Managing Quality through Records Management in Open and Distance Leaning Institutions

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---**ABSTRACT**--
An Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution should use an effective and efficient records management system to maintain quality. ODL has become the most favoured mode of learning worldwide. This has resulted in the generation of a lot of records which need to be managed according to the theories and principles of records management. The purpose of this study therefore, was to assess the applicability of records management theories to ODL institutions in dealing with an increased amount of information resulting from an increased enrolment of students. The study suggests the strategies that can be employed by ODL institutions to safeguard their corporate memory. A qualitative descriptive survey in which the researchers sought the perceptions of selected key informants was used. Open-ended questionnaires and interviews were used to get views on how best records management theories could be applied. The perceptions of staff members indicated that records management could help in the preservation of institutional memory. They indicated there was need for identifying and developing a vital records protection program, in case of a disaster. The study recommended the need to redefine standards, procedures and guidelines for managing quality through the records management framework. Further research in this crucial area of records management is recommended.
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I.   INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is fast becoming an acceptable and indispensable part of modern life and has been centrally placed in the mainstream of the Zimbabwean society's education system. It has become the driving force in educational, social, political and economic development aspects of the country. Mapfumo (1995), described ODL as the use of specific instructional techniques, resources and media to facilitate learning and teaching between learners and teachers who are separated by time and place. It provides a coherent and consistent service that meets the needs of the user, which has long been a challenge for many organizations. It is a challenge in the digital world of Information Communication Technology (ICT). Timely access to accurate, reliable, authentic, complete and readable records over time is always difficult for both users and custodians. In this article, the authors described the principles that govern the care of records: the *respect- des-fonds* concept, the Continuum concept and the Life Cycle concept in relation to their applicability to ODL, citing Distance University (*Pseudo name*) as a case study. Distance University's vision is to become a world class university in open and distance learning. Quality records management must be established in accordance with procedures and guidelines that address accountability, responsibility and authority for ZOU to attain its vision. The authors described records management as the de facto method for measuring quality assurance in open and distance learning institutions. Quality assurance, as defined by American Society for Quality (ASQ) 1994, is the planned and systematic activity implemented in a system so that quality requirements for a product or service are fulfilled. From the above definition, we can say that quality assurance is the set of procedures developed and activities done before the product or service is manufactured or delivered to assure good quality to the customers. Records Management is the first step in any quality assurance endeavour, as it provides evidence highly needed to determine quality assurance in every organisation. Organisations can achieve their set objectives if their records are accurate. The authors provide a detailed discussion of the importance of records management as a quality assurance tool in ODL institutions.

Purpose of the article
The purpose of this article was to come up with a detailed discussion in considering records management as a quality assurance tool in ODL institutions.

II. WHAT IS A RECORD?

A record is an imprint of an event, occasion, process or an outcome (throughput) as it occurs and later used as memory, report or a history. Bradsher (2004) and International Standard Organisation (ISO) 15489-1 (2001) defined records as recorded information (regardless of form or medium), created, received and maintained by an agency, institution, organization or individual in pursuance of its legal obligation or in the transaction of business. Records are used to justify official actions and to explain and record policy decisions. Records include a wide variety of documentary forms and classes such as correspondence, reports, maps, photographs and sound recordings. Records are linked to the business process to which they are related, normally by means of a file plan or a business classification scheme. A record has the potential to become part of the archival collection of an institution or nation. If selected for permanent preservation, records are transferred to an archival repository to be preserved in perpetuity, Cochran (2009).

Characteristics of a Record

A record should correctly reflect what was communicated or decided or what action was taken. It should be able to support the needs of the business to which it relates and be used for accountability purposes, according to ISO 15489-1:2001 (E). Records management policies, procedures and practices should lead to keeping of authoritative records which are authentic, reliable, and useable.

Records Management

Records management was defined by the *Dictionary of archival terminology* (2016) as "that area of general administrative management concerned with achieving economy and efficiency in the creation, maintenance, use, and disposal of records during their life cycle". Records management relates to documentation in terms of input, processes and output. The documents are kept for standard measurement in relationship to benchmarking. Benchmarking, which was done using standards of successful universities in records management, is useful in attaining best possible standards of operation for any ODL institution. According to Bradsher (2004), records management is used to improve records administration throughout the record life cycle, help prevent uninformed destruction of records, and assist with the preservation of adequate documentation of organizational policies and programmes. Records management could improve the quality, and reduce the quantity, of records, and ultimately facilitate access to information for reference and research, (ISO 15489-1:2001(E).

