



REFLECTION ARTICLE

Reflecting on the Place of Regional University Libraries and Archival Collections

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Abstract

University archives sit in a unique space within the Australian archives landscape, with many serving a dual purpose. Archives may be collected and maintained as the historical memory of an institution. Others also act as archives for their local community or the state. Most Australian universities have a dedicated archive, and the Australian Society of Archivists (2024) has a Special Interest Group devoted to the sector (see Appendix 1). This paper reflects on some of the different models offered at regional universities. As members of the Regional Universities Network, they share a particular context; each institution is committed to the broader community and serves the research and teaching purposes required in their establishment. Echoing early research on Australian university archives, however, there are marked differences in their approaches to managing archives, different functions and strategic alignment and diverse organisational arrangements.¹ Prompted by the initiative to develop a university archive at Southern Cross University, we would like to reflect on the strengths and challenges, limitations and possibilities of different models, how each archive relates to the business of the university, and echoing Boadle, to ask whether they function as a community or university resource.² Centring the place of regional universities, this paper also allowed us to collaborate and traverse the boundaries between our institutions and within them, as well as between the university and community.

Keywords: *University archives; Regional universities; Community.*

University archives are collected and maintained as the historical memory of an institution, which arguably reflects aspects of the regional community history. Some also act as archives for their local community and Museums of History New South Wales. There has not been a substantial survey of Australian university archives since Allen's research in the 1980s and Boadle's survey a decade later, which found a lack of consistency in function, in managing archives, their organisational structure and funding.³ A desktop survey of current institutional archives suggests this is still the case. The formation of a university archive at Southern Cross University (SCU) provides an opportunity to explore the place of regional

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university libraries in local communities. The University of Southern Queensland shares a similar commitment to its local community and established its archive in 2006. The differences between university archives raise questions for further research and highlight the value of collaboration.

Context

The University of New England (UNE) began as Australia's first regional university when it was formed in 1954. The UNE Archives and Heritage Centre is a repository for regional NSW State archival records and includes a New England regional collection and institutional archives. Charles Sturt University (CSU) traces its history to the establishment of the Bathurst Experimental Farm in 1895, and its various campuses were part of the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education before the incorporation of the university in 1989. Their archival collection reflects their status as a Regional Archives Centre for Museums of History NSW and their commitment to preserving and managing the historical records of the Riverina and Murray Regions. Federation University started as the School of Mines in Ballarat in 1869. Their historical collection is also closely aligned with their history and the region, including institutional records, the Geoffrey Blainey Mining Collection and the Creedy Economics Collection. SCU traces its history to the Lismore Teachers College, established in 1970. It was a College of Advanced Education until 1989, when it joined UNE as the Northern Rivers campus before becoming independent in 1994. The University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) was an Institute of Technology in 1967 and then an Institute of Advanced Education from 1971 to 1989. Central Queensland University (CQUni) also began as an Institute of Technology in 1967 and transformed into the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education in 1971. After the binary system was replaced in the late 1980s, SCU, CQUni and UniSQ became universities in the following decade, but the histories of their predecessor institutions are reflected in their collections and still resonate today. UniSQ has a professional archivist and Historical Archives, established as a project in the lead-up to the 40th anniversary of the University in 2006 and falls under Enterprise Information Management. Central Queensland, conversely, has a Records and Archives Office established as a division of the Library in 2003 following the introduction of the *Public Records Act 2002* (Qld) (J. Stehbins, personal communication 20 August 2023). SCU does not have a publicly accessible and searchable institutional archive. The Corporate Records Unit sits in Governance Services. The University of Sunshine Coast (UniSC) opened in 1996. The K'gari (Fraser Island) Research Archive is a special collection managed by the library.

All seven institutions are part of the Regional Universities Network (RUN). The RUN was formed in 2011 to provide advice to government, strengthen and promote the contributions of regional universities and build capacity and sustainability through the network.⁴ Its work and existence affirm the unique place regional universities occupy in the tertiary sector in Australia. Outside of the seven institutions that are members of the RUN, with other regional institutions, that distinction is also recognised in Commonwealth reviews of higher education in Australia, which acknowledge the contributions they make to regional and national development (even while they seek remedies to common issues around their viability).⁵ A summary of RUN university archives is provided in Table 1.

