The story of the Australian recordkeeping competency standards

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Abstract
In July 2001 a comprehensive training package for business services successfully jumped its first hurdle on the way to endorsement when the Australian National Training Authority passed it onto the National Quality Training Council for quality checking. The Business Services Training Package includes a revised set of recordkeeping competency units based on the 1997 Records and Archives Competency Standards. The revised standards have been packaged into recommended qualifications which embrace both specialist recordkeeping qualifications and general business services qualifications. The training package may be used to construct training programs through a range of levels, from school-leavers entering the workforce to do office work, through to professional development programs for experienced recordkeeping professionals. The process of re-organising the 1997 competency standards into training packages has been a subject of controversy in the industry. This article provides an account of the original project to develop records management and archives competency standards and the subsequent revision project in the context of major changes in the tertiary education sector in Australia.

Introduction
Back in 1994 a small group of people from the records management and archival profession met with a union official from the Australian Services Union (ASU) and a representative from the Australian National Training Authority to discuss how to develop national competency standards for the records management industry. From this first meeting the National Records and Archives Competency Standards Project Steering Committee was formed - consisting of representatives from the Records Management Association of Australia, the Council of Archives, the Australian Society of Archivists, the Health Information Management...
Association of Australia and the Association of Information and Image Management. The broad representation of records, archives and information management was identified very early as a necessary requirement to establish the legitimacy of records and archives work as a distinct field of competency to fit in with the national competency standards initiative.

Development of national competency standards for qualifications was originally an initiative of the trade union movement in conjunction with the then Federal Labor government and industry bodies to improve the standards of technical skills training. Its initial focus was tradesmen's qualifications, with the intention of:

- improving training and skills development;
- establishing national standards for national recognition and portability of qualifications;
- delivering equity through the recognition of prior learning of people without formal qualifications but with substantial experience and competence.

In the late 1980s when the competency initiative began, the primary arena for delivering training for tradesmen was the apprenticeship system with a mixture of on the job training and experience and formal classroom teaching in local colleges run by the states. The TAFE colleges also offered courses in a wide range of skills and qualifications beyond the trades qualifications, which included records management. TAFE courses had few prerequisites, and their qualifications did not, and do not, have professional (as distinct from technical) status. Overseeing the development of competency standards and subsequently the translation into courses was a network of Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABs) at state and national level. For an industry or speciality like records and archives work to get recognition to develop competency standards it had to be accepted as falling within the coverage of an ITAB. This was a significant hurdle for the records and archives 'industry' right at the beginning.

In parallel, by 1994, the higher education sector (the universities and colleges of advanced education) offered a number of (mostly) post-graduate courses in records and archives work with a strong archival orientation. The university post-graduate and higher degree courses in archives and records, archives administration, information management and librarianship had a limited number of places and could only flourish in a fee-free tertiary environment. The courses were generally recognised by the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) as an appropriate vocational qualification which, combined with a university degree and a period of time working in a recognised archival institution, formed the basis for conferring professional membership status.
The universities section of tertiary education had held aloof from the general competency developments which were regarded as specific to vocational training, and not appropriate to higher education. When the competency initiative began, the universities across Australia were enjoying a significant expansion in funding and new campuses were springing up, sometimes as new universities and sometimes as up-graded and expanded colleges of advanced education or technical institutes. Subsequently university schools teaching in areas like librarianship and archives where competency standards existed took them into account when developing courses.

The third potential stakeholder in standards developments were the professional societies. The decision to develop competency standards for records and archives work was, in the higher education context, a radical one which posed a dilemma for the ASA. The argument which won the day was this: if archivists themselves did not move into the competency field then some other industry group would define records work and its standards. Moving into the competency field was recognised as anomalous at the time when the industry was struggling to sustain its claim to professional status. However the danger of the unique skills and knowledge of records and archives work being subsumed by other industry groups was considered real enough to persuade the ASA Council to join the project. The demand from the many volunteers or part-time paid people caring for records in schools, churches and local history collections for non-university training in archives administration and records management was also a factor in the ASA’s pursuing the project.

The RMAA on the contrary had embraced development of competency standards as a means of bringing some order to the many post-secondary courses offering records management qualifications of varying quality. Both the RMAA and the ASA were concerned with the impact of the technological revolution which had started its transformation of records work in both government and private sectors. The danger that information technology might swallow up records work or put it beyond the competence of records practitioners loomed. Development of national competency standards was seen as one means of meeting the IT challenge and preserving areas of work specific to records management.

