

Distance Learning: A new approach to archival education

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Consultation with the archival community and market research confirmed a need and demand for a distance education course which would provide a professional qualification for archivists. The Department of Library and Information Science at Edith Cowan University took up this challenge, designing a course consisting entirely of records and archives studies aimed at educating professionals to work in a technological environment. Field work assignments and the practicum provide hands-on experience, but the course emphasis is on the provision of a sound theoretical framework and research skills to equip students to deal with future problems as they are encountered. Use of communications technology in course delivery increases ease of contact with lecturers and access to university services, as well as providing Internet access.

The course is now in its second year. Enrolments and student reaction are both very pleasing and tend to support the usefulness of market surveys and consultation in the development of university courses for professional education.

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY is a multi-campus institution established in 1991 from the former Western Australian College of Advanced Education, which had a particular strength in teaching programs. It has a current enrolment of approximately 20 000 students. As a new university, it takes pride in its willingness to adopt new techniques; its program development,

especially for professional education; and given its antecedents in teacher education, in the quality of its teaching. In 1993 the Department of Library and Information Science at Edith Cowan University embarked on a course development program aimed at increasing its involvement in professional education for the wider information service industry. Because access to professional archival education has been a long-felt need in the Western Australian archival community, the Department decided to investigate the possibility of creating a course which would provide archivists with a professional qualification.

Informal approaches to members of the local archives community met with encouragement to proceed with plans for such a course and suggestions that the most appropriate level for the award was a graduate diploma. A planning process was initiated, commencing with a study of need and demand for the course.

Consultation and Market Research

Formal approaches were made to major employers of archivists. Australian Archives and the State Archives of Western Australia agreed to discuss the structure and content of the proposed course. Both institutions responded with constructive criticism which influenced the course development process.

Chris Coggin, Director of State Archives in Western Australia¹ and George Nichols, Director-General of the Australian Archives provided letters of support to go forward with the formal proposal for the Graduate Diploma of Science (Archives Studies) to the University's Programs Committee.

Mr Nichols' letter confirmed the need for an award available through distance education, saying:

I understand that Edith Cowan University is planning to offer externally a Graduate Diploma of Applied Science (Archives Studies) next year.

From several points of view, this news is particularly welcome. Until now, with the concentration of the three currently available archives programs in Melbourne and Sydney, the opportunities to obtain an archives qualification have been limited. A distance learning course would effectively meet a problem which has long faced a large regionally based organisation such as the Australian Archives and provide its staff with ready access to an appropriate course regardless of their whereabouts. Additionally, archivists throughout Australia and in neighbouring countries have in prospect a means to obtain a formal qualification in archives administration.²

Edith Cowan University requires that a Consultative Committee be set up for every course and report to their appropriate Faculty Consultative Committee. Membership consists of community members appointed on the basis of their personal expertise and at least one graduate of the course, together with representative university staff associated with the course. Consultative Committees are an effective means of ensuring that courses are responsive to the community environment and of staying in touch with developments and changing needs in employing agencies and users of professional services. Although the Committee for the Graduate Diploma was not formally constituted until University approval for the Diploma was achieved, prospective members were identified and consulted informally throughout the period of course development.

The viability of the market for the Graduate Diploma was tested by calling for expressions of interest in enrolling for such a course. An advertisement placed in *The West Australian* on Saturday, 3 April 1993, in *The Weekend Australian* on Saturday, 10 April and in an issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* elicited over two hundred responses by mid May. Further inquiries followed, indicating particularly strong interest in the proposed Graduate Diploma from across the Australian archival community. Sixty of the responses were from metropolitan Perth, and eight from country Western Australia. The rest were spread across all states of Australia. There were few responses and no enrolments from residents of Melbourne and Sydney where archival education courses are easily accessed.

