Best Practice in Records Management in Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

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ABSTRACT--- *The aim of this study was to assess the extent to which Records management practice in ODL institutions comply with International best practice (ISO 15489 standards of 2001). The best practice identified in this study included the creation of records management policies and procedures, designing and implementation of the records system, file plan, records management processes and controls, disposal and retention of records. Consistent with the problem being investigated the study adopted a qualitative research methodology premised on the interpretivist philosophy. Document survey, observation and interviews were the major methods used to generate data. A case study design, where the Zimbabwe Open University was the single entity studied, was used. The study concluded that records management in the ODL institution was, to a larger extent, compliant with international best practice. The structure, policies and support systems required in records management are available in the institution. The institution's Records Centre is however in its infancy and is yet to be fully equipped with adequate office space, equipment and IT facilities. The study recommends that the ODL institution should consolidate the advances it has made in Records Management by investing in more office space and equipment. The institution should also invest in records management information technology equipment and software which would enable it to effectively manage its electronic records.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The imperatives for sound record management in ODL institutions are clear and varied. ODL institutions are generally large organizations which employ hundreds of staff and enroll thousands of students in multiple geographical locations. Distance Education (ODL) has become the most favoured mode of learning worldwide and this has resulted in many people studying through this mode of learning. At ZOU, for example, the large enrollments have resulted in the production of large volumes of records which include student records, staff files, administration and financial records. In order to operate as a modern, agile and efficient organisation, it is essential for ZOU and other ODL institutions to have effective control over the records they create and use.

Literature reveals that records management in ODL institutions has evolved over time in response to the growth of the institutions, the changing needs of students, the need to embrace new technologies and the adoption of international best practice in this field. ZOU, for example has developed a more proactive, consistent and comprehensive approach in records management. The ZOU records management concept is based on the realization that records management must be premised on policies, procedures and guidelines that address accountability, responsibility and authority.

2. AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to assess the extent to which the records management practices in ODL were compliant with International best practice. The study was guided by the following objectives.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To assess the extent to which records management in ODL is compliant with international best practice.
- To identify non compliant areas and recommend corrective action.

4. KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to answer the following research questions;
- To what extent does records management in ODL comply with international best practice?
- What improvements in records management should be undertaken, if any, in order to comply with international best practice?

5. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A record is defined as information, regardless of form or medium, created, received and maintained by an agency, institution, organisation or individual in pursuit of legal obligations or in the carrying out of business transactions (ISO 15489, 2001).

5.1 Records management

The ISO 15489:2001 defines records management as "The field of management responsible for the effective and efficient control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records. It includes the processes of capturing and maintaining of evidence and information about business activities and transactions in the form of records."

5.2 The imperatives for sound records management in ODL

Records management ensures the proper creation, maintenance, use and disposal of records. Information is every organisation's most basic and essential asset, and in common with any other business assets, recorded information requires effective management (Michael, 1982). A good records management system ensures that information can be accessed easily, destroyed reliably when no longer needed and it enables organisations to fulfill their legal and financial requirements.

A well managed system of records management allows organisations to know what records they have, and locate them easily; increase efficiency and effectiveness; make savings in administration costs, both in staff time and storage; support decision making; be accountable; achieve business objectives and targets; provide continuity in the event of a disaster; meet legislative and regulatory requirements and protect the interests of employees, clients and stakeholders (Donald H. Kraft. 1985).

5.3 Best Practice in Records Management

Best practice, generally refers to "any practice, know-how, or experience that has proven to be valuable or effective within one organization that may have applicability to other organizations" (O'Dell and Grayson, 1998). Best practices are exemplary or successfully demonstrated ideas or activities, viewed by some as top-notch "standards" for guiding benchmarking and making comparisons. The ISO 15459, (2001) evaluates an organisation's records management practice according to the following criteria; p*olicies and procedures, designing and implementation plan of the records system, file plan, records management controls, disposal and retention and records appraisal.*

5.4 Theories of Records Management

The Life cycle, Continuum, Hybrid theory and the Entity life history constitute some of the theories that form the core of records management theory.