**Steering Committee**

The steering committee, which began meeting in 1995, was dominated numerically by the RMAA. It was obliged, under the competency standards rules, to have representation from the employers’ organisation, as well as the unions and other bodies which represent qualified people of
the industry. However under the same rules, active training providers, whose courses would have to meet the competency standards, were excluded. The Australian Council of Archives, as the archival institutions body stood for the employers. The union representation was principally supplied by the ASU and the Financial Services Union (banking and insurance industry union for clerical workers). Despite the fact that there were more records managers and archivists in the government sector than in the private sector, attempts to involve the government sector unions failed. It has to be stated that the beginnings of the committee’s work were characterised by real tensions between the orientation to the TAFE sector, which provided most of the records management qualifications to people represented by the RMAA and the ASU, and the focus on preserving the professional status of the work of, and the courses provided to, people who identified themselves as archivists. It is fair to say that neither side fully understood then the nature of the challenge of IT facing the records and archives industry and there was resistance to describing the competencies in terms which embraced both computerised recordkeeping and paper-based records work.

Records and archives competency standards project

By the time the records and archives competency standards project had begun, the development of an Australian standard for records management was well advanced, with the final draft in circulation by late 1995. The standard for records management was path breaking, as the first authoritative description of Australian records management practice. It provided a framework which the new competency standards could follow (as indeed the rules of competency development required) but it also crystallised other industry developments which were significant for the records and archives profession. One was the recovery and analysis of a distinct Australian recordkeeping practice, and the theory which underpinned it. The other was the exposition of a philosophy of recordkeeping which located it in the framework of accountability, both in individual organisations and in a democratic society in general. The accountability aspect was invoked in the introduction of the first Records and Archives Competency Standards to argue the importance of records and recordkeeping. The significance of the practice and theory of recordkeeping peculiar to Australia was revealed as the competency standards project progressed. That Australian practice has been expounded in the records continuum theory in the context of an international debate in the English-speaking world about the challenge of recordkeeping in the electronic business environment. The particular significance of the Australian practice and the records continuum framework in the context of competency development was that it dissolved the wall between records management practices and archival practices.
Development of standards

From the outset records management and archives practitioners embraced the project of describing their work with enthusiasm. Workshops around the country quickly came up with a range of process descriptions and threw up major arguments about terminology and the framework of the competencies. This early work encountered difficulties because of the disparate levels of the work processes. The approach to competency development in other industries typically started with the simplest work processes and built up in complexity and requisite skills to identify higher level skills and knowledge. Employing this approach for records and archives work exacerbated the tensions between the parties whose focus was repetitive, low-level, clerical tasks and those whose work embraced design of the records systems in which the clerical tasks took place.

Adoption in 1996 of the newly published Australian Standard Records management (AS4390) as a principal reference cut through the logjam and provided a way of ordering the multiple descriptions of work processes into a comprehensible framework. Application of the records management standard to what had been already done prompted turning the organisation of those descriptions on its head, with the most complex, high level tasks described first and then proceeding through a decomposition analysis down to the individual clerical processes. The decomposition analysis also facilitated the presentation of the competency standards at a number of levels differing in complexity and scale. It was in the third draft stage in 1997 that the Steering Committee decided that there was no basis for identifying the archival competencies as a specialisation of records management work. On the contrary, archivists and records managers performed recordkeeping processes differing only in emphasis or primary focus but which required the same, fundamental competencies.

The final version of the 1997 records and archives competency standards was a highly detailed set of descriptions of work processes performed by records workers in a variety of settings. The competency standards consciously attempted to embrace all records media and systems, whether manual and paper-based or electronic in the computing environment. The variables included the location on the records continuum of the work process and the scale of the work. What is meant by this is that the process of (for example) “Documenting a records system and its relationships over time” (competency standard 402, p.175) could occur in the different contexts of writing a procedures manual, drafting a migration plan for implementing a new computer application to perform records management tasks, or describing the personal papers of a depositor to a manuscript collection. The scale could vary from a keystroke by keystroke level of description for training purposes to an essay on the...
correspondence system of the Colonial Governor's Office for a historical journal article. The analytical skills and specialist records knowledge are embraced in the same basic competency.

The Steering Committee itself understood the competency standards as an account of how to deliver the Australian records management standard in practice. It regarded the competency standards as building on the Australian Standard, extending the high level descriptions in the Standard to accounts of processes which could be used to develop procedures as well as training courses. It was also recognised as an intervention in the ongoing debate between exponents of the life-cycle view of records management and archives work and the records continuum approach. For that reason the competency standards encountered hostility as well as praise.

