

Records management practices to support administrative operations at the University of Venda in South Africa

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Abstract

This study qualitatively examined records management practices at the University of Venda in South Africa. Despite the availability of substantial literature on records management practices in diverse organisations within the country, very little attention has been given to problems faced by institutions of higher learning in this regard. Ten purposively selected records management staff at the University of Venda were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that the records management policies applied in different departments and units across the university were inconsistent. The findings further revealed that these disparities were observed both through physical or digital recording and storage of information as well as in how personnel assigned to work with records were trained. Additionally, this paper found which challenges were associated with the university records management policies, procedures and governance frameworks, which lacked effective communication channels, implementation strategies and harmonisation with national legislation and standards. This made it difficult for them to protect their information assets from tampering while also ensuring they complied with established accessibility rules. As part of mitigating these issues, this study recommends that the university should put more efforts into its existing framework relating to record keeping by emphasising efficient communication, training processes, policy review exercises, strengthened governance mechanisms and a team approach towards policy formulation. Consequently, improved capacities will enable the university to streamline its records management system into a more consistent adaptive model capable of being accountable while supporting its teaching, research as well as administrative needs. This study initiates a pioneering effort in understanding records management practices at the University of Venda in South Africa.

Keywords: Institutions of higher learning, records, records management, records management practice, University of Venda

1. Introduction and background

Higher education records are crucial for institutional compliance, academic research and operational excellence (Netshakhuma 2020b). Effective records administration in higher

education is vital for educational quality, administrative efficiency and historical integrity (Kumalo 2020; Makoti 2020). Records management, as described by Netshakhuma (2020a), is an essential part of institutional governance that controls and supervises an organisation's recorded information from creation to disposal. Furthermore, the growing scholarly attention to records management in higher education has various causes. Current digitisation trends and information governance difficulties force organisations to balance conserving significant historical records and deleting unnecessary content (Mnjama 2020). This change brings problems and possibilities (Saffady 2021). Saffady (2021) claims that deleting duplicate data keeps information current and lowers storage expenses. According to Lauriault and Hackett (2017), rigorous disposal and retention categorisation might be excessively restrictive, forcing record-keeping systems to adjust to changing information.

Digital records management offers advantages and drawbacks when technology is introduced into records keeping (Sund & Björk 2018). McKemmish (2017) urges rethinking records management in the digital era. Institutions must use digital technology to preserve and access records (Makoti 2020). Shepherd and Saffady (2021) caution that over-reliance on technology might cause digital obsolescence and complexity. Thus, a balanced strategy that uses technology while preserving tradition is needed.

Educational records management techniques vary by institution size, financing and purpose (Bastian & Webber 2017). This study examined South African higher education records management techniques to contribute to the field. The research used theoretical frameworks and actual data to identify best practices and areas for development (Masalu, 2021). This study evaluated the University of Venda's records management methods using multiple interpretations and perspectives. It also examined how these organisations may use technology to improve their record keeping. Document analysis and interviews with university workers, including governance and IT professionals, were used to examine institutional frameworks, technical systems and societal attitudes regarding records management at the University of Venda. This study also examined public opinions of university records management, filling a literature space.

2. Problem statement

Despite the undeniable evidence on the significance of records management within the context of universities, it is evident that the implementation and utilisation of records management practices in South African institutions of higher education are not accorded the level of appreciation and utilisation they truly deserve (Mnjama 2002). Even though it is well known how significant it is for universities to keep good records, many studies showed that they still have a hard time making records management frameworks that work well together (Netshakhuma 2020a). Higher education research shows that bad records keeping often causes records to be lost, which hurts efforts by institutions to provide good education and run efficiently (Chinyemba & Ngulube 2005). The digitisation of records made information control more difficult, which makes this problem worse (Mnjama 2020). When moving from paper-based document management systems to electronic records, it can be difficult to find a good balance between keeping important past data safe and getting rid of useless data (Saffady 2021; Lauriault & Hackett 2017).

