

SOME THOUGHTS ON ARCHIVES AND RECORDS IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

FRED ALEXANDER

- I. CENTRAL RECORDS
- II. CURRENT RECORD-KEEPING PRACTICE
- III. DECENTRALISED HOLDINGS
- IV. COLLEGE RECORDS

It should be made clear at the outset that this article does not presume to be a comprehensive and critical analysis of the archival resources or record-keeping procedures of the several Australian universities. The opinion may be hazarded that no archivist or historian exists who has the knowledge necessary for such a general survey. It has nevertheless been suggested to the writer that, having recently completed a four to five year research project based primarily on the historical records of one Australian university, some reflections by him on the nature and extent of these records, and on resultant problems, might be of possible value to archivists and historians working, or likely to work, in similar fields elsewhere.

A second qualification is also desirable. The detailed knowledge of existing university records on which the following observations are based is confined very largely to this one institution, the University of Western Australia.¹ Such recourse as was had during the research project in question to the records of other universities, notably those of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, was primarily for the origins and early history of the sixth Australian university, established in Perth in 1912-13. This was supplemented by occasional reference for comparable developments during the half century that followed, but the records of the eastern Australian universities were then rarely consulted at first hand thanks to the generous co-operation of academic and administrative colleagues on the spot.

Some appreciation of the rich records available outside Western Australia² and certain indications of gaps and limitations in other universities had, however, also been furnished in the mid-nineteen fifties when another historical investigation—as yet uncompleted—had led the writer to intermittent personal research spread over a couple of years among the records of five of those institutions.

That most of the earlier universities of Australia then had serious shortcomings in the comprehensiveness, the organisation and the availability of their records may be suggested by two personal experiences. A fruitless search for

1. The research project was commissioned by the Senate of the University for its Golden Jubilee celebrations of 1963 and resulted in the writer's *Campus at Crawley, A Narrative and Critical Appreciation of the First Fifty Years at the University of Western Australia* (Melbourne, 1963) pp. xx + 875.

2. The resources of the University of Melbourne, for example, have been surveyed very briefly by Geoffrey Blainey in the Bibliography of his *A Centenary History of the University of Melbourne* (Melbourne, 1957).

a key minute book in one university was surprisingly compensated a year later by the handing over of the missing volume as the sequel to a casual conversation with a former staff member of the university in question during a counter lunch at a hotel near the campus of a sister institution a thousand miles away! At yet a third university a valuable set of early minutes unknown to the authorities was located during a personal rummage through an old cupboard, during the temporary absence through illness of a member of the clerical staff who had promised to look for some other possibly relevant documents.

I.

In writing of the material available to a researcher in the University of Western Australia,³ a distinction may conveniently be drawn between central records and those held by individual faculties or departments. In neither of these cases has the University had the benefit of professional archival advice or control. Surprisingly enough, however, the central records are remarkably well preserved and, in general, very comprehensive.

The Minute Books of the governing body, and of boards and faculties, are virtually complete. (Despite the illustrations cited above, the writer has no reason to doubt that conditions are comparable elsewhere throughout the Australian universities, if only because successive academic and administrative authorities have continually been called upon to refer back to previous practice on many matters.) The form of such proceedings varied little over the University's half century and no serious difficulty of back reference confronts the historian, though the practice of indexing the several volumes, which had begun with the establishment of the University, was discontinued after a few years and not resumed until relatively late in its history.

The fact that the University was largely State-financed (though fortunately free throughout from more than minimal interference or control from State government or legislature) led to the statutory requirement of an annual report

3. Some indication of the range and extent of this material may be gained from the following summary of the *Campus at Crawley* Annotated Select Bibliography, *loc. cit.*, pp. 827-52.

1. BIBLIOGRAPHIES

2. GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS AND RECORDS: (a) Publications (b) Records

3. PUBLICATIONS AND RECORDS OF THE UNIVERSITY: (a) Official Publications (b) University Press Publications (c) Minute Books (d) Annual Reports (e) Central Office Files (f) Departmental Files (g) Statistics (h) Guild Publications (i) Departmental Handbooks (j) Maps, Designs and Working Drawings (k) Art Collections

4. COLLEGE RECORDS: (a) Minute Books (b) Miscellaneous Documentary Material (c) Other Sources

5. RECORDS OF OTHER UNIVERSITIES AND ALLIED INSTITUTIONS: (a) Minute Books (b) Other Documentary Material

6. REPORTS OF ROYAL COMMISSIONERS AND OTHER INVESTIGATORS: (a) Royal Commissions (b) Other Investigations (c) Reports Submitted to Investigators

7. BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS: (a) Books (b) Pamphlets

8. PRIVATE PAPERS AND MANUSCRIPTS

9. NEWSPAPERS AND JOURNALS: (a) Newspapers (b) Journals

10. ARTICLES AND ADDRESSES

11. UNPUBLISHED THESES

to both houses of the State Parliament. These reports, with their statistical and bibliographical supplements, often contain information difficult to discover elsewhere, especially for the earlier years. The reports themselves are somewhat elusive. The file devoted to them is incomplete, but in every year except two a copy of the report may be found after diligent hunting through the Minutes of the Senate or governing body of the University, appended to the proceedings of the Senate meeting at which it was adopted.