Although the advertisement asked only for an expression of interest in enrolling in the course at some future date, the response was exciting. It was clear that a major part of the potential market for the course was outside Perth. This realisation, together with the strong interest expressed by Australian Archives in Canberra, was a major factor in the decision to offer the Diploma nationally by distance education in the first instance. It was a bold decision, given that we knew of no other University offering a course by distance education leading to a professional qualification for archivists.³

The response from Western Australia raised a potential problem which has not so far eventuated, but had to be considered. There is a limited number of archival institutions in Western Australia, which employ qualified archivists and which could provide student projects and practicum placements. Taking advantage of these local institutions by importuning them to be hosts for too many student projects would ultimately alienate them, resulting in a possible loss of support for the course and its graduates. To avoid this the Department was prepared to impose quotas if necessary. However, the need has not arisen

for two reasons. The first is that enrolments are well within manageable levels. The second is that all currently enrolled students are part time and their rates of progress vary. The present cohort is likely to address the practicum unit in stages rather than all together. Although this problem of shortage of host institutions is less likely to arise in more populous states where a greater number of archival institutions exist, the Department's experience with practicum placements in other courses has made it sensitive to the needs not only of employing institutions but also of other educational institutions with students requiring placement. If there should be students resident within the major intake area of another institution offering archival education, staff of that institution will, as a matter of courtesy, be consulted before practicum placements are made.

At this stage in planning the University advised the Department that the course would only be approved if it were fee-paying. This discouraged a number of prospective students from enrolling. But if fees must be charged it is probably less unattractive in the case of distance education courses because the fee can be set against the alternative of the outlay for travel and accommodation costs; income forgone and the personal costs of separation from or disruption to families which are associated with a decision to study on campus at an institution far from home.

One advantage of the fee to the Graduate Diploma of Science (Archives Studies) is that students who have paid fees are likely to be both more committed to their studies and more critical of the course and the educational services offered by the University. Staff work constantly to improve the standard of course materials and access to facilities, as well as providing extensive telephone and e-mail support to students and host supervisors who wish to discuss problems or study-topics. It is also, of course, very rewarding to lecturing staff to work with highly committed and enthusiastic students. These incentives constantly to improve the quality of the course can only be of benefit to the profession in general.

The Graduate Diploma of Science (Archives Studies) will become self-funding, but at present the University is still providing some financial support to the program.

Philosophy and Content of the Program

The Diploma was planned to provide a program dealing exclusively with records and archives studies, placing an emphasis on fostering an understanding of the records continuum. The consultation process had made

it clear that the archives community did not want any library studies content included in such a professional award. As it was to be a graduate level award, there was no need to include elective units or historical studies, because students are likely to have pursued such studies during their undergraduate years. Furthermore, because a Graduate Diploma is an entry level professional award and the equivalent of one year's full-time study, there is literally no room for peripheral content. No prior knowledge is assumed, so when the course content was being mapped out it was necessary to design a program which would develop students' knowledge from basic principles to an advanced understanding of current and future issues.

Structurally, the Diploma consists of eight units which are the equivalent of one year's full-time study. Although full-time students would complete four units each semester and the course structure is designed to cater for this, most external students are enrolled part time. First semester's studies commence with two introductory units: *An Introduction to Archives Management* and *The Records Management Environment*. These are set as prerequisites for some of the later units, to ensure orderly progression of studies for part-time students and a clear understanding of basic principles. *Preservation and Storage* and *Government Records and Archives* are also studied in first semester. This last unit provides an introduction to the machinery of government, to Australian government records and archives practice, and to issues in accountability in recordkeeping. In second semester students build on concepts mastered in the two introductory units in their studies of *Arrangement and Description of Archives* and *Records Services: Administration and Control*, a unit which emphasises records classification and thesaurus construction. *Electronic Recordkeeping* also builds on records management principles, exploring the practices necessary to preserve electronic records with continuing value.

The course is completed by requiring students to practise their skills in the *Archives Practicum* unit. Under the supervision of a professional archivist they will complete a project agreed upon by the student and the host institution. If the organisation is outside the Perth Metropolitan area and there is no professional archivist on staff able to undertake supervision of the student at the workplace, the Department will approve the practicum only if a local professional archivist can be found to act as a part-time professional supervisor and mentor for the student. The Practicum is a pass/fail unit: the host institution supervisor and University supervising lecturer must agree on the basis of workplace performance and submitted reports that the student is competent to practise as a professional archivist.

