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Ugonna Vivian Ailakhu

National Open University of Nigeria, [vailakhu@noun.edu.ng](mailto:vailakhu@noun.edu.ng)

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**BEST PRACTICE IN RECORDS MANAGEMENT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE  
LEARNING (ODL): A CASE OF NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA  
(NOUN)**

**AILAKHU, UGONNA VIVIAN**

**DEPARTMENT OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE**

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA**

**ABUJA.**

Email: [vailakhu@noun.edu.ng](mailto:vailakhu@noun.edu.ng)

## **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this study was to assess how well the NOUN complies with international best practices for records management in Open and Distance Learning Institutions (ODL). The development of records management policies and procedures, designing and implementing the records system, file planning, records management processes and controls, disposal of records, and record retention were all among the International Best Practices mentioned in this article. Observations, document surveys, and oral interviews were the main approaches utilized to gather data. The paper's main finding was that the National Open University of Nigeria's records management procedures complied with global best practices. The institution has the framework, rules, and assistance systems needed for records management. However, the Records unit of the organization is still in its infancy and lacks enough office space, equipment, and information technology resources. The NOUN should consolidate the strides it has achieved in records management by investing in more office space and equipment. The study suggests, as an institution for open and distance learning, the organization should also spend money on records management software and hardware so that it may efficiently manage its electronic records.

**Keywords:** Records, Record Management Practices, Open and Distance Learning Institution, National Open University of Nigeria.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the course of their daily activities, institutions of higher education all over the world produce a significant amount of records, whether they are in paper-based or electronic format. Records are made and kept for a variety of administrative, financial, and legal purposes. In most universities, records need to be captured, managed, and safeguarded in an organized and efficient way in order to retain their value for as long as possible. Records management practices' primary goal is to provide guidance and assistance in managing the institution's records and information they create and use daily (Ailakhu, 2021). To meet the university's information demands, these documents must be managed effectively.

The National Open University of Nigeria is one open and distance learning institution that has defined requirements for good record management practices. The National Open University of Nigeria is fortunate to have a diverse team of qualified academic and non-academic employees, including senior and junior staff members, who support the university's mission of teaching, research, and community service. Since its beginning, the institution has produced a large number of documents, including staff records, financial records, administrative/personnel records, and student records, to document various actions (National Open University of Nigeria Annual Report 2019). When making choices, whether during active duty or even after staff members leave and students graduate, these records are frequently checked. Taking the academic registry as an example it is the guardian of all students' records, including transcripts, which are frequently requested by potential employers and educational institutions. If a records management and archival program is established at the National Open University of Nigeria, a good preservation and conservation method for the records will be in place. Because these important documents are kept in cabinets inside the unit, they are at great risk in the event of a fatal event, such as a fire outbreak or flooding caused by water pipes inside the unit.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study's objective was to evaluate how closely National Open University of Nigeria's records management procedures adhered to international best practices. The following goals served as the study's direction:

1. To determine how closely National Open University of Nigeria's records management complies with global best practices.
2. To locate places that are not compliant and suggest remedies.

## **Background to the Study**

Nigeria's leading and exclusive source of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) university education is the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). In terms of population, it is also the largest tertiary institution in the nation. With study centres dispersed across Nigeria's six geo-political zones, the National Open University of Nigeria conducts business from its administrative headquarter in Abuja. At the graduate and postgraduate levels, the university now offers 61 programs and 1864 courses.

The university contains seven faculties at its main campus: Agricultural Sciences, Education, Law, Arts, Management Sciences, Health Science, and Social Sciences. These faculties offer undergraduate and graduate-level programs in these fields.

## **Records Management Practices**

Records are defined by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 15489 (2001) as information created, received, and maintained as proof and information by an organization or person(s), in compliance with legal responsibilities or in the conduct of business.

Records management procedures involve the systematic control of an organization's records at every stage of their existence (creation, classification, usage, filing, retention, storage, and disposal), in order to satisfy the operational business needs, legislative and financial requirements, and community expectations. The proliferation of pointless reports and papers can be reduced with the aid of records management procedures (Ailakhu, 2022). Establishing retention guidelines based on an examination of the records' legal, financial, administrative, and historical requirements and values is a sign of strong records management procedures. Without such rules, many institutions either delete data that ought to be kept or keep everything, putting them in jeopardy legally and incurring unnecessary operating costs. Effective records management aims to manage and control documents at all stages of their life cycle, including production, distribution, filing, use, and eventual disposal or permanent

retention. The advantages of records management methods are numerous, including adherence to legal retention requirements, quicker information retrieval, space savings, a decrease in lost or misfiled records, and lower costs for filing equipment. Using retention strategies, the University can drastically minimize the amount of space taken up by documents in the registry by methodically eliminating records that have fulfilled their retention obligations and on a timetable. It is possible to significantly reduce the requirement for filing cabinets, file folders, and electronic storage devices by properly disposing of records. The administration of paper records systems can be enhanced, and non-paper systems like electronic document imaging and micrographics can be implemented cost-effectively and efficiently to increase the efficiency of information retrieval. An inventory of the records kept by the university and the identification of either an existing retention schedule or the creation of a new retention schedule that can be applied to those data are necessary for a successful university records management program. The university's records are listed in the retention schedule, which also specifies the minimum retention periods for each type of record depending on the administrative, financial, legal, and historical values of the documents, must be kept. Disposal of the records is advised upon the completion of the minimal retention period. Disposition can take the form of physical obliteration, such as burning or transfer to another agency. A records retention schedule identifies a series of records and establishes the minimum amount of time that the data must be kept before being disposed of completely.

### **Records Lifecycle**

Records have a life cycle that includes both their current use and eventual disposal. According to the records life cycle concept, all records have a lifespan similar to that of biological creatures. Records are created, received, used, and maintained during their lifetimes, and then they are transferred to an archive repository as they get older before being destroyed (Shephard & Yeo, 2003). The life cycle of a record illustrates the flow of actions conducted at various stages of the record's existence, which typically include creation, upkeep and use, retention, and disposal.

## RECORDS LIFE CYCLE



Source: UW- Madison Archives and Records Management – 10 Step Plan for Org Records

2015

Creating records is a daily activity for all institutions. The initial stage of the records life cycle is record creation. The maintenance of records of each business activity that are sufficiently complete and accurate to facilitate an audit of any aