

Recordkeeping & Corporate Records: the Thread for the Fabric of an Information Future

The Information Futures Commission consultation paper *Scholarly Information in a Digital Age – Choices for the University of Melbourne* defines its scope and the four dimensions of ‘scholarly information’ early in its introduction. It also outlines how it is impossible to consider this future without at the same time having discussions about the information technologies which will underpin this vision.

However, if we were only to consider these two components, we face a future which could easily come apart at the seams without the core ‘enablers’ to provide the foundation for the future – ‘recordkeeping and corporate records’.

The 2008 University Plan (April 2008) clearly articulates the importance of enablers across all strands of the triple helix:

- ‘As we concentrate on research and the quality of learning and teaching, it is timely to consider a key scholarly enabler – information’;

and later on the same page:

- ‘Without a well-oiled machine of enablers, built by dedicated staff, our research, teaching and knowledge transfer would grind to a halt’¹

We urge the Commission to heed the University’s own words and we argue for a straight forward proposition. In short, we are saying

- Indeed, without enablers, the University would grind to a halt;
- Information is a crucial enabler, and
- Records and their management processes and strategic frameworks (recordkeeping) are a crucial component of information.

IMPORTANCE OF RECORDKEEPING

Recordkeeping is undeniably critical to the success and health of any corporate entity. Taking it seriously makes good business and legal sense; saves money; supports corporate memory; meets compliance obligations and international standards best practice; and, like black box flight recorders utterly depended upon by global aviation, has clear diagnostic value.²

THE CHALLENGE

On the other hand, the logical common sense of proper recordkeeping is rarely appreciated. It is never an end in itself: it is not core business, but secondary business;

¹ *The University of Melbourne Plan 2008* (April 2008), p. 15.

² Among the better statements about the importance of recordkeeping are the National Archives of Australia’s *Why records are kept* (2003; see http://www.naa.gov.au/Images/Why%20records%20are%20kept%5B1%5D_tcm2-4856.pdf) and the International standard *AS ISO 15489.1: Records Management – Part 1: General; Part 2: Guidelines*.

it directly and indirectly *enables* things to happen and helps prevent things from happening. In financial terms it is usually seen as an overhead (except when they save one from lawsuits). It is regularly ridiculed as 'red tape' and as something only a 'Sir Humphrey' public servant mentality would support. Like the person who doesn't bother with 3rd party car insurance, one can usually go for years gambling on the risk and ignore it.

Recordkeeping not only plays a support role to core business as an enabler, it is also usually invisible. When a transaction is dealt with expeditiously and to a client's satisfaction, the fact that the right documentation existed and was accessible is taken for granted. Like clean water and a safe working environment, we just assume it will be in place. When a transaction fails and, as in actual if extreme cases, requires the University to settle out of court, visibility is neither natural nor welcomed.³

RECORDKEEPING SUPPORTS ACCOUNTABILITY

Accounts of recordkeeping failures are typically embedded in royal commissions, auditor-general's and judicial inquiries within the public sector, corporate collapses etc. Within the Commonwealth, the Auditor General has been particularly aware of the integral links between recordkeeping and accountability, noting in relation to one accountability crisis: 'Poor recordkeeping attracts corruption like flies to a carcass'⁴.

Rarely do recordkeeping failures in higher education settings become known, three infamous instances being the alteration of academic results by a graduate student advisor at UTS in 2001, fraud at Victoria University from the early 2000s, and issues around the academic system at RMIT investigated by the Auditor General in 2000-2.⁵ A more recent instance was described last year as follows:

Macquarie University was subject to a second audit following on from the one instigated in September by the new vice-chancellor Steven Schwarz into the administration of Professor Yerbury (former Vice Chancellor). It was ordered after the discovery that university records were incomplete, particularly regarding Professor Yerbury's employment entitlements, and confusion over the ownership of artworks after her collection was mingled with the university's.⁶

In summary, a university and particularly a public one established by an act of parliament must be compliant and accountable. Good recordkeeping regimes are essential to support such qualities.

³ A dated but still useful instance of published cases from the related discipline of information management is Forest Horton and Dennis Lewis, *Great Information Disasters*. Aslib, 1991. There is no similarly convenient anthology of records related case studies.

⁴ Professor McKemish, 'The Smoking Gun: Recordkeeping and Accountability', <http://www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/rcrg>. (1998).

⁵ On the UTS case, see 'Investigation Issues: Investigation into the conduct of officers and students at University of Technology, Sydney' at <http://www.icac.nsw.gov.au/index.cfm?objectID=E29C5A25-F6CF-6BA0-7F3A1F659F2D699A&NavID=262D7C09-D0B7-4CD6-F993A6EA89379A0B>. On VUT, see '25 facing charges in \$10m uni fraud', *The Age* 11 January 2004, at <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/01/10/1073437522774.html>. For the RMIT case, see *Report of the Auditor-General on RMIT's finances*, 2003, esp. Part 9 at http://archive.audit.vic.gov.au/reports_other/agprmit00.html

⁶ 'Huge Uni expenses bill to be audited', *The Australian*, 17 February 2007 at <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21239885-601,00.html>

RECORDKEEPING SUPPORTS CORPORATE HISTORY

In his Preamble to *The Making of The Australian National University 1946 – 1996*, Professor Stephen Foster describes his and co-author Margaret Varghese's efforts to follow the advice of the first Registrar to examine a crucial primary source for this project, a binder of documents called *Basic Papers (with Index)*. They were two or three years into the project when they stumbled upon them in a cupboard in the Chancellery.