Benefits of Records Management

In an organisation records management includes setting policies and standards, assigning responsibilities and authorisation, designing, implementing and administering specialised systems for managing records. According to ISO 15489-1:2001 (E) a records management system results in a source of information about business activities that can support subsequent activities and business decisions, as well as ensure accountability to present and future stakeholders. Records enable organizations to;
- conduct business in an orderly, efficient and accountable manner,
- support and document policy formulation and managerial decision making,
- provide continuity in the event of a disaster,
- Provide evidence of business, personal and cultural activity,
- Maintain corporate, personal or collective memory,
- Allow fast, accurate and reliable access to relevant information that is properly contextualized and
- Ensure that redundant records can be destroyed routinely and according to a structured auditable process when they are no longer needed.

III. QUALITY

Quality relates to excellent performance that is benchmarked to industry standard levels. It entails efficiency (doing the right thing first time), effectiveness (doing the right thing in the right way) and economy (achieving standards at least cost). Assurance defines the standards to be followed in order to meet the customer requirements.

Records, as relating to inputs, processes and outputs, are useful tools for highlighting movement/informational flows: historical, current or future. Historical records provide information on contemporary problems and issues. Records have lent administrative continuity to institutions.

A system should be functional and should be intended to produce standard results. In a system, there is a flow of inputs which are then processed to produce outputs, and only a properly documented and laid out structure can produce the standard results. Systems documentation is intended to standardize performance. The documentation can either be diagrammatic or instructional. In order to maintain standards, or improve on them, inputs, processes and outputs are subjected to quality inspection. The purpose of quality inspection is to fulfil quality assurance. A system that has a good quality assurance structure is self regulatory in that there are

indicators which are automatically triggered if there is a problem. In order to minimize flaws in a system, it is necessary to carry out quality assurance audits. Quality audits ensure that retrieval, storage and application of records achieve efficiency, effectiveness and economy in the system, whether information records are historical, current or relate to the future.

Records management must entail quality in terms of storage, retrieval and application or in terms of inputs, processes and outputs. These are continuous and repetitive activities where processes or executions dovetail. Quality must not apply only to the management of records, but also to the records that are being managed (medium), flows, authenticity (validity) and authority.

IV.   RECORDS MANAGEMENT AS A TOOL FOR MANAGING QUALITY IN ODL.

Record keeping, according to Lasselle (1982), is the handling of information in such a way that others can easily determine what happened, what is current and what is expected. Records management is an integral part of an institution's quality assurance for products and services offered. Despite the differences in the definition of record keeping and records management, these terms are often used interchangeably. But, the importance of both terms can not be undermined. Records management has become important to ODL, and more importantly at ZOU, especially at a time the University is emphasising zero tolerance on quality assurance as a way of gaining world class status. The institution is increasingly embracing the virtual environment for learning and pursuing new educational techniques to maximise students' learning and knowledge creation. The academic demand places great emphasis on effective records management for quality assurance and improved learning. Indeed, for its innovative search for quality education, records management is the key to the success of this demand. Through accurate record keeping, the institution can effectively account for its academic and administrative actions. It can predict the impact of change and forecast the demand inclusion in open and distance learning.

Furthermore, records management is seen as the vehicle that drives quality assurance, based on the ability of the institution to have enough evidence to account for its endeavours in the academic world. Apart from this records management provides a cost-effective service as records created by academic demand on the University need to be looked at and used in the future. Records Management also provides a rational basis for making decisions necessary to support the legal, fiscal, administrative and other research needs. The challenge is for the institution to be responsive to the dynamics and diverse needs of the educational community in terms of educational competency and excellence. Therefore, the quality assurance policy should emphasise the institution's vision as "a world class university in open and distance learning".