The University of Venda has implemented a comprehensive records management practice to effectively support the institution's day-to-day administrative operations. The underlying

assumption posits that lingering challenges persist in the realm of records management, which are essential for facilitating the University of Venda's routine administrative operations. Consequently, it becomes imperative to fully grasp and thoroughly examine the multifaceted role played by records management in this context. The goal of this study was to help better understand the problems that come with managing records at South African colleges and universities by filling in the gaps in the existing research and focusing on the University of Venda.

3. Aims

This research study aimed to evaluate records management practices to support administrative operations at the University of Venda in South Africa.

4. Research questions

Research questions were as follows:

- How are different kinds of records managed at the University of Venda?
- How does the University of Venda use digital technology to manage records?
- What staff training, skill development and career growth opportunities are there for records management at the University of Venda?
- What policies, processes and governance structures regulate records management at the University of Venda?

5. Literature review

The academic writing on managing records in higher education institutions is complex and always changing, showing different points of view and new ways of doing things. These have a lot to do with the goals of this study. This review brings together the main ideas and actual results from recent studies by laying the groundwork for a full evaluation of how the University of Venda manages its records. This review looks at the theoretical theories, methods, and results from past research. The goal is to show where more information is needed, what problems need to be solved and what the best practices are that can help guide the current study.

5.1 Types of records and management practices

Start by looking at higher education records to understand records management. Universities maintain several administrative, academic, financial and operational records to reflect their diverse activities. Based on access frequency and purpose, these papers are active, semi-active or inactive (Namuddu 2019; Igwe & Oyewo 2020). Semi-active files are less accessible than running files like research data and student files, which are essential for university operations. Records that are no longer useful are either archived or deleted (Kumalo 2020). Additionally, scholarly administration of this diverse variety of records uses systematic and efficient methods to oversee recorded information throughout its life cycle (Netshakhuma 2020b). Records are created, captured, organised, treated, stored, retrieved and disposed of according to legal/regulatory obligations. Proper record keeping ensures information asset integrity, accessibility and accountability (Adzido & Agbanu 2015; Nevhutalu 2016). However, studies highlight greater issues in higher education entities'

consistent application of full standardised record-keeping practices across all departments (Matemo 2018).

5.2 The use of digital technologies in records creation, capturing and indexing

The use of digital tools has had a big effect on how higher education institutions handle their records. Finding the right mix between keeping important historical records safe and keeping up with the huge growth of electronic information is one of the hardest parts of digitisation (Makoti 2020). Because of this change, old ways of keeping records need to be rethought, because digital records are easier to reach, find and keep (McKemmish 2017; Saffady 2021). Furthermore, studies showed that universities need to quickly come up with strong ways to create, store and organise both paper and digital records to make sure they are accurate and easy to find (Netshakhuma 2020b; Yusof & Chell 1999). This includes making rules that are easy to understand, putting in place good methods for registering and sorting, and using technology to make managing records more efficient (Shepherd & Yeo 2003; Ngoepe 2019). But different schools have had different levels of success with integrating digital technologies into their records management systems. For example, some universities still have trouble finding the right mix between paper-based and computer systems (Makoti 2020; Sund & Björk 2018). It is important to keep electronic information safe and easy to find over time, lower the risk of data breaches or losses and deal with the challenges of technological change as we move towards digital records management (Duranti & Rogers 2012; Lauriault & Hackett 2017). Therefore, universities need to come up with complete plans and rules for handling digital records throughout their whole lifecycle, from making and saving them to finding them and throwing them away (Saffady 2021; Makoti 2020). This needs a multifaceted approach that considers not only technological factors but also organisational culture, laws and the changing needs of academia (Mnjama 2020; Ndenje-Sichalwe 2020). Additionally, Item 9 of ISO 15489-1:2016(E), which lists international guidelines for records management, can help you make sure that your records are managed in an orderly and effective way. This standard can help organisations set up organised ways to create, store and keep data, which will help them stay in compliance and run their businesses more efficiently in the long term.