"These were some of the key documents which got the University started and gave it its shape" he wrote, adding:

By the 1990s they had evidently ceased to matter. The 'loss' of the Basic Papers symbolises how the ANU has forgotten its past; or more precisely how its corporate memory has been receding, as in any institution when one generation of makers gives way to the next.

In part, the University of Melbourne brand trades on its age and tradition. It went to great lengths to celebrate and announce its sesquicentenary in 2003 and commission corporate histories, and as individual faculties and departments reach significant milestones the records documenting their achievements play a further crucial enabling role.

RECORDKEEPING SUPPORTS RESEARCH

'This is indeed a mystery', I remarked.

'What do you imagine that it means?'

'I have no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.

'Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts'.

From 'A Scandal in Bohemia' in: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, 1892

The University has a reputation as a major international research University. It is measured and ranked against its research performance both nationally and internationally. Research is primarily evidence based. The collection and management of complete, accurate and retrievable results is integral to the research process. Good research practice and good recordkeeping practice go hand in glove.

Ensuring that the integrity and security of research data and records is maintained, and that this material is stored in an identifiable and retrievable way allows for the discussion of data and research methods with colleagues and for verification of the research such as might be required to refute allegations of falsification of data.

This is clearly demonstrated by;

- Laboratory notebooks which are examples of good recordkeeping. They document all aspects of the research process from the conceptualisation of a hypothesis or research problem, through to the formulations of research methodologies, the design of equipment and techniques used, the conduct of experiments and observational data. They are used to assert or defend

⁷ Allen & Unwin, 1996, ix

intellectual property rights, especially in regard to patent claims, selling IP and developing commercial spin-offs.⁸

The corporate records which form part of the administration of research also facilitate excellence in research. These include records of grant applications, research contracts, activity reports, funding allocations and expenditure records etc. These records document the agreements and expectations made at the establishment of a research project and provide accountability against expenditure of public money.

RECORDKEEPING SUPPORTS TEACHING AND LEARNING

At the very heart of the entire edifice of higher education is the interaction of academics and students. This relationship depends totally on a regime of trusted reliable recordkeeping. This typically involves⁹

- the authentication of academic staff (covering for instance accreditation, validation of qualifications, publishing record, etc validation, etc)
- and
- the enrolment, confirming advancement and formal certification through graduation of students (covering for instance proof of identity, citizenship, payment of fees, production and validation of identification, payment of fines, lodgement of thesis, resolution of discipline charges).

Underpinning the work of the academic and student are an array of HR, information systems, property, teaching spaces, laboratories, libraries and other infrastructure. All depend on recordkeeping, the most obvious being in the finance, copyright and health & safety domains, but broadening the list, buildings simply could not be altered, maintained, protected under heritage legislation or demolished without vast quantities of documentation being created and maintained.

RECORDKEEPING SUPPORTS KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER, ALUMNI RELATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

It is self evident that successful relationship and interaction with the public, depends in part on proper recordkeeping. Just as we automatically expect a bank to know out current and past account details and so on, so the University's clients, stakeholders, former employees, alumni, research partners, and one's neighbours expect sound administrative records-based efficiency. In dealing with us, they rightly expect us to have 'done our homework', to have 'checked our files', and obviously both efficiency and the success of a transaction can depend on our corporate ability to do so.

This can especially apply in cases involving:

- alumni relations: the University is gradually learning two lessons: it depends increasingly on non-government funding sources, and its vast alumni numbers represent to date a poorly tapped source of support. The maintenance of good records about them and our past dealings (including previous donations and gifts) is essential;

⁸ Policy on the Management of Research Data and Records University of Melbourne 2005

⁹ For a greatly expanded treatment of these points, see the study by the then MIT archivist Helen Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges*, SAA & Scarecrow Press, 1992.

- bequests, trusts etc; the basic rule of attentive stewardship, the management of funds, the variation of legal instruments, relies largely on sound documentation;
- knowledge transfer projects: increasingly, mutually beneficial partnership projects include agreements with deliverables, financial obligations, project management processes etc . All of these require proper recordkeeping.

CONCLUSION

It is clearly evident recordkeeping and corporate records are key enablers for the University. They 'enable' our aspirations across the strands of the triple helix. Like a haute couture design relies on an expert seamstress with needle and thread to create an exquisitely crafted garment the Information Futures Commission, as seamstress, must consider recordkeeping and corporate records its 'thread' to craft a visionary Information Future

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