The member institutions of Queensland in the RUN, Central Queensland, Southern Queensland, Sunshine Coast and the UNE, like the metropolitan University of Sydney, have functions defined by their Acts related to 'community' generally. Other RUN partners, Charles Sturt and Federation Universities, like Southern Cross, include reference to the needs and aspirations of residents of the places they were established (regional Victoria, western and

Table 1. Summary of RUN university archives was from personal communication

University	Structure	Regional	MoH NSW	Institutional	Leadership
UNE	Library	✓	✓	✓	Manager, Archivist
CSU	Library	✓	✓	✓	Manager, Archivist
Federation	Library	✓	-	✓	Curator
CQUni	Library	-	-	✓	Senior Manager, Archivist
UniSQ	Enterprise Information Management	Japanese Garden, Toowoomba Chronicle	-	✓	University Archivist
SCU	Library	Richmond River	-	-	Director, University Library
UniSC	Library	K'Gari	-	-	Director, Library Services

UNE, University of New England; CQUni, Central Queensland University; UniSQ, University of Southern Queensland; SCU, Southern Cross University; UniSC, University of Sunshine Coast; RUN, Regional Universities Network.

south-western NSW and the needs of the North Coast region of the state, respectively). The Universities Accord final report described the role regional universities play in their local communities:

They are often the largest employer in their area. They provide facilities and essential infrastructure, foster community participation and connection through local sports and other sponsorships and can play an important role in times of crisis, as evidenced by examples of universities providing support to their communities during natural disasters such as cyclones, bushfires and floods.⁶

This raises the question of what role regional universities should play in preserving local history and what local histories are visible in the institution's archives. Regional historical societies and local government public libraries often serve as repositories for the histories of regional communities, preserving records that document the unique stories and experiences of that place. However, they are often run by volunteers and poorly resourced, providing scope for collaboration. Regional universities have long played a role as 'anchor institutions' in their communities, important to the wider community life of the towns and cities where they are headquartered.⁷ This is reflected in their collections.

Nevertheless, universities that do not list a regional archive hold items that demonstrate the interconnections between the institution and community. The UniSQ Historical Archives have collections connected to the Toowoomba region, such as the *Chronicle* and the Japanese Garden Collection. The Garden was intended to provide a facility for students to learn about Asia and increase the cultural awareness of students and community. Initiated by Dr Adrian Allen, a Lecturer in Asian Studies, the Garden was built with the support and funding from the community. The collection includes planning development and construction records, plant listings and documents explaining the design and meaning of the plants. The University is the custodian of the Japanese Garden for the community. The campaign for a Teachers College in Lismore, launched in 1959, also provides a history of the region as much as it documents the institution. The establishment of the Aboriginal Institute of Community Education at the Northern Rivers Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) in 1977 is part of the history of SCU and the Bundjalung community, which initiated the development.

Description

University archives are diverse in their collection policies, the professional profile of staff and the people to whom they report. They reflect the characteristics of their institutions, their communities, funding arrangements and resources, and the contemporary period in which they were established. This makes it challenging to compare different university archives and to draw conclusions about the sector. With some irony, the lack of standardisation is a global phenomenon university archives share in Australia.⁸ University archives currently sit within the institution's library, enterprise or governance area. Individuals often initiated their development. As the foundation archivist at James Cook University lamented, 'so much [in universities] depends on individuals rather than the organisational structure. People can be convinced of the need to pursue certain goals but, if they leave, the negotiating has to begin all over again'.⁹

Fifteen of the 19 universities Nesity Allen surveyed in 1987 had formal archives.¹⁰ CAE were excluded from the research, although some of these, such as the Riverina CAE, which became part of Charles Sturt University, had an established archive. All universities must meet standards for record management as a function of state and territory legislation and national information management legislation, but an archive is a deliberate choice. Archives are records selected for *ongoing* retention,¹¹ but the institutional memories enshrined in their collections can be shaped by curators and opportunism, community expectations and the interests of collectors.¹²

The establishment of archives in universities was related to their research and teaching functions and their responsibility to serve society, and these elements define the range of stakeholders as well as the information and knowledge university archives manage. The UNE and Charles Sturt have a regional repository established by the Archives Authority of New South Wales (now Museums of History), driven by their local communities who wanted to retain custody of 'what they regard as their cultural property'.¹³

