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Developing a research agenda for records management: a short story.

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Introduction

How do you develop a research agenda when you and your subject have little or no track record of research and there are no explicit funding sources to support your research? This article chronicles the successful approach taken by Northumbria University to develop and deliver its records management research agenda over more than a decade. It summarises what we did, how and why; highlights the most recent projects and discusses the challenges and opportunities moving forward.

The prologue

In the early 1990s the Department of Information and Library Management at Northumbria University made a strategic decision to extend its teaching and learning portfolio to include records management. This was driven by staff expertise and interest and recognition that it complemented its other programmes in information and library management. By 1993 the MA/MSc Information & Records Management became one of only two named records management awards in the UK[1] and records management was offered as an option on undergraduate information and library management programme. In 1996 a new distance learning MSc in Records Management was launched.[2] It was unique because it was the first exclusively named award in records management and also the first distance learning delivery in the discipline in the UK, possibly Europe. The new distance learning Masters enabled working practitioners to study for a formal qualification, sometimes recognising their wealth of experience and knowledge, sometimes enabling them to embark on a new career. Over the last 12 years, it has seen the successful graduation of more than 100 students including international students from many European countries, Iceland, the USA, the Caribbean and Africa. It achieved full accreditation status from the Society of Archivists in 2007, was described as “a unique and outstanding programme” and commended for its incredibly high standard of teaching materials, flexible approach to distance learning and the desire to constantly improve the student experience. Records management research work conducted by academic staff and made accessible to students was also singled out for praise. This research is the result of the proactive strategic approach to developing a research profile discussed by Hare and McLeod (1999).

In the same year the distance learning Masters was launched UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were entering into the fourth Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) conducted by the Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The purpose of the RAEs is to assess the quality of research in HEIs on a regular basis. As Elkin (1999) points out “[t]he outcome determines the allocation of grants for research in the following period of assessment” and “[a]s such, they are critically important in terms of research funding in the United Kingdom.”

It is in this context of the relatively early development of a research culture in both the records management profession in the UK and Northumbria University that the story of building a successful research track record in records management unfolds.

Timeline: 1996-1999

Despite having been "identified and acknowledged as a distinct occupation in the early 19th century" (Webster, 1999), being inextricably linked with the archives profession and having professional bodies[3], the relatively recent establishment (at that time) of records management as a taught subject in HEIs, and lack of research track record, went someway perhaps to explaining why it was not explicitly identified in any Unit of Assessment in the 1996 RAE. In contrast archives was included under both the history and library and information management panels. At Northumbria University records management was seen as a key part of the subject portfolio and was presented as an *emerging research theme* in its 1996 RAE submission to the Library and Information Management Unit of Assessment alongside research activity in that field. This presented a significant opportunity but one not without pressure.

A two pronged approach or pincer movement was taken to developing this emergent research theme: (i) being creative in respect of funding opportunities not directed explicitly at records management, and (ii) creating opportunities (Hare and McLeod, 1999). Securing funds is a constant challenge but was particularly so at that time, given the fact that records management did "not benefit from funding bodies with specific policy and strategy targets" (Hare and McLeod, 1999). Bids were submitted to the British Library's Research and Innovation Committee and the Arts and Humanities Research Board (now the Arts and Humanities Research Council) but were unsuccessful. However, consultancy earnings and money allocated to the Department (renamed the School of Information Studies) from its success in the previous RAE, supported the emergent records management research theme.

The focus of our early research was education and training and original investigation to gain knowledge and understanding. Education and trainnig included a 4-year externally funded project into the continuing professional development for records management practitioners (Hare, McLeod & King, 1996; King, Hare & McLeod, 1996); a European Socrates funded project with four partners to develop a European-wide core curriculum for electronic records management (Valtonen et al, 1998) and a follow-on Leonardo funded project with similar partners (eTerm http://www.ucl.ac.uk/e-term/). Education and training became less prominent and original research moved "centre stage … taking a higher priority" (Hare and McLeod, 1999). Internal funding supported an investigation of records management practice in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the local region (Webster, Hare & McLeod, 1999). The choice was driven by our desire from the outset to link to and from practice[4], the private sector experience of members of the research group and the limited knowledge about records management in SMEs, which made up a large proportion of UK businesses (DTI, 1995).

Timeline: 2000-2002

Other original research explored the management of records in library and information science research projects using the functional approach to records management (Hare et al, 2000) and a survey of selected English local authorities gauged early reactions to balancing information access with privacy protection in the context of established data protection legislation and the new UK Freedom of Information Act (Whitman, McLeod and Hare, (2001). This was the start of going beyond descriptive studies of practice to exploring emerging issues for practice.

As an original member of the BSI Committee on records management, which is represented on the ISO committee responsible for the development of ISO 15489 (2001), I was keen to assess the impact of the first international standard on records

management. A bid for a two-year longitudinal study of its impact on organisations in the UK was submitted to the ARHC in late 2001 but, despite very positive comments, was initially unsuccessful.