5.3 Records management training, competency and professional development

The knowledge, skills and professional development of higher education records management staff are crucial to their success (Bamgboye & Satgoor 2016). Records management professionals need structured training and ongoing professional development to keep up with new standards, technology and best practices (Shepherd & Yeo 2003; Tough & Moss 2006). However, budget constraints and conflicting institutional goals frequently prevent higher education records management professionals from receiving thorough and regular training. On-the-job training and practical learning become the norm for many employees, resulting in varied skills levels and suboptimal practices (Bamgboye & Satgoor 2016).

Higher education institutions must engage in long-term records management staff training to address these issues. These activities should improve technical skills, strategic thinking and problem-solving to handle change (Bamgboye & Satgoor 2016). Institutions can strengthen their records management frameworks to support academic and administrative responsibilities by training their records management staff (Ngoepe 2019).

5.4 Records management policies, procedures, and governance structures

Higher education schools in South Africa must follow a complicated set of state laws, rules and industry standards when it comes to managing records. Following the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act (No. 43 of 1996) and its related laws sets the rules for creating, managing and disposing of records, including records made by universities (Makoti 2020; Nevhutalu 2016). This Act makes sure that institutions follow the national rules for keeping records and use organised processes to protect the accuracy of their records.

Ngoepe (2019) talks about how important it is for colleges and universities to make clear rules about how to handle records and make sure that these rules are followed. Such structures should make it clear who is responsible for creating records, set rules for collecting and handling records, and spell out when records should be stored and thrown away by destroying them or saving them (Shepherd & Yeo 2003; Adams 2016). Research revealed that colleges often have trouble getting these policy papers to all their offices, which makes it harder to police the policies (Matemo 2018; Bennett & McRobb 2008). If these rules are not communicated well, it can lead to inconsistent and inefficient records management, which can threaten the institution's compliance and working efficiency.

Policies for managing records need to be updated on a regular basis to stay useful and relevant. Institutions need to make sure that their rules include new technology trends, changes to the law and the best ways to handle records around the world (Ngoepe 2019; Netshakhuma 2020b). By doing this, institutions can improve their ability to meet national standards, make their operations run more smoothly and protect historical memory.

6. Methodology

This qualitative case study examined the University of Venda's records management practices (Yin 2018; Creswell & Poth 2018). Ten participants were purposefully picked from university departments and sections for this investigation. Participants were records management workers, including those directly responsible for procedures. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of records management practices across the institution, the study included participants from records management and archives such as records administrator and filing clerk. Participants were chosen based on their records management experience.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' records management viewpoints and experiences. In the semi-structured approach participants can expound on their replies (Marshall & Rossman 2016). Participants were asked not to reveal their names during interviews and signed consent forms before the interviews, following the institution's ethical standards and qualitative research principles (Creswell & Poth 2018).

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, as per Braun and Clarke (2006) and Nowell, Norris, White and Moule (2017). An inductive, data-driven approach to thematic analysis revealed important themes and patterns in participant replies. The process included familiarising oneself with the data, producing initial codes, looking for themes, evaluating and improving them, and defining and identifying them by property (Braun & Clarke 2006).

7. Presentation of results

Thematic study of interviews data gave us more detailed information about how the University of Venda managed its records. Several main themes were found, which gave us a better idea of the kinds of records kept, how well they were created and indexed, how skilled the people who worked in records management were and how well university policies matched with national laws and standards.

7.1 Types of records and management practices

Participants indicated that the University of Venda generates and manages many records, indicating its diversified activities. According to university records literature, these records contain administrative, academic, financial and operational papers (Yusof & Chell 1998; Netshakhuma 2020a). Participant 1 said, *“We deal with many student records, like their academic files, research publications, and even staff employment.”* This diversity emphasises information management's relevance to the university's everyday operations, academics and regulatory compliance.

Financial records, which are vital to the university, are also varied. Participant 4 said, *“The amount of financial paperwork is staggering; this includes invoices and grants that require meticulous handling.”*

Participants also noted the increase of digital records at the university. According to Participant 7, *“We are generating more digitised records, particularly now with virtual learning modules.”* These findings supported studies showing that sophisticated technology have transformed higher education records administration (Sund & Björk 2018; Makoti 2020). Participants did not specify whether the university has an electronic document and records management system. The institution's technology infrastructure may be lacking if such a system is not mentioned, requiring more inquiry into digital records management methods.

