

MAKING A CASE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A UNIVERSITY RECORDS AND ARCHIVES MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The importance of institutional archives cannot be denied especially where institutions of higher learning are concerned. Universities generate a lot of records, which are at the heart of their administrative and academic activities. Due to the importance of records in institutions of higher learning, universities all over the world have established institutional archives to manage a plethora of recorded information which document their daily activities, transactions, culture and history. The National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe currently has no dedicated records and archives management staff committed to managing records which are key to the survival of the university. Universities that have established records and archives management programmes are benefiting from such establishments and NUST can learn from such

universities. This article makes a case for the need to establish a university records and archives management programme at the National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe. Literature has been reviewed to show how university records and archives management programmes have proved to be important in other institutions of higher learning around the world.

Keywords: university archives, records management, National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Records, whose creation results from any given organisation's day to day business transactions, are assets which have to be managed satisfactorily. Tertiary institutions conduct a lot of transactions which lead to the creation of numerous types of records ranging from admission, assessment, human resources, financial, memos and other communication records. Iwhiwhu (2005) highlighted that universities generate an immense quantity and bewildering variety of records every day. Various departments or faculties create and use records for the purposes of documenting their activities. Institutions of higher learning therefore, need meticulous records management systems to carefully manage records throughout their lifecycle. Chinyemba (2011) posited that without a robust records management programme in place, universities cannot claim to be accountable and transparent. State universities are public organisations which have to be accountable and transparent, and such can only be achieved through the presence of proper records and archives management systems. Asogwa (2013) also postulated that tertiary institutions can only be effective and efficient if records management is considered a business process designed to support institution's objectives.

The National University of Science and Technology (NUST) Zimbabwe, is a state university which was established in 1991 and has a very rich history which spans for close to 25 years. Such a history requires the presence of a records document and archives management programme. Records management is central to the

management of any given university. Chinyemba and Ngulube (2005) highlighted that proper records management could help universities to manage their information efficiently, fulfil their mandate, protect them from litigation, preserve their corporate memory, and foster accountability and good governance. A clumsy and haphazard approach to records management will at most destroy the reputation of the university. Universities have to have an understanding of what records, paper or electronic, they create and or receive and are required to manage (Ohio State University 2010). NUST offers a degree program in Records and Archives Management, yet it does not have a records and archives management programme in place.

Omenyi (1997) in Iwhiwhu (2005:349) observed that most institutions have failed in the keeping and management of records because:

- i. the rise in student's population has made data generated too complex to handle; the offices charged with the analysis of the data are ill-equipped and ill-trained to do so;
- ii. there is a lot of indiscipline among these officers; they leave their work undone and even destroy the confidentiality of the data;
- iii. students and other users tend to bribe the record officers to alter some information in the files;
- iv. the computational aids, like computers, may be unavailable; and
- v. poor funding has led to non-recruitment of sufficient and qualitative staff, low provision of adequate space and lack of modern computational and storage aids.

2. Problem statement

NUST does not have a records and archives management programme in place to manage the enormous amount of records generated by the university. Not having an archives and records management unit,

policies, purpose built records management structures, qualified personnel and resources means that the university's records management resources face the danger of being inaccessible. Iwhiwhu (2005) noted that university records support the administrative and educational research of the institution and the objective of the university is to support the teaching, research and services in the university. Despite the fact that universities are continually being called upon to function in a business-like manner in order to be self-sustaining and to remain competitive, they overlook the enormous advantages that proper records management practices could contribute to the achievement of their objectives (Mnjama 2002:34; Procter 2002:49). This study sought to make a case for the establishment of university records and archives management programme at NUST. The study also sought to determine how records and archives management programmes have benefited other tertiary institutions.

3. The nexus between university mission and records management

For tertiary institutions like NUST which are set to grow and attract international students and academics, there is a need for efficiency and timely decision making. Chinyemba and Ngulube (2005) were of the opinion that records are considered a resource and are utilized fully and cost effectively to realize an institution's mission and to facilitate timely decision-making. NUST therefore, has to manage its records as assets which support the objectives of the university. Asogwa (2013) mooted that tertiary institutions can only be effective and efficient if records management is considered a business process designed to support institution's objectives and records are considered a resource and are utilized fully and cost effectively to realize an institution's mission. Moreover, disposing of obsolete records substantially reduces the volume of records stored in campus departments. This, in turn, reduces unnecessary maintenance costs and expands the availability of expensive office space (Marywood University 2013:1).

4. The need for a records and archives programme at NUST

NUST can no longer afford to turn a blind eye on establishing a records and archives programme as Coetzer (2012) highlighted that university records have to be part of a comprehensive records management system that ensures that all university records are properly and securely managed, replaceable (in the case of vital records), preserved, archived and disposed of. The main purpose of establishing a records management system in university systems is to have the right information in the right place in the right order, at the right time, for the right person at the lowest possible cost (Popoola & Baje 2004). It is therefore imperative that NUST establishes a records and archives management programme in order for information to be readily accessible as and when needed.

Universities are accountable to government and the general populace and as a result, a records and archives management programme must be in place to guarantee that the institution meets its records keeping requirements by ensuring that the university captures and preserves the evidence required to establish its accountability (Chinyemba 2011). Funding from government and support from communities is hinged on accountability and thus, a records and archives programme has to guarantee that complete records are generated and made available as and when required. Coetzer (2012:32) highlighted that university records management systems serve through facilitating administrative access to inactive as well as active records, ensuring the consistent maintenance of records, decreasing operational costs, increasing staff productivity, and assisting the university in meeting legal and regulatory standards. Good governance is hinged on informed decision making and records management are the sources of information which can be used by NUST management to make meaningful decisions. To the University of Stirling (2007:1) the increased emphasis on good governance and accountability brought about by the Freedom of Information legislation and other compliance legislation requires that the university manages its information effectively.