These are exciting and challenging times for archives and records management: it was seen as valuable to the future of the profession to deal with the opportunities presented by technological change in the workplace and the difficulties for accountability and records control that are inherent in this rapidly changing environment. So students are not only introduced to these concepts in a study unit on electronic recordkeeping, and the technological environment addressed throughout the course content, but are made familiar with computers and communication technology in the day-to-day pursuit of their studies.

The Faculty of Science and Technology developed the Virtual Campus in 1992 in order to ease the isolation of external students and improve their access to University services. Students need only a telephone, a modem and a personal computer to use the system, which offers access to the Internet; e-mail facilities to contact lecturers, fellow students and University administrative officers; use of the University Library and the opportunity to participate in social or tutorial 'chat' sessions. The Virtual Campus operates twenty-four hours a day and so reduces telephone communication difficulties caused by differences in time zones across Australia. The system also allows electronic submission, marking and return of assignments, thus eliminating what Virtual Campus users call 'snail mail'. Postal delivery to and from eastern states' country areas can take as much as a week each way, so feedback on student progress is delivered much more speedily and discussions about any difficulties are far less distant and stilted.⁴

The Archives Studies program takes full advantage of the Virtual Campus facilities. It provides access to copyright-cleared readings and an archives management package which students can download to their home computer to familiarise themselves with an automated archives management system. They are offered the option of submitting arrangement and description assignments in the form of a file created on this system. Guidance to the Internet is given so that students learn to access news groups and to transfer files. More recently, students have also been encouraged to use the World Wide Web and take advantage of its more user-friendly facilities and capabilities for the delivery and use of graphics. The Department has set up its own Web server which can be accessed through the Edith Cowan University home page at <http://www.cowan.edu.au>.

In semester one 1995, an enhanced form of Web access using the PPP protocol became available to students via remote log-in. With a fast modem (14 000 baud minimum, 28 000 baud preferred) students can have multimedia access rather than the restrictive text-only mode access previously available.

To take advantage of the course delivery possibilities afforded by the Web, the Department has embarked on an ongoing program to convert its curriculum material to World Wide Web Hyper Text Markup Language. Adobe Acrobat is also under investigation as a crossplatform courseware authoring environment.

Assessment of student progress in external courses is governed by University regulations. In each unit of study except the Practicum, students must submit three assignments at prescribed intervals and sit for an examination at the end of the unit. While the four sets of marks are aggregated to a total semester mark, students must pass the examination to pass the unit. Even if the total semester mark is greater than the set pass mark, if the examination is failed the unit must be repeated. There is considerable variety in the type of assignments set, ranging from literature surveys and discussions of theory and practice, reports on services and procedures observed in host archives, to practical field work. Students visit archival institutions, observe actual practice and participate in field work. Several units in the course contain practical projects as assignments. For example, in the two introductory units students are asked to visit an archives or records service and write reports on services observed. In the unit *Arrangement and Description* students prepare a guide to a major record series, including an agency or biographical history describing the provenance of the records and the necessary series description, in an archival agency of their choosing. In the *Government Records and Archives* unit students are directed to choose a government archival agency, describe its records description practices and systems and evaluate them against the ICA's *Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description* and ISAD(G): General International Standard in its *Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description*. Both of these field work assignments attract twenty-five per cent of the semester mark. There are two practical projects in the *Preservation and Storage* unit: students first directed to conduct a preservation survey of a small collection, and then prepare a disaster plan for the collection. Students are given letters of introduction to agencies for all practical assignments, identifying them as students of Edith Cowan University's Graduate Diploma of Science (Archives Studies) and outlining their project requirements. They are asked to accept gracefully a refusal by an agency to act as their host.

While this practice relies on the goodwill of archival institutions it offers them some benefits such as the opportunity for completion of small projects which might otherwise take longer to complete or remain as part of a backlog for some time to come. It also introduces prospective members of the profession to those established in it, providing an opportunity to assess performance of possible employees and exchange ideas. Networking and

cooperation is a notable feature of the archival community and establishment of professional contacts is of great value to newcomers. Archival institutions which participate may well benefit from these aspects.

