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# PROMOTING THE INTER- GENERATIONAL EQUITY PRINCIPLE THROUGH ARCHIVAL REFERENCE SERVICES

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## **Abstract**

*Applied in the discipline of Archival Science, the Inter-Generational Equity (IGE) theory implies that both the present and future generations are entitled to use and benefit from the extant public documentary heritage. Using a pragmatic philosophical paradigm that permitted the use of both qualitative and quantitative research instruments, this study examined the archival reference services at the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) with the view of assessing how well archivists are meeting the needs of today's researchers without compromising future users. Guided by IGE theory, this paper underscores the need for a rationally balanced equation where neither preservation nor access is given priority at the expense of the other. The gist of the paper is therefore on NAZ's ability to provide information about its holdings and making it available to the current generation of users without compromising the ability of the future users to benefit from the same archival material. The study was driven by the need to eliminate the perceived privilege given to the preservation of archival material at the expense of access and use. In this regard, the IGE theory emerged appropriate as it is grounded in the formula that neither Preservation (P) nor Use (U) should be greater than the other ( $P < > U$ ) as the two should always be equal ( $P = U$ ).*

## **Keywords**

Access, Use, Documentary Heritage, Inter-Generational Equity, Reference Services, Preservation

## **Introduction and background to the study**

The relevance and meaning of an archival institution relies on the service it offers to its clientele. Reference services and the provision of access together with the use of the archival material is a critical archival function that defines the position of archival institutions in society (Trace and Ovalle 2012). As such, it is the mandate of archival institutions to provide good reference services in order to ensure that all users have equal access to archival materials (Roper and Millar 1999a). In the interest of balancing preservation needs and access requirements, archival institutions are called upon to always remember the safety of their materials without necessarily compromising the ability of today's researchers to use the archives.

Preservation at the expense of access and use is useless. In this article, preservation refers to the efforts put in place to reduce the risks of damage and to slow down the rate of deterioration (Roper and Millar 1999b), while access is the availability of records for consultation as a result of legal authorization and the existence of finding aids (Peterson 2012). The main purpose of archival institutions is to preserve and make available information to their users. To this effect, archival institutions are to align their services to the needs of their users. There is therefore the need to ensure that the efforts, time and resources dedicated towards preservation are not put to waste by failing to make available for use the preserved materials. This article is however not going to address the entire preservation activities at the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ)

as the focus is on reference services and the specific preservation issues that go with the activities involved.

Access to public records can only be guaranteed where records are well arranged and finding aids are in place (Mazikana 1999; Murambiwa and Ngulube 2011). The ability of archival institutions to provide information about their holdings and making them available to users depends on having up-to date finding aids with no backlogs in archives processing. In the same vein, Mnjama (2008) highlights that bibliographic access is very much dependent on the levels at which the holdings have been described in the form of finding aids or retrieval tools. Ayoo and Otiye (2000) indicate that poor understanding of user needs is a hindrance to access to information. In Kenya Mnjama (2008) reveals that new researchers who visit the National Archives of Kenya have to go through painstaking weeks working on trial and error for them to master the intricacies of the archives cataloging and holding systems. To this effect, Mnjama (2008) warns new researchers that they should be ready to dedicate a considerable amount of time to learn how to locate and identify sources. In light of such findings from previous research and informed by the IGE theory, it became essential for this article to address the issues of reference services vis-a-vis meeting the expectations of today's archives' users without compromising the ability of the coming generations to benefit from the same material.

### **Problem statement**

There is a perceived struggle that archivists face in trying to promote the interests of current users of archives without compromising the perceived research needs of future researchers. In many instances, meeting the requirements of the current generation of archives users will be in conflict with the donor restrictions, policy issues, executive orders, specific statutes and pieces of Acts and legislation. In this respect, this study echoes the research problem by posing the question that; 'for who are the archives being restricted and preserved for if the current generation of users are denied access to them?' In view of the identified problem, the study adopts the IGE theory which advocates for the principle of preservation of access (Weiss 1992). The principle asserts that each generation should provide its members with the equitable rights of access to the legacy of past generations and should preserve this access for future generations, hence use should always be balanced to preservation and vice versa.