However, according to Cadler (1994), whatever approach to managing quality is adopted, all institutions need information to manage themselves effectively. In this regard, records management has become the administrative tool for communication purposes in relationship to the past, the present and the future. If records are well managed, the effectiveness of the institution is enhanced and programmes become more responsive to properly managed records, including the realisation of economies of scale. Indeed, records management is now seen to be primarily an accountability discipline because no organization, without good records management, can convincingly demonstrate its actions to society.

V.   THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGING RECORDS

Records contain information which is a valuable resource, therefore, a systematic approach to their management is essential to protect and preserve proven evidence for activities. This evidence is critical and is needed by both the present and future stakeholders. With a viable records management programme in place, the institution can easily control the quality of its activities. Well managed records are the foundation of good governance, as they document the policies and transactions and provide a trusted source of information to support decision making and accountability (Millar 2009).

Distance University is migrating to an on-line environment, and it is necessary to have a legal and policy framework for managing records in electronic format. Records management is becoming increasingly dependent on technology. It is important to have an objective means of evaluating quality in order to ensure that the records created are capable of capturing, maintaining and being accessible over time. Information Communication Technology (ICT) is making a significant contribution to improving quality assurance in an on-line environment. Millar (2009) points out that ICT system are being introduced without the essential processes and controls for the capture, storage and accessibility of electronic records. This usually undermines an institution's ability to correctly measure quality assurance. People end up mistrusting information generated in such a system. Quality can be assured through monitoring and auditing and the following points are important.
-    The regulatory environment may require that external bodies undertake monitoring and auditing of records
-    Modification to the records systems and records management processes should be made if these are found to be unsuitable or ineffective
-    Systems compliance and monitoring should be documented and reports should be maintained.

The challenge for Distance University is to ensure that records created in ICT systems provide trusted information that is reliable, complete, unaltered and or unadulterated. In this respect, records management solutions are to be integrated in ICT systems. A records management framework must also be in place to ensure that recordkeeping is taken into account and is in compliance with standard requirements. However, for the institution to comply with the standard, it must have in place policies, procedures and practices to ensure that its needs for documentary evidence are met, and that the organization can be accountable for its activities. The bottom line for the institution is to create and manage records that are authentic, reliable, complete, unaltered and useable.

Theories of Records Management
Millar (1997) explained the theories of records management. ***Respect- des- fonds*** is the first theory which entails the respect of the creator of a record. Under this theory there are two related concepts which are; provenance (office of origin must be known whenever a record is created) and original order (the order and organization in which records were created and stored by the office of origin).
The second theory is the records life cycle. The basic concept of this theory is that every record progresses through three phases; a record is created, is used and maintained and is dispositioned (either by destruction as record of ephemeral value or by transfer to national archives as a record of enduring value). This can be analogous to human life where a human being is born, lives, dies and others resurrect to eternal life. According to Millar (1997), without the life cycle concept, vast quantities of inactive records clog up expensive office space, and it is virtually impossible to retrieve important administrative, financial and legal information. The records life cycle goes as follows: -
The document is created and enters what is called the current stage. Current records are records regularly used for the conduct of the current business of an organisation or individual they are also known as active records. They are normally kept near the place of origin or the records office. From current, a record goes on to the semi-current stage where records are infrequently required in the conduct of current business. Semi-current records are maintained in the records centre pending their ultimate disposal. From semi-current phase, some records are selected as archives. Archives are records selected for permanent preservation because of their enduring value. They are normally preserved in an archival institution. The life cycle concept has been useful in promoting a sense of order and a systematic approach to the overall management of recorded information.
The third and last theory is the continuum concept. This theory is a consistent and coherent regime of management processes from the time of the creation of records through to the preservation and use of records as archives. The International Council on Archives (ICA) defines the continuum concept as a consistent and coherent process of records management throughout the life of records, from the development of record keeping systems through the creation and preservation of records, to their retention and use as archives. Frank Upward, an Australian archival theorist, formulated the records continuum as a model based on four principles.
a) The first concept of records includes records of continuing value (archives) stressing their use for transactional, evidentiary, and memory purposes, and unifies approaches to archiving.
b) The second concept is the focus on records as logical, rather than physical entities, regardless of whether they appear on paper or in electronic form.
c) The third is the institutionalisation of record keeping. The profession's role requires a particular emphasis on the need to integrate record keeping into business and societal processes and purposes.
d) The fourth point is that archival science is the foundation for organized knowledge.