Electronic Recordkeeping was selected to pilot another innovation of the Archives program: delivery of course material by CD-ROM. The content of this unit is particularly appropriate to electronic delivery and the CD-ROM version of the unit is in use for the first time in semester one, 1995. This format has the potential greatly to enhance students' opportunities to practice newly acquired skills through the inclusion of interactive exercises. Future versions of this unit will also be available for sale as an educational package. The unit is currently mounted on the Department's Web server for anyone who wishes to preview its content and format.

Other units will be converted to electronic format as development funds become available. However, while competence in archival practice is seen as essential, emphasis is given to a thorough grounding in theory and ethics acquired through extensive reading and case studies. This approach provides students with the philosophical framework and research skills to tackle future problems as they are encountered. To rely solely on the provision of competence in prescribed tasks is to educate on the basis of current and past practice alone. In a fast changing world we must equip students with a sound basis for dealing with the future.

We are confident that we have the right blend of theory and practice. As well as acting on the advice obtained through the consultative process the Department engaged the professional services of experts to write certain units which required the technical expertise of professional archivists and conservators. This collegial approach, together with the involvement of the Consultative Committee for the course was a most stimulating working environment during the period of course materials development. Course writing for first semester units was completed late in 1993 and a professional archivist was appointed to the staff of the Department before teaching started in 1994.

While the Archives Program is now entering a period of consolidation, in which course materials will be progressively revised in the light of constructive criticism from the Consultative Committee and students, there are also plans for the future. Increasingly sophisticated interactive exercises for the *Electronic Recordkeeping* CD-ROM will be further developed as funds become available. Interest in purchasing this unit for inclusion in teaching programs has been expressed by other archival educators in Australia and North America and

the package will be available for sale to individuals and institutions. Development of the electronic version of this study package will enable us to use it as a template to convert other units to this format. While not all students presently have access to CD-ROM drives, this technology is becoming increasingly common in the home as well as the workplace and the Archives Program is now well positioned to take advantage of a delivery mode which is far more flexible than the conventional printed study packages.

The Archives Studies program is well placed in the University, drawing on the very stimulating and supportive environment of the Department of Library and Information Science. For many years the Department has offered courses for teacher librarians and library technicians to both internal and external students and has fostered an ethos of strong support for isolated students. There is a clear commitment to developing and offering quality professional education for the information service industry. Concurrent with the development of the Graduate Diploma of Science (Archives Studies), the Department also

- developed a new undergraduate degree: the Bachelor of Science (Communication and Information Technology) which contains a stream of study for records managers;
- revised the Associate Diploma of Science (Library Technology) to wider awareness of records management issues by including two units in records management and one on archives practice;
- participated in the open learning project of the Wollongong Graduate Consortium. Four videos⁵ on records management and archives have now been shown on SBS Television. These together with another produced in the last year are regularly used in both the records and archives teaching programs;
- appointed a lecturer expert in the field of multimedia who has, among other things, been instrumental in the development of the CD-ROM version of the *Electronic Recordkeeping* unit for the Department's World Wide Web server; and
- developed in cooperation with the Records Management Association of Australia (WA Branch) a University Certificate in Public Sector Records Management which is now available for individual enrolment on a fee-paying basis or for purchase as an in-house training package by government agencies. There are no prerequisites for the course, other

than completion of Year Twelve or equivalent records management experience. The Certificate aims to provide public sector records officers with basic training in the practices and procedures of records management, developing in students the skills, knowledge and understanding which will allow them to apply sound principles to the management of records in their organisation. It will also provide a base for further study. Elective units allow students to study either Commonwealth, state, or local government recordkeeping practices in more depth, according to their employment needs.

Results of the Program To Date

There are presently twenty-five part-time students enrolled in the Course. This number is considerably lower than indicated by the response to the April 1993 advertisements, but there are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, the advertisement called only for expressions of interest in enrolling in a Graduate Diploma in Archives Studies at some time in the future. It did not ask for commitment to enrol at any specific time, or at all. Those experienced in administration of the enrolment process indicate that actual enrolments are often in the order of only fifty per cent of applications to study externally.