With specific reference to the National Archives of Zimbabwe, the problem this study attempts to solve is the perceived lack of user studies to understand the calibre of archives users and their interests. Without a complete understanding of your visitors and their expectations, it becomes difficult and or artificial to provide them with the services they will appreciate. The lack of user studies is also against the principles of the IGE theory as it violates the rights of today's archives users in that it is very difficult to satisfactorily serve a client when their expectations are not known and or understood. The preliminary results of this study reflected the inadequacies of the reference tools at NAZ in making information available to researchers. As such, it became critical for this article to launch an investigation on archival reference services and the role they play in upholding the IGE theory, thus preservation and access to archival material.

### **Research aim and objectives**

The aim of the study was to ascertain the role of reference services at NAZ in promoting the inter-generational equity theory, in view of the need to balance both preservation and access to Zimbabwe's documentary heritage. In this regard, the study focused on assessing how well archivists balance their responsibilities to preserve archival materials against their duties to make

the same archival materials available to members of the public. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- i. Ascertain if NAZ conducts user studies to understand the calibre of archives users and their interests. User studies help archival institutions to tailor-make their reference service to the needs of their clientele thereby leading to a possible increase of the access level
- ii. Evaluate the adequacy of reference tools at NAZ in making information available to researchers.
- iii. Examine NAZ's search regulations and the influence they have on access and preservation of public archives.
- iv. Establish the availability of signage to the search room

### **The Inter-Generational Equity (IGE) theory and its implications on the preservation and use of archives**

The IGE theory has its origins in environmental sustainable development. The main pillars of the theory are on issues of fairness between generations. The theory is grounded on the understanding that all generations are equal beneficiaries to the natural and cultural system of which they are a part (Weiss 1989 and 1992). In this regard, the earth must be safeguarded for the benefit of the present and future generations through careful planning and management. Applied in the discipline of Archival Science, IGE focuses on matters of fairness between generations in the care and use of archives. As such reference services and access policies in archival institutions should seek to satisfy the needs of the current generation of archives users without compromising the ability of the future generations to use the same archival material. Today's archivists keep the archives in trust for the current and future generations of users, thus promoting the IGE theory.

The IGE theory further emphasises that the present, current and past generations are inherently linked to each other (Weiss 1989 and 1992). It is therefore not rational to prefer one generation over another. In this regard, to favour the present generation to use the archives at the expense of future generations or to compromise the present generation in favour of future generations would be contrary to the IGE theory. The responsibility of archival institutions must be to realise and protect the interests of every generation of archives users. This requires archival reference services that are sustainable. The next generation of archives users would surely want to access and use the archives in at least the good condition as the archival material had been for the previous generation. With reference to the IGE theory, each generation of archivists, users and potential users is a trustee for the archival material with the responsibility to care for the archives and a beneficiary with rights to use them. Quite often, preservation and use actions are consistent (Weiss 1992). However, there are instances where the needs of the current generation of archives users will be in conflict with legal and preservation needs of the archival material. In this regard, the IGE theory advocates for the principle of preservation of access which asserts that each generation should provide its members with the equitable rights of access to the legacy of past generations and should preserve this access for future generations (Weiss 1989 and 1992).

The IGE theory was adopted in this study because of its clear emphasis on the need to promote equity among generations by respecting both the rights of the present and future generations of users. Similarly, the International Council on Archives in its 5<sup>th</sup> Principle on access to archives states that archives should be made available on equal and fair terms, hence implying that neither the current nor the future generation of users should be a priority over another.

### Conceptualising archival reference services within the dictum of the IGE theory

Archival reference services refer to the tools, facilities and services that enable a researcher to use the archival material after the physical access and legal authorisation have been granted. Archival reference services are a critical component of archival functions whose failure and or success determines the relevance of an archival institution in the society (Trace and Ovalle 2012; Parham 2014). The reference services are crucial in that they direct archives users to the records they are seeking and provides them with the information on how to search for the records needed to complete their work (Parham 2014). Thus, archival reference services mainly exist to promote access to archives.

The reference services in an archival institution must be user-centred and should move away from over-emphasising the preservation of archival material at the expense of the current users. In this regard, Murambiwa and Ngulube (2011) underscore the need for proper reference services from the reference officers. They emphasized the need for user education as a way of cultivating researchers on how to use the finding aids efficiently in accessing the required information. Similarly, Jeong (2014) indicates that archivists have a tendency of assuming that the majority of their archives are academic researchers and or elite members of a bureaucratic organization. To this effect, the hunch has been that users are familiar with the records they are accessing and they understand how archival institutions operate. In light of this background, the current study deemed it necessary to establish if NAZ conducts user studies to understand the nature of their clientele and offer them the services they desire. The importance of conducting user studies is also underscored by Trace and Ovalle (2012) who highlight that an effective reference service system relies on the understanding of the use and the users of the archives. Similarly, Williams (2006) observes that there is a crucial need to assess customer satisfaction in respect to the quality of services rendered.

The existence of archival institutions is justified by the nexus that exist between people and the archival materials. Archival institutions strive to meet the sociological, historical, political and cultural needs of a people by means of making available the relevant records containing the required information (Trace and Ovalle 2012). In this respect, archivists always seek to promote the IGE theory by making sure that the country's recorded memory of the humankind is made available for use while being protected from decay, neglect and theft amongst other agents of deterioration. This noble obligation can be achieved through effective and up to date finding aids.

The need to make documentary heritage available to people is critical and quite prevalent in today's public discussions and gatherings. Of particular interest is the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2015's forum organised by the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT) where the Vice President of Nigeria Professor Yemi Osinbajo said that "access to information and data is the right of citizens and not a privilege" (news24Nigeria 2015). After taking the oath of office and secrecy on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 2015 to assume her duty as a speaker of parliament for Nepal, Onsari Gharti stressed the need for increasing people's access to information regarding government's activities (The Himalayan Times 2015). In South Africa, President Jacob Zuma announced that he will lead the government in improving public access to information about its work (Independent On-line 2015). The prominence of the discourse on access to government information on public fora emphasizes the importance of information to a people, hence, archival reference service should form part of the integral components of archival activities.

As such, it is important for archival institutions to understand their users so as to develop services that meet their expectations and concerns. Understanding users and addressing their

expectations usually leads to increased access and use of archival materials. Mere assumptions about the users of archives lead to misconceptions that alienate archivists from researchers. The need for archival user studies is therefore a serious cause of concern for archivists (Ruth 1988). It is dangerous for archivists to continue rendering their services based on assumptions. To help archivists conduct user studies, Conway (1986) offered a framework that allows archivists to evaluate the reference process. The framework includes assessing the effectiveness of service (quality), the protection of archival materials (integrity) and the benefits of archival research (value).