The historian's ability to locate document "X" in the place where "Y" is normally preserved is one of the peculiarities of the central records preserved in the Registrar's Office on the Crawley campus of the University of Western Australia. This confusing if cheering compensation for inadequacies of the University's early filing system is to be explained in part by what the writer himself recalls from the mid-twenties as an invaluable characteristic of the member of the administrative staff who for many years after the death on active service in 1915 of the University's first Registrar⁴ combined most of his duties with those of Accountant. Whenever an important-looking document reached this gentleman it was his custom to call in his secretary-typist and instruct her to make six copies of it. A researcher who nowadays has failed to locate the original document in what would seem to be its proper place on a subject file may have the unexpected pleasure of coming upon one of the carbon copies of it on a file concerned with other matters—frequently on the personal file of one of the professorial staff of the time.

These personal files have been well preserved and are a rich source of information on matters in which professorial staff were involved, directly or indirectly, especially in the years prior to 1927 when a permanent appointment was made as Vice-Chancellor and that office ceased to rotate among the relatively few senior members of the teaching staff.

Such compensating information to overcome deficiencies in the organisation of archival material prior to the second world war is more difficult to come by in respect to the history of the finances of the University. This is explained in part by the fact that the afore-mentioned administrative officer (and thus his executive and academic colleagues) drew heavily on an encyclopaedic and detailed memory. This great gift, combined with wholehearted and devoted round-the-clock service to the University for nearly thirty years, unfortunately failed to offset the fact that, until the second world war, the officer conducted the whole of the University's financial records on the basis of a single-entry accounting system. Consequential limitations for the historian of the University's first three decades are obvious. Prior to 1942 detailed financial statements were not prepared. Instead, the auditors' report and summary of the year's financial transactions were accepted by the Senate and the substance incorporated in its Annual Report. From 1941 to 1952 detailed statements of general and trust accounts were published in an appendix of some ten pages in the *University Calendar* for the year in question, a certain number of offprints being made in booklet form. From 1953 (i.e. accounts for the year 1952) financial statements ceased to appear in the *Calendar* and a separate book of statements was issued annually as *University of Western Australia Financial Statements*.

Before passing to post-war improvements in the Registrar's central office record-keeping and in resultant information for the academic historian, reference should be made to the highly satisfactory state of the records of most

4. No other appointment to the office of Registrar was made until 1941!

student activities in the centrally preserved office records of the Guild of Undergraduates. This was due in part to the fact that statutory recognition of the Guild in the Act establishing the University⁵, and the vigour of its officers during the first couple of decades gave the organised student body in Western Australia a higher degree of autonomy than comparable bodies then enjoyed in other Australian universities. There are some significant gaps in the records of individual student societies—notably in those of the University Boat Club, the premises of which were taken over by the United States Navy during the second world war and its records lost before the return of the building. Those of the student body as a whole, however, are preserved in the central office of the Guild and are highly informative.

Reference may also be made in passing to the value to the historian of the substantially complete though as yet only partially classified collection of Maps, Designs and Working Drawings (*Campus at Crawley*, pp. 834-9). The University's art collections, by contrast, have been catalogued in part only and, indeed, are no longer completely preserved. Nor is there available a list of photographs or other pictorial material illustrating the history of its first half century.

II.

Historical investigators and others concerned in methods of record-keeping in Australian universities may be interested in the changes effected in the methods of filing and presentation of central office records during the latter part of the second world war and since.

Some reforms took place after the long delayed appointment in 1941 of the University's second Registrar, Dr. (now Professor) C. R. Sanders, but the major reorganisation did not come until some years after he was succeeded by Mr. A. J. Williams, in 1954. By the eve of the University's golden jubilee celebrations in 1963, its central administrative records consisted of four types of files covering, respectively, general subjects, staff, students and prospective students.⁶

Of *general files*, 2,450 were in 1963 classified as current and had been serially numbered from No. 1. All had been indexed and cross-referenced. The majority of these were treated as permanent and were broken up into parts after approximately 150 folios. In the creation of these "permanent" files a number of older files were re-numbered and incorporated in the general files.

Current staff files were numbered serially with the prefix S. These were indexed alphabetically. The files of former staff members remained as formerly, many of them in the "dungeons" below the University's central administrative building and the neighbouring Winthrop Hall, but under conditions which no longer endangered their security or good condition.