Because it was placed very early in the planning stages, the advertisement did not indicate that the Diploma would be a fee-paying course, although this was explained in conversations with those who responded later rather than sooner. A number of respondents indicated that they had been prompted by a general interest in history to inquire about the course and saw this as an opportunity to pursue that interest, rather than being motivated by an ambition to pursue a career in archives management. It is likely that the prospect of paying fees for the course discouraged this small group. Indeed, the fee is likely to have discouraged others too. Australians are not accustomed to paying for tertiary education: some disagree in principle, but it is equally likely that fees for education are simply not included in personal financial plans.

Evaluation of Progress

Consultation with representatives of the archival profession has been vital in the development of the Graduate Diploma of Science (Archives Studies) and will continue to be a feature of its management. The Department believes that the best way to stay in touch with the needs of the profession is through the involvement and collaboration of employers, practising archivists and

educators from other institutions in course development and revision to respond to changing needs in the workplace. The contribution of the Consultative Committee has been and will continue to be highly valued. Advertising strategies to inform the archives and records community of our intentions to offer the Graduate Diploma, to raise awareness of the course, to analyse the spread of the potential student population and to compile a mailing list of potential students have also been particularly useful. The Archives Program will continue to advertise its activities, including continuing education courses and courseware through the professional literature. The Archives Program has been able to reduce the isolation and increase the technological literacy of students by exploring the leading edge of technology in distance education delivery. Current strategies will be refined where possible and implemented for all appropriate units. As further opportunities which may be of benefit to students present themselves they will be evaluated for implementation.

The Graduate Diploma of Science (Archives Studies) will, of course, be judged on the quality of its product. Although there are no graduates as yet because all students are part-time and progressing at differing rates through the course, some are already in employment. Of those, some are supported by their employers who are monitoring their progress with interest. Although there have been some withdrawals from the course, none has indicated dissatisfaction as a reason for discontinuing studies. Feedback from students both informally and through the University's formal evaluation process has been encouraging, indicating that they find their studies stimulating and enjoyable.

Endnotes

1. C. Coggin. Letter dated 3 May 1993.
2. G. Nichols. Letter dated 11 April 1993.
3. Literature on existing archives education programs employing distance learning methods, at least in English language journals, is decidedly patchy. For passing mentions to some overseas examples, see Rosmary Dunhill and Cynthia Short, 'The training of archivists 1970–1990: an overview', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 12, no. 1 Spring 1991, pp. 42–50; Intervention at Session 3 of the ICA 12th International Congress on Archives by Feng Zizhi, State Archives Bureau of China, *Archivum*, vol. xxxix, 1994, p. 371; and Francis Blouin, 'Moscow State Historico-Archival Institute and Archival Education in the USSR', *American Archivist*, vol. 51, no. 4, Fall 1988, pp. 501–511. ARMA International lists in its 1994 *Directory of Collegiate Schools Offering Courses and Majors in Records and Information Management* introductory semester-long correspondence courses in records management for business students offered by Chadron State College in Nebraska and Murray State University in Kentucky. As for the future, Goucher College Center for Continuing Studies has indicated on Educom

Update, an electronic information services (URL <http://educom.edu/>), its intention to offer a Preservation Distance Learning Program at Master of Arts level and distance education has been proposed as a session of the Archival Educators Roundtable at the forthcoming SAA conference in Washington.

4. For a more comprehensive description of Virtual Campus facilities see K. Anderson, 'Archives at a distance; developing professional education by external study for archivists', paper presented to the ASA Annual Conference, Townsville, May 1994. (Proceedings forthcoming.)
5. 1992 Records Management Concepts. Perth: Media Production Unit, Edith Cowan University.
1993 The Records Retention and Disposal Schedule. Perth: Media Production Unit, Edith Cowan University.
1993 Archives. Perth: Media Production Unit, Edith Cowan University.
1994 Electronic Recordkeeping. Perth: Media Production Unit, Edith Cowan University.
1993 The Oldest Profession: Records Management in the Western World. Perth: Media Production Unit, Edith Cowan University.