MANAGING INFORMATION -
WHY RECORDS MANAGEMENT IS NECESSARY

Managing information
- All organisations need to manage the information they create and accumulate in the course of their activities.
- Without good information management no institution can function efficiently, since legal, financial and administrative transactions must be documented and the reference needs and research requirements of the institution serviced.
- Poor information management means that organisations may lose part or all of their corporate memory; records documenting the development of functions and data on research carried out may be destroyed or misplaced.
- Surviving material may be without order and control, thus losing its evidential value and resulting in over-dependence on individual memory.
- Such lack of control results in loss of accountability for an organisation’s actions.
- This in turn can raise questions of corruption or mismanagement in addition to the usual problems of time and cost caused by inefficiency.

Accountability and management
- Evidence of past actions is the basis of all forms of accountability; that evidence is captured as records.
- For records to retain their value as evidence they need to be preserved and managed. This information management needs to cover the whole life cycle of the records produced, irrespective of format.
- There are three stages of the life of every record: it is created as a current record; it is maintained as a semi-current record with continued value for the business of the organisation; and it is disposed of when it becomes a non-current record of no further business use.
- Records management is the area of professional work which is concerned with achieving economy and efficiency in the creation, maintenance, business use and disposal of records.
- Archival administration is that which becomes concerned at the disposal stage with the preservation and research use of those records which have been selected as archives.

The value of records management
Good records management is always advantageous, both financially and administratively, to an institution. Costs will decrease and efficiency increase as a result of the following actions:

- Records of ephemeral quality will be identified which can be immediately destroyed.
In consultation with the responsible Division, preparation of records retention schedules earmarking material for permanent retention, review or destruction within a specified period, will mean that ad hoc, uninformed decisions will no longer have to be made about how to dispose of records.

• Sorting and listing of older records will mean that files needed by staff (such as students files) can always be found immediately.

• Creation of a secure, managed semi-current records storage area will release office space. Proper identification and listing of semi-current records will again ensure efficient retrieval when necessary.

• If required, the records manager can advise on the most useful filing systems, file classifications and retrieval systems, including advice on electronic information management in relation to the needs of the organisation for long-term preservation of records.

The value of archives
Good information management cannot exist without archives, which comprise the final stage in the life cycle of every record of permanent value.

What are archives?
The word "archives" has three meanings. Archives are:

• the non-current records of an organisation or an individual, which are selected for preservation because of their continuing value;

• the repository or building (or part thereof) where archival material is stored (n.b. this should not be confused with the semi-current file storage area);

• the agency responsible for the selection, preservation, documentation and making available of archival material.

Why do we keep archives?
There are four main reasons for preserving specific records permanently:

1. Administrative value
   In the conduct of their business, organisations and individuals often need to refer back to records of former activities and decisions; for example, to provide background information, establish the existence of a precedent or to substantiate or refute a claim or allegation.

2. Financial value
   An organisation needs long-term documentary evidence of the way in which monies were obtained, allocated, controlled and expended. This includes budget records which provide evidence of how income and expenditure were planned, and various accounting records which record and document financial transactions.

3. Legal value
   Legal records provide evidence of contractual obligations, duties and privileges agreed upon by governments, organisations or individuals. They provide a record of such matters as charters, property titles, charitable status and other legal and civil rights. They may be preserved as evidence of the decisions of governments, courts and other bodies, or as the source of the authority for actions taken by organisations or individuals.

4. Information value
Archives are generally recognised as the primary source materials for information and research into the history of society. They form a unique and indispensable record for researchers such as historians, scientists, geographers, sociologists, statisticians, architects, writers, genealogists, local historians, broadcasters and journalists. Archives are valued so highly because they have formed an intrinsic part of the activity which brought them into existence; unlike, for example, newspapers which place particular interpretations upon events, or articles which seek to put forward a particular viewpoint on an occurrence or activity. Archives, in other words, do not interpret or distort events to suit the particular ethos of the time or the inclinations of the author and/or sponsor.

How do we select archives?
- Once records are no longer needed by the administration they may, if they are felt to be of research value, be placed in the organisation's archives.
- The majority of records (at least 95%) created by a particular institution do not have sufficient importance to warrant permanent retention and should be destroyed at specified times according to an agreed Records Retention Schedule.
- Records managers and archivists will, in conjunction with the relevant divisional staff, appraise, select or weed out material of value by looking at the whole life-cycle of a record, including both long-term administrative need and the need to retain the corporate memory and long term research requirements for a variety of disciplines.
- A record produced for one specific function may have research value (and, quite possibly, further administrative reference use) in areas never dreamt of by its creator.
- Records retained permanently in the University Archives will be so retained because they show decisions made and the decision-making processes. Other types of records such as maps, plans, films, sound recordings and photographs which have historical significance to the University will also be retained.

Electronic information management
- All records, but especially electronic records, suffer from physical deterioration over time, loss of control and accessibility and doubt about their authenticity.
- A record is a document of a transaction, irrespective of format; a disk, like a paper file, is only a container for information. All institutions must therefore decide how to create, record and preserve these electronic transactions, whether by printing onto paper or retention in electronic format.
- What this means is that electronic transactions which should be recorded, whether to document legal, financial, administrative transactions or for reference needs or research requirements, must be so recorded.
- To an organisation and its archives, one of the great advantages of electronic records is the low cost of storage; the principal disadvantage is the speed of technological change, which renders hardware and software systems obsolete very quickly, making recorded objects unreadable.
• Any plan for design, redesign or substantial enhancement of any systems that use electronic data processing or optical imaging technologies to retain records must therefore incorporate records retention requirements, so that information of long term value will be saved and converted onto new systems as they are set up.

Stephen Plant
University of London Records Manager

Procedure approved 9/9/02; amended 30/1/03; 17/07/06