Evaluation and revision

Three years later when the competency standards were due for revision and re-development into a training package, a survey was conducted to uncover how they had been used by the industry. This found that the standards had been embraced for a variety of purposes not all directly related to training. They had been adopted by the ASA and the RMAA as standards for the associations' joint assessment of records and archives courses in the higher education sector. The RMAA also used the standards for a similar assessment process for courses in the vocational and training sector (VETS). In workplaces respondents identified a variety of uses:

- recruitment and selection (including development of position descriptions)
- formal and informal training – development & delivery
- promoting the need for professional recordkeeping.
- skills recognition
- performance management
- explanation and practical implementation of the records management standard (AS4390).

The feedback was generally very positive but there was one prevalent message about the shortcomings of the standards. To the surprise of those involved in the original project it was issues relating to electronic records which respondents said needed addressing in the review:
“The large majority of respondents repeated that the issues which needed to be covered were electronic records, interfacing with other technologies, and world wide web documents”.

What members from the original steering committee noticed about the 1997 Standards was the overlap between levels, and most surprisingly, the prevalence of the viewpoint of the archival collection in many of the competencies. The newly constituted Technical Committee for the review project identified the size, complexity, and amount of duplication of the 1997 set – 43 individual competencies across 6 levels – as issues to be addressed in revision, in addition to the perceived gap of the new technology. Recordkeeping was one part of an ambitious project to cover a range of business activities to be integrated into a proposed Business Services training package. Under the current rules, competency standards must be presented as training packages for approval by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). A training package consists of the competency standards, recommended groupings of the standards into qualifications and assessment guidelines but may also include, as non-endorsed supplements, such tools as recommended learning strategies, training and assessment material.

The environment for the delivery of education and training in the recordkeeping industry has changed considerably since the 1997 Standards were published. From more than 40 courses in records and archives offered in June 1997 by 20 universities and TAFE institutions across the country, vocational recordkeeping courses have shrunk to fewer than a dozen courses in both sectors. The introduction of full fees for postgraduate courses in universities and reduction in direct funding to universities made it very difficult to sustain the multiple higher education courses with tiny numbers of students. The TAFE sector in every state has likewise lost government funding and has had to rationalise its offerings. The Federal government has made explicit its preference for the private sector’s greater role in training and education delivery. The framework which ANTA oversees is intended to enable more private sector involvement but to ensure that qualifications based on competency standards remain comparable and nationally recognised. ANTA’s requirements for registration as training organisations are more stringent than hitherto, as are the requirements for approval of training packages. The combined effect of these factors has transformed the vocational educational and training sector.

Universities are starting to move into the VET sector, with some establishing schools for which they are seeking registration as training organisations. The primary reason for this seems to be to access revenues flowing from courses geared to the existing marketplace for which students will pay upfront fees. A similar crossover between the TAFE colleges, private sector training organisations and the universities for
post-graduate qualifications in the vocational sector has been antici-
pated by the Australian Qualifications Framework Review. The 
review canvassed opinions in the educational and training sectors about 
articulating post-secondary qualifications in a single framework so that 
no matter how the qualifications are acquired, whether by formal course 
work, delivered in workplace-based training or by recognition of prior 
learning, they should have the same weight for employers or education-
al institutions. Whatever the outcome of the review, moving to a single 
framework for tertiary qualifications is likely to be controversial where a 
postgraduate university qualification is seen as important for profession-
al status.

The revised competency standards have changed considerably. The num-
ber of individual units of competency fell from 43 across six levels in the 
1997 Standards to 21 over four levels in the revised package. The top 
level (level 7–senior management) and the bottom level (level 2) of the 
old competency standards have been dropped. The new competency 
standards roll up a number of the old competencies into one – for exam-
ple, BSBRKG608A “Plan management of records over time” incorpo-
rates six of the old competencies such as “determine records storage 
requirements” and “implement a record preservation program”. There 
has been a conscious effort to describe the recordkeeping processes 
concretely with assessable outcomes. The new format ties the range of 
contextual variables tightly to the elements and the performance 
indicators, and pays more attention to the “critical aspect of evidence” 
specific to each competency. With the greatest number of recordkeeping 
competencies at level 6 (management level) clustering of units into 
specialist recordkeeping qualifications was somewhat difficult. The 
outcome is four qualifications, at levels three and four (Certificate III 
and IV) and levels five and six (Diploma and Advanced Diploma), with 
the greatest choice of units at level 6.