The actions for records management are; the creation or acquisition of records, classification or description, its appraisal for continuing value and its maintenance and use.
The theories above are brought together under an integrated record keeping framework with the same goal, to guarantee the reliability, authenticity and completeness of records. The framework provides common understanding, consistent standard based on unified best practice criteria, and interdisciplinary approaches to recordkeeping and archiving processes for both paper and digital worlds, McKemmish (1997).
The new comers in the organisation are helped to learn and assimilate the culture within the organisation if these theories are put in place. Rogoff (2003) suggests that people acquire their cultural values and practices from the communities in which they interact, thus through guided participation, learning occurs.
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Conceptual Framework of Records Management
The conceptual framework links each institutional objective, records management, and overall organisational output. The conceptual framework has three components in relation to quality assurance, which are institutional objectives, records management and output. Institutional objectives set the impetus into motion or is the driver of the vehicle. For example, just as the Distance University Act sets the parameters of the institution, we talk of records management from the moment a person is recruited. As indicated by the diagram below, proper records management ignites other processes such as staff recruitment and students records to produce graduates, quality, credibility and accountability among other outputs. Records Management ensures continuity and enhances quality. Proper records management outlines the framework within which an institution can live beyond the lifespan of individual players. Proper records management provides precedence, consistence, and uniformity even if the current workforce is no longer with the institution. It takes over from where human minds fail, as it reflects past actions and decisions, which are required for Distance University to forge ahead.
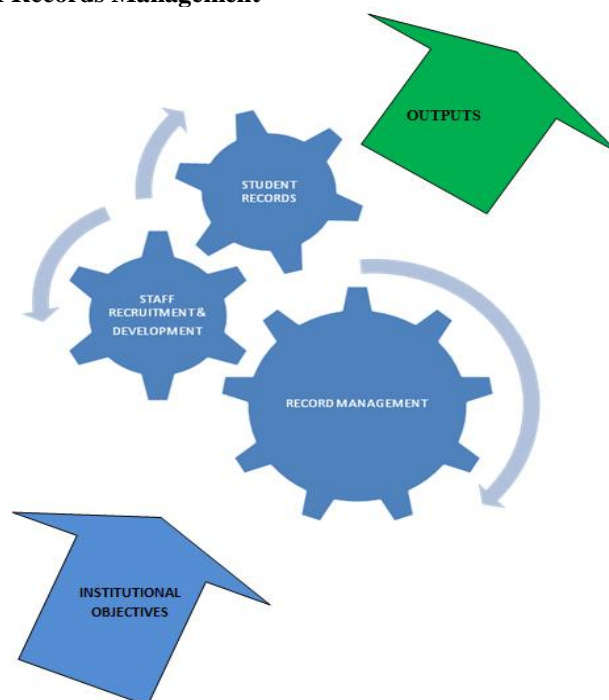
Conceptual Framework of Records Management

Figure 1. Linkages between institutional objectives, records management and organizational output

Institutional objectives
Policies provide the framework for institutional involvement in the creation and management of records, but implementation is at the record keeping system level. With proper records management, quality is guaranteed. ISO Standard 15489 contains an existence list of policy issues and suggested requirements that can be used as a basis for cooperation with records managers in promoting good records management as the basis for the creation and preservation of records. A viable ODL institution should institute and carry out a comprehensive management programme which includes:

- Determining what records should be created, what information needs to be included in the record and what level of accuracy is required;
- Deciding in what form and structure records should be created and captured;
- Preserving the records and making them accessible over time in order to meet institutional requirements;
- Complying with legal and regulatory requirements and organizational policy; and
- Ensuring that records are retained for as long as required.

VI. METHODOLOGY

The researchers adopted a qualitative descriptive research design in which they sought the perceptions of staff members in the Faculties of Applied Social Sciences, Commerce and Law and the Quality Assurance department on what they considered to be the best practices in managing quality and the benefits derived from the records management process. The researchers adopted the case study approach in trying to understand complex organisational problems. Moore (1983) advances the view that a case study is usually used when the researcher is attempting to understand complex organisational problems, or diffuse causes and effects of change. In this respect, the researchers chose a case study so as to focus on a single entity which was sufficiently manageable and understandable in all its complexity.

