

## **MANAGING UNIVERSITY RECORDS**

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"All Universities worthy of the name possess three functions: The storage of knowledge already acquired, the dissemination of knowledge in man's possession, and the search for new knowledge." A. R. Kerr, President of the University of Alberta, 1938.

### **Introduction**

The management of records is very often given low priority in organizations, and universities are no exception in this. As stated in the quotation above, one of the principal functions of universities is the storage of knowledge. However, in as much as universities provide excellent facilities and services in the provision of library materials, some of our universities are unable to manage the records they create. Records document all the activities of the organization. It cannot therefore be overstated that failure to control records under one's control is not just a minor lapse in administrative activities, but in most cases it is a matter of bad management. Today, information is seen as a resource comparable to finance, workers and equipment. This article addresses some of the issues which should be examined by any university striving to establish an effective records management programme for its semi-current and non-current records. In the recent past we have witnessed an increase in articles contributed to this journal based on university records. Most of these articles have highlighted various problems currently affecting the creation, maintenance, use and disposal of university records.

### **Statement of the problem**

The nature of the problem can be stated quite simply. It is that, as a result of the increasing day-to-day activities of the universities, records are being created in large quantities. Most universities have witnessed considerable growth in terms of programmes being offered as well as in their physical infrastructure. To a very large extent, these developments have influenced the manner in which records are being created, stored and retrieved. The proliferation of records in electronic formats also poses a unique challenge for universities to develop and adopt campus-wide integrated records management programmes. This article seeks to offer solutions to some of the problems experienced by many custodians of university records who in some cases have had no formal training in the area of archives and records management

## **The records survey**

Many of the articles that have been carried in this journal do not seem to indicate that the authors have carried out thorough surveys of their records materials. The ability of the university to manage its records in an efficient manner depends largely on its ability to answer the following questions:

- What records exist and in what quantity?
- What is their growth rate?
- What proportion can be destroyed?
- What proportion is used?
- What record types exist?
- Where are the records stored?
- What kind of facilities and equipment are required?
- Where and when will these facilities be required?
- Who manages the records?
- Are there any university rules and regulations regarding the retention and destruction of records?
- What types of filing and retrieval systems are used? Do they follow the orderly systematic flow of records and information throughout the life cycle, i.e current, semi-current, and non-current?

This information can be obtained from a records survey conducted by an information professional. Without this information, it will be virtually impossible to plan for the archives programme. I will not attempt to address all these questions. Instead, I will look at the policies, infrastructure and procedures that need to be in place for a successful archives and records management programme to be implemented in a university.

## **University records management programmes**

A review of the literature on managing university archives suggests records management programmes exist to fulfill some or all of the following objectives:

- To provide control over the records: that is the creation, utilization, storage, retrieval and disposition of records. Without a records management programme, a university will not have an effective means of controlling the creation, maintenance and disposal of its records. Despite the introduction of non-paper information storage media, the volume of paper records continues to grow. The introduction of modern copiers, printers, fax machines, etc have increased the quantity of paper received and created in universities.
- To eliminate needless storage of duplicate or ephemeral records. Not all records in the university are of long-term value. Some records are only useful for a limited time after which they can be disposed of. Examples include student application forms, examination scripts, invoices, receipts,

copies of minutes of various committees, etc. When large volumes of ephemeral records are held, it becomes difficult to retrieve records.