5. Act No. 37 of 1911, Section 4.

6. The paragraphs that follow are based on details in the bibliography of the writer's *Campus at Crawley*, *passim* and especially pp. 830-1. For the separate organisation of statistical details regarding the University, especially from 1947 onwards, see *ibid*, p. 833.

Student files. Files of former students were numbered and indexed in straight numerical order with the Prefix D, which in this connection indicated dead file but not necessarily deceased student! Students who first enrolled during 1959 or subsequent years were issued with a serial number, the first two digits of which indicated the year of first enrolment—e.g. 590001, etc., or 620001, etc. Students who enrolled prior to 1959 but continued or resumed their studies in that year or later also received the '59 prefix. This numerical classification of students was used by all faculties and departments within the University. Both alphabetical and numerical indexes were maintained for these student files.

Prospective students' files were maintained for three years. They were numbered serially and prefixed by the last two digits of the year of enquiry and the capital letter A—e.g. 59A/1. An alphabetical index was maintained but the files were destroyed after three years if students had not enrolled in the interim.

These desirable reforms, some of them necessitated by the growth of the University and assisted by the provision of more adequate space for the Records Clerk and his staff, do not fully meet the needs of either the historian or the administrative officers in the second half century of the University. There are still many old unindexed records housed for the time being in the "dungeons." It seems inevitable that, for space reasons alone, attention must sooner or later be given to the possible destruction of some of these old records. They contain much duplicated material and other documents of no value. On the other hand, it is probable that, for the reason listed in Section I. above, some winnowing out of this material may bring to light significant information relating to the first half century of the University.

The need for expert archival advice before this additional reorganisation of central records takes place is strengthened by the much less satisfactory condition of records outside the central repository under the direct control of the Registrar and his officers.

III.

Until the late 'forties the only approach to effectively organised records were those housed in the University's central repository. The very limited clerical facilities available to most faculties and departments precluded the building up of extensive decentralised holdings. The practice varied not only from department to department but even from successive professor to professor within the same department. Special reference may be made to four faculties in which significant depositories were being maintained in 1963.

The Law School throughout its existence from 1927, and especially after it moved into separate "temporary" buildings in 1947, maintained independent records. These contain not only student and curricular details peculiar to the Faculty of Law but also, because from time to time its first Dean filled other important roles in the University, including that of Acting Vice-Chancellor in 1939-40, certain significant material relevant to other aspects of the life of the University which is not available elsewhere.

The Faculty and Institute of Agriculture, by reason of its special affiliations with other research organisations outside the University, also built up records of not only historical but also scientific importance, the destruction of which would involve serious loss. Organisation of these records has not, however, been the responsibility of specially trained staff, and the ease with which they have been accessible depended to a considerable extent on the extensive acquaintance with them of staff members, academic or administrative, who had been for many years in the service of the University. Classified files cover: History of the Institute (A/13) Main Buildings [old file and A/2 (a)]; Ancillary Buildings and Grounds [old file and A/2 (c)]; Field Station [A/2 (d)]; Research Grants—recurring, RG/1 (a-b), non-recurring, RG/2 (a-f), in suspense, RG/3 (a-e); Students—present, FT/9 (a-d), postgraduate from other faculties and universities, FT/12 (a-d) and past students, FT/11 (a-z); Current Courses, FT/1 (a-b); Staff and Research Officers and Fellows from 1936, RO/3 and RO/4. A number of earlier files, including some research reports, dating to 1936, are in storage, unclassified.

The School of Engineering, on the other hand, partly because of the lack of centralised administrative control of its activities from the date of Whitfield's appointment as permanent Vice-Chancellor in 1927, approximated more closely in its administrative practice to that of the larger and more diversified faculties of Arts and Science, the deans of which also held office in rotation and were without special decanal clerical staff. A notable exception in the case of the School of Engineering has, however, been the care and preservation of all records concerned with testing, which at one time was not only an important but also virtually an autonomous function, financially and otherwise, of the Engineering School. These records still remained in the custody of the school in 1963.

The Medical School stood in a very special position in regard to records at the end of the University's half century. Though geographically separate in its administration from the Crawley campus, it was administratively linked with the central offices of Registrar and Bursar through the fact that its senior administrative officer under the Dean was an Assistant Registrar, who made it part of the consistent administrative practice of the new faculty from its inception in 1956 to ensure that all documents of permanent importance were lodged in the central records of the University, with copies in the Medical School of such as might be needed for the convenience of the faculty. In addition, the Medical School office continued to hold its own domestic records and such other documents as concerned the preliminary stages of discussions which ultimately led to action recorded on the files of the central office or in the minutes of the Faculty of Medicine or of its Advisory Board or of the Professorial Board and the Senate.

