

Access and Partnerships: Issues in Professional Education

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Introduction

This paper will address a number of issues which help and hinder access to professional education for archivists and records managers. It will argue that cooperation and partnership between employers, professional associations and educators is essential to ensure viable professional education courses and will outline some possibilities for mutual support and issues which I hope will stimulate discussion in the Forum.

Access to Education for the Recordkeeping Professions

The advent of online provision of education is a great boon to relatively small and scattered professions such as ours. The decreasing number of university course providers of education for the recordkeeping professions has meant a decrease in diversity of approach to professional education and a decrease in choice for students and employers, all of which is a great loss to the profession. However, online education goes a long way towards offsetting the decrease in numbers of course providers by improving access to professional education. It no longer matters where you live, so long as you have good internet access, you have access to professional education courses.

Online delivery of courses has also made it possible for potential consumers to see detailed outlines of content of courses. Employers and potential students can now not only view online in its most current form conventional course information of the type usually found in University handbooks, online course delivery systems such as eCourse, built by the School of Computer and Information Science at Edith Cowan University, allow visitors to the site to look at the weekly topic structure of each unit and view the full outline of the resources provided for students. What you see is what you will get, plus the guidance of teaching staff who are available through online forums, email and telephone contact. Only enrolled students can open the documents and resources within each unit, thus protecting copyright and ECU's intellectual

property, but all viewers can see titles and descriptions of lectures as well as titles of required and optional reading.

Online delivery of professional education assumes a minimum standard of technological competence of participants. Surprisingly, a significant number of students struggle to meet these requirements at first. Some, including students in employment, lack basic skills in using common applications such as word processing, spreadsheet and presentation applications and many have poor Internet searching skills. Many of these skills are built into course content so that students acquire them as needed, but it is interesting to note that there must be a lack of quality training in the workplace, despite daily use of computers by employees.

Although class contact is an option which will continue to be provided in some courses and units where class sizes warrant it, online education allows students to study without leaving home and thus makes professional education potentially available to a much wider population. There is no need to travel to attend classes, so family life and employment are not disrupted, promotional opportunities are not lost and employers are not inconvenienced by staff absences. This opens greater possibilities for professional education to be sponsored by potential students' employers.

Employer Support for Education

One of the strongest indicators of employer support for professional education is the inclusion of professional qualifications as essential selection criteria in job advertisements. This makes it clear to all potential applicants that the position requires specialist knowledge and skills and thus supports the recordkeeping professions as a whole, while also supporting the professional educational system.

When considering advertising for new staff, it is important not to confuse education with training. A new graduate should not be expected to be immediately be familiar with structures, corporate systems and specialist proprietary software in use in their new employing organisation. They will need an orientation program and in-house training to familiarise them with their new environment. However, they should have gained the intellectual tools in their studies that will enable them to apply their knowledge to their new environment and systems, synthesise the two and very quickly become useful and valuable employees.

Requiring Qualifications in Advertised Positions

Hiring graduates in new positions, or as old ones become vacant is only a small part of the solution necessary for a professionally qualified workforce. Encouraging existing employees to gain qualifications takes advantage of existing investment in training and employees' knowledge of the organisations systems and services. It enhances the quality of their service through personal professional development and helps to increase employee loyalty.

Supporting Existing Employees' Professional Education

For students in full fee paying courses, provision of scholarships or cadetships to employees is the most comprehensive support that an employer can provide. Providing a scholarship means committing in advance to support the successful scholarship winner under the terms of the scholarship for the complete course. It involves trust and commitment from both the employer and employee, but can provide considerable benefits in employee loyalty, enhance the employer's reputation for commitment to high standards and best practice as well as fostering a well-educated, creative workforce. Scholarships support education and benefit the chosen educational institution by signalling employer support for the particular course chosen. Such indicators of employer support are very valuable to course providers as tangible evidence of course approval. They also increase enrolment numbers by offering opportunities to those who could not otherwise afford to study and help to ensure faster course completion. Students sometimes drop out completely or progress slowly through their course, perhaps studying one unit at a time or skipping semesters because they cannot afford course fees.

Offering some contribution to fees is the next level of support that can be offered by employers. Whether or not fees are supported in full or in part is a matter for the employer to decide. One model that is used in some organisations is to refund fees when the student successfully passes each unit. That is, the student pays the fees upon enrolment and the employer provides a refund when proof of successful results is produced by the student. This encourages completion of units and also eliminates the risk of loss of investment through student withdrawal from studies or failure to fulfil course requirements.

There are further options for practical support that employers can offer and this is particularly helpful where students are studying in HECS fee courses. Time release for study purposes is always welcome. Full-time study is a commitment equivalent to the time-load of a full-time job. Therefore part-time study load can be calculated as equivalent to a fraction of a full-time job. If four units is a full-time semester load and equivalent to approximately 38-40 hours work a week, then a university student undertaking one unit is making a time-commitment of 9-10 hours per week for the entire semester to complete that unit. Some allowance towards that amount of time is very helpful.

Where professional expertise and a supportive environment is available within the organisation, mentoring provides invaluable help to students. This might be provided by a range of people in turn, depending on the topic studied at the time, or by one person willing to listen and provide encouragement.