- To furnish timely, accurate and complete information for efficient decision-making. Most of the information necessary for decision-making is contained in records. For information to be useful, it should be available when needed, it should be accurate, and sufficient enough to enable a person to make informed decisions. Sad to say, more often than not decisions are made based on incomplete, inaccurate and unreliable information. Where procedures for filing records are inadequate, it becomes virtually impossible to locate records when the need arises.
- To ensure regulatory compliance. Within each country, there are laws and regulations that require the universities to maintain records. These laws include the Public Archives Act, Financial Regulations, University Statutes, etc. These laws and regulations require that the universities keep certain types of records. For instance, auditing requirements demand that the universities maintain well kept and well managed records.
- To minimize litigation risks. Virtually all litigation cases are based on the availability of information. Successful defense of a university against cases brought before courts depends on the ability of a university to provide authentic documentary evidence.
- To preserve corporate memory. Records created by the University constitute our collective memory and are an irreplaceable asset of great value, but which we very often overlook. These records document our past policies, programmes and developments and are vital for research and reference purposes. They show us where we have come from, where we are and where we are heading.
- To safeguard vital information. Without a records management programme it is difficult to identify valuable records that a university may require during or after an emergency or disaster. At least I am not aware of any university in the region that has a vital records management programme.
- To promote good governance, transparency and public accountability. The last few years have witnessed a greater demand from the public to hold institutions accountable for their actions. Translated into action, this means the legal right of access to institutional information. Time and again demands have been made on the universities to declare their position on various issues affecting students, disciplinary procedures, appointment of staff, etc. Without reliable authentic documentary evidence no university will be seen to be transparent in its operations.

Despite these clear objectives, many of the universities are unable to meet them. For instance, a study conducted by Oyiti at the University of Botswana revealed that the University lacks policies and procedures governing the creation, maintenance and use and disposition of its records.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the University has accumulated large quantities of records since its inception in 1982 which now need to be transferred to the University Library for permanent preservation. However, the actual transfer of these records cannot take place until the records have been sorted, appraised, arranged and listed.

## University archives and records management policy

William Saffady<sup>2</sup> argues that the effective and efficient management of records must be supported by an infrastructure of policies, structures, procedures, tools, training and resources. It is for this reason that the archives and records management function of the university must derive its authority from a policy statement or charter issued by the university administration setting out the objectives and mapping out the plan for the programme. Ideally, this policy statement should be approved by the University Council and issued in the form of a directive by the Vice Chancellor or the University Registrar. It should specify the need for the programme, the objectives, the proposed structure of the programme and the level of administrative and technical support required. The policy statement should clearly state that:

- All records created by the university (including records created by faculties, departments, schools, institutes, etc) belong to the university
- All official records must be incorporated into the University (registry) records system. Private or individual record systems will not be allowed.
- Records must not be destroyed without proper authorization from the University Archivist.
- The University Archives will be the depository for all university records.
- The University Archivist/Records Manager shall be the established official responsible for all aspects of records management from creation to their ultimate disposition.
- Access to University archives shall be subject to regulations formulated and approved by the university.

In addition, the university administration should clearly define the boundaries of its archives and records management programme. Traditionally, university archives programmes were limited to managing historical or simply non-current records of their parent organizations. Today, virtually all university archives and records management programmes deal with managing the entire life cycle of records. It is vital that a university declares its stance on this matter. Failure to do so will impact on the records manager's ability to intervene effectively on all aspects of records management practices, as some of his/her activities might be misunderstood to mean engagements outside assigned duties.

There are reasons why Universities should formulate such a policy. In the first instance, resources must be allocated for running the University Archives. Secondly, the establishment of the post of a University Records Manager/Archivist and other support staff, the training of staff and development of records retention schedules must be approved by the university administration and an administrative framework established. Thirdly, as major records are created at the higher levels of administration, it is important that the chief officers of the university be bound by a policy on records management. Moreover, as the creation of a University Archives will have far-reaching implications on the way records are maintained and used throughout the university, a policy would help to ensure a coordinated approach to managing records throughout the university.

## **A university archives centre**

In many African universities, the responsibility for managing university archives is part of the special collections, rare publications, national collections, etc. In some other universities, the records of universities remain unmanaged, though the institutions recognize the need to establish units for managing university records. As a result, many university archives programmes have failed to carry out their mandate satisfactorily. No wonder Annabel Straus argues that “recognizing a need does not mean that action will be taken. Nothing can be done until key faculty and administration agree that the helter-skelter dispersion of records is fundamentally unsound and that something must be done about it.”<sup>3</sup> The creation of a university archives centre should be one practical step towards the establishment of an effective university records management programme. Among other things, the centre should collect, organize, appraise, preserve and make available records of the university. Specifically the archives centre should:

- Provide information services and finding aids that will assist in the retrieval of information from the archives.
- Establish procedures and guidelines for the systematic collection and disposal of university records and archives.
- Prepare registers, calendars, inventories, guides, pathfinders and databases to facilitate the retrieval of information from the centre.
- Make available and encourage the use of the collection by members of the university community and the general public.
- Facilitate efficient records management.
- Promote knowledge and understanding of the origins and development of the university.