Participants across university departments and units observed inconsistent records management, despite the variety of documents. This study found that higher education institutions struggle to create a consistent records management system across departments (Matemo 2018; Mnjama 2014). Participant 1 said, *“I don't know if everyone reads it or not, but we do have a SOP,”* showing a lack of record-keeping SOP understanding and execution. Participant 7 said, *“I didn't even know there were any SOPs until recently.”* These remarks indicated that university departments may not convey records management rules like SOPs.

Participant 3 said, *“The SOPs are good, but they can be improved; they should be updated more often to reflect technological advancements.”* This supports research recommending frequent institutional policy assessments to stay aligned with technology advances (Adams 2016; Netshakhuma 2020b). The University of Venda may need to investigate whether it has a formal policy for reviewing its SOPs. Disparities in records management practices are consistent with research on resource allocation, institutional goals and strategic emphasis among university sections (Bastian & Webber 2017; Chiwambo 2020). The university's 2022 annual report suggests that records management is a strategic focus in its operating strategy.

7.2 Records creation, capture and indexing using digital technologies

Participants gave feedback on the pros and cons of the University of Venda's ways of keeping records and making new ones. Participant 2 said, "*There were some trainings, but they weren't always the same. Not any computer records.*" This shows that the university might not properly support the creation and capturing of both digital and paper-based records, which could lower the quality of the way it keeps records (Netshakhuma 2020b; Yusof & Chell 1999).

Participant 6 was unhappy with the training and said, "*Training feels like a box-ticking exercise.*" We are not skilled enough to keep new kinds of records. This is in line with research that showed how important it is for records management staff to get ongoing, thorough training to handle both paper and computer records properly (Shepherd & Yeo 2003; Tough & Moss 2006). But it was not clear whether the training was offered by internal staff or outside experts, or if the people who took part had proper training in managing records. This means that the University of Venda needs to give a clearer definition of "records management personnel" to make sure that staff have the right skills.

Participants pointed out that there was not consistent training, which could make the processes of making and capturing records less efficient overall. Without regular, high-quality training, important tasks like creating, storing and organising documents could become less reliable, which could cause problems like losing information, having trouble finding it and not meeting legal requirements (Penn, Pennix & Coulson 1999). It was also important to find out if the university received its training from internal or external experts, since this could affect the level of the training.

Participants' responses also raised concerns regarding physical and digital record integrity and accessibility. Participant 2 said, "*I have been trained a bit, but not always. Also, there is nothing to do with electronic records.*" People who work in records management may not receive enough training and direction, which can make it harder for them to keep the university's information assets safe and easy to access (Penn et al. 1999; Participant 5 in this study).

Participant 9 has been working as a records administrator for more than five years and said the following, "*I think it is the leadership that does not understand what proper records management is about. Though some of us are well-trained but we are very few.*" This suggests that the university's leaders may not fully understand the importance of records management, which is why they are not providing enough resources and assistance for this important task (Ngoepe 2019; Netshakhuma 2020b).

Several research studies agreed with these participants' concerns about the accuracy and availability of records, stating that poor record keeping can cause data breaches, memory loss in institutions and transgression of the law. To solve these problems, we need a comprehensive plan that puts policies and procedures, government frameworks, and training and development at the top of the list (Shepherd & Yeo 2003; Adams 2016).

7.3 Records management training, skill, professional growth and best practices

Participants found considerable variations in the University of Venda's records management training and professional growth. Participant 3 said, "*I was lucky enough to go through a two-week programme on record management skills, but that was years ago now,*" suggesting that the university may not be investing enough in structured and ongoing records management training. This suggests that personnel may struggle to keep up with records management procedures due to training frequency and quality.

Participant 3 said, "*Honestly, almost no staff ever trained me, and it affects our efficiency.*" Because of budget restrictions, higher education institutions may not be able to consistently provide complete training programmes before or after hiring employees (Masalu 2021). The use of informal, on-the-job training complicates matters.