The records life-cycle theory (T Shellenberg 1930s)

The Records life cycle model assumes that records are initially kept for organizational purposes, and implies that after their usefulness, they may be retired into archival custody. Records move through three stages from their creation to disposal. The three stages through which records pass are current records, semi- current and non-current records. The ZOU records management practice has a similar design where current records are kept and maintained at the Departments where they are required for current operations.

Semi-current records are records required infrequently in the conduct of current University business. These should be transferred from user offices to a records centre pending their ultimate disposal. Non-current records are records no longer needed for current business. They are retired to the records centre as archival files if they are of enduring value.

Hybrid records life cycle theory (Ngulube & Tafor, 2006)

The Hybrid theory integrates the prenatal phase of the continuum theory with the records life cycle conceptual stages to come up with a model which is more suitable for managing records in this modern era of information management. The Hybrid theory assumes that records management involves planning, organizing and controlling the records system through the prenatal phase, current phase, semi-current phase and the non-current phase.

The Hybrid theory arguably is the most relevant and current theory which integrates several elements required in records management international best practice. The prenatal phase is where the records policy and objectives are conceived. The current and semi-current phases are made up of several elements of the design and implementation requirements of the records management system. The non-current phase relates to the security and responsible management of non-current records which have enduring value to the institution.

The theories of records management mentioned above give an in-depth understanding of the concept of records management. They are a historical reference of the trends in records management and are essential in understanding the current school of thought in records management best practice.

6. METHODOLOGY

This paper employed the case study method, which falls within the qualitative research methodology. Document survey, observation and interviews were used to review the records management practice at ZOU, which is one of the leading ODL institutions in Zimbabwe and in the SADC region.. The researcher analysed the ZOU records management policy and procedure manual, records management processes and controls, monitoring and records audit techniques and staff training. These key records management processes were matched with the requirements of ISO15489. The Researcher also interviewed ZOU Records Centre employees.

The research techniques referred to above are often criticized on the basis of the greater likelihood of producing biased results. For example, the interviewees could provide a more positive image of the ZOU Records Centre given that the findings of the study could be perceived as having an effect on their credibility and competence as ZOU employees. It should, however, be appreciated that the same research techniques do provide a more informed insight of the research area, hence the results and conclusions produced are considered to be more reliable. In addition the triangulation of methods enhanced rigour in this study.

7. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

7.1 Does the ODL institution's Records Management system meet International Best Practice?

The researcher noted that the University records management function is executed primarily through the Records Centre. The Unit was formally established in 2012. The Records Centre is guided by a policy document which spells out its roles and responsibilities. It is manned by professionals in Records management. It was observed that before the Institution's Records Centre was established, an extensive environmental analysis (records management survey) was conducted to get a full understanding of the legal, social, political, economic and technological variables that would affect its functioning. Research was carried out in two phases, the first phase being external environmental analysis investigating the external factors cited above. The University conducted consultations with the Standards Association of Zimbabwe with an objective to establish a quality driven Records centre which is well informed of the international standards requirements and the legal formalities. The second phase was the analysis of the internal business operations which clearly defined the needs of the institution's operational records management requirements. The Records Management department is guided by 5 principles which are; reliability, integrity, compliance, comprehensiveness and systematic.

7.2 Compliance to best Practice

Compliance to best practice in records management generally entails setting and surpassing standards in key records management areas. The key areas identified and adopted by the University are; policies and responsibilities, design and implementation of the records system, records management processes and controls, monitoring and auditing, and training. These are as per the requirements of ISO 15489 standards of 2001.

7.3 Policies and Responsibilities

The Researcher observed that the purpose of the University's records management policy is to guide the building of a comprehensive and compliant records management program that must demonstrate the key elements of efficiency, effectiveness, consistency, accountability and accessibility. The ZOU records policy, in summary, points out that; the University records management systems and practices shall conform to international records management best practices. University records shall be available and accessible every time to meet administrative, financial, legal and any other requirements of the University. All print and electronic records are official University records. The records shall be classified and indexed according to the ZOU House Style. The Policy objectives are intended to establish records management systems that are in conformity with international standards in records management (ISO 15489 of 2001), provide a framework for management of the University records and to ensure that all activities and decisions of the University are fully and accurately documented.