## **Placement of the archives/records management function within the university administrative hierarchy**

Perhaps one of the thorniest issues that needs to be addressed is the question of the placement of the university archives and records services within the administrative structure of the university. Nicholas Burckel opines that “the staffing of the archives and its place in the organization of the college are perhaps the most important determinant of how successful it will be”<sup>4</sup>. Where should the archives and records service be placed? To whom should the unit be answerable? Should it be answerable to the a University Librarian or to the University Registrar or should it be an autonomous unit answerable to the Vice Chancellor? Although any of these arrangements is possible, each has its own limitations. Any of the following options may be considered.

In some universities, it is common practice to find university archives placed under the University Librarian. This was the observation made by Kufa: “at some universities archives do not have a status and an identity different from that of the special materials sections in libraries”.<sup>5</sup> Placing the university archives service under the University Librarian might lead to the service being neglected, as the Librarian

may be pre-occupied with the administration of library materials as opposed to records management. Experience gained elsewhere indicates that where university archives services have been placed under the Librarian, they have ended up inadequately funded or allowed to die a natural death.

Placement of an archives service under a central authority such as the University Registrar would be ideal, as the archives service collects and receives records from all sectors of the university, and its activities and operations transcend all barriers. In terms of administrative support, the archives service receives direct support from the high echelons of the university, especially where the University Archivist is responsible for managing the entire life cycle of records.

Creation of a new Records Management Unit is another option. This option would lead to the creation of a completely new unit within the University to be called the Archives and Records Management Unit, which would be answerable to the Vice Chancellor. This option might be attractive, but the Vice Chancellor might be pre-occupied with other university activities and fail to provide the support that might be required unless the Vice Chancellor delegates powers to another senior officer.

Of these options, I would recommend option number two, and suggest that the holder of the post works closely with the University Librarian to ensure that certain common activities such as security and infrastructure run smoothly.

### **Appointment of a university archivist/records manager**

In order to ensure that recorded information is accessible and can be managed throughout the university, it is essential that a Records Manager/Archivist be appointed to take direct responsibility for the records management system. It would be futile for the university to embark on a campus-wide records management programme without a trained archivist. No wonder Donald Simpson advises “do not embark on a sea of records management with an inexperienced navigator.”<sup>6</sup> Ideally, the person appointed to this post should be educated to Diploma/Masters Level in Archives and Records Management and should have the ability to work methodically and reliably. Subject to the approval of the university administration, I would suggest that the duties of the University Archivist be as follows:

- To direct, plan and administer the University Archives.
- To preserve, repair and provide access to University archives.
- To compile guides and other retrieval tools to University archives.
- To acquire through purchase, donation, bequests etc on behalf of the university any records, books or other materials which in the archivist’s opinion has enduring or historical value.
- To devise procedures for the listing, scheduling and destruction of university records no longer needed by the institution.
- To regulate the conditions under which researchers may use University archives.
- To provide authority and equipment for making and authenticating copies of documents and extracts from University archives for the purpose of research or as evidence in courts of law.
- To perform such other functions as are necessary for purposes of directing, managing and controlling the University Archives.

- To advocate and promote the use of archives by the University community.

Where it is established that the University Records Manager/Archivist is also responsible for managing current records, his/her duties should also include the following:

- Designing and implementing new file classification systems for the university.
- Developing standards and filing procedures for records in the university.
- Developing records retention schedules.
- Appraisal of university records.
- Maintaining records storage facilities.
- Developing efficient records retrieval systems for records transferred to the university archives.
- Protection of university records, including document repair, restoration and reformatting (or migration of information to other formats).
- Identification of vital records.
- Preparation of a disaster preparedness and response plan for university records.
- Liaising with schools, faculties and all other university offices on matters pertaining to university archives and records management.