Participant 8 said, "*Most of us have learnt through experience and not necessarily formal training,*" highlighting records management staff's experiential learning. On-the-job training is popular in many institutions (Bangboye & Satgoor 2016): however, overusing it may lead to skill gaps and poor practices. According to the research, informal learning affects record-keeping efficiency and standardisation (Penn et al. 1999).

The reviewer's worry concerning participants' official credentials is reasonable, especially given replies like "*almost no staff ever trained me.*" It was crucial to determine if the participants were competent records officers or administrators who handled records every day. The Office of the Registrar's records management and archiving staff should undergo formal records management training, according to best practices. Key records management professionals have not received formal training, raising issues about the university's approach to competence in this essential area

Participants showed that there were big differences in how competent and skilled the records management staff at the University of Venda were. Participant 2 said, "*I have undergone training sessions before, but they were not consistent and did not tackle digital records.*" This raised the question of whether the institution may not be doing enough to make sure its workers have the right knowledge and skills to handle both paper and digital records, especially since increasingly more records are being kept digitally.

Participant 6 emphasised this by saying, "*The training feels like a check-the-box exercise.*" "*We don't know how to use new types of records well enough.*" This fits with other research that state how important it is for people who work in records management to attend regular training and professional development to make sure they keep up with changes in standards and procedures (Shepherd & Yeo 2003; Tough & Moss 2006).

One person with more than three years of experience gave a more general view, saying, "*I think the problem is that management doesn't know what good records management is. There are some of us who are well-trained, but not many of us.*" This sentence suggests that irregular and inadequate training might be a sign that the university was not aware of how important records management is from a strategy point of view. Records management is usually seen as an important job within an organisation (Ngoepe 2019; Netshakhuma 2020b). However, it important to think about whether the problems people brought up were not just caused by bad leadership, but also by bigger problems like not having enough resources or people with the

right skills. The jobs listed in the Office of the Registrar indicated that there were two records officers in the records management and preserving area. With so few people, it might be difficult for them to oversee all the university's records management.

The feedback from the participants showed that the records management staff had a wide range of skills and levels of performance. This could make it more difficult for the university to use best practices and keep its documents safe and easy to find (Penn et al. 1999; Participant 5, current study). To deal with these issues, the university have to put professional growth of its records management team at the top of its list of priorities. It also needs to understand how important records management is to its overall business plan. To do this, they would need to be trained regularly and have money spent on tools and improving their skills (Bamgboye & Satgoor 2016; Ngoepe 2019).

7.4 Records management policies, procedures and governance structures

Participants' replies showed variable knowledge of and compliance with university records management regulations. Participant 1 said, *"Yes, we do have a SOP, but I'm not so sure if everyone reads it,"* indicating university departments communicate and apply these standards inconsistently. This supported studies showing that universities struggle to adapt and enforce records management rules across organisational levels (Matemo 2018; Bennett & McRobb 2008). Participant 7 said, *"I didn't know about SOPs until recently."*

Participant 3 said, *"The SOPs are good, but there is room for improvement; they should be updated more frequently to match technological advancements."* This indicated that records management policies must be updated often to be relevant in the context of digital transformation, which may greatly impact efficiency and effectiveness (Adams 2016; Netshakhuma, 2020b).

The replies showed some understanding, but how students applied records management regulations and procedures was unclear. Student behaviours may affect or support the institutional records management architecture; therefore, their position requires additional investigation. As suggested in the methodology, readers should examine emerging patterns and trends in stakeholder groups – students, faculty and staff – awareness and engagement with the university's records management practices to improve the findings' clarity and robustness.

Participants talked about how well the University of Venda's policies and processes for managing records match up with national laws and standards. The National Archives and Record Service of South Africa Act (No. 43 of 1996) and the rules that go with it set the general rules for managing records, such as those made by universities (Makoti 2020; Nevhutalu 2016). Higher education institutions in South Africa must have detailed records management policies, processes and control frameworks in place to make sure they follow these national laws (Ngoepe 2019; Netshakhuma 2020b).

