

THE STATUS OF RECORDS MANAGEMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND

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ABSTRACT

Records management seeks to efficiently and systematically control the lifecycle of records that are routinely generated as a result of activities and transactions. This paper reports on a study that sought to investigate the status of records management at the University of Zululand determining whether the university has a formal records management system besides the ITS which is an Enterprise Resource Management Program (ERMP). The study used the survey research method to assess records management at the University of Zululand. Questionnaires and interviews were used as primary data collection instruments. The study targeted both administrative and academic (Heads of Departments) employees at the University of Zululand. Purposive sampling was used to select 26 academic Heads of Departments. Both purposive and snowball sampling were used to select 24 administrative employees. The study reveals that besides the ITS, which is an electronic records management system, there is no records management system at the University of Zululand that deals with general paper work/ documents and electronic records such as emails and correspondence. There also appears to be no specific policy that governs records management. Recommendations include the development of a proper records management policy, appointment of a records manager, and records management training for staff. The full study is reported in a Master's dissertation.

Keywords: Records management, university of Zululand,

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a study that investigated the status of records management at the University of Zululand. The study sought to determine whether the university has a formal records management system besides the ITS which is not a records management system but an enterprise resource management program. Like all higher education institutions in South Africa, the University of Zululand is semi-autonomous

in that it receives part of its funding from the state and the rest from students' fees. The university generates large amounts of physical and electronic documents and data on a daily basis. These documents and data are important and need to be preserved when necessary. Universities, like any other semi-government or government institutions, are legally bound to retain and preserve documents as a record of their activities and proceedings.

The University of Zululand was established in 1960 as a fully-fledged university, and in 2002 it was changed to a comprehensive institution of higher learning (University of Zululand website, 2010:np). The university's website states that it is currently the only such institution in the Kwa-Zulu Natal Province and that it has two campuses, i.e. the main campus situated in Kwa-Dlangezwa and the Richards Bay Campus (in Richards Bay). Before the mergers of 2004, the university also had the Durban-Umlazi Campus which was established in 1979, but this became part of the Durban University of Technology in 2002 (University of Zululand website, 2010:np).

In 2006, the University of Zululand replaced its in-house IT system with a new system specifically designed for higher education institutions. The Integrated Tertiary Software (ITS) known as an Enterprise Resource Management Program and is specifically designed to capture and maintain student, financial and staff personal records. According to the Integrated Tertiary Software User Group (2011:n.p), the system was designed to support the administrative functions within higher education/ further education and training institutions. The ITS can also be implemented as a fully integrated solution to support the student, financial, human resources, payroll and library business processes of a university, polytechnic or college. The ITS system is web-based, and it can be accessed by both students and staff depending on the allocated level of security.

Both academic and non-academic departments generate records at the University of Zululand. The academic section consists of four faculties: Arts, Education, Science and Agriculture, and Commerce, Administration and Law. These 4 faculties have a total of 51 departments: 21 in Arts, 7 in Education, 15 in Science and Agriculture, and 8 in Commerce, Admin and Law.

2. DEFINITION OF RECORDS MANAGEMENT

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (2009:np) defines a record as “recorded information, in any form, created or received and maintained in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business and kept as evidence of such activity”. The University of Manchester (2010:np) states that any recorded information which is produced, received or kept by the university as part of its business processes and which provides evidence of a specific activity can be defined as a record. The University of South Africa (2007:01) likewise explains that a record refers to recorded information, regardless of format or medium, which has been created, received, used, accessed and maintained by the university at large (and/or its predecessors) as evidence and information in pursuance of its legal obligations or in the transaction of business, and this includes e-mails, records in electronic form, and records other than correspondence.

The concept of records management is linked to records. The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (2009:np) defines records management as the management of information resources in a manner that makes information easily accessible, securely protected and stored, and correctly disposed of when necessary. Thus records management controls the creation, maintenance, use and disposal of records. Records management is the process by which internally or externally generated, physical or electronic records are managed from their inception, receipt and storage, all the way through to their disposal (Ngulube 2000:164; Wallace 1987:2; Yusof & Chell 1999:10). In the words of Place and Hyslop (1982:4), records management is a “process of controlling information from creation through to its final disposition”.