The internal stakeholders of university archives are producers and consumers of the documents they hold – students, academic and administrative staff. UNE has a stakeholder engagement strategy, working directly with historians in the university to promote their collections for teaching. Newcastle, Melbourne and Deakin have formal programs that engage students with their collections.¹⁴ UniSQ holds guided tours of the Historical Archives facilities for university staff, mounts exhibitions in the three campuses (Toowoomba, Ipswich and Springfield) and assists with researching material and mounting displays by request from faculties/departments for special occasions such as anniversaries. Their research enquiries are almost exclusively from university staff. UNE, UniSQ, CSU and Federation archives are also open to the public in separate facilities. CQUni and UniSQ access is by appointment, and the public can complete an onsite access form for UniSC materials that are not online. They each employ professional archivists.

SCU has not yet invested in a formal archive to preserve its history or the stories of the regions its campuses are located in. The Bachelor of Arts program, with its major in history, is now only available in a double degree with Education, and it is unlikely that students will be significant stakeholders of a university archive. In the aftermath of the 2022 Lismore floods, seed funding to create an online open-access repository for records related to the river was provided through a small internal grants scheme focused on recovery and resilience. Academic and library staff collaborated to build a repository of digital, historical information accessible for research and disaster planning during and following flooding events, with a focus on scientific, cultural and historical records.¹⁵ The Richmond River Open Access Repository (RROAR) comes under the auspices of the university's Library as an emerging collection of significance for the university's community and regional engagement strategic priorities, with ongoing staff resourcing absorbed into the Library's operations. Governance of the repository

was established by introducing and implementing the *Library Archives Procedure*, and donation and digitisation agreement forms were developed, reviewed and approved by the University's Legal office. The successful establishment of the RROAR has demonstrated the purpose and benefit of archives as a university resource of value. When SCU celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2024, we began to revisit the need for an archive of historical items about the university itself, and work is currently underway to acquire, describe, store, digitise and preserve archival objects from the 50 years of the university and its predecessor institutions.

Conclusion

The examples of other regional universities bring to light a series of issues that continue to differentiate university archives across Australia:

- Staffing and use of volunteers
- Collection focus: regional history and/or institutional archives
- Funding models and community grants
- Stakeholders
- Community expectations and aspirations
- Formal engagement with teaching program and research priorities
- The role of patronage

How university archives relate to the business of the university (teaching, research and records management) and perform a responsibility to community and local heritage is shaped by these factors and connections with other agencies relevant to local heritage. More research is needed to understand the contemporary state of university archives in Australia. We invite other university archivists to contact us to contribute to that research. In the meantime, our collaboration has provided a valuable learning opportunity, highlighting our collective need as regional practitioners to overcome professional and geographic isolation. While each university archive is different, we share similar challenges in managing collections with limited resources, finding engaging ways to connect with our communities to embed archives into our university's teaching, learning and research, and acknowledging and untangling the legacy of colonialism threaded throughout archival material. Understanding the constraints and possibilities of our work and strategies to deal with these has been supported through this reflection.

Notes on contributors

Adele Wessell is an Associate Professor of History at SCU. She is a State Library of NSW Merewether Fellow (2024), undertaking a history of the Richmond River in Northern New South Wales. Adele is currently undertaking a Graduate Certificate in Digital Archives at Charles Sturt University.

Clare Thorpe is the Director, Library Services at SCU, a researcher-practitioner and a non-executive board director who has worked in academic and state libraries since 2001. Clare and Adele established the Richmond River Open Access Repository as a special collection within the university library, and both are working towards opening a university archive following the 30th anniversary of the founding of SCU.

Monica Casavieja Muniz has been the University Archivist at the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) since 2010. She has a degree in Archives Sciences from the University of the Republic (Uruguay, South America). After graduating, Monica worked as an Archivist for 10 years at the University Archives in the University of the Republic. She moved to Australia in 2006 and lived for 3 years in NSW. Monica is studying for a Master of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University.