There were, however, not many specific opinions from people about how well the University of Venda's records management system meets these national standards. There was no clear information in the answers about how well the University's actions match up with the legal requirements set out in the National Archives and Record Service Act. This leads to the question of whether it might be difficult to get all departments to work together, especially

since different departments did not always know and follow the university's records policies, as already said (Matemo 2018; Bennett & McRobb 2008). These mistakes could make it harder for the university to make sure that its records management follows all national laws and rules.

It is important for teams to work together for better harmony. To do this, not only records management professionals must be involved, but also IT experts and security officers who know exactly what the rules are for properly keeping records. It is important to note, though, that technology experts were not asked to participate in this study. Looking into their role could give us more information about how well technology and records management methods fit together.

It is also important for the university's strategic goals to lead its records management in a way that supports following changing rules and meeting the growing needs of the academic community (Adams 2016; Nevhotalu 2016). Although this study did not go into detail about the university's history or long-term goals, knowing these goals better might help explain how records management can help the university reach its bigger goals.

8. Discussions of findings

This research showed that the University of Venda needs a more comprehensive and integrated strategy to controlling its information assets due to various major records management system difficulties. Inconsistent records management policy implementation, poor staff training and professional growth, and misalignment between institutional governance structures and record management are major challenges. These results support the research on higher education records management's complexity (Matemo 2018; Ngoepe 2019).

University records management policy discrepancies are concerning. Due to departmental communication breakdown, some participants were unsure regarding SOP knowledge and use. Matemo (2018) found that universities struggle to enforce standard records management rules across organisational tiers. Unresolved differences might hinder the institution's capacity to comply with laws and preserve record integrity and accessibility (Shepherd & Yeo 2003). The various reactions to digital technology and electronic records management showed that inconsistent regulations caused inefficiencies in document generation, indexing, and preservation.

This survey also found that records management professionals had little training and professional development options. Participants complained about inconsistent instruction, particularly for digital records. This supports records management studies on the significance of ongoing professional growth (Shepherd & Yeo 2003; Tough & Moss 2006). Bamgboye and Satgoor (2016) suggest that records management workers may lack the ability to adapt to technological developments and maintain accurate, accessible information without sufficient training. The University of Venda's participants' lack of formal training indicated that records management was not prioritised, which might lead to non-compliance with national requirements (Ngoepe 2019; Netshakhuma 2020b).

9. Study limitations and future studies

The records managers were hesitant to provide the researcher with all the requested information. They explained that, due to the absence of a Head of Department for Records and Archives, they had been instructed not to conduct interviews with anyone. Being on contract, they feared losing their jobs, which resulted in the researcher receiving only limited responses. Also, the technical parts of records management, especially the use of electronic document and records management systems (EDRMS), were not investigated in detail in this study. Since digital technologies are being used more and more in records management, future research should investigate how colleges and universities can use EDRMS to make records more efficiently and easy to find while still meeting national standards. Also, a further study needs to be done on how colleges and universities can keep past data safe while getting rid of unnecessary data, especially as they move to more digital environments (Saffady 2021; Lauriault & Hackett 2017).

10. Recommendations

This study suggests numerous ways the University of Venda can improve its records management. Due to the study's limited sample size and the potential that some participants lacked records management skills, the following suggestions are made.

The analysis showed that University of Venda records management rules and SOPs were fragmented and inconsistently applied across departments. This contradiction may indicate a capacity issue in the Office of the Registrar and records management. Instead of creating new regulations, the university should improve existing records management framework's execution, communication and monitoring. Regular audits and compliance checks would verify that rules are enforced similarly across departments and units.

It is very important that records management policies and SOPs are shared with all relevant parties, such as records management staff, teachers and office staff. There should be comprehensive training programmes not only for people who work in records management, but also for other important users across the organisation. This would help make sure that everyone on staff knows how the university manages records and what their part is in it. To fill in gaps in knowledge and use, this kind of training should cover both paper-based and digital record-keeping methods. To keep staff up to date on best practices, it would also be helpful to have regular meetings and retraining courses.

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