

The Use of Information Technology in Accessing Archival Documents in Tertiary Institutions in Uganda: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The Archive records at various tertiary institutions in Uganda are a source to important academic historical information. The use of information held in archives provides the ultimate justification for the existence of an archival institution. On the other hand archivists in tertiary institutions in Uganda are constrained by a number of obstacles in their quest to provide information to various users who come to their universities. For instance, most of the archival documents found in tertiary institutions in Uganda are mostly in paper form, they are stored in a disorganized manner; the archivists lack appropriate instruments and tools to facilitate access. In short, these archival documents are subject to deterioration. Furthermore the manual system of obtaining information from the archives is time consuming and inefficient. The users of the archives facilities must first consult the list of the available materials and then go to boxes and obtain the document or documents needed. And in case of periodic upgrades these lists are difficult to maintain. Such obstacles rotate around the lack of the use of an information system for the proper management of the archives. In the context stated above, regular users of the archives have expressed the difficulties encountered in accessing required information from the archive, yet if the current manual system is maintained the users' expectations will not be met. For easy accessibility of documents in tertiary institution archives, professional staffing and efficient policies are important. While these measures represent the necessary factors for easy accessibility of archival documents, the sufficient condition is for the tertiary institutions in Uganda to shift from a manual system of managing archive activities to an electronic based system. The efficient management of records and archives is one part of an efficient information management program. It is therefore possible to efficiently manage records and archives using information technology at the tertiary institution level. An information system for efficiently managing the archive files is therefore essential. This paper therefore discusses without technical detail (a) the significant role information technology plays in the accessibility of archival documents by staff in the archive and users of the archive respectively. (b) The problems the management of computerized data often presents since information can be manipulated easily, updated and even deleted thus undermining the accuracy and reliability of the information. Finally, the author recommends that archivists in tertiary institutions in Uganda have to rethink through their way of working in order to meet the new challenges posed by technological advances.

Introduction

I am profoundly grateful for the privilege extended to me to address this distinguished group on the topic: The Use of Information Technology in Accessing Archival Documents in Tertiary Institutions in Uganda: Challenges and opportunities. Ladies and gentlemen, let me begin my presentation by making two preliminary comments:

Although the conclusions on The Use of Information Technology in Accessing Archival Documents in Tertiary Institutions in Uganda: Challenges and opportunities made in this paper might be generalized to many tertiary institutions in Uganda, they are limited to one university namely, Uganda Christian University. Admittedly, different tertiary institutions in Uganda are likely to be motivated differently on how to manage their archival documents, but the guiding principles are likely to be similar throughout the tertiary institutions in Uganda.

I am using the word archives to designate all documents that are produced or received by the tertiary institution in the performance of its activities and are deemed to have lasting evidential or informational value.¹

This paper makes a major contribution in:

Our better understanding of opportunities and problems that are facing archival documents management in tertiary institutions in Uganda.

Providing solutions to what is to be done.

As this paper will show, in Uganda, the system of managing archival documents in tertiary institutions is very weak and ineffective mainly due to lack of the use of information technology.

Access to the archive repositories

As providing firsthand information especially about the past, archives are valuable to researchers, scholars, students and other users. Archives in tertiary institutions in Uganda supply information to staff, students and other researchers about the important personalities and institutions associated with tertiary education in Uganda. For this reason, it is very important that archives are managed efficiently and effectively because the information they contain is the cornerstone of fostering good and original research. Archive staff members are therefore expected to

¹ For detailed information on the definition of the word archives see, Sue Myburgh, 2005.

facilitate the proper management of archival documents so that the information contained in them is accessible.

Archivists in tertiary institutions in Uganda have experienced a considerable number of challenges that fall into two categories namely, professional and technical.

a. Professional challenges

Most of the tertiary institutions in Uganda have no specific procedure for the life cycle of the documents from the time they are created until their final storage in archive. The danger in this is that by the time the archives reach the archival storage irreversible harm may already have been done.

The inability to appraise documents among document creating centers means that such documents are not eventually available for research. Archives that are the result of a planned and systematic documents management process are bound to be of a higher quality than those that have survived by accident. For archival documents management to be effective the document life cycle phases have to be handled in a professional manner.²

The records are mostly in paper form and thus subject to deterioration; there is also lack of housing of the documents in environmentally secure facilities; and there is lack of appropriate instruments and tools to facilitate access to these documents. Again, there is the lack of trained archive staff in the use of Information Technology.

