The Role of Outreach in Australian Archive Programs

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Catherine Nicholls is the Archives Systems Officer for Monash University Archives, Records and Archives Services, where she has worked since 1995. Catherine has a BA in History from Monash University and has recently submitted her thesis titled 'Outreach in Australian Archive Programs' as part of a Master of Information Management and Systems (Honours) degree at Monash University.

The article outlines the writer's research into the exploration of the concept and practice of outreach in Australian archive programs, which was completed as the thesis component of her Masters degree.[1] The thesis is currently under examination. The article outlines the purpose of the research, definitions used in the research, methods and sources and an overview of the research results. This is a refereed article.

The role and concept of outreach in Australian archive programs does not have a particularly high profile in the world of recordkeeping theory and practice. The objective of this article is to introduce the purpose, definitions, motivation, methods and sources used in recent research undertaken into outreach in Australian archive programs. The article will also provide an overview of some of the key research results, including a proposed new definition of the concept of outreach.

Purpose of research

The aim of the research was to investigate outreach activities in Australian archive programs, with a particular focus on the role they can play in relation to the mission and goals of the program as a whole, and on what constitutes a successful outreach activity. Through analysis of the literary warrant, surveys

and best practice case studies, the research explored the nature of outreach activities, their objectives and purposes, and their place in archive programs. Particular attention was paid to critical success factors and the evaluation of outreach activities. Resulting from this research were proposals about the ways in which outreach activities could be more effectively incorporated into archive programs and support their overall objectives.

Outreach activity receives little mention in the available Australian archival literature,[2] and it is used in different ways by different archive programs and by commentators in the literature. Therefore, another aim of the research was to explore the terms and concepts relating to outreach, to consider whether a better articulation of outreach and its role in an archive program is needed, and, if so, to propose a new definition of the concept.

Definitions

Definitions of the key concepts including outreach, outreach activities, archive programs, and the wider or defined community were formulated.

The working definition of outreach used during the research stated that:

> outreach activity is any activity that promotes the use and/or mission of the archive program to its wider community.

In this definition, archive program is defined as:

> managing records of continuing value

and the wider community as:

> the range of people and organisations that the archive program services or aims to service.

The usefulness of these definitions were tested in relation to the findings of the surveys and case studies and an overall refined definition was developed, which shifted the focus to the role outreach plays in marketing the archive program. The definition of the term 'marketing' was influenced by the work of Dickman, and is defined as a:

> combination of activities aimed at attracting the [defined community to the archive program] and making people aware of the collections, facilities and services.[3]

Motivation

The prime motivation for undertaking the research was a concern about the lack of previous research into outreach activities in Australian archive programs. As mentioned earlier this is reflected in the available archival literature which barely acknowledges the role of outreach activities in

Australian archive programs, let alone presents any detailed research into their role or purpose.

Indeed, when the issue of outreach is raised in either the literature or through informal discussions with professionals in the archives field, its importance in relation to other archive activities is often underrated. Although many archivists value outreach activities and participate in them when they can, there is an underlying assumption that outreach activities are not an essential component of an archive program's core functions. There is a suggestion that outreach activities are a luxury activity that can only be executed once all other archival work has been completed.

Therefore, another related motivation of the research was to explore whether this attitude towards outreach activities was reflected in the actual policies, procedures and practices of archive programs in Australia. It was important to find out why professionals in the field held this opinion because the issue raises many questions. For example, if archive programs do not participate in outreach activities, then how do they market their programs to their resources allocators? If archive programs do not participate in outreach activities, how does their community of users come to know about their services? If archive programs do not participate in outreach activities, how do they expect their clients to find out about and follow any of the regulations, procedures and/ or guidelines the archive program may issue?

Methods and sources

A range of methods were used in the research, including:

- use of literary warrant analysis to define key concepts and related paradigms;

- surveys of outreach activities, comprising a questionnaire canvassing all archive programs in the Directory of Archives in Australia,[4] and a focused study of state and territory government archive programs based on analysis of the publicity they provide on their websites, documents such as annual reports, and follow-up discussions with their staff;

- case studies of 'typical' outreach activities (including the BHP *Leadership and Learning* exhibition and the National Archives of Australia's *Between Two Worlds* exhibition); and

- content analysis of exhibition visitors books from the *Between Two Worlds* exhibition.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all of these resources in detail,[5] however the results from the questionnaire and case studies were particularly illuminating; therefore the methods used in their construction deserve some elaboration. The questionnaire was broken into two parts and was designed to provide information about outreach activities in general and exhibitions in particular. Part 1 of the survey was quantitative and focused on questions which aimed to gather information about:

- the archive program's profile (eg name of program, size of program, objectives of program, etc);

- the objective or mission of the archive program;

- the level of importance that outreach has within the overall context of the archive program;

- the types of outreach activities the archive program participated in;

- the types of exhibition activities the archive program participated in (if they participated in exhibitions); and

- staff resources for outreach activities.

