

2020 MARGARET JENNINGS AWARD PROFILE

ELIZABETH HUGHES – CURTIN UNIVERSITY

Tell us how you first got involved in the archival profession?



I got an email from the Curtin LARIS mailing list advertising some temporary positions at Queensland State Archives in 2017 – although I wasn't at all qualified at that stage, I expressed my interest anyway, and ended up being successful in landing a short term entry level retrieval position. From there, I jumped on every opportunity I could and am still at QSA (now in a permanent Collection Management Archivist role) over 4 years later! I was really drawn to working with historical documents, discovering our Queensland stories and history through the archives of our government... and I still am.

What has surprised you most about the profession?

How complex and subjective actual archival practice can be! I had this idea that everything would be pristinely and perfectly logical and consistent, but in reality, it just isn't. Real life recordkeeping systems and archives reflect the messy reality of their ever-changing environments and creators, but it turns out that getting to the bottom of that and making it work within the constraints of our current reality (and archival theory of course!) is a huge part of the fun of A&D.

Also, how much technical/IT-related knowledge I've needed to acquire and use, like learning database query languages and advanced Excel data manipulation techniques.

What would you tell someone who is thinking about studying in the area?

If you have an interest in history, are detail oriented, enjoy research and like helping people, then in my experience, archival practice is for you! I've met archivists from a huge variety of professional backgrounds who each bring their own perspective and a plethora of highly valuable transferrable skills.

Also, I'd strongly recommend working in the area while you're studying if you possibly can. Get involved with networks like ASA, volunteer, apply for entry level positions in the field– whatever works for you! Having an insight into the real life application of the theory I was studying was invaluable to my understanding of the content, and the content I was studying supported me in my day-to-day work and ongoing professional development. It was absolutely a win-win.

What do you think will change within the sector over the next five years?

My hope is that we'll see a lot of progress in decolonising the archives as institutions start to implement the actions detailed in their responses to the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration. Government archives in particular have a huge role to play in truth-telling and adjusting our practices to incorporate and empathise with narratives, practices and understandings that have traditionally been excluded, and I'm really interested to see how that plays out over the next few years.

I'm also very interested in the Digital Archiving space and following changes in theory and practice as it develops (particularly as QSA develops our own Digital Archive over the coming years!).