

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

POLICIES AND SERVICES IN THE READING ROOM

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Abstract

Policies and services in archival reading rooms in South African university libraries were studied by means of a survey. Ten reading rooms were asked to answer ten questions regarding access to and services in the reading room. It was found that South African archival reading room policies agree on basic principles such as the prohibition of food, drink and the use of cell phones. Differences exist in policies around access to digitised copies of archival documents, the use of gloves in handling photographs and documents, costs of photocopying and scanning of photographs and documents and in the use of portable digital devices for copying of photographs and documents. Further study is necessary on the use of gloves in the reading room and the use of personal scanners and digital cameras. A more in-depth study is necessary in order to standardise charges for services.

Key words: Archive, Academic archive, Reading room, Policy, Digitisation

Introduction

Policy documents for archives are necessary to inform reading room users of what they can expect from the archives. They also inform researchers of what is expected of them when they make use of the

reading room. Without written policies, archival staff members are without guidance regarding the boundaries of their service. Similarly, without published policy documents, researchers are ignorant of what to expect of a particular reading room.

Archival policy documents which might exist are collection, access, service and reprographic policies. Collection policies provide guidance to archival staff on the kind of collections to accept for their archives and on the level of service to provide. Access and service policies guide staff on who may or may not use the archives and reprographic policies inform staff and researchers of charges and restrictions on copying of archival material. The documents and policies that were examined in this study are those that govern use of the reading room. These documents covered such issues as handling of manuscripts, access to the reading room, and reprographic charges and policies.

Methodology

A survey of ten questions was compiled, using a free Survey Monkey account (www.surveymonkey.com). Ten archival reading rooms in South African university libraries were purposefully chosen. Email addresses were obtained via the institutional web pages and an email was sent out to all the chosen reading rooms, informing them of the survey and the reason for it. Participants were asked to provide electronic copies of any written archival policies and reprographic charges in existence. A web address was included in the email, which participants were requested to click on to access the survey. It was noted that no names of persons or institutions would be mentioned in the resulting article. After a month, three responses had been received. Those who had not yet responded were sent a reminder via email to participate in the survey. After two weeks, those who had still not responded were telephoned and requested to participate. Ultimately, six out of ten reading rooms responded to the survey.

Findings

The ten questions and the responses from the participants are detailed below.

Question 1: Do you have a written Reading Room policy document?

4 responded 'Yes'

2 responded 'Other'

Of the latter, one reading room responded that they have a 'staff rules document', which is not published, or provided to researchers, but serves as a guide for archival staff.

Question 2: Do you have a written scale of charges for reprographic services?

3 responded 'Yes'

1 responded 'No'

2 responded 'Other'

Of the latter, one reading room responded that their reprographic charges were the same as those of the rest of the library and therefore a separate document is not necessary. Another responded that they do not charge for copying.

Question 3: Do you allow researchers to use their own digital cameras to copy archival material?

4 responded 'Yes'

1 responded 'No'

1 responded 'Other'

The latter response included a comment to the effect that no flash photography is allowed in the Reading Room. This would therefore alter the result to 5 reading rooms out of 6 who allow researchers to use their own digital cameras to copy archival material. One reading room also commented that they require a written application prior to the use of a digital camera.

Question 4: Do you allow researchers to use their own portable scanners to copy archival material?

3 responded 'Yes'

2 responded 'No'

1 responded 'Other'

The latter response included a comment that allowing use of portable scanners depended on the fragility of the documents in question. This would therefore alter the result to 4 out of 6 reading rooms which allow researchers to use their own portable scanners to copy archival material.

Question 5: If you answered "Yes" to questions 3 and/or 4, how do you decide what can and can't be digitised by users? (i. e – what factors do you take into account? For example, whether the material is rare or not; whether it is robust enough to withstand such handling,

or whether the researcher is well known to you and experienced in handling archival material).

Some reading rooms responded that all of the examples mentioned are taken into consideration. Others said that requests for use of portable scanners were considered separately and that physical condition of the documents was one of the primary factors to be taken into consideration. One responded that it depended on whether there was a staff member available to assist the researcher with such scanning. Another specified that while use of portable scanners is allowed, only 10% of a folder is permitted to be copied and a copyright form must be filled in by the researcher, stating that use of the copies will only be for personal and research purposes.

Question 6: Have you digitized any of your archival holdings?

6 responded 'Yes'

Question 7: If you answered "Yes" to 6, do you allow access to the original or the digitised copy or both?

One reading room provides access to only the digitised copy once documents have been digitized. Four responded that they allow access to both the digitized copy and the original. One responded 'Other', with the comment that some items are packed away permanently after being digitized, while others may still be viewed by researchers.

Question 8: Do you provide gloves for the handling of photographs or documents or both?