The acceptance of the training package and the qualifications proposed 
by the industry bodies was not automatic and may have been made eas-
ier if it had been possible to include the university-based diploma, 
advanced diploma and even the graduate certificate in the packaging. 
While this was not possible under the current guidelines, the qualifica-
tions framework review may change this. In the meantime there is a bar-
rier between the lower level university qualifications and the 
qualifications available through the VET sector. Given the shrinking 
availability of courses in both sectors, this will prove an artificial dis-

tinction and increasingly an impractical one. The real question at the end 
of the approval process for the new recordkeeping training package is 
where and how will the recordkeepers of the future acquire the new qual-
ifications. All the courses delivered through class/lecture room teaching 
are hanging on by a thread but the private sector and institutional train-
ing programs are hardly in a position to fill the gap. It seems a supreme
irony that at the end of nearly a decade's work to develop competency standards and a comprehensive training package for the Australian records and archives industry that vocational education in recordkeeping may revert to the model of on-the-job training in 'reputable' institutions with which it began in the early 1970s.

References

1. Originally six members of the Records Management Association of Australia (the RMAA), and a representative sent by the Australian Council of Archives (the ACA, the institutions' body, now disbanded). The Australian Services Union, (the ASU) was the principal union for clerical workers in the non-government sector.

2. ANTA was established by Commonwealth statute in 1992 to embody an agreement with the heads of government (states and federal) and commenced operations in 1994. It is an industry-based board which oversees the national vocational training framework. See http://www.anta.gov.au

3. Education in Australia is primarily funded and delivered by the states, not the Federal government nor the municipal councils of local government. The state colleges which provide technical education for trades are known as the Technical and Further Education colleges - TAFE.

4. The Records and Archives competency project was accepted by the Finance Services ITAB as having some synergies with para-professional specialities like accounting and legal services.


6. See the discussion of the current context of the records and archives industry, p14, in the Records and Archives Competency Standards, National Finance Industry Training Advisory Body Ltd, 1997

7. The definitive account of the records continuum theory comes from by a small group of academics at Monash University, foremost of whom are Frank Upward and Dr Sue McKemmish. See Frank Upward's paper, "Structuring the Records Continuum - Part One: Postcustodial principles and properties" available at http://rcrg.dstc.edu.au/publications/recordscontinuum/fupp1.html. Dr McKemmish, who was a member of the Steering Committee, had written extensively on recordkeeping and accountability when the competency project began, for example see "The Smoking Gun: Recordkeeping
and Accountability”, keynote address at the 22nd Annual Conference of the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand, Dunedin, 1998, also available at http://rcrg.dstc.edu.au/publications/recordscontinuum/smoking.html

8. For example, compare the six elements of the competency unit, “Appraise records” with the account of appraisal in AS 4390.5 “Appraisal and Disposal” to see how the steps have been developed to identify measurable outcomes for each element.


10. Three members of the old Steering Committee participated in the new Technical Committee, which was similarly constituted across the record and archives industry but had a reduced role in the revision process. Its most important role was liaison between the national industry training advisory board, Business Services, and practitioners in the industry for the review process to ensure their input.

11. Recordkeeping had become the preferred term embracing both records management and archival work in the three years between release of the 1997 Standards and the start of the revision project. Despite some misgivings from both the archival and the records management quarters, “recordkeeping” was adopted by the Technical committee because of its higher recognition rate with the business audience.

12. The other activities were legal services, human resource management, sales, marketing and advertising, assessment and workplace training, small business management and frontline management. See the Business Services Training website: http://www.bsitab.org

13. Places in undergraduate university courses, whether they are of a general education character or more vocational in nature, are part-funded through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, essentially a deferred fee-paying scheme which students pay for through increased tax contributions after they begin earning. Students have the choice of paying their HECS fees before beginning the course, an option which the majority cannot afford.

14. See the Australian Qualifications Framework website for the guidelines for degree requirements and comment on the survey conducted for the review which has not been completed. The ASA Council made a submission to the review. See also the AQF guide to the secondary and VETS qualifications which provided the framework.
for clustering recordkeeping competencies into qualifications –
twelve.htm

15. See the guide at http://www.bsitab.org/Draft_4_Units/bsb01_quals.
htm

16. Most of the State Archives Authorities or Public Records Offices
offer training programs in specific skills or local procedures. Private
consultants also offer training but there is little private delivery of
recordkeeping education equivalent to the many private colleges
offering computer training or business skills

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