Two significant developments occurred in this period. The first was the explicit identification of records management in the 2001 RAE, featuring alongside archives administration in the Library and Information Management Assessment Panel (Unit of Assessment 61), and therefore its recognition as a research domain (HEFCE et al, 1999). The second was the announcement of the first public funds for records management specific research projects in the UK.

Building on the success of its initial *Study of the Records Lifecycle* work (JISC, 1999), in late 2002 the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) issued Circular 9/02 *Supporting Institutional Records Management* This made approximately £300,000 available for research projects in higher and further education sector under three themes: (1) *Beyond the Study of the Records Lifecycle* which included practical implementation of the records retention findings in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and exploration of specific areas of records retention not addressed by the study; (2) *Developing records management programmes in Further Education Institution*s (FEIs); and (3) an electronic records management training package (http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_supporting_irm.aspx). Specific funding for records management research and development from such a major UK organisation was a statement that this discipline had been recognised as being important, at least in the higher education sector. It was a turning point in records management research.

Timeline: 2003-06

This period was very positive and successful - a 'purple patch' or a 'coming of age' so to speak. All four bids to the JISC's *Supporting Institutional Records Management* call were successful as was the resubmission of the ISO 15489 research project.

JISC projects

These projects:

- investigated the application of JISC's generic records retention schedules[5] to (a) the student assessment process, from assignment setting to progression/award decisions; and (b) primary research data, records and digital assets of research projects;
- investigated the development of records management programmes within FEIs in North East England appraising the extent to which the Model Action Plan (MAP) recommendations for compliance with the Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on records management could be realistically applied in FEIs; and
- designed and developed an electronic records management training package for all staff in FEIs/HEIs.

They provided case studies of practical implementations of guidelines (principles) from which other HEIs could learn; benchmarked records management practice in selected FEIs against the MAP, identifying difficulties and barriers to compliance, and raised awareness of records management and its role in meeting FoI requirements in those FEIs; and provided a practical electronic tool for training and educating staff, which was made freely available on the Web (Childs and McLeod, 2004; Edward and McLeod, 2004; JISC, 2003) They also provided opportunities to work with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders, many unfamiliar with records management concepts, albeit they were records creators and users.

AHRC Research Projects

The ISO 15489 project (2003-05) sought to assess the impact of the first international records management standard in the UK from as early a point as possible after its publication to ensure that any impact or change could be attributed, or not, to the standard. It built upon the results of a preliminary survey of reactions to the standard and plans for using it (McLeod, 2003) by investigating which kinds of organisations had adopted the standard, how they were using it and why/why not; exploring the extent to which standards influence management practice and behaviour; and evaluating the ability of a global and generic standard to support a specific national approach to records management policy and practice. The aim was to assess the opinions of both adopters and non-adopters and the project was ambitious given the nascent status of research in the discipline. The methodology required practitioners to want to participate and involved monitoring organisations at two distinct levels: at a macro level - 50 organisations, electronically at a distance; and at a micro level - four case studies, face-to-face using interviews.

The findings identified drivers for adopting ISO 15489 were to ensure best practice, as a framework for developing policies and procedures, to promote and raise the profile of records management, and for credibility in the profession. Reasons for non-adoption included other competing priorities (particularly EDRMS implementation and FoI preparation in the public sector), lack of incentive (standards are not important), that it offered nothing new, criticisms of it (e.g. its technical language), and lack of resources to implement it. During the two-year study at least one organisation ceased to use the standard but had adapted it to fit local needs. Those organisations who had not adopted it said they would need an incentive to start using it, e.g. regulatory or legal compliance requirement, implementation resources, and an easier to use format. Because the results identified limited impact the final stage of research was changed to a Delphi study with a small group of international experts discussing complex issues that had emerged about the role, value and nature of records management standards and the future of ISO 15489 (McLeod and Childs, 2007).

The second much shorter project evaluated four self-assessment toolkits for measuring records and information management capacity, compliance or readiness. Three of the toolkits – the UK NHS Information Governance Toolkit (IGT), RMCAS (Records Management Capacity Assessment System) from IRMT and ARMA International's RiskProfiler - are software tools for data input, analysis and report generation. The fourth -Library and Archives Canada's IMCC (Information Management Capacity Check) - comprises documentation describing the process to be undertaken, which not only assesses information management capabilities but also engages staff with records management and encourages change. All of the toolkits are based on relevant national/international records management legislation, standards, e.g. ISO 15489 (2001), and good practice. Each toolkit was evaluated by multiple stakeholders, including records creators, records professionals and 'real' end-users, against a range of criteria, from provenance to content and approach to usability. The study identified the strengths of each toolkits, any improvements needed and lessons that could be transferred from one to another. The main output was a guide to toolkits with four real case study applications and set of evaluation criteria (McLeod, Childs and Heaford, 2007). A successful bid for further funding enabled wider dissemination of the research results to, for instance, information professionals in the UK and Spain[6].

All of the research in this period focused in different ways on original investigation of records management principles in practice adding to the knowledge base in our

discipline, as well as research methodology, and providing practical tools and findings for practitioners and students.