However, Ngulube (2007), Myers (2004), Yin (1994) and Bryman (1988) point out that a case study methodology revolves around two major approaches that are qualitative and quantitative whose differences are technical rather than epistemological. Yin (1994) also supports a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context. An open-ended questionnaire was used to gather data from all the participants. According to Chisnell (1986) an open-ended questionnaire known as 'free answer or free response' calls for a response of more than a few words and in this regard, the respondents are left to structure a reply as he/she sees fit with considerable freedom in phrasing answers in his/her own words. In this respect, the researchers also used the questionnaire as it provided an opportunity for respondents to give frank and anonymous answers. According to Williamson (2002), a questionnaire is effective as it stirs up data buried deep in the minds of respondents and reports on it frankly.

Interviews were held with key personnel in the Academic Registry, Quality Assurance Department, selected Regional Directors, Deans and Chairpersons of the two faculties. Interviews were used as they were seen as the most important source of case study information and were open-ended in nature, as researchers could probe for more information in situations where respondents gave short answers.

VII. THE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS
Background information of Distance University employees
The findings of the study were categorised into themes, which were meant to determine why records management is important in ODL institutions. The general picture that was revealed was that most key respondents have stayed in the organization for more than 5 years and the information they gave should be accurate because they are well versed with the system.

7.1 Why records are kept at Distance University?
The respondents gave a host of answers to why records are kept in ODL institutions. The general perceptions of why records are kept were given as follows:
- Records keep the institution going beyond the life of individuals;
- They help in decision making;
- They are kept for future reference;
- Records are important when people are carrying out research;
- Formulation of policies is successful when records are in shape; and
- Records are kept for efficiency and effective operations.

7.2 The implications of not having proper records management
The research participants highlighted a number of challenges that can be met if records managements is not in place. Below are the participants' views on poor records management in an ODL set up.
- Failure to have history of the organisation
- A substantial number of participants reported that records management is important in the day to day running of the institution. For example, one participant said;
- Without proper records management, institutional memory fades away.
- Arbitrary decision making
- Repetition of tasks which leads to waste of resources and time
- People perceived records management as a tool in serving time. For example, some participants mentioned that proper records management will help the efficiency and effectiveness in any institution.
- Contradicting records
- Admission irregularities
- Failure to provide accurate student results
- Unable to trace students records if they come for reference years later
- Unable to reconstruct after a disaster

A systematic approach to records management is essential to protect and preserve proven   evidence for activities. Another participant said,
In case of a disaster, the institution will have nowhere to start from because all valuable resources would have gone.

Suggestions on how to overcome records management challenges
The recommendation which came out of respondents was that the institution should continue to employ qualified records managers in the central registry and continue to narrow its focus of attention where all records are systematically kept. In order to enhance service delivery, the participants suggested that a records management framework be supported to ensure records keeping is in line with the required standards.
The findings from all participants pointed t o the need for redefining (fine tuning) policies and procedures to make them more responsive to the demands of records procedures. Effective records management programme in ODL is vital for purposes of preserving institutional memory and continuity as pointed out by the findings. The study revealed the need for the university to run a dual records management programme in which students should have physical records and not depend on the electronic ones as these are transitory (i.e. can not live for a long time as technology changes by the day).

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

However, in its endeavour to maintain the quality of its services, it is important for any ODL institution to observe the following:

- ➢ Establish standards, procedures and guidelines for managing quality through the records management framework
- ➢ Conduct surveys of national and regional centres on records management practices to ensure accountability and improve records care
- ➢ Designate responsibility to records liaison officers for overall coordination of records management
- ➢ Establish effective management controls over the creation, maintenance and use of records
- ➢ Create and safeguard records that adequately and effectively document the organizational functions, policies, decisions and procedures
- ➢ Establish safeguards against the unauthorized removal or destruction of records
- ➢ Identify and develop a vital records protection programme in case of disasters.
- ➢ There is need for further research in this area

IX. CONCLUSION

Effective records management and record keeping can help to improve quality assurance at any ODL institution. Therefore, each ODL institution should have a functional quality assurance policy document in its possession.

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