

The Establishment of University Archives — The Western Australian Experience

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University Archivist

The historical consciousness of the University administration in its own heritage was aroused many years before professional staff were finally appointed to organise its records.

The need for a University archivist was raised as early as November 1953, when the University of Western Australia was forty years old. The then Registrar, Dr Colsell Sanders, (later Professor of Education) in a letter to the Registrar of the University of Sydney, Mr Harold Maze, wrote:

“I saw your advertisement recently for an archives officer. It is quite obvious that we think on parallel lines. I wish I had such an officer. About five years ago I started collecting documents wherever I could lay hands on them which related to the history of the University I know you have done this sort of thing long ago It has only really been brought home to me recently in the discussions on future planning which have taken place that past history becomes very important.”¹

The matter was again raised in the late 1950s, and in his *magnum opus* celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the University, the Professor of Modern History, Professor Fred Alexander, stressed the need for “expert archival advice”² on the care, retention and disposal of the University’s records which showed “surprisingly that unexpectedly few gaps in essential information are evident after half a century, though highly relevant documents sometimes appear where they might least be expected”.³ Alexander alternatively proposed that, given the projected development within the University, it may warrant the creation of a position of University Archivist, whose chief responsibility would be the organisation, preservation and continuing co-ordination of all the records of the University.⁴

This proposal was discussed many times in Senate meetings during the following years and although the notion gained considerable support, it was not until 1979 that funds were allocated from the Federal Government General Development Grant 1979-1981 Triennium for the appointment of an Archivist. The writer was appointed as temporary Archivist (responsible to the Registrar) in November 1979 for a fourteen month period, which was later extended until the end of the triennium, in December 1981. Funds for the continuation of the Archivist's position, for an additional three years, were voted by the Senate at its meeting on 26th October 1981.

Historical Background

The University of Western Australia was established by the University of Western Australia Act No.37 of 1911. The University Endowment Act had already been passed in 1904, giving the Governor power to appoint trustees to control and manage all real and personal property vested in, or acquired by them for the purposes of a State University to be established by Parliament.

Staff were appointed during 1911 and 1912, and classes commenced in March 1913 in, what became commonly (though affectionately) known as "Tin Pot Alley", temporary buildings on Irwin Street in the Perth city centre.

Early administrative organisation came under the auspices of a temporary "Organiser", Hugh Gunn, who appointed the first two permanent administrators, Steve Harold Fletcher as Clerk of Senate and Ralph Ewart Parker as Accountant, in 1912. Hugh Gunn was replaced by the first Registrar, Samuel E. Townsend, BA, LLB, in September 1913.

Fletcher and Parker were largely responsible for the institution of the initial record filing and accounting systems, as Townsend's term as Registrar was shortlived, due to his death at Gallipoli. It was not until 1940 that the *ad hoc* organisation of administrative details was formalised and the University's second Registrar, Dr Colsell Sanders, was appointed.

Describing the period between 1913 and 1940, Alexander wrote:

"the records of the University were preserved with commendable zeal but without any regard for any subsequently recognisable system of indexing or cross reference by means of which even documents known to have existed might easily be found by a researcher."⁵

"... Parker's simple accountancy methods, like his filing system, remained a good deal of a mystery, fully understood only by himself and by God, though apparently sufficient to satisfy the University's not too exacting auditors."⁶

It was into the dungeon housing these records that the writer was flung on her first hot and dusty day in the new Archives!

Administrative Records

The first tasks were to survey the size and condition of the central administration records, recommend cataloguing procedures, and draw up retention and disposal schedules for the records extant in 1979. While the appointment was made primarily for administrative reasons, the first appointee was trained as a librarian/archivist and historian. Historical considerations therefore have rated highly in the retention and disposal of material and the compilation of finding aids.

At the University of Western Australia the central administration consists of the Registrar's Office, the Bursar's Office (formerly the Accountant), the Architect's Office, the Estates Office (controlling the University's endowment land and investment properties) and the Vice-Chancellor. To date only the Registrar's Office and Bursar's Office records have been fully listed and accessioned.

At the time of appointment of the Archivist, the central administrative, non-current records were stored precariously in two "dungeons". One had a leaking water main as an added attraction, so it was decided to sort, organise and accession the existing material immediately.

Generally speaking, very little early material has been lost. Any lack of documentation probably is due to the initial club-like nature of the University, in which decisions apparently were taken at evening coffee sessions at the office of the Chancellor and passed on verbally.

Registrar's Office Records

The Registrar's Office has evolved to provide secretarial service for all ten faculties; it controls the admission and examination of students, the administration of scholarships and research grants as well as staffing, publications and services sections.

The Registrar's Office archival records comprise four non-current file series; the central Senate, Professorial Board, Academic Council, Faculty and other Committees' minute books; Examinations Office, Music and Drama Examinations Board and Public Examinations Board file series and registers; Bursaries and Scholarships file series, non-current staff file series, and other miscellaneous records concerning the establishment of the University. These include, for example, a register of *ad eundem gradum* degree holders 1913-1916, and a journal about the architectural competition for the construction of Winthrop Hall and the Hackett Buildings.

The first problem facing the Archivist was to decipher the hieroglyphics on the files series and find their original order (some files had been top-numbered up to three times). Unfortunately the current series had been

in operation for twenty years, and there were no records staff who could help. Neither was there any documentation on the early series. It took the writer several months, and many false trails, to determine that there were four non-current file series. Then came the decision about which archival classification system to impose, as the file series particularly posed several problems.

First, there were four different series of general files involved — all with different numerical classification systems. For example, the first series was a single running number system, running from 1 to 874, containing 1892 files. Although there is no empirical evidence to support this thesis, it has been suggested that the files were numbered according to the pigeon holes in which they were filed, like subjects initially being filed together, but as space ran out, unrelated files were grouped together. There is no other rational explanation for the first filing system. The second was similarly a single running number system comprising 470 files with numbers running from File No.1 to File No.174, the numbers roughly relating to the letters of the alphabet, i.e. 1-18 were used for subjects beginning with A, 19-14 for subjects commencing with B, etc. The third and fourth file series were based on a Roneo number-alpha system, with a number allocated to each letter of the alphabet except X, for example, File 19/19: Vice-Chancellor's fund for staff study leave 1934-1949, the primary number 19 being used for Staffing matters.

Secondly, within these first two series, there were a number of files having the same file number, for example:

First Series File 12 — Re Lectureships, July-Aug 1912 — Gunn's recommendation.

12 — Conditions of Appointment, Professorship of Biology, Circular 2.7.1920.

12 — University of Queensland, Conditions of Appointment — Lectureship in Biology, 1924.

This negated the possibility of simply using the original number for retrieval purposes, as in some cases one number was used for up to eighty file titles.

Thirdly, the series of committee minute books is obviously not static, and will continue to be supplemented, so that an open expandable system is necessary for these.

It was decided to impose a straight numerical system of a five digit number (commencing at 00001) on the file series only. Problems with this system may arise if estrays are found, but as there are about 4000 files

involved in the Registrar's Office archival general file series, the writer concluded that this was the best option.

Each file was allocated a discrete number, and listed, giving file title, file number, previous file number(s) in the cases where the file had been top-numbered, and a brief annotated note where the Archivist considered some explanation of the content necessary.

In addition, a computer-data sheet was completed for each item, giving accession number, file title, original file number and keywords relating to the content. The keywords were taken from the file title but the file content was also scanned for extra descriptors. These data sheets were then punched, a programme written and what is basically a KWOC (Key Word Out of Context) Index produced.

In the case of the committee minute books, because the collection is relatively small and is still maintained by the Records Office, these have simply been listed chronologically, and arranged alphabetically by committee within each broad division, for example Senate, Professorial Board, etc. It may eventuate that an alpha-number system is eventually imposed for example PROF/1, PROF/2, for Professorial Board minutes, G.P./1, G.P./2, for General Purpose minutes, etc. With the growth and depersonalisation of the collection, this system will soon need a location register.

The resultant listings of the file series, registers and minute books has been collated, and was recently released as a 570 page *Listing of the Registrar's Office Archives 1913-1980*.

Bursar's Office Records

The Bursar's Office collection of archival accounting records extant in 1979 dated mainly from 1904 to the 1940s, although the Medical School material covers the late 1950s. It includes endowment land records, the Hackett and Gladden Bequest accounting records, student accounting records (although UWA was a feeless University, students were required to pay deposits on laboratory equipment, were fined for late return of library books, etc.), staff and salaries records, and records pertaining to the inauguration of the Medical School.

Since this record group is also static, it was decided to continue the numbering system applied to Registrar's Office material, (i.e. Accession 4852 ff). The records were arranged by subject (i.e. Account) rather than by function. *A Listing of the Bursar's Office Archives 1904-1960* has also recently been issued.

Repository

A temporary repository to house the accessioned records has been

established on the outskirts of the campus and more appropriate and secure accommodation is being sought. In the current economic climate, it is unlikely that a temperature controlled, archivally ideal building will be provided, but it is hoped that provision may be made to locate the archivist in the same building as the collection, with provision for a research/reading room.

Retention and Disposal

It was decided to retain intact the first series of Registrar's Office general files, which ran from c.1912 to c.1940, to illustrate as fully as possible the administrative machinery of the new University.

Retention and disposal principles were roughly devised for the second, third and fourth series and these have now been refined for the current general file series. As the current series is organised by a simple running number, it was not possible to draw up a structured schedule. Instead, each file has been examined (over 6000 files) and a life term imposed on each.

Unofficial disposal procedures were already operative for the Bursar's Office accounting records, as most series have legal retention periods stipulated. For example, creditors remittance advices and payment vouchers are destroyed after seven years. Disposal procedures have now been formalised and a Retention and Disposal Schedule for the Bursar's Office material has been drawn up.

A Retention and Disposal Schedule for Staffing Office records (based on that compiled by the University of Melbourne) has also recently been compiled, and is awaiting approval by the Registrar.

Departmental Records

Although the Archivist's initial brief concerned only the central administration records, it was considered important to gain an overview of all other record holdings, current and non-current, on campus. Consequently, an inventory form (based on that used by Macquarie University) was circulated to all fifty-two departments as well as other agencies such as the Guild of Undergraduates, Extension Service, etc. Initially, about 50 per cent of the departments responded to the form. Six months later, this inventory form was re-circulated and the writer is gratified to report that co-operation from departments was overwhelming, and that the response to the circular has been almost 100 per cent. It is in this area of departmental record management that much work has yet to be undertaken.

Other Activities

The appointment of a part-time assistant in late 1980 released the Archivist to undertake several other projects noted below.

Research Material of Ex-staff Members

During the Archivist's first year several eminent scientific Professors died: Professors Alan Posner (Animal Science), Eric Underwood (Agriculture), and Harry Waring (Zoology). Collections of their research papers have been culled and transferred to the Archives; Professor Waring's papers, for example, measures 15 metres of boxed records.

In addition, retiring staff members are asked to deposit any material of historical value with the Archives, and collections have been received from Anthropology, Medicine, Law, etc. Within each accession, these records have been divided into groups portraying the originator as a teacher, researcher and administrator. In some cases the accessions include personal records and photographs. Each accession has been listed, giving an introduction with brief biographical details of the donor. Each item (file, reprint, etc) has been allocated a running number to facilitate retrieval, but as yet, no formal accession number has been devised for this group of records.

Photographic Collection

An unordered collection of historical photographs relating to the University was already in existence in the Publications Section. In addition the Architect's Office maintained albums of new buildings constructed from about the 1960s, and the official University photographer during the 1960s and 1970s has transferred his collection.

These have been centralised in the Archives and a numerical accession number, similar to that used by the Battye Library, allocated to each photograph, with access through a subject index, for example, 1P, 2P, etc.

From this collection a "travelling exhibition" has been set up and displayed at official University functions as well as several local public libraries.

In addition, ex-students have donated or lent for copying photographs dating back to the 1920s and this is proving a valuable source.

Oral History Programme

A modest attempt is being made to establish an oral history programme in co-operation with that run by the Battye Library. Ex-staff and ex-students are being interviewed for their reminiscences of the early days

in Irwin Street and later at Crawley, the present campus. These interviews are conducted in the University Radio Station 6UVS FM Studios, and it is envisaged that a weekly or fortnightly programme giving excerpts from these interviews will commence once a backlog of recordings is available.

The Future

Recently the Archivist has become more involved with the general records management of the Registrar's Office, and has undertaken a survey with a view to upgrading the central records system. It is proposed that the current filing system be changed to a KWOC Index system, perhaps combined with a meaningful number classification system. It is envisaged that a considerable portion of the next three year contract will be spent on this project.

On the purely archival side, no attempt has yet been made to accession the University Architect's collection of maps and plans pertaining to the University. Once this collection has been ordered, the organisation of the backlog of administrative records will be complete.

The Archivist's task will then be to visit each of the 52 departments with the dual purpose of transferring and accessioning non-current records and advising on current record management. It is also envisaged that the oral history programme will be developed, with a view to publishing a selection of edited interviews.

FOOTNOTES

1. C. Sanders to W. H. Maze, 20th November 1953; UWAA Sanders Papers, Item 14
2. Alexander, Fred., *Campus at Crawley*, Cheshire, 1963, p.831
3. *ibid* p.830
4. *ibid* p.831
5. *ibid* p.830
6. *ibid* pp.52-53