There is lack of enough trained archivists and lack of enough training schools for archival staff. Skills and knowledge of document management techniques and procedures have a direct effect on the management of archival documents.

There are no purpose built archive buildings with adequate documents storage facilities. For documents to be adequately cared for, separate building and storage facilities have to be provided. There should be a secure room for vital documents.

The above mentioned problems have implications for the accessibility of archival documents for research. For instance, inadequate processing implies that these documents are not available for research. As E. B. Iwhiwhu (2005) argues, having documents in the archives without proper plans for their management leaves those documents in shambles which causes chaos in an archive.

Due to the challenges mentioned above archive staff members spend a lot of time trying to locate the relevant documents for the users. This crisis in archival documents management, if not addressed, will greatly undermine the ability of the tertiary institutions in Uganda to have a competitive edge in the information and knowledge society.

² The document life cycle is composed of: creation phase, maintenance and use phase, and disposition phase.

Technical challenges

The major challenge to accessing and utilizing information contained in archival documents has been the lack of the use of ICT in the management of archival documents (archives). Information Communications Technology has been embraced by tertiary institutions in Uganda in a big way. And individual tertiary institutions are continuing to make important strides in the area of ICT. As Michael J. Kurtz (2004) observes that rapid changes in information technology are profoundly altering work processes, communication systems and methods, and how business is conducted. Major changes in how documents are created, used and preserved affect archival operations in almost all tertiary institutions in Uganda.

Many tertiary institutions in Uganda are seeking to use ICT to streamline their archival documents management operations. The reason for doing this is the advantages associated with modern information technology in enhancing archival documents management. First, the use of ICT in the storage and retrieval of information facilitates faster access and use of available data. ICT presents opportunities for archival document management in tertiary institutions in Uganda. For instance, retrieval systems and online search facilities have been enhanced. Secondly there are opportunities for compact storage through electronic and digital storage devices. These devices offer an alternative to bulky paper documents that need a big storage space.

Challenges in the use of ICT in archival document management

However, the challenges of the use of ICT in archival document management include:

i. The identification of appropriate software and hardware which is compounded by the rapidly changing information environment.

ii. The small number of archivists trained in computer technology. Most of the archivists in tertiary institutions in Uganda lack Information Technology skills and therefore many of them are not prepared to work in an electronic environment.

iii. The management of computerized data often presents security problems since information can easily be manipulated, updated and even deleted thus undermining the accuracy and reliability of the information. This observation notwithstanding the ability of individuals to alter information may not be a major problem as this depends on the software used by archival institutions and the levels of access provided by it.

iv. Other problems are costs associated with the purchase of hardware and software, training, consultancy, networking, maintenance of software and hardware, identifying systems that are user friendly.

v. As S. F. Oketunji (2002) says, electronic archival management is an aspect of the computer revolution which tends to be under-appreciated by the general public and even by many archivists.

Archivists in tertiary institutions in Uganda have to rethink through their way of working in order to meet the new challenges posed by technological advances. First, archivists in tertiary institutions in Uganda:

a. Must be conversant with those information technology environmental factors which may affect the services they provide. These factors may be of a professional, technical, administrative or legal nature. There is need therefore to constantly seek solutions to these problems in order to improve on service delivery and client satisfaction.

b. Should strive to market archival information to users by use of information technology. Through marketing, they will create and maintain awareness of information services, create and encourage use of information services, enhance the image and professional status of the archive profession and attract more funding.

c. Need to have a better understanding of those who use archival documents and for what purpose. This can be achieved through conducting archival user studies. Through user studies, archivists are able to understand problems that users face while using ICT.

d. Must embrace ICT as a tool that can enhance the exploitation of information found in the archival documents. This

can be through the creation of electronic repositories, accessing archival information online, preparation of searching and retrieval tools, for instance finding aids, marketing of archival information and sharing of information through local area networks or wide area networks.

e. Archives in tertiary institutions in Uganda should commit themselves to a strategic shift from the traditional manual archival system to computerized systems.

Conclusion

The contribution of archives to the goal of the tertiary institutions in Uganda of enhancing research activities and teaching can be attained with the new approaches that utilize ICT tools. It is believed that through ICT approaches the problems relating to accessibility, retrieval, storage and preservation can easily be dealt with. However, given the dynamic nature of ICT, it is important to put in place a digital preservation strategy to ensure that the archival documents created using electronic means remain accessible and useable over time.

Author Biography

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