Notes

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2. D Boadle, 'Academic or Community Resource? Stakeholder Interests and Collection Management at Charles Sturt University Regional Archives 1973–2003', *The Australian Library Journal*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2003, pp. 273–86. doi: 10.1080/00049670.2003.10721555.
3. Allen; Boadle.
4. Regional Universities Network, Objectives, 2024, <https://www.run.edu.au/about-us/run-objectives/>.
5. The seven member institutions are: the Universities of New England, Southern Queensland, Central Queensland, Sunshine Coast, Charles Sturt, Federation and Southern Cross. For insight into the value and challenges of regional universities acknowledged by the Commonwealth, see for example: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report (Bradley Review)*, Canberra, December 2008, p. 205, <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv/%3A32134>, Australian Universities Accord Review Panel 2023 *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*, <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>.
6. Australian Universities Accord Review Panel 2023, p. 35.
7. For a discussion of 'anchor institutions', see J. Goddard, 'The Civic University and the City', in P Meusbürger, M Heffernan and L Suarsana (eds.), *Geographies of the University, Knowledge and Space*, vol. 12, 2018, pp. 355–73. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-75593-9_11.
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12. A Byrne, 'Institutional Memory and Memory Institutions', *The Australian Library Journal*, vol. 64, no. 4, 2015, pp. 260–1. doi: 10.1080/00049670.2015.1073657.
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15. For more information, see: A Wessell and C Thorpe, 'Digital Stewardship for River Stewardship: Creating the Richmond River Open Access Repository', *Archives and Records*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2024, pp. 1–18. doi: 10.1080/23257962.2024.2344216.

Appendix I. Foundation dates of Universities and their archives

University	Archive	Webpage
Sydney	1850	1954 https://www.sydney.edu.au/archives/
Melbourne	1853	1960 https://library.unimelb.edu.au/asc
Adelaide	1874	1983 https://www.adelaide.edu.au/records/university-archives
Tasmania	1890	1969 https://www.utas.edu.au/library/research/special-and-rare-collections
Queensland	1910	1982 https://web.library.uq.edu.au/collections/university-queensland-archives
WA	1911	1979 https://www.uwa.edu.au/library/Find-resources/Records-and-Archives
ANU	1946	1956 https://archives.anu.edu.au/
NSW	1949	1980 https://www.recordkeeping.unsw.edu.au/university-archives
UNE	1954	1960 https://www.une.edu.au/library/visit-us/une-archives-and-heritage-centre
Monash	1958	1976 https://www.monash.edu/records-archives/archives
La Trobe	1964	1982 https://www.latrobe.edu.au/library/research-support/university-historical-archives
Macquarie	1964	1978 https://www.mq.edu.au/about/facilities/museums-collections
Newcastle	1965	1975 https://libguides.newcastle.edu.au/archives
Flinders	1966	1986 https://library.flinders.edu.au/accessing-collections/special/flinders-university-archives-collection
JCU	1970	1970 https://www.jcu.edu.au/chancellery/university-archives
Griffith	1971	2012 https://griffitharchive.griffith.edu.au/
Murdoch	1973	1975 https://www.murdoch.edu.au/library/resources/special-collections
Deakin	1974	1983 https://www.deakin.edu.au/library/use-our-libraries/asc/collections/archives
Wollongong	1975	1969 https://www.uow.edu.au/library/archives/
Curtin	1987	1967 https://www.curtin.edu.au/archives/
Charles Darwin	1988	2022? https://digitalcollections.cdu.edu.au/
QUT	1988	2014? https://digitalcollections.qut.edu.au/
UTS	1988	2008? https://www.uts.edu.au/about/uts-governance/records-and-archives
WSU	1989	1991 https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/rams/archives
CSU	1990	1973 https://library.csu.edu.au/archives/home
Canberra	1990	? https://www.canberra.edu.au/policies/PolicyProcedure/Index/1597
ACU	1991	?
Edith Cowan	1991	1983 https://www.ecu.edu.au/centres/library-services/services-and-facilities/archives
UniSA	1991	1997 https://guides.library.unisa.edu.au/specialandarchivalcollections/
CQUni	1992	2003 https://www.cqu.edu.au/about-us/cquuniversity-archives
RMIT	1992	2021 https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-heritage/rmit-archives-collection
Swinburne	1992	2004 https://commons.swinburne.edu.au/hierarchy.do?topic=d8f0565e-17b0-403b-88b1-b68dfd5a0fce
UniSQ	1992	2006 https://www.unisq.edu.au/about-unisq/values-culture/history
Victoria	1992	1992 https://libraryguides.vu.edu.au/vu-archives
SCU	1994	*
Federation	1992	? https://victoriancollections.net.au/organisations/federation-university-historical-collection#collection-records
UniSC	1999	* https://www.usc.edu.au/library/collections

*No university archive? Unknown at time of submission.