Many employers provide access to technology and technology support for employees who are undertaking professional studies. Although ECU now stipulates good Internet access and a computer with minimum software and hardware requirements as a pre-requisite for study, many students use their employer's Internet access to search for information because it is faster than their home access. Some students arrange with their employer to use computer facilities out of hours (lunch breaks, before and after work) for all their study needs. This is best done by formal agreement to protect both the student from blame for unauthorised use of facilities and the employer from unknowingly supporting extra Internet traffic.

Benefiting both students and employers

Many professional education courses require students to undertake short periods of work experience supervised by a professional archivist or records manager. The benefits to the student include the opportunity to:

- Gain valuable experience in the 'real' professional world, particularly outside their current institution if already employed;
- Place their studies in context, connecting theory to practice;
- Understand the challenges facing professionals in contemporary organisations;

- Decide which aspects of the profession appeal to them most for career development purposes;
- Start to develop a professional network;
- Gain a potential referee when applying for jobs.

The benefits to employers who accept students on practicum placements include:

- Exposure to fresh ideas;
- Opportunities to complete small projects that would otherwise languish because regular staff don't have time;
- A chance to 'try before you buy'. Occasionally, practicum students are offered jobs by their host organisation.

Many undergraduate degrees and coursework master degrees contain project work requirements. These projects are at least a full unit and may be the equivalent of two units. In undergraduate degrees, projects are usually undertaken at third year level. In master degrees projects are usually undertaken after substantial curriculum content has been completed. They may be of a practical nature or may be small research projects. For example, ECU Records Management Minor students have undertaken two projects for the WA Police Department, the current one being the analysis of more than ten series of index cards and the creation of a database to integrate the information contained into an integrated and fully searchable resource. The cards index the records of a number of former sections and authorities of the Police service, some now defunct. The project was a challenge, but is close to successful completion. Educators are always interested to receive offers of projects such as this.

Employer Input into Curriculum Design

All of the above assumes that employers find advantages in employing graduates of courses for the recordkeeping professions. Active engagement in discussions with the profession at large and with educators in particular, about what graduates need to know and what skills are needed in the workplace is one of the most important ways that employers or their representatives can support professional education. Feedback to educators about the quality of graduates, the suitability of their knowledge and skills and their preparedness for the challenges they will find in the workplace is highly valued. While educators have access to data provided by Course Evaluation

Questionnaires completed by students at the end of their courses and Graduate Destination surveys, input and opinion from employers on a regular basis is less easily available, other than indirectly through course accreditation processes which are provided by professional associations.

What's Available in University-Based Professional Education: Course Levels and Options

Students who don't have a degree can consider the following options:

- A three-year undergraduate degree is usually undertaken as a pre-service qualification. That is, the potential student decides on a future career and completes an appropriate undergraduate degree before seeking employment. An appropriate qualification may not necessarily have the words 'records management', 'record keeping' or 'archives' in the title. Apart from the predilection of various sectors of the information industries for renaming themselves at regular intervals, undergraduate degrees usually contain majors and minors and may contain streams which don't appear on the degree testamur upon graduation. For example, Edith Cowan University has a Records Management Minor, recognised by both the ASA and the RMAA, which can be undertaken within any ECU degree. So students graduating with the Bachelor of Science (Communications and IT), having taken the Records Management Minor as part of their degree will have a professional qualification that won't be obvious unless a full transcript of units and results is provided.
- Alternative entry to graduate level study. Those already in the workforce who decide they need a professional qualification but don't have an undergraduate degree don't necessarily have to take the long road to completing a three-year degree part-time. Alternative entry to postgraduate courses are increasingly available. In some cases, universities are willing to offer entry and possibly advanced standing, or exemptions from particular units, in some postgraduate

courses for those with TAFE qualifications at Diploma level. ECU¹ offers alternative entry through its Executive Certificate in Records Management to prospective students without an undergraduate degree but some experience in the profession. Students who successfully pass the four units in the Executive Certificate can transfer with full credit to the Graduate Diploma of Science (Information Services) Archives and Records Stream, and continue to the Master of Information Services if they wish. Thus full access to higher education through coursework is available to all active and committed professionals. Although many students who enrol through alternative pathways achieve very good results, it is clear that not all students who try this option cope well with the demands and standards of university postgraduate education. Some find the difference between TAFE and postgraduate courses too great to sustain, underestimating the amount of reading and the depth of analytical thought required.

Students who have at least an undergraduate degree in any discipline other than archives and records management are eligible for entry into entry-level postgraduate courses. These courses generally assume no prior recordkeeping knowledge. These include:

- Graduate Certificates;
- Graduate Diplomas;
- Coursework or Professional Masters (usually the full-time equivalent of three semesters).

Prospective students who have a university qualification in the recordkeeping discipline can consider further studies by research, making new contributions to the profession's body of knowledge. Options include:

- Masters by research (usually the full-time equivalent of four semesters);
- Doctor of Philosophy (PhD); or

¹ Examples drawn from Edith Cowan University courses are used throughout this paper. However, similar opportunities for alternative entry and recognition of prior learning are offered by the other course providers.