The Institution's records management policy statement and objectives reflect a strong quality driven ODL records management framework. The policy is in line with the SAZS/ISO 15489:2003 and the National Archives of Zimbabwe Act (Chapter 25:06) both of which guide the proper management of both print and electronic records in formal organizations. The Institution's records management policy gives senior management the responsibility to supervise the implementation of the records management policy. Senior management are mandated to ensure that the records policy is adhered to, monitored and evaluated. The Registrar of the University must ensure that the policy is regularly revised and that the policy is approved and distributed to all units.

The policy further stipulates that Deans of Faculties and other Unit Heads shall ensure that all their staff members adhere to the records management policy. All members shall comply with the legislative provisions and administrative requirements needed to create, manage, protect and provide proper, accurate, adequate and complete University records.

7.4 Records Management Procedure Manual

The study revealed that the ODL institution has in place a records management procedure manual whose purpose is to guide the institution's personnel in creating and managing records. It outlines the processes for records registration, classification, retention, transfer, and disposal using records management software.

The Records Management Procedure Manual was developed to provide guidelines for creating consistent and meaningful file names, explain the registration process, describe the institution's Writing House Style for record classification and how it should be applied, describe the procedure for transferring records and to explain the records retention and disposal procedures. The procedure manual, among other key terms, defines and explains procedure on the management of active or current records, semi-active/ semi-current records, non-active/ non-current records, archival records, confidential records, records appraisal, disposal and destruction of records and preservation of records.

7.5 The Institution's file plan

Documentary evidence revealed that the Institution has a file plan which facilitates the orderly arrangement and storage of documents. This file plan enables the quick retrieval of information. It reduces duplication of effort in the storage of records. It was also noted that the file plan complemented the procedure manual. It included the records series, file organization, active file locations, file transfer instructions, file retention and disposition instructions, and other specific instructions that provide guidance for effective management of records, including vital records. The File plan specify how records are to be organized once they have been created or received, provide a "roadmap" to the records created and maintained by an organizational unit, and facilitate the disposal of the records.

7.6 File creation (Registration, Classification and Indexing)

The objective of the Registration, Classification and Indexing system is to use filenames that provide enough information that they can be readily understood by employees and at the same time provide an effective file system that saves space and funds. All files and communication created within the Institution are given a unique identifier to provide evidence of the origin and context of the document. Records are classified according to the department or unit of origin and the context of the document. The House Writing style simplifies communication and enables understanding and confidentiality of communication within the institution.

7.7 Student records

The study revealed that the processing of students records is done through creating individual student files. A student file is created by assembling the necessary documents and information. An activity tracking form keeps details about the movement of files from the records office to where ever they are requested to provide information. Student files are filed in Regional Centres, programme by programme, alphabetically by surname and each file has dividers that demarcate different activities/documents/information captured in the student's file.

7.8 Staff files

A personal file is updated through the filing of personal correspondences pertaining to a member. Such correspondences may include correspondences generated from the various units of the University, for example performance appraisal forms and action plans. Copies of additional qualifications acquired during the course of one's employment are also placed in the file when received. These copies are placed in the personal files. An activity tracking form is used to keep details of the movement of a staff file from one office to another.

7.9 Administrative records

The processing of administrative records involves the opening, date stamping, and recording of correspondences in incoming and outgoing registers. It also includes sorting and classification of records into the appropriate classes and filling documents.

7.10 Preservation and Security

The University records are protected from theft, vandalism, sabotage, unauthorized access and perusal, computer assisted fraud, computer virus, water, sunlight, fire and dust. The university employs several mechanisms which include the employment of security systems, use of lockable cabinets and drawers. The University uses security passwords and up to date antivirus systems for protecting electronic records from viruses, malicious programmes, unauthorized access and destruction. It is University records policy that under no circumstances shall records be filed or placed on the floor where they may be exposed to biological, physical and environmental threats. The University Records department has

developed mechanisms for the preservation of records under the security, access and use, maintenance, storage and vital records management procedures.

7.11   Vital Records

The University's vital records are marked and recorded specifically as vital records, listed and utmost care is taken to ensure that they are secured. The University employs a vital records management programme to cater for such type of records.

7.12   Access, use and storage of Records

Access to records is regulated by access procedures and authority controls. Access to the records and use is authorised to the Institution's personnel only and is strictly for the execution of University business.