Part 2 of the questionnaire was qualitative and aimed to collect information about:

- evaluation methods for outreach activities;

- collaboration with other institutions or organisations on exhibitions;

- the objectives of exhibition participation (if they participated in exhibitions);

- reasons why an archive program might participate in exhibitions;

- the perceived benefits/disadvantages of migrating from static exhibitions to virtual exhibitions on the Internet/Intranet; and

- the essential elements of a successful exhibition.

The questionnaire consisted of a combination of written responses and tick boxes.

Contextualised case studies of a 'typical' outreach activity – exhibitions – were undertaken to provide an in-depth view of successful best practice outreach activities. The studies also collected and analysed data about the program as a whole and other outreach activities undertaken. It was decided to use both

survey and case study methods in order to find out as much as possible about the nature of outreach activities in Australian archive programs.

In order to examine outreach activities in detail in the case studies it was decided to focus on one type of activity that was relatively common across all archive programs. The decision to select exhibitions as the focus was made after some initial reading about outreach activities in the literature and preliminary discussions with other recordkeeping professionals. It was apparent that most writers and archive programs identified exhibitions as a typical outreach activity. One of the reasons it was important to find an activity that was accepted as being a typical outreach activity across the majority of archive programs was because it would make data comparison between the case studies and survey results consistent. In other words, it was assumed that archive programs approached during the course of the survey research would be likely to participate in exhibition activities, and able to identify and provide information about their exhibition activities.

Criteria for the selection of the case studies were that the exhibition must:

•   contain archival material;

•   be produced by the archive program (as opposed to an exhibition that included archival material but was produced by a library, museum or other institution);

•   be viewed as a success by the archive program; and

•   incorporate a high number of 'best practice' features as outlined in the relevant literature sources, including formal outreach policies and procedures.

Other factors taken into account included the size and scope of the archive program. Although government or corporate archive programs were not the only ones considered at the beginning of the project, it soon became apparent that the large, high profile archive programs would be the most appropriate candidates. Although initial research indicated that all types of archive programs participated in outreach there was also an indication that many outreach activities took place on an ad hoc basis, particularly in small, under-resourced programs.

An informal interview with two archivists from small archive programs was conducted before the selection of case studies took place. An informal interview about archive exhibitions with a librarian from a large institution was also conducted around the same time. The archivists and librarian involved in these interviews were all enthusiastic supporters of outreach activities. However, the point was made that smaller archive programs were often staffed

by sole archivists. In many cases the sole archivist *is* the archives and every phone call, visit, or request is an outreach activity or has to be treated as such. The sole archivist cannot delegate and is responsible for everything, so it is even harder to find the time and resources for outreach activities. Outreach activities are probably done on an ad hoc basis for most sole archivists.

BHP Archives was approached because it is a large non-government archive program that has been involved in exhibition (and related types of) activities over a number of years. The case study focused on the BHP Archives exhibition, *Leadership and Learning*, which was first shown in February 1997, at the company's Global Leadership Centre opening.

The National Archives presented itself as a case study. The *Between Two Worlds* exhibition, which was opened in 1993 and has been travelling ever since, has been a well-documented success for the archive program. By mid-1993, the National Archives had established a public programs section and was participating in a selection of ad hoc outreach activities. When research began in 1997, the National Archives' Public Programs section was fully established and was participating in a broad range of outreach activities. Both the public program and the exhibition itself had been documented in the literature, which indicated that there was a range of available research resources for the case study.

Overview of results

The research established that most small archive program survey respondents do not participate in outreach activities in any formal or systematic way. However, many were involved in participating in outreach activities in an ad hoc fashion. On the other hand, the case study programs and most state and territory archive programs do participate in a formal way, and take a more systematic and planned approach towards their outreach activities. The factors that influence an archive program's decision to participate or not participate in outreach activities per se varied from archive program to archive program. The research revealed that issues including lack of financial resources and access to professional designers were relevant, but not critical to this decision.

If resources are not the only issue which determine why an archive program does or does not participate in outreach activities, what other factors are involved? The research results indicate that in many instances the decision to participate or not participate in outreach activities was determined by a number of other inter-related factors, including the mission and objectives of the archive program, the way in which the archive program understands and values the role of outreach activities, and the way the archive program chooses to incorporate outreach activities into its program.

The survey results, the study of state and government archive programs, and the two best practice case studies suggest that participation in outreach can either be well-planned and systematic or ad hoc and serendipitous depending on the amount and nature of resources available to the archive program.

The research results also indicate that archive programs participate in a much wider range of outreach activities than exhibitions and publications, although these are among the most common, and tend to be regarded as the most typical. The survey results demonstrate that there are no standard outreach activities that are common to all the archive programs that responded. Many archive programs participate in a wide range of activities with an outreach component that are related to the core business of the archive program or its parent organisation. For example, open days are a popular school activity among school archive programs, probably because participation in open days are an important objective of these schools.

