

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

There seems to be a massive misconception circulating in the archival profession at present in relation to Australian and International Standards on Records Management. The misconception, that the standards do not deal with public access to archival material, seems to have been stimulated in part by an article by Paul Macpherson in *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 30, no. 1 (May 2002).

To prove his case, Macpherson in part counts lines in the standard devoted to access and did not find many. Apart from the folly of using one word to identify access issues, such an approach ignores what standards can actually do. They can authorise actions and generate other actions and discussion. Nowhere does Macpherson look at what role for archivists can be authorised and what actions can be generated. Instead he imposes his own discussions from the past, inventing absences that when the standard is looked at properly are in fact presences.

In the definitions in the 1996 version of AS 4390 accountability was defined in such a way that no archival authorities had their powers diminished, whether those powers are codified in legislation or based on organisational policy decisions. It said in part:

Organisations must be able to account to appropriate regulatory authorities ... to meet statutory obligations, auditing responsibilities, relevant standards and codes of practice and community expectations.

Throughout the standard and particularly in the sections relating to juridical environments that proposition was supported. Even a casual reading of the standard would show that it can authorise any 'standard or code of practice' issued by archival authorities providing the authority has the right to do so, which in the Australian context ensures that responsibility for public access to government records is covered and that is all Macpherson's article deals with. Business records would require the archivist to get into policy issuing positions to claim that right but archivists can use other provisions of the standard to argue

their case to have that right. This approach has assisted some archival authorities in Australia to extend their influence and power.

Of those archivists involved in producing the standard (and my experiences run across three standards and many archivists) every one of them saw public access as a major issue. They appreciated an approach built around authorisation processes. It countered their concerns about a records management standard that might have been overly attached to narrow organisational interests. It also eased concerns about issuing a 'single' standard. For better or worse, access involves many jurisdictional variations. Many archivists did not want the standard to cut across the standards they would want to issue in their jurisdiction, or had already issued.

The issues involved in public access continue to be looked at. Some archivists, including myself, hope general standards can be developed for public access, but it is no easy task even if the general principles are easy enough to identify in democratic systems of government.

The solution to public access issues in the records management standards proved to be a shrewd one, ensuring that records managers and archivists were able to push through to finalisation a standard rather than debating the issue endlessly. If in particular jurisdictions there are no worthwhile public access standards, consider blaming those who can issue such standards for their failures. That is where the task is already feasible, and where accountability for failures to live up to the task can be identified.

Why create scapegoats out of those archivists who devised a way to strengthen the archivist's hand, a mechanism which some authorities in Australia have used to their benefit and others could use if they stopped amusing themselves by using discredited line counting techniques and started reading text again?

Yours through gritted teeth,

Frank Upward
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