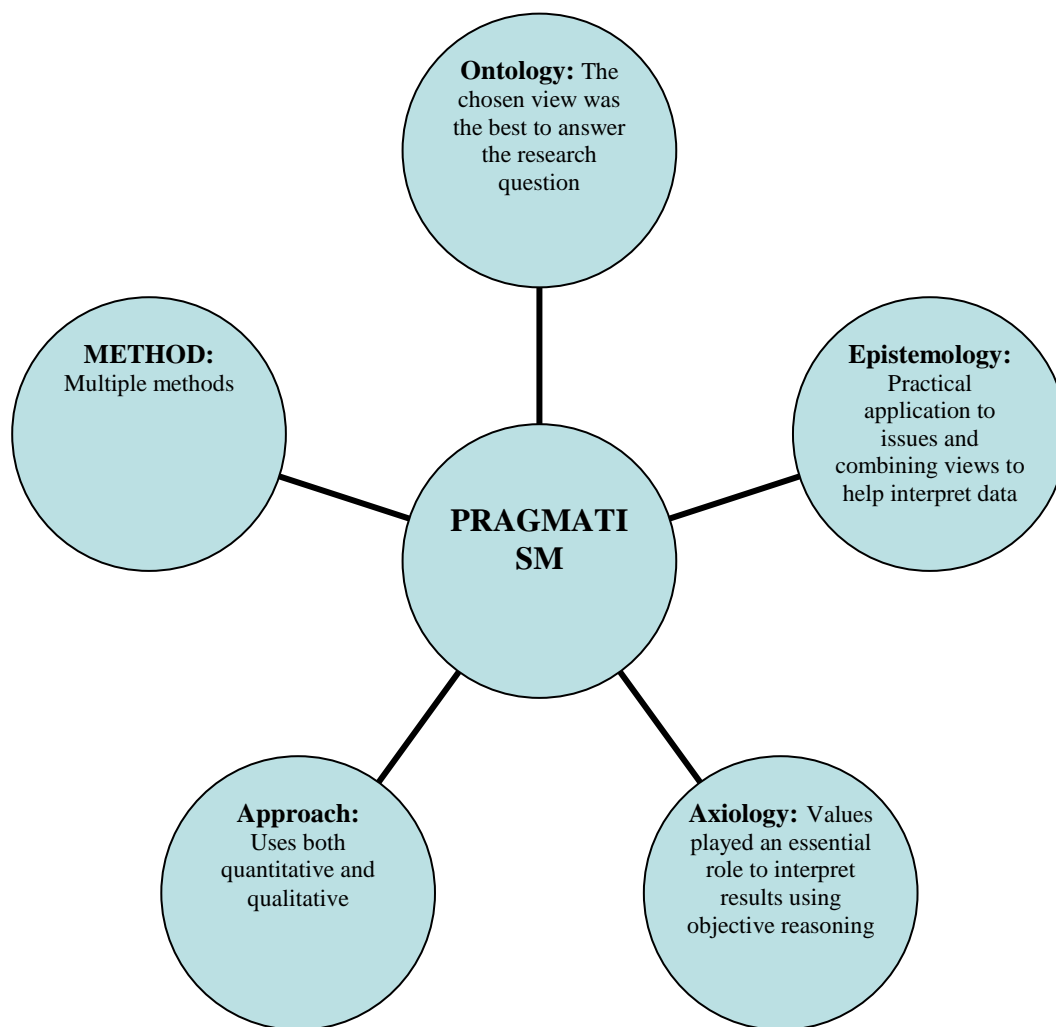
### Research methodology

The study used a pragmatic philosophical paradigm to determine the adequacy of the archival reference services at NAZ vis a vis preservation requirements. The choice of this method was largely based on its flexibility as it allows the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods as well as tools from both the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. The study was however much inclined to the quantitative approach in which experimental use and questionnaires were the main data collection instruments. Data collected from these instruments were complemented by structured interviews and content analysis. Intercept interviews were done with a total of nine researchers at NAZ on the three consecutive days that the researcher visited NAZ. In-depth structured interviews were also conducted with five of the archivists at NAZ who rotate on the reference desk in the search room. The archivists were mainly consulted to provide information relating to user studies and the nature of their finding aids. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to a total of twenty purposively identified lecturers at the Midlands State University. These were aimed at complementing the data regarding the adequacy of finding aids and the issue of user studies. The choice of the lecturers was influenced by observations made in the register for researchers at NAZ where history as a subject of research dominated the category of the area of study.

The questionnaires were distributed as follows; History and International Relations Department - eight (8); Development Studies Department - eight (8), African Languages and Culture Department - two (2) and Archaeology, Cultural heritage and Museum Studies - two (2). Content analysis of the visitors' register in the search room and the reading room regulations displayed on users' desks also constituted part of the data gathering exercise as well as analysis of the literature that goes with the subject. Experiential use of the reference facilities was also performed to obtain further insights into the issues of user studies, finding aids, search room regulations and signage. Table 1 summarises the research population for this study while Figure 1 demonstrates the pragmatic philosophical paradigm used in this study.