Records management therefore seeks to efficiently and systematically control records that are routinely created as a result of activities and transactions and throughout their lifecycle (creation, use, maintenance, archive or disposal). This means that records management is also based on the principles of regular review and controlled retention or destruction with the general aim of ensuring cost-effective business processes, legal and regulatory compliance, and corporate accountability. According to Chinyemba and Ngulube (2005:np), “Proper records management involves establishing systematic controls at every stage of the record’s lifecycle in accordance with

established principles and accepted models of records management.” This therefore means that practicing proper records management leads to good management because a university’s activities are based on access to the information contained in records.

3. PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to investigate the status of records management at the University of Zululand. It sought to determine whether the university has a formal records management system other than the ITS which is not a records management system but an enterprise resource management program (ERPM) which is also known as the enterprise resource planning management system (ERP). Besides this system, there appears to be no formal records management system deployed by the university with regards to both electronic and paper based records generated in both the administrative and academic departments. The ITS system in its standard format does not come with a records management module thus it is not referred to as a records management system even though it somehow functions as a records keeping system. The ITS was initially designed namely for, maintaining financial data (statements of accounts, hotel and flight booking information etc.), student records (registration records, exam results, fees etc), staff details (salaries, pensions), human resources and library services (research etc).

The lack of records management at university level is mostly at administration, faculty and departmental level where no formal records management practice is in place. There is a major difference in records management in administration and records management in faculties. Records management in administration deal with mostly business and students services, human resources, financial records e.t.c whereas records management in faculties and departments deal with courses offered and curriculum, faculty and departmental committees, projects, budgets e.t.c. It is unfortunate that the integrated tertiary system does not encompass any faculty or departmental management in it and this brings forth problems towards the management of records in faculties and departments in the university such as UNIZUL.

The main research questions of the study were:

- a) Does the University of Zululand have a formal records management system besides the ITS which is an enterprise resource management program?
- b) Does the university have a formal policy/ procedures/ filing system for records?
- c) Does the policy form part of the university's regulatory structures?
- d) Does the policy comply with the government's records management regulations?
- e) What types of records are kept in the records management system?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Many studies mix qualitative (Trochim, 2000:n.p; Neuman, 2000:122; Sarantakos, 1997:6; Flick, 2006:11) and quantitative (Burns, 2000:43;Neumann, 2000:56; Creswell, 1994:2; Locke, Silverman & Spirduso, 1998:123) research methodologies. The study used the survey method to assess records management at the University of Zululand. Questionnaires and interviews were the main research instruments. The study population (Neuman, 2000:201) consisted of administrative staff and academic Heads of Departments. Purposive and snowball sampling (Neuman, 2000:195-196) were used to sample academic and administrative staff respectively. Purposive sampling is judgmental and allows the researcher to use his/her knowledge of the population to handpick certain groups or individuals from a population based on their relevance to the research topic (Aina and Ajifuruke, 2002:37-38). Snowball sampling, on the other hand, is based on referrals by respondents who are experienced in the field.

With respect to administration, the researcher opted to concentrate on those departments that mostly dealt with records, e.g. student registration, exams, filing, finance committee, research, human resources, faculty officers, Rector's office and Registrar's office. The departments that we were referred to by the administrative staff were Protective Services, Student Services, Graduation, Financial Aid Bureau, ICT and Housing. The overall response rate was 24 from administration and 26 academic Heads of Departments.

Research instruments (Force, 1997:143) are tools that are used to collect data. Qualitative and quantitative studies largely use the same research instruments for data collection. Both questionnaires(Onyango, 2002:65; Babbie, 2005:254)and interviews(Force, 1997:43; Bless and Higson- Smith, 2000:104-105) were used as

research instruments. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with key informants to get more in-depth information. Nine administrative staff were interviewed to expand on the information that was provided in the questionnaire. A semi-standardized interview was used to facilitate the exploration of emergent themes and ideas rather than relying only on concepts and questions defined in advance of the interview. This enabled respondents to be free to choose how to answer the questions. This approach was convenient because it facilitated faster interviews that could be analysed and compared more easily.