The summary in Sections I. and II. above suggests that the adequate preservation of central records throughout the University's first half century provides the historian with most of the material needed for a comprehensive coverage of its activities, especially during its first four decades. With the rapid expansion of the last ten years, however, the consequential increase in decentralised faculty and departmental clerical staffs and the well known application of Parkinson's Law confirm the argument in the closing paragraph of the preceding section of this paper. Early action should be taken to ensure the more effective housing of faculty and departmental records and their co-ordination with central records, possibly under the supervision of a University archivist. Point is given to this argument by the rapid building programme of

recent years and the increased danger that valuable records may be destroyed—may well, in fact, already have been destroyed—in the movement of certain departments or groups of departments to new locations.

Here the argument from Western Australia would seem to have more than local application. Most Australian university authorities must be aware of the problem, but few would appear to have taken adequate steps to meet it. The University of Sydney was the first to appoint an archivist in 1954. The next Australian university archival appointment was to the National University in 1958 “primarily to deal with the collection and arrangement of business records.” At least two other eastern Australian universities have since made archival appointments, within or without their respective university libraries. On the other side of the continent, however, the farthest the University of Western Australia had gone by 1963 was to constitute a committee to investigate the position. In the pressure of other activities, the committee did not meet in 1963.

One obstacle to effective action clearly lies in the divergence of opinion whether the person responsible for the control of a university's archives and for the co-ordination of its record-keeping should be a substantially independent university officer, or whether he should be as much a member of the Registrar's staff as the Record Clerk or his equivalent, or, again, whether the business of academic archives and records should be a function of the University Library and the officer appointed a member of the Librarian's staff.

Whatever the answer, there can be little doubt that the problem is one which demands urgent attention. It would seem reasonable to suggest that whatever solution particular universities apply, in virtue of their traditional insistence on autonomy, should be arrived at after the pooling of their several experiences and in the light of such expert advice as may be obtained, from outside as well as inside their own communities.

IV.

One peculiar facet of the problem just mentioned is the fear of some that the appointment of a university archivist as a substantially independent officer might encourage him to develop his own particular variant of Parkinson's Law. This, it is argued, might involve the university in question in a competitive effort to build up a body of archives not exclusively concerned with the history and current administration of the university or even designed to enrich the activities of a research school or schools within it. The experience of at least two of the Australian universities in recent years might be cited in illustration.

Without entering on this contentious ground, where more than angels might fear to tread, there is one incidental feature of this fact-finding report on academic records in Western Australia which should be mentioned.⁷ This concerns the affiliated colleges and associated residential institutions. Here in

7. See *Campus at Crawley*, pp. 839-40.

general there is convincing argument for the closest possible collaboration between university and non-university record-keeping bodies if comprehensive resources are to be available to the academic historian.

In Western Australia, as throughout Australia, the development of residential facilities for university students has been connected very closely but not exclusively with denominational colleges on or near the campus. The story of residence cannot therefore be told at all effectively without recourse to the archival resources of the organised religious denominations in question.

Of the four residential colleges and one hall of residence established on the Crawley campus by 1963, three were denominational institutions. Of these, two had been in existence since 1931 and 1955, respectively; the third, Kingswood College, opened its doors to students only in March, 1963. The records of the first college, St. George's, are not as complete and well organised as those of its Melbourne University equivalent, Trinity College, appeared to be when its archives were inspected by the writer in 1958 in a rewarding search for material relevant to the founder of the University of Western Australia, John Winthrop Hackett, who had been the first Vice-Principal or Sub-Warden of Trinity. The Minutes of St. George's College Council are still held in the archives of the Anglican Church Office in Cathedral Avenue, Perth. Though the corresponding minute books of the Council of St. Thomas More College are held in the college, the most illuminating documents concerning the origins and early development of this Roman Catholic college are in the archives of St. Mary's Cathedral.

This documentary material regarding both colleges is supplemented in some instances, as well as duplicated in others, by the holdings on the subject files of the University's own central records which deal with residential institutions. These records are even more closely correlated with those of the Women's College, St. Catherine's, and Currie Hall, the latter of which grew out of the University Hostel, with which the former was also associated until the end of 1959. In addition, the Hostel was closely linked with the Guild of Undergraduates, as the central records of that student body reveal.

This brief reference to some of the archival sources relating to the history of student residence at the University of Western Australia is not included to suggest paucity of relevant material. Taken together, the existing sources—read with those of the Methodist Conference in Western Australia for the origins of Kingswood College—permit the historian to piece together most that is significant in the origins and development of residential institutions on the Crawley campus. As the material might in some instances be more closely correlated, it is perhaps permissible to suggest that such steps as may be taken by any of the Australian universities in the near future for the more effective arrangement and preservation of their archival material and current records might with profit be extended to mutual advantage by inviting the collaboration of their several affiliated residential institutions.