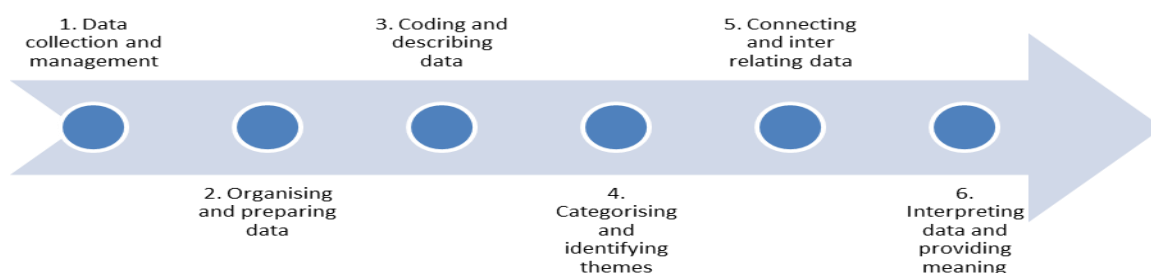
**Table 1 Research population**

Data collection method	Informants category	Frequency
Intercept interviews	Researchers	9
In-depth structured interviews	NAZ Archivists	5
Questionnaires	<b>Midlands State University Lecturers</b>	
	History and International Relations Department	<b>8</b>
	Development Studies Department	<b>8</b>
	African Languages Department	<b>2</b>
	Archaeology, Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies Department	<b>2</b>
<b>Total research population</b>		<b>34</b>



**Figure 1: The pragmatic philosophical paradigm**

Figure 1 illustrates the pragmatic philosophical paradigm and how it was used in this study. The qualitative data obtained in this study was analysed following a content analysis process as depicted in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: The content analysis process**

## Findings and discussion

Conducting user studies is the key to upholding the IGE theory (Yakel 2002). It is essential for archival institutions to devote their time in examining the composition of their clientele and the needs of their existing user groups and compare them with the services they currently provide. These services must be adjusted regularly so that users are provided with the tools necessary to successfully exploit the available resources, thus promoting the IGE theory.

An analysis of the register in the search room at NAZ showed that historians and researchers from other academic disciplines constitute a relatively bigger percentage of NAZ clientele. The other types of research that emerged prominent were on family history, migrant cultures, economic and agricultural history, the environment and the development of urban cities.

The first objective of this study was to ascertain if NAZ conducts user studies. The responses obtained from interviews conducted with NAZ archivists who constitute part of the team that circulates on the reference desk showed that NAZ does not actively engage in soliciting information from its users regarding their interests, concerns and expectations. No follow-ups in terms of in-depth interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions were done before and after users complete their work in the search room. To understand the needs, expectations and concerns of their users, the archivists at NAZ reported that they used the visitor's register and comment book. The visitors' register is crucial in keeping a record of how many visitors came to the archives and in identifying users on a particular day in the event of loss or damage. The study found that the information captured in the register include the name, address, affiliation and the area of study. These information categories are very important but however inadequate in gaining a full understanding on the calibre of archives users. The same applies to the visitors' comment book. It does not permit a probe of the user's comments to get deeper insights into the issues raised by researchers. The lack of user studies at NAZ compromises the access and use of the documentary heritage at the institution as the concerns of users are almost certain to be overlooked since they are not known.

As indicated in the second objective, this study also sought to evaluate the adequacy of reference tools at NAZ in making the information available to the archives users. Using the experiential method of research and the responses obtained from the researchers, the finding aids at NAZ were found to be useful in helping researchers to identify the materials needed to address their inquires. However, there was a general dissatisfaction over the finding aids being prepared in such a way that the intervention of an archivist was always needed. The archives users lamented the inadequacy of contextual introduction to the records to facilitate self-directed research.

In order to protect the records, all users must abide by clear and documented reference rules. As such, the third objective of the current study was to examine NAZ search regulations and the impact they have on the current and future users. Using experiential research and content analysis of the displayed rules on each users desks, the study found that NAZ has search room rules that regulate the behaviour of researchers. Items (i) to (viii) below provide a summary of the search room regulations at NAZ as they are displayed on users' desks in the reading room.

- i. Ink bottles, food or drink are not allowed in the reading and search rooms
- ii. Ensure hands are not dirty, greasy or sweaty as they leave marks on the documents
- iii. Only pencils may be used. The use of ink is strictly prohibited as it puts permanent marks on documents
- iv. Only four items are allowed to a researcher at a time



- v. Do not mark or dog ear papers. You may mark the relevant pages by inserting loose slips of paper
- vi. To photocopy, take the complete item to the reference desk officer who will then direct you to the photocopying office. It normally takes three days before something taken for photocopying is ready
- vii. Containers such as bags and briefcases may not be taken into the reading room
- viii. Always return the items to the reference desk officer after using them

An analysis of the search regulations indicate that the measures are meant to protect the archives from possible forms of damage by current users, hence promoting the IGE theory's component of preserving the archival material for future generations. The search room regulations at NAZ seek to ensure the future generations of archives users find the material in as good state of preservation as the current users are enjoying. In essence, the search room regulations are there to protect the interests of the users and the general populace for which the archival materials are held in trust.

Of interest to the current research was also the availability of basic facilities such as signage to the search room and other important areas. Roper and Millar (1999a) indicate that there should be signage that directs researchers to the search room. To this effect, the fourth objective of the current study examined the existence of informational, directional and regulatory signage in the search room and on the way to the reading room. In this regard, the study attests that NAZ has clear directional signs that guide researchers. The study also did a checklist for the NAZ reference area and the following were observed:

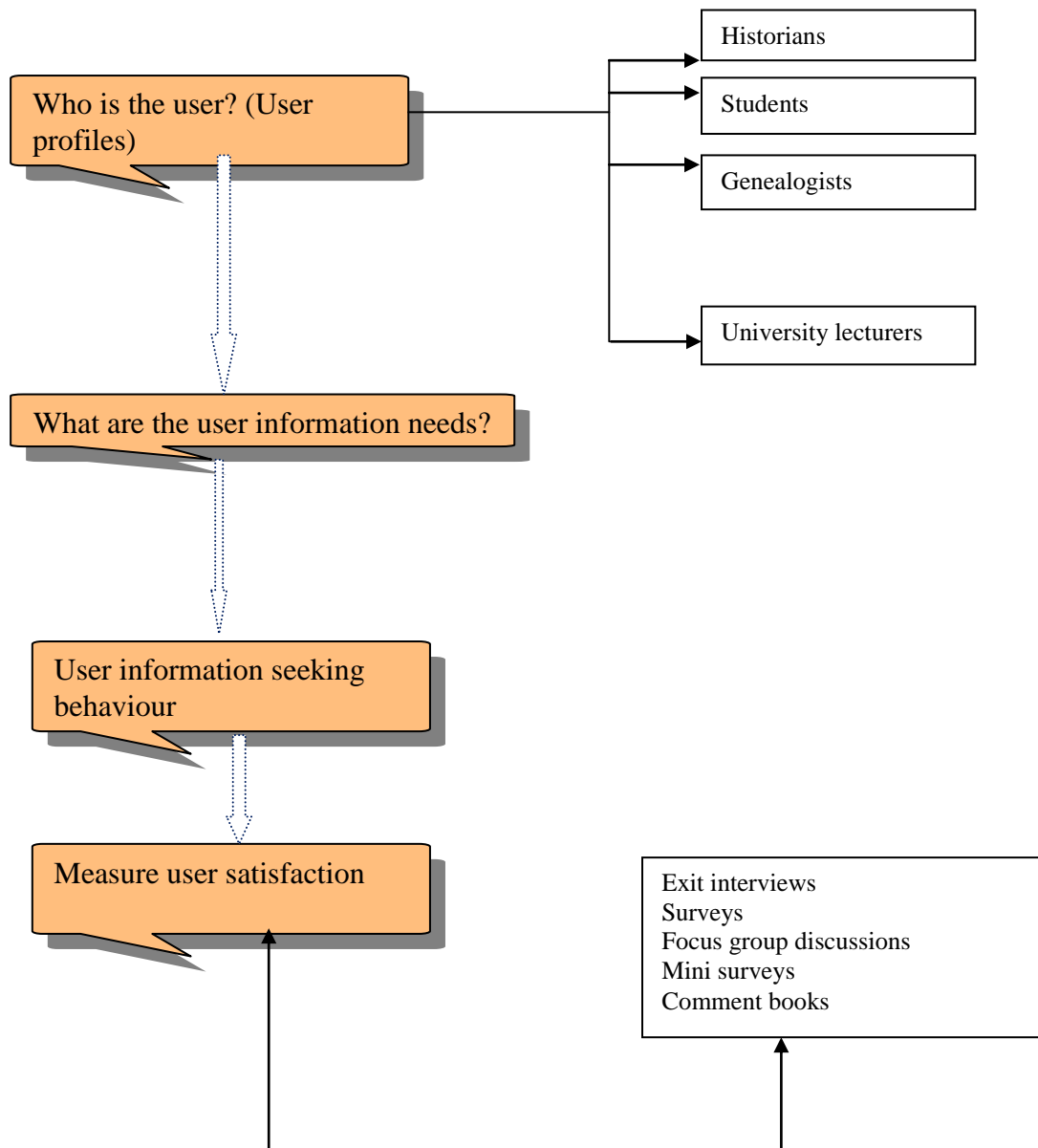
- The entrance door to the search room was clearly labelled
- The opening and closing times for using the search room were displayed at the entrance door
- The reference desk officer is clearly distinguished and can be easily identified by researchers
- The location of finding aids, catalogue cards and the guide to NAZ collections and reference books is clearly marked
- The area where requests for documents and photocopying services is clearly marked
- The rules for users are prominently displayed in the search room on each desk

Directional, informational and regulatory signs were found on the way to the search room and in the search room. These are essential in that they make it easy for researchers to find their way to the search room, prevent researchers from entering restricted areas and help researchers to behave accordingly.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The needs, expectations and concerns of the archives users at NAZ are barely known and understood as there have been no user studies. This violates the IGE theory as the rights of the current users may not be fully taken on board if they are neither known nor understood. The finding aids are commendable in helping the researchers find the materials they need to solve their research problems. However, the finding aids can be improved to a level where the

researcher would require very little or no intervention from the archivists. The behavior of the archives users in the reading room is highly controlled and monitored through the use of search room regulations that are clearly displayed on each user's desk. The signage to the search room and in the search room is clear and well labeled. This is in harmony with the IGE theory that calls for the need to ensure that the use of the archival material by the current generation does not threaten the survival of the same material into the future.



**Figure 3: User Studies Model (USM)**

Archival institutions exist not only to preserve the archival material but also to make the documentary heritage available for use, hence neither 'Preservation (P) nor Use (U) should be greater than the other. This renders reference services a critical function of an archival institution. Placing the mandate of archival institutions within the IGE theory, archivists are called upon to observe the following dicta when offering reference services:

- Conduct user studies to understand their clientele and respond accordingly
- Provide access on equal basis
- Prepare adequate finding aids that permit an absolute self-research
- Collect standard reference material
- Have all visitors to the archives sign a register
- Explain the contents and organisation of your archives to all new visitors
- Keep a copy of all correspondence of written answers to research questions showing who inquired what kind of information

Given the critical role played by the user studies in offering archival reference services and in promoting the IGE theory, this article proposes a user studies model (see figure 3) that uses a user centred design with aim of enhancing the archive going experience.

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