- Doctorate in a specialist discipline, eg Doctor of Information Technology (DIT). These last often contain a coursework component as well as a thesis produced as a result of original research.

Fostering research is essential to a healthy, vibrant and forward-looking profession. Research creates theoretical models, tackles problems that the profession needs to solve, helps find ways to develop or improve systems and practices. Another of the main functions of undergraduate honours, master degrees and doctorates is educating students in research methods, providing skills that are then applicable to problem-solving in the workplace or the wider profession. And last, but certainly not least, a doctorate is now a requirement for those who wish to teach at university level. Ensuring that the profession produces a healthy number of doctorates is essential to ensuring the future of university-based professional education.

Problems with Access to Professional Education

There are some groups in the profession who have problems accessing appropriate professional education. They include:

1. Lone archivists and records managers working for small and not-for-profit organisations are frequently less well paid than those who work for larger organisations. They have less ability to pay the fees for university courses than those in better paid jobs. Those who are able to enrol have little opportunity to take advantage of mentoring and professional discussion in the workplace. This also applies to the lone recordkeeping professional in a larger organisation who can find themselves professionally isolated. Educators employ a range of strategies to build discussion groups within their student bodies, and professional associations provide an important avenue for networking, but can more be done to reduce professional isolation? Can the profession effectively implement better mentoring strategies?
2. Volunteers are another group who are now disadvantaged in access to professional education. These people, who have a strong commitment to their work, would possibly have enrolled in courses to pursue their interests in a free education environment. However the advent of fees for education has effectively removed this opportunity. Few can afford to pay for a professional education when they work for no income.

There is no point in wishing to turn back the clock. Fees for university education are here to stay and likely to rise. But for those already in the profession, lack of standardisation in salary scales across the profession can seriously affect their access to education. Potentially poor financial return can turn away those considering entry to the small archives sector of the profession. This in turn affects course enrolments.

Course Accreditation

There is much concern and debate about course recognition or accreditation by the professional associations. It is my personal belief and that of Edith Cowan University, that accreditation is very important to the continuing survival of professional courses.

Accreditation

- enables educators to demonstrate industry's interest in maintaining professional courses in general and endorsement of particular courses to university administrators;
- provides benchmarks for course quality and curriculum content;
- provides a clear answer for students who ask, 'Who recognises this course?' 'Is this course appropriate for entry to my chosen profession?'
- offers an opportunity for both the educators and the profession to consider changes to the Australian Qualification Framework.

Universities are now so thoroughly reviewed for quality of facilities, processes, documentation and scholarship by internal processes, Area of Scholarship Reviews and AUQA² Reviews that the professional bodies can confidently confine themselves to assessing matters of specialist curriculum content and level. In the past, accreditation has been a costly process, involving visiting teams assessing teaching and support facilities and documentation. However, the rigor of existing quality assurance processes should significantly reduce this burden on both the professional associations and the educators in future. Where courses are offered online, the accreditation team need only be given full access to enable them to review course materials at their convenience. However, if the professional bodies choose to accredit

² Australian University Quality Agency

courses offered by providers other than universities then those broader supporting factors would again become an issue needing consideration.

Course recognition or accreditation would gain more credibility and be more mutually beneficial to both the professional associations and the course providers if the associations made the professional benefits clearer. For example, if there were a faster track to professional membership of the ASA or a particular level of membership of the RMAA for graduates of accredited courses than for those who have completed other courses. The right to use post-nominal letters for professional ASA members, as is the case for RMAA and ALIA, would also provide a more tangible benefit and encourage financial professional membership of the Australian Society of Archivists.

Accreditation tools

There is considerable room for concern about the use of the revised edition of the *Competency Standard for Records Management* as a course accreditation benchmarking tool. It is essential that archivists and records managers understand the theory that underpins their professional practice. Competency-based training alone will not provide this understanding. It is static, training tied to the practices of today, providing little if anything in the way of insights or tools to meet future challenges. Professional education should be based on sound pedagogical principles that encourage students to analyse and synthesise information and stimulate independent thinking.

A further concern is that the revised Competency Standard is clearly associated with TAFE-level qualifications in the AQF. Having recently had to jettison Associate Diploma/Degree level courses because these were seen as exclusively TAFE qualifications, ECU is very reluctant to formally equate to TAFE-level Diplomas any courses at Bachelor degree level or above through the accreditation process, lest it lead to their appropriateness at that AQF level being questioned. This reluctance extends to our courses recognised under the former *Competency Standard*: the Records Management Minor and the Graduate Diploma.

Conclusion

A sound future for professional archives and records education is dependent on professional associations, employers and educators working together in partnership

and developing strong communication and mutual support strategies. This paper has raised far more questions than it has answered, but discussion is the purpose of our meeting. To start today's discussion, I put the following

Questions for the Forum:

- What do employers want in a graduate?
- Do they get what they want? Is anything missing from current curriculum content of courses?
- How can we improve and sustain communication between employers and educators?
- What strategies for accreditation can be developed that are economically feasible and philosophically acceptable to the ASA, the RMAA and the educators?