion**

The response to the survey was excellent, and reflects international interest and engagement on the part of the education and training community in the records management standards. The geographical spread of education and training activities demonstrates the usage of standards in diverse regions that reflect the predominant theoretical models that characterise practice in the northern and southern hemispheres: the lifecycle and recordkeeping continuum. Our survey respondents did not indicate any barriers to use with respect to different theoretical starting points, so it seems that the standards have achieved their goal of acceptability to both continuum and lifecycle adherents. It should be noted however that one limitation of the survey data is the potential for skew given the large number of respondents from the US and Europe.

With regard to the quantitative data, minimal difference could be seen in the responses from the three education environments. Overall, the quantitative data provide a very positive picture of the influence of records management ISO standards on informing the content and scope of education and training. In the case of ISO 15489, usage appears to be very widespread, with the other standards less well used. The difference in uptake between ISO 15489, ISO 23081 and the ISO 30300 series is likely to be influenced by the length of time each standard has been in existence. ISO 15489 was published in 2001, ISO 23081 in 2006 (part 1), 2009 (part 2) and 2011 (part 3), and ISO 30300 and ISO 30301 in 2011.

More insight into usage is gleaned from the qualitative data. Usage of the different standards may also reflect the restricted scope of many records management programs. Typically, there may not be enough space in the curriculum to cover much more than the basic essentials. As one respondent commented, '... it is too difficult to go in-depth with standards using a three credit-course that introduces students to the broad world of RIM [records information management] and Information Governance'.

The qualitative data also provided insight into another barrier to use. Comments made about the prohibitive cost of the standards are concerning. Comments of this nature did not emanate by any means solely from respondents in developing countries; the majority were from respondents speaking about their own contexts in wealthier nations (specific names of countries have been removed from the comments quoted above). This is a significant issue which needs to be considered at national and international level, by professional associations and archival authorities. In the light of the investment being made in terms of people and financial resources in the development of these ISO standards, whether that investment is being fully realised in an environment where access is restricted is open to question.

One respondent commented on the need for input into ISO records management standards from developing countries. This issue has been discussed with reference to

ISO 14721 Trusted Digital Repositories: Open Archival Information System and ISO 16363 Repository Audit and Certification.<sup>12</sup> Seles points out that although the standards are intended to be formulated at a principle level, by not taking into account the absence of technical expertise and inadequate infrastructure characteristic of the developing world, they are not universally applicable.<sup>13</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The findings from this online survey indicate that educators and trainers assign value to the international records management standards, in particular to ISO 15489. The extent to which standards are used and promoted by educators and trainers however is affected by a number of issues, notably including the costs relating to access and also perhaps by their applicability to developing-world contexts. Some cost–benefit analysis in the creation and use of standards would appear to be an important subject for future research.

The use of standards to inform the content and scope of education and training programs means that learners, our current and future practitioners, are being exposed to the standards, and it is entirely feasible that the principles embodied in the standards are significantly influencing practice. However, how such principles are interpreted and applied, and to what extent the profession has truly adopted common understandings of core recordkeeping principles and activities, are issues that our survey could only touch on.

The intent of this research was to provide a high-level view of the use of records management standards in education and training, and so should be considered a first step along the path to understanding the influence and impact of the standards. Nevertheless, findings are significant firstly because of the global nature of the survey (thus encompassing both lifecycle and continuum perspectives), and secondly because the only previous large-scale attempt at evaluation focused solely on ISO 15498 and was based on data collected from 2003–05.<sup>14</sup>

The research has laid a foundation for future studies, to explore how the influence of the ISO standards is manifest in practice. Investigating this presents some considerable difficulty, given that practitioners may not be aware of, or may have simply forgotten, the foundational role of standards in education and training. This suggests that direct questioning of practitioners by surveys or interviews may only be partially successful. More intensive, ethnographic studies of practice may be more enlightening. Another strand of further research which may throw more light on the impact of the ISO standards relates to documentation of their usage to develop national standards, policies and guidelines, which is not always made explicit. In terms of curriculum development, it may be interesting to compare the weight given to international standards to other authoritative sources, such as professional associations' statements of knowledge, professional and scholarly literature, domain expert input and other forms of literary warrant.

Given the usage demonstrated of the international records management standards in the delivery of education and training, it is important that the ISO community recognise educators and trainers as key stakeholders. Targeting this sector with information about the standards development process (the revision of existing standards and publication of new standards) will assist in enabling educators and trainers to ensure their course offerings are up to date and relevant. Finally, the last word should go to one of our survey

respondents who emphasised the significance of the standards endeavour by suggesting that assessment of impact is demonstrated at a higher level:

The concepts underlying the standards and the fact that there is confirmation of acceptance of these concepts in the international community is more important than the actual teaching of the standards itself.

### **Endnotes**

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