The research looked in depth at the reasons why archive programs participate in outreach and the goals and objectives of particular outreach activities. Although the programs that participated in the research all identified promotion of their services, in particular their reference and access services, as a primary objective of outreach activities, they also advanced a range of other important reasons, including education, entertainment, raising the profile of the archive program, and allowing the client base to see the records (which does not necessarily mean using or accessing the records for research purposes).

The survey results also demonstrated that archive programs believe that some outreach activities, in particular exhibitions are important because they have the potential to reach large audiences, encourage spin off outreach activities and dramatically alter the target audience's perception about a particular person, place or event in history.

The findings of the research tend to support the view that traditional definitions and understandings of outreach have limited its role in an archive program and tended to perpetuate the view that it is an activity that is either marginal to the core business of an archive program, or associated exclusively with the reference and access sub-programs, rather than all aspects of the archive program.

A significant insight coming out of the research was the realisation that a more refined concept of outreach can only be embraced if it is not seen as exclusively associated with reference and access activities. Many archive programs and literature sources position outreach activities as the final step in promoting the use of archive programs through reference and access

services. Although providing access, and promoting the archive program's ability to provide access to records, is an important, even central, objective of many archive program activities, it is not necessarily the prime or singular objective of all archive program activities. However, if the archive program's concept of outreach is inextricably linked to access and reference issues, to the point where this is seen as the main reason for participating in such activities, then other activities with a strong outreach component run the risk of being marginalised within the archive program.

The research suggests that activities like exhibitions, that have long been regarded as typical outreach activities are actually more than a peripheral public relations tool. Both the survey results and the case studies in particular, clearly demonstrated that exhibitions perform a wide range of purposes. For example, the BHP Archives *Leadership and Learning* exhibition aimed to educate and inform staff about the company's early introduction of in-house training and its continued commitment to leadership and learning. The National Archives' *Between Two Worlds* exhibition aimed to contribute to the International Year for the World's Indigenous People celebrations, further the process of reconciliation in Australia, and inform, provide insight and increase visitors' understanding of the issues affecting Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders. Other goals of the exhibition included giving Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders a better understanding of what records about them and their people are likely to be held by the Archives or Commonwealth departments. The exhibition also aimed to be relevant, stimulating, challenging and raise awareness of the existence and purpose of the National Archives and to convince visitors of its significance.

A new definition

The research results suggest that applying a more rigorously defined concept of outreach may assist archive programs to gain much greater benefits from the activities currently labelled as 'outreach', and to develop more effective and co-ordinated promotional and marketing services in relation to all their functions. The proposed new definition focuses on the marketing or promotional purposes of outreach, and specifies its relationship to all aspects of the archive program:

> Outreach is marketing the mission of the archive program to its defined community.

Identifying or maximising the outreach potential of all the activities the archive program already participates in, as well as accurately identifying those components of so-called outreach activities that serve other archival purposes, is seen as the first step in developing a strong and useful strategy for outreach within the archive program as a whole, and more effectively integrating those

components of existing 'outreach' initiatives that serve other archival purposes with related parts of the program.

The new definition views the concept of outreach as a consistent and thorough approach to the development and implementation of strategies that successfully market the mission of the archive program to its defined community. This concept of outreach can be implemented by a dedicated sub-program within the archive program, or it can be implemented as a component of all other sub-programs. However, once outreach thus defined is implemented, it is proposed that a single-minded approach towards the marketing and promotional objectives of an archive program should be consistently applied across the whole spectrum of an archive program's activities.

ENDNOTES

1 I would like to thank the National Archives, BHP and the survey participants for their help and cooperation throughout the research project. I also appreciated the help and feedback from my colleagues and friends during the writing of the thesis and the completion of this article. I would also like to thank Professor Sue McKemmish for her valuable feedback, words of wisdom and commitment to this research and for providing advice in the construction of this article.

2 Some of the available literature included:

Helen Nosworthy, 'Reaching Out: A Core Program for Australian Archives', in Sue McKemmish & Michael Piggott (eds), *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives [National Archives] First Fifty Years*, Ancora Press in association with Australian Archives, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 64–77.

Ann Pederson, 'User Education and Public Relations' in *Keeping Archives*, second edition, Australian Society of Archivists and Thorpe, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 306–49.

Ann Pederson & Gail Farr Casterline, *Archives and Manuscripts: Public Programs*, SAA Basic Manual Series, Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 1982.

Ann Pederson, 'Educating for Advocacy: What Content Is Appropriate?', *Janus Archival Review*, 1997.1, pp. 7–15.

3 Dr Sharron Dickman, *The Marketing Mix: Promoting Museums, Galleries and Exhibitions*, Museums Australia Inc., Melbourne, 1995, p. 1.

4 Rosanne Clayton, Guillaume Mallet, and Tim Sherratt, *Directory of Archives in Australia*, 1998 at *www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/asa/directory/asa_dir.htm*. Originally compiled by Susan Burnstein, Vanessa Goodhew, Barbara Reed, and Guy Tranter.

5 More detail about any component of the research, including methods, resources and results, is available within the content of the thesis and can be provided to interested parties upon request to the author.