Four out of 6 reading rooms provide gloves for handling of photographs, while 2 out of 6 reading rooms provide gloves for the handling of documents.

Question 9: Do you impose a limit on the amount of copying a researcher can do?

3 responded 'Yes'

1 responded 'No'

1 omitted to answer the question.

A comment was included by one reading room that a limit on the amount of copying would be imposed if the rules and restrictions of the collection required it.

Question 10: What security measures do you have in place at your archive?

2 have CCTV

4 have controlled access

- 3 require visitor registration
- 3 provide lockers for personal belongings
- 2 mentioned staff presence at all times

Discussion

Perusal of those policy documents that were shared revealed that prohibitions that are generally applicable in South African archival reading rooms include the use of cell phones and the bringing in of food and drink. In addition, no documents may leave South African archival reading rooms.

A question that was omitted from this study was what researchers are permitted to bring into the reading room. Given that some reading rooms provide lockers, it is assumed that researchers are requested to lock away items such as bags and other personal belongings. Some reading rooms specify that only paper, pencils and laptops are allowed.

Some reading room policy documents specify ways of handling archival material. Some prohibit leaning on them or folding them anew, as well as handling them in any way that might damage them. Some prohibit them to be lifted from their folders, while others warn that documents should be kept in the order in which they are arranged in their folders.

Regarding the question of security in and access to reading rooms, all the respondents include some form of visitor registration in their policies. One reading room requires researchers to register annually during their first visit and to sign a visitor's book at each consecutive visit.

Some reading rooms place restrictions on the number of folders or boxes that may be consulted at once. Two reading rooms include a restriction of one archives box at a time and one file at a time in their policy document.

Generally, photocopying is done at the archivist's discretion and it is a rule for all the respondents that photocopying is done by archival staff. A rule of no more than 10% of a folder may be copied is applied

by some reading rooms, while one reading room states that no more than 20% of a collection may be copied.

Costs of photocopied pages range from 35c to R4. Different charges apply to staff or students of the university and outsiders or visitors to the university. Minimum charges on postal requests apply for some reading rooms.

Costs of scanned images range from zero to R20,00 and again, different charges apply to staff or students of the university and outsiders or visitors to the university. Two reading rooms apply different charges to images of varying quality.

How do we compare?

The policies of three international archival reading rooms were examined: Harvard University Archives, Duke University Archives and Stanford University Archives. At Harvard, special permission is required for the use of a personal digital camera for copying of archival documents and use of any other copying devices is banned. Harvard restricts the amount of files that may be consulted at a time. Prepayment for any copying is required and no self-service photocopying is permitted.

At Duke, use of personal scanners and digital cameras is permitted, provided their use does not disturb other researchers. Other equipment has to be approved by archival staff. Duke also bans the use of strong colognes and perfumes, with the caveat that these might also disturb other researchers. On the other hand, Stanford specifies the requirement of the use of gloves while handling photographs. Digital photography and personal scanners are not permitted. Their policy insists that documents lie flat on the table, that they must be kept in their original order and that only one archival box may be consulted at a time.

Two controversial issues in the literature

A controversy arose in 2005 when Silverman and Baker launched a campaign to “stop the white glove” (Silverman and Baker 2005). In their paper, they argued that the wearing of white gloves makes

researchers more clumsy when handling rare and fragile documents and that their use could damage archival material. They called for the wearing of white gloves to be replaced by the washing of hands. A popular article on the topic, which was published by the Guardian, followed in 2006 (Dent 2006).

South African archival reading rooms seem to be divided on this issue. Generally, it seems to be accepted that the handling of photographs requires gloves, while it is not clear whether documents require a similar policy.

In 2006, Oxford University Library services began to see an increase in the demand for personal scanners and digital cameras. At the time, their regulations forbade the use of these devices. The increased demand forced them to revisit these regulations. They found that use of these devices had some merit, such as being gentler on books than flatbed scanners and photocopy machines, as some personal scanners do not make contact with the page. It was decided that use of these devices would be allowed, provided that no flash photography was permitted, and flatbed personal scanners were banned. Some very rare material was still prohibited from being scanned or copied by researchers. Copyright guidelines were displayed prominently in the reading room and some reading rooms within the service set up separate areas where these functions could be done (Rose and Evison 2006). South African archival reading rooms generally allow use of these devices, but seem divided on whether permission is required prior to a researcher's visit.

Conclusion

From the results of this small study, it can be seen that generally, reading rooms in South African university archives agree on several important principles, such as the prohibition of food and drink and basic rules governing the handling of archival documents.

Further study is necessary, however, on the use of gloves for the handling of documents and the use of personal scanners and digital cameras. A thorough investigation of charges for photocopying and scanning should be done to compare and perhaps agree on a standardised price for these services.

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