NUST has a lot of departments, units and faculties which produce records and thus, there is a need to have a central agency or unit which coordinates all records management activities. The University of Stirling (2007) noted that a records management office will produce high-level guidance to allow departments across the university to manage the records that they create and receive. An advantage of having a records and archives department within the university is that it will provide training and guide all units and departments on proper records management. A records management programme provides a primary means of creating and disseminating knowledge, training, and tools about best practices in creating and managing all types of university records. Such a department will also facilitate professional records management within the university.

Students may query marks and grades allocated to them, or their assessment marks may be missing. There has to be proper records management to ensure that all assessment marks are captured to safeguard the credibility of the university's grading and assessment system. The Department of Education at the University of Zululand in March 2010 proved with evidence that there was a lack of proper records management at the University of Zululand, where cases were reported of missing marks, incorrect marks being entered and even graduation certificates being issued even though there are incomplete academic records¹ (Department of Higher Education 2010:21). In cases where there are no proper records management systems, students may demand marks and grades which they did not attain as there will be a lack of evidence to show their real marks. Furthermore, students may be failed or allocated marks belonging to other students.

5. The importance of university records management for planning and decision making

For a university like NUST to achieve excellence and stay afloat in academic excellence, there is a need for informed planning and decision making. Without proper records in place, university management and administration cannot plan well for

the future. In order to survive, NUST has got to make investments as it cannot solely depend on grants and funding from government. In the words of Uwaifo (2004:85) universities in general should take a giant stride by putting in place robust or result-oriented records management programmes. This will ensure an effective creation and dissemination of information for effective planning, decision making and control. The right investment decisions cannot be made by university administrators unless records management personnel make information available and accessible for such purposes. Furthermore, for a university which has been in existence for nearly twenty-five years, there is a need to have plans and decisions informed by lessons, successes and failures of the past. Young (2006) noted that the existence of an archives gives a real boost to strategic planning as current members can look back at their group's history to learn which efforts were successful or unsuccessful in the past, and why. Ngulube (2004:23) postulated that change brings uncertainty, but records make decision making during uncertainty possible and changes that are not informed by reliable information are likely to be unsustainable, unjustifiable and lacking transparency. There is also no need to reinvent the wheel as NUST can refer to strategies and decisions made in the past to overcome current challenges. Young (2006) also pointed out that knowledge and understanding of previous errors, as well as previous successes, can determine future strategy. Without proper records which are managed according to set records management principles like *respect des fonds*, it becomes challenging for decision makers to have access to orderly, meaningful, complete and related records of the university.

6. The need for a records management programme at NUST

As tertiary institutions keep conducting their business, they generate records on a daily basis which need to be reduced lest they become voluminous and unmanageable. The DePaul University (2008) noted that a records management program provides volume reduction and cost control by reducing costs associated with the storage of records that have met their retention period and can be destroyed in the normal course of business. NUST is in dire need of space as office space is a challenge to the extent that some academics share offices and are cramped when office space is occupied by records which are not in current use in those offices. It is prudent that some records be managed and preserved for posterity due to their secondary value, yet some records have to be destroyed at some point to save space and resources used to manage such records. Furthermore, without records and archives management programme in place, duplicates of records will continue to occupy space which is seriously needed for other pressing purposes.

Another challenge associated with the absence of a records and archives programme is the loss, theft and destruction of records. Graham (2005) highlighted that the danger of not having a records and archives programme in a university setup is that core records will be lost or difficult to find, leading to an inability to carry out functions, a failure in accountability and delays or an inability to respond quickly and accurately to a freedom of information request. A missing record can halt business, that is, stop promotion of deserving employees, stop a disciplinary hearing, and stop an important meeting from taking off. Thus, NUST cannot afford at all to have its business coming to a halt because of missing records. Iwhiwhu (2005) stated that in instances where queries or controversial files disappear and with the gap in the filing cabinets conspicuously noticeable, it may even be difficult to locate some records a few years after. Therefore, records cannot be left in offices whose mandate is not records management as there might not be proper control measures to secure records from theft and loss. For

NUST to avoid losses of records, there is a need to establish a proper records and archives management programme. The University of London (2009) noted that poor information management means that organisations may lose part or all of their corporate memory; records documenting the development of functions and data on research carried out may be destroyed or misplaced.

A records and archives management system will ensure that records management is integrated, whether the records management activities are centralised or decentralised. Enwere (1992) argued that the unintegrated records management programmes lead to inefficiency in administration and to loss or non-availability of vital information needed for decision making at the right time. NUST will have to make it a point that records management activities are integrated and administered by a central office. Records management programmes also develop disaster management strategies and plans which can help the university to recover or survive disasters. Shepherd (2006) opined that effective records management programmes will help organizations to respond to planned and unplanned events such as audits and disasters. The researchers noted that the registry and records storage for the Admissions and Students Records unit at NUST was located next to a food outlet and such an environment was not appropriate for records as fire and water leakages could emanate from the food outlet. Without proper records and archives management systems in place, there will be no officers to assess records risks and possible disasters at NUST.

10. Conclusion

It is a truism that NUST needs a records and archives management programme. Such a system will go a long way in facilitating informed decision making, compliance and records management policy formulation inter alia. Without a records and archives management systems in place, NUST will face litigation, loss of vital research, incomplete records, and poor decision making.

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