The Records Manager/University Archivist must be supported by a team of well trained officers at appropriate levels. The level of training for the support staff should be at least at the certificate and diploma levels.

### **Publicizing the programme**

Although the formulation of a records management policy and the appointment of a University Archivist/Records Manager is a critical step in the establishment of a university archives, there must be a method of publicizing the programme and enforcing it. The new programme will require advertising and promotion to get it underway. William Saffady argues that: "A records management programme will never develop fully without appropriate publicity that clearly delineates the advantages of a sound programme for the administration of institutional operating records and the role of the university archives in that programme."<sup>7</sup> Coordination and cooperation from those presently holding all sorts of records is important. Moreover, the interest of potential users must be aroused and maintained through an effective and efficient records service.

The records service may be publicized through a newsletter or a circular originating from the Vice Chancellor's Office or the University Registrar. The launching of the programme should be followed by courtesy calls to all the major officers of the university, exhibitions, etc. All these activities will require the support of the university administration.

### **Appointment of an archives and records management advisory committee**

The creation of an Archives and Records Management Advisory Committee of the university should be constituted as soon as possible. The committee should ensure that the University Archives pursues the objectives and policies set in the policy statement and that it has the resources to do so. Initially, the main function of the committee would be to approve measures designed to set up the Archives and Records Management Programme. Once the programme has been launched, the specific functions of the Committee should include:

- Approving manuals and other publications prepared by the records office.
- Approving retention/disposition schedules.
- Compiling and revising search room rules and regulations.
- Hearing appeals from the researchers as far as access to records is concerned.
- Assisting and communicating key problems or issues to the University Administration.

### **The budget**

Many archives and records management programmes fail due to inadequate funding. Any university contemplating establishing an archives service must be prepared to provide the necessary funding to support the programme. No wonder McCarthy argues that "poorly or inadequately supported programmes have a debilitating effect on staff morale, on the institution's image and most important on the use of historical materials."<sup>8</sup> Funds will be needed for the purchase of specialized storage equipment, payment of staff salaries, restoration facilities, maintenance costs, archival boxes, insurance, acid free paper, etc.

### **Access policy**

Virtually all the articles reviewed on university archives and records management in Africa make no reference to access to university archives. Without an access policy, it will be extremely difficult to determine which records should be made available and which should be restricted. It is common practice in many countries to follow the same restrictions for public as private manuscripts deposited by individuals. It is suggested that clear guidelines be developed concerning access to university records by university personnel as well as members of the public with a genuine interest in university archives. Below are some suggested guidelines on developing an access policy to university archives.

- Access to records held by the University Archives should be subject to regulations approved by the highest organ of the university. The regulations should be reviewed from time to time.
- A department depositing records with the University Archives may impose limitations on access to their records so long as these limitations are not



- contrary to the general regulations approved by the governing body.
- Each department, faculty, office, etc transferring its records to the University Archives will have access to its records at all times.
  - Nobody other than the office which created the records will be granted access to university records which are less than thirty years old. Access to records less than 30 years old will be subject to the approval of the body which created them.
  - A creating body can request that some of its records be closed for periods in excess of 30 years.

## Endnotes

1. M Oyiti, "Records and Archives Management in Academic Institutions: A Case Study of the University of Botswana", masters thesis, University of Botswana, 1998.
2. William Saffady, "A University Archives and Records Management Programme: Some Operational Guidelines", *College and Research Libraries* 35,3 (1974), p. 204.
3. Annabel Straus, "College and University Archives: Three Decades", *College and Research Libraries*, 40,5 (1979), p. 435.
4. Nicholas Burckel, "Establishing a College Archives", *College and Research Libraries*, 36,5 (1975), p. 385.
5. J Kufa, "Whither University Archives?", *South African Archives Journal* 36 (1994), p. 78.
6. Donald Simpson, "The Don'ts of a Good Records Management Programme", *Records Management Quarterly* 9,1 (1975), p. 22.
7. Saffady, op.cit., p. 208.
8. PH McCarthy, "Overview: Essentials of Archives or Manuscript Program", in R Lytle, *Management of Archives and Manuscript Collections for Librarians* (Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 1975), p.7.