Timeline: 2007 to date

Feedback about this research, from participants, enquirers, ad hoc conversations, citation of our outputs and students with whom we shared and discussed the findings, together with our experience and learning, confirmed the value of conducting this kind of records management research. What was needed was the next project and it materialised as *AC$^+$erm (Accelerating Positive Change in e-records management*). A 3-year AHRC funded project, their first on e-records management and the largest grant to have been awarded in the discipline, AC$^+$erm builds on our research philosophy and expertise, viz. empirical investigation, evaluation and assessment in the context of principles and practice, to address community needs, in this case records management principles and practice for the e-environment[7].

Inspired by John McDonald's opening chapter in the *Managing Electronic Records* book (McLeod and Hare, 2005) the aim is to investigate and critically explore issues and practical strategies to support accelerating the pace of positive change in managing e-records. It is developing a critical view of ERM globally, gathering multi-disciplinary and key stakeholder opinion on ERM issues, knowledge of practical strategies and critical success factors for managing e-records to develop an appropriate paradigm for ERM. The main outputs will be a series of vignettes to support ERM and sharing of knowledge and practice with stakeholders who have responsibility for records management. It is our current research project, and a major endeavour utilising an interesting approach which combines a systematic literature review with a series of (global) e-Delphi studies, colloquia and expert panels, together with a blog and website for ongoing dissemination throughout the project (McLeod, 2008).

The epilogue: challenges and opportunities

This short story highlights the challenges that all researchers face - ideas that will attract funding, finding funding sources and being successful with funding bids, other resources such as time, facilities, tool, appropriate people and participants – but in the context of a discipline with limited if any track record. Records management is everywhere and nowhere, it's everyone's business yet no-one's business, at least in terms of UK Research Funding Councils. Its relationship with archives management brought it within the remit of the AHRC's Peer Review Panel 6[8] but this is due to change as the established subject panels disappear in favour of bigger, broader themes. Archives are recognised by many members as valuable research resources and will clearly fit under the new 'heritage' banner. But will records management be recognised as a vital function to ensure the ultimate availability, accessibility and useability of archives in the future, particularly in the digital world? And with no real boundaries one challenge is breadth vs depth, what is worthwhile researching? The opportunities are endless.

Another challenge in the e-environment is that managing records involves *everyone;* it is an inter/multi/trans-disciplinary activity. As an academic discipline at Northumbria University, records management is located in the School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences alongside IT, engineering, mathematical modelling, information systems, librarianship and communications. This is unique in UK HEIs with peers based in schools of history, arts, library and information studies and

presents opportunities to work with a wide range of experts from other relevant disciplines (Ryan, 2005 p55).

A third challenge is the lack of any discipline-specific research methodology but that in fact presents enormous opportunities. We have chosen not to focus on desk-based research using the records as the data source, rather to conduct empirical research gathering new primary data. Our methodology is predominantly qualitative, employing social science methods in different ways. As a result the research is able to contribute knowledge about research methodology, for use in our discipline and other disciplines, as well as about records management.

Conclusion

Looking forward successful research and development in records management requires strong partnerships between many professions and professionals – practitioners, academics and students in both academia and the profession. There is a place, a role and need for all stakeholders in multiple disciplines to participate in records management research. It also requires funding from those who have supported previous research, such as JISC and AHRC, and others. Finding new funding sources will challenge the research community to be creative, innovative and persuasive that research in this discipline is valuable and vital.

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[1] The other was University College London's MA in Archives and Records Management which had changed its name from the MA in Archive Studies.

[2]The MSc Records Management part-time distance learning programme is a 2-year course studied through the use of electronically delivered learning materials via a web-based e-learning platform and supported by online tutor/students discussions. Records management modules include Recordkeeping Principles, Recordkeeping Practice and Electronic Recordkeeping. It begins in September each year and full details are available at http://northumbria.ac.uk/?view=CourseDetail&code=DTDRCM6

[3] The Records Management Society (RMS) was founded 1983 http://www.rms-gb.org.uk and the Records Management Group of the Society of Archivists was established 1978 http://www.archives.org.uk/

[4] This was very much in keeping with the Arts & Humanities Research Board (AHRB) principle of doing original research that helps practitioners.

[5]JISC (2003) *Revision of the Study of the Records Lifecycle* http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_preservation/project_lifecycle_revision.aspx

[6] An AHRC Research Dissemination Scheme Award (1 Nov 2006 – 31 Jul 2007) enabled production of a briefing leaflet and bookmark, which was distributed materials at five events (10th FESABID Documentation Conference, Santiago de Compostela, Spain 11 May 2007; CILIP's Umbrella 2007 Research & Evidence-Based Practice Seminar; the Society of Archivists Conference, Belfast 28-31 Aug 2007; the Information Governance Seminar, 18 Jul 2007 Newcastle upon Tyne; and the AIIM Ireland Roadshow, Dublin Sept 2007. A short item was also published in the Socitm newsletter (Socitm News Issue 97 August 2007 www.socitm.gov.uk).

[7] AC^{+}erm (2007-2009) website www.northumbria.ac.uk/acerm with links to blog and interim results.

[8] AHRC Panel 6 Librarianship, Information and Museum Studies http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/about/subject_coverage.asp