In order to improve validity and reliability (Hopkins, n.d; Edwards and Talbot, 1994:70; Sarantakos, 1997:80), questions were first piloted on a small group of colleagues from the University of Zululand (n=5) before being distributed to the main sample. Frankel and Wallen (2000:169) recognize that the quality of the instruments used in any research is important because the information obtained through them is used to draw conclusions. For the actual study, the researcher drew up a list of all the selected Heads of Departments and administrative personnel before distributing the questionnaires to them. The questionnaires were collected three days after delivery. Telephone calls were made to staff prior to sending them the questionnaire. Data was analyzed manually through Microsoft Excel and presented both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Several challenges were encountered in the course of the study. Some respondents took longer to finish the questionnaire than expected, while others refused to complete the questionnaire but agreed to be interviewed. Some of the administrative staff members refused to take part in the study, especially those who the researcher was determined to include in the study. The Acting Registrar of the University of Zululand also refused to be interviewed. Some respondents were fearful of victimization even though they were assured of the ethical considerations involved.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results are presented and discussed below according to the research questions of the study.

5.1. Does the University of Zululand have a records management system besides the ITS which is an enterprise resource management program?

The University of Zululand's academic and administrative personnel work with records on a daily basis, meaning that a records management system is essential. The university has an Enterprise Resource Management Program called Integrated Tertiary Software (ITS) which is mainly used for student's registration and examination records, and staff and financial records. The ITS system does not address the large quantities of physical and electronic documents that are generated on a daily basis by the administrative and academic departments. For the storage of this type of information, academic and administrative personnel were relying on other software to keep their records, in particular Microsoft Word and Excel. They also physically store records in cabinets, specialized filing folders, and empty photocopy paper boxes. These implications show that the university does not have a formal records management system, however it is in a process of purchasing the module integrator v2.0.

5.2. Does the university have a formal policy/ procedures/ filing system for records management?

Policies play a vital role in any university or organization because they set out the goals to be achieved as well as guidelines for implementing them. A policy provides reliable and authentic information for the evaluation of actions and decisions. A records management policy serves as a reminder of all the procedures that need to be followed if important records are to be saved for present and future generations.

It was expected that there would be a records management policy at the university, but the research results proved otherwise - there appeared to be no records management policy at the university other than the ITS system, even though two (10%) of the respondents mentioned that there is a records management policy.

The study however clearly shows that despite these singular claims that the university has procedures and official filing system governing it in place, there appears to be no written proof of these procedures leading to the administration sections managing records in ways that they think are conducive for the records.

5.3. Does the policy form part of the university's regulatory structures?

Universities in South Africa operate in compliance with the Higher Education Act of 1997 as amended by the Higher Education Amendment Act 55 of 1999 and their internal regulatory structures. It is therefore prudent for a university's policy to form part of its regulatory structure. As mentioned in 5.2, only two (10%) of the respondents stated that a records management policy exists as part of the regulatory structure of the university.

5.4. Does the policy comply with government regulations for records management?

Because the university is a semi-autonomous institution whose actions are governed by national legislation, it is expected to comply with the government's regulations for records management. The two respondents, who indicated that the university has an official records management policy and that it complies with the government's regulations for records management, could not produce any policy documents to substantiate their claims. This, and the fact that the majority of the respondents' (90%) believed that there is no records management policy, suggests that the university does not have a formal records management policy. The University of Zululand therefore has no official records management policy to ensure that in terms of the Standard for Records Management (ISO 15489), there is appropriate attention and protection applied to all records and that the evidence and information that they contain can be retrieved effectively and efficiently using standard practices and procedures.

5.5. What types of records are kept in the records management system?

A records management system helps to improve office efficiency, facilitate administrative access to inactive as well as active records, ensure the consistent maintenance of records, decrease operational costs, increase staff productivity, and assist the university in meeting legal and regulatory standards. A records management system has many benefits, such as the fact that work is done more easily (less effort required), more quickly and with better quality, and records are easier to find, understand and monitor.

It was found that general records, such as those generated in the daily running of departments, and especially academic departments, were not being filed or retained

according to formal records management principles or policies, but left to the ingenuity of the records holder. Some documents were stored or dumped in filing cabinets while others were saved electronically on computers. There was no formal or collective approach towards records management in the academic departments mainly because of the absence of a formal records management system.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The University of Zululand creates records on a daily basis, resulting in a lot of records that need to be filed, preserved, appraised and archived according to some or other formal records management policy. It was discovered that records management was not an objective in the strategic plan of the university. 90% of the staff revealed the lack of a records management policy. But if there is no records management policy, how is the university operating in terms of records management, and also how protected is the university in terms of its records? No overall departmental performance management framework that related to records management was identified in this study. In other words, employees were not being measured on records management during performance appraisal as it does not form part of their performance contracts. There was also not much evidence of the management's support for records management activities.

Overall, there appear to be no qualified records management practitioners at the University of Zululand. The lack of appropriate records management experts and specialists is partly responsible for the misunderstandings in terms of records management operations, functions, roles and responsibilities at the University. Even though the university has records officers, there appears to be no clarity or knowledge of their roles and responsibilities because they are not fully supported by university management. The lack of proper training or workshops in records management also wasn't helping the existing personnel.

Even though there is some form of records management in Integrated Tertiary Software, the employees operated more according to principles of decentralization as opposed to centralization. This means that they opted to work with ITS only when they did something that specifically required ITS. Otherwise, they relied on Microsoft

software to keep their departmental records. This suggests that decentralization (records are kept/maintained in various departments/sections where employees work) works more effectively than centralization (records are kept into one centralized system), even though ITS is central to the university

Ultimately, even though the university has an ITS it does not have a formal records management system, it is clear from the literature, discussions and findings that the university still has a long way to go as far as records management is concerned. Only a few staff members appeared to be acquainted with the requisite skills for records management, resulting in improper records keeping, especially with physical records. The community at the University of Zululand appeared to rely more on the records that are generated on a daily basis, such as research, university's core businesses, teaching, etc. Because of the tangible and intangible value of university records, it is critical that they be made part of a comprehensive records management program that ensures that all the university's records are properly and securely managed, replaceable (in the case of vital records), preserved, archived and disposed of when necessary. It is essential that those who are responsible for virtually any type of information become familiar with the requirements and processes of records management. Every employee must know why records management matters to them and why it is so important to the university.

The researcher also took note of the fact that the records management infrastructure was in danger of collapsing in various departments at the university, and especially in the administrative sections. Very few or no staff were equipped with the knowledge, skills and abilities required to develop and rebuild infrastructure that is relevant to university needs. This is demonstrated in the qualifications that employees possess being the opposite of what they are doing.

Essentially, the main objectives of records management are to: set policies and procedures; assign responsibilities for records management at various levels within the organization; set best practice standards; process and maintain records in safe and secure storage; implement access policies; implement a records retention and disposal policy; integrate records management into business systems and processes; assign,

implement and administer specialized systems for managing records; and provide a range of services relating to the management and use of records. While there were claims that the university has a records management policy, there appeared to be no dissemination of such a policy to staff members, leading to a number of employees not being aware of such a policy and resulting in employees managing records in a way that suited them in the belief that there was no policy. We recommend the following:

- 1) An additional module of a formal records management system to the ITS would be essential: Alternatively an immediate purchase of an Integrator v2.0 would be an advantage.
- 2) The University of Zululand needs to establish a records department where records may be kept
- 3) A records management policy is essential
- 4) Employees should be made aware of the policies of the university
- 5) The university has to hire a records manager who will know his/her responsibilities and role as a manager, as well as other qualified staff
- 6) There should be training and workshops in records management
- 7) A centralized system needs to be implemented that will focus on all aspects of the university
- 8) Each department must have a storeroom for physical records
- 9) The filing system needs to be organized so that records can be protected against loss and damage
- 10) The university should buy special boxes for storing physical records
- 11) Management should offer full support to all the departments, i.e. administrative and academic departments, in records management
- 12) The university will have to develop an improvement agenda that should be endorsed and supported throughout by the departments
- 13) Outsourcing records specialists who know how to build and maintain record-keeping infrastructure
- 14) There has to be a maintenance centre for adequate management techniques of keeping records
- 15) Records management software should be user friendly so that it can be used by less computer literate personnel

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