

## ARCHIVES AND AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

by

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For some years various universities in Australia have been aware of the value of business and private papers, but have, almost without exception, done little to preserve the papers of their own administrations, while even less attention has been paid to departmental records. For purposes of discussion the term "university archives" is confined to the records of the university itself – that is, it covers all records created by all university staff in the performance of their university duties and includes minutes, correspondence, financial, personnel, legal, student and curricular records, official publications and photographs, and architectural drawings and plans; it is not concerned with archival material which university depositories have collected from other sources. It is not suggested that these very valuable schemes should be shelved in favour of university archive schemes, but rather that the latter should be established by the universities as a normal procedure.

The main obstacle in establishing an archives for any institution lies in the general failure to recognise the archival function as an integral part of the administrative process, and that it is not an information service which differs only from a reference library service in that it provides information from a collection of documents rather than books. That it "collects" such documents by a selection process which places greater importance on older documents signed by various dignitaries and officials is an unfortunate, but prevalent, misconception which surrounds the archival process. It is perhaps more unfortunate that the records management aspect of archives never receives publicity, and that publicity about archives invariably reinforces the view that the archivist's concern is for the past. It is to be hoped that with the growing accumulation of paperwork which attends the administration of any organization, the archivist can gain recognition of his role as a records manager whose interest in contemporary records is as great as his concern for the records of the past.

In this respect it is necessary for the archivist to provide a service and to justify his *raison d'être* solely on these grounds. Although there will always be a need for archival agencies to collect (the records of clubs and societies are an example which come to mind immediately), service to current administration is the aspect of archives which should be promoted if the myths which surround the profession are to be dispelled. It is farcical if the archivist is to be perpetually engaged in salvage operations instead of being a part of the operation from the outset.

The tendency in Australia has been to cater for the research worker, but to keep in line with the need for greater service to present record makers, the archivist should devote more of his time to the record and filing clerk and less to the research worker. A significant contribution in this field was a seminar on

records management and disposal scheduling which was held conjointly under the auspices of the Local Government Department and the Archives Division of the State Library of Victoria in 1967.<sup>1</sup>

Out of a total of fifteen Australian universities, only five have archivists — Sydney, the Australian National University, Melbourne, New England and Tasmania. Within the staff structure the archivist's position varies considerably, ranging from departmental head at the A.N.U. and Melbourne, to a section of the Registrar's department in Sydney and sections of the library in New England and Tasmania. Only in Sydney is the archivist a university archivist per se, having been appointed to administer the archives of the central administration. In other centres where the emphasis has been on the collection of business and private papers, university archives have not been totally neglected. At the A.N.U. some transfers from departments have been effected, and Tasmania and New England hold material from the central administration. Melbourne collects material relating to persons and societies associated with the university, while the recent statute<sup>2</sup> will ensure that the non-current material from the Central Registry will be transferred to the Archives Department.

For purposes of comparison, Australian figures compare favourably with American. In 1949 a survey of 150 colleges and universities showed that 56 had archives and archival programmes; another survey in 1962 covered 350 institutions, and of these, 113 had archival programmes. The latter figure represents a decrease of 5%.<sup>3</sup>

An examination of the statutes and by-laws of the Australian universities has revealed some interesting discrepancies between administrative theory and archival fact. The statutes of New England,<sup>4</sup> Monash,<sup>5</sup> Melbourne,<sup>6</sup> Flinders,<sup>7</sup> Sydney,<sup>8</sup> and Tasmania<sup>9</sup> make specific reference to the Registrar's responsibility for keeping the minutes of official university boards and committees, and except in the case of Tasmania, the Registrar is also specifically responsible for the preservation of records of permanent importance. (The recent statute at Melbourne will no doubt transfer the latter responsibility to the Archives.) At universities where there is no archivist, the role has sometimes been assumed by the Registrar, presumably of administrative demands rather than a desire to preserve papers which will be of permanent interest to the university — such is the case at Western Australia, Queensland, Newcastle and James Cook. In these instances, the Registrar's concern is limited to the records of the central administration, and if departmental records do survive it is a case of their doing so more because of good luck than good management. Monash and Flinders are, according to statute, committed to record preservation but in neither case has an archivist been appointed. At La Trobe the Library has accepted the responsibility of preserving the university archives, but it is not anticipated that an archivist will be appointed within the next ten years. There is no archivist at Macquarie and Adelaide, and the only likely new position in the archival field is the possible appointment of an archivist to the library staff at the University of New South Wales in 1971. In 1966 a proposal to appoint an archivist to the library staff at the University of Western

Australia did not eventuate, and the position was later abolished.

The most promising development in the Australian university archival scene is the recent Melbourne Statute, and the establishment of similar departments in all Australian universities would appear to be an imperative step if a university archival service is to function with full efficiency. The necessity of preserving the earlier records of the older universities and the implementation of a sound record management scheme for the newer institutions are matters of equal importance, neither of which is going to be possible unless there is a drastic re-evaluation of the role of archives in the university.

That the archives should be an independent department is a necessity if it is to have independent access to the record creating agencies of the university, and such access is going to be of a limited nature if it must operate through the head of another department. The need to enforce necessary restricted access conditions cannot be met if the archivist must account to another departmental head, who in certain circumstances, would have to be denied access to the papers for which he is theoretically responsible. Furthermore, no departmental head is likely to place his administrative papers with a junior member of another department, and administratively there is no departmental framework which could absorb the archives department into its overall administrative pattern, in the event of the archives department being established as a statutory authority within the university:

While it can be argued that an archives department is the logical outgrowth of a central records office, and that for this reason the archives should fall within the department administering the records office, it is inadequate in that it does not encompass departmental records. Although the basic records of the central administration are, by their nature, assured of indefinite preservation in most instances, the current situation indicates that an independent archives department is a necessity if departmental papers are to survive. An archives maintained by and for the central administration is not a satisfactory solution to the problem of maintaining departmental records, which are endangered each time there is a change of personnel. Coupled with the need for an archives department there is an even greater need for archival legislation to prevent university staff from destroying departmental records when these are of no further interest to the department or an individual staff member. Such legislation could follow the pattern for destruction procedure in state government departments, where both departmental head and the archivist must agree to destruction.

It would be impractical to suggest that university archives and other archive collections which may have been acquired should be stored and processed in separate offices — obviously it is difficult enough to obtain one archivist and archives staff! In cases where another department has an interest in collecting non-university material the advantages of combining staff and repository resources would be considerable. The duties of the University Archivist and the Archivist in Charge of other collections should be clearly defined to prevent difficulties in the performance of their duties. This is to assume that the archives repository

warrants two archivists – where the economy only runs to one, there is much ivory tower unrealism if this solitary archivist is employed to ensure the preservation of the records of other organisations while his own institution's archives go unattended. Such institutions, obviously committed to record preservation, would do better for the cause by first putting their own houses in order.

#### REFERENCES

1. Proceedings of the Seminar on Records Management and Disposal Scheduling held under the auspices of the Local Government Department and the Archives of the State Library of Victoria. 13-17 February, 1967.
2. The Statute established the Archives as an independent department, and set up a Board of Management for Archives.
3. "Colleges and University Archives: 1962" Philip P. Mason, American Archivist Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 161-5, April 1963.
4. By-Law 14, Sec. 2.
5. Statute 3.5, Division 2.
6. St. 3.13.
7. St. 2.6.
8. By-Law 4 Sec. 1.
9. Statute IV (5 and 6).