Vital records such as students' records, staff files, financial records, administrative records are stored in a disaster-resistant safe or vault to protect them from fire, floods, earthquakes and possible destruction during human conflict. Fire extinguishers and smoke detectors are installed in offices housing vital records.

7.13   Records management controls

The Records Management processes and controls ensure that records are created/received, maintained, used and disposed of systematically and according to established records management principles and the University policy. The University established physical and intellectual control mechanisms over the records so that the organisation knows what records it has, where they are and what has happened to them. The control mechanisms are monitored and fall under the direct responsibility of the Records Centre. The Records Centre is responsible for training ZOU employees on the requirements and performance standards of ZOU records management as outlined in the policy document and procedure manual. The control mechanisms are in the form of procedures on retention, registration, classification, storage and handling, access, tracking, transfer and disposal of records.

- Classification – refers to the categorization of records in systematic and consistent ways so that related records are grouped together to facilitate capture, retrieval, maintenance and disposal.
- Language control – refers to the use of language control tools (the ZOU House writing Style) which are specific to the organisation and familiar to ZOU employees only. The ZOU language control uses a combination of index numbers and the classification system.
- Indexing – relates to attaching searchable terms (from the ZOU House Writing Style) to records to help with retrieval.
- Tracking – tracking the physical movement of records to know who has used them and where they are at any one time. ZOU has standard record registration and transfer guidelines in its procedure manual

7.14   Auditing

The ZOU Records Centre is mandated to carry out an annual audit of the institution's Records management function. The audit assesses the compliance of the institution's records policy and practice to international best practice. Through the audit, the Records Centre assesses the strategic fit of the records policy. The Unit submits the resultant annual report, with recommendations to senior management through the Registrar

Auditing is an essential aspect of the records retention and disposal process at ZOU. Finance and Administration Records are disposed or retired subject to an Audit. The auditing of records ensures accountability and transparency in the institution.

7.15   Training

Continuous records management training is a priority for any organization which seeks conformity to ISO 15489 (2001) standards. Continuous improvement entails the continuous training of records professionals, senior management and all employees so that the records management systems and operational standards are consistent throughout the organization. The ZOU records management department is manned by professional records officers who have experience in the records field. It is the University's policy to employ such highly qualified staff. The university is also fully committed to further improve the records management function. ZOU supports employee development through financing for academic progression and subsidizing employees who undertake refresher courses.

7.16   Transfer of records

Records that are no longer necessary in the daily course of business will be transferred to the Records Centre where they are retained as indicated on the records retention schedule. Semi current records as defined in the Policy document are records which are not required frequently in the conduct of current business. The Records officer (Current Records) informs the Records Officer (Semi-Current Records), in writing, of the intention to transfer the records from creating offices to the Records Centre.

On Transferring, the Records Officer (Current Records) packages the semi-current records in acid-free archival storage boxes. He/ She legibly and correctly complete, in triplicate, a record transmittal list that shall accompany the consignment to the Records Centre. The standard ZOU records transmittal list bears the following information; Name and address of transferring office, the consignment number, description of records being transferred and covering dates of the records contained in the package. The Records officer (Current Records) takes the packaged records, accompanied by the records transmittal list and hands over to the Records Officer (Semi-Current Records) at the Records Centre. The Records Officer (Semi-Current Records) signs the transmittal list as proof of receipt of the records and takes over the custody of the transferred records in the storage boxes. The Records officer shall enter details of the transferred records into records accessions register.

Following the closure and retirement of records the Records Centre schedules the records for disposal by reference to authorized disposal schedules. Records are sorted by disposal date and listed on a Records Transfer Transmitted List. Whenever possible, records with the same disposal date are listed together on the same page and placed in the same box.

7.17   Disposal and Retention
Records retention and disposal at ZOU is performed after an appraisal process. Disposal of any records without prior appraisal process is illegal. Appraisal is the process of evaluating records to determine their retention or disposal based on administrative, legal, fiscal and historical values. Retention and disposal of Records within ZOU is conducted in accordance with the approved retention and disposal schedules produced upon appraisal. The Retention Schedule is integrated into the classification scheme. It is the responsibility of the Registrar to retain and dispose of records according to the records retention schedule. No other official or employee of the University is allowed to dispose records without authority and without adhering to the records retention and disposal schedules. This is deemed illegal by the University policy. The purpose of the records disposal system is to ensure that authorized disposal instructions are effectively and efficiently applied to ZOU records. This is done uniformly in all Regional Centres to ensure that records of continuing value have been retained in appropriate locations for the required period of time. This facilitates the timely destruction of records in a secure manner.

7.18   Retention periods (examples) as per Disposal schedule
It is common that records found having enduring value may be disposed of by transfer for further retention as archival records to the Records Centre. Those found having ephemeral values can be disposed of by distribution (burning, shredding). All other non statutory records, excluding the audited financial statements and the bank statements are disposed of immediately after their usefulness.

The University has set standard retention periods for different classes of records; these are indicated in the ZOU records disposal schedule as follows;

> Administration – retention periods for these files range between 7-10 years. Invoices and stores records are retained for at least 7 years and are disposed subject to an Audit. Transport (accident and insurance) reports are disposed after 10 years. Records for movable assets are retained for at least 30 years.

> The Articles of incorporation, Deeds titles, leases, Mortgages and other important University documents are classified as permanent records and are not destroyed. They are transferred to a dedicated archival facility for preservation.

Finance - Budgets, Expenditure, Revenue and other essential Banking records are retained for at least 10 years and are disposed of subject to Audit. Weekly and quarterly finance reports are retained for at least one year and are disposed of subject to an Audit. Records document the decisions and activities of the private and public institutions and they serve as benchmark by which future activities and decisions are measured. Without good records management, officials are forced to take decisions on an ad hoc basis without the benefit of an institutional memory. It is important to realize that records are essential for the effective and productive functioning of all organizations and the Open and Distance Learning sector is not an exception. Records management is a fundamental activity of administration as records provide a reliable, legally verifiable source of evidence of decisions and actions.

8.   CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the extent to which records management in ODL complies with international best practice. The study revealed that the ODL institution has established a standalone Records Centre that is responsible for managing all institutional records and ensuring full compliance with international best practice.The University has ensured that critical resources for the Records Centre are available. The institution has also established the structures, policies, procedures and guidelines for the Records Centre and the institution's records management function in order to

fully comply with the requirements of international best practice. The study also revealed that the Institution's Records management function operates with a vision to fully comply with International standards and currently is in the process of getting an ISO (15489 of 2001) certification.

The study concludes that the Zimbabwe Open University is, to a greater extent, compliant with International Best Practice. ZOU has developed a Records policy which clearly spells out responsibility for senior management and all ZOU staff. The University produced and distributed the Records management procedure manual which gives specific guidelines to all ZOU employees. The University also centralized its records management function into a department which manages all institutional records in a professional manner while ensuring their safety and fostering accountability.

The ZOU Records centre though rich in structure and having a world-class conception is still at its infancy and needs to be nurtured in order to be fully compliant with international best practice. The Unit and other offices which develop and keep University records are yet to be provided adequate and appropriate office space and furniture. The institution needs more lockable desks and cabinets to store files.

Though the ZOU records centre has made headway in managing physical records, it is still lagging behind in managing electronic records.. Employees are still using different external e-mail accounts as they are yet to create ZOU e-mail accounts. The use of personal email accounts is a security hazard in future as employees may still retain ZOU information and use it after leaving the institution .The university's electronic records file plan is yet to be developed for the access and sharing of electronic records between employees. The University is yet to acquire and install electronic Records management software. The major contribution of this study has been its ability to benchmark records management practices in ODL against international best practice. This information will assist the ODL institution to monitor on a regular basis the performance of its records management unit in line with international best practice.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the above findings, this study comes up with the following recommendations;

- It is recommended that ZOU consolidates the Records Centre's viability by investing in more office space and other essential resources. It is therefore necessary for the records function to receive substantial funding to address this issue.

- ZOU needs to embrace the latest information technology in records management. The institution should acquire and install software to effectively manage electronic records.

- It is also recommended that ZOU employees use ZOU e-mail accounts to communicate official information rather than their own external email accounts as University records may be exposed to constant security risk.

- The ZOU Records Centre is at its infancy and is still developing. This development has to be nurtured within the University's vision of being a world class distance learning University. This calls for continuous improvement and adaptation to international trends. There is, therefore, a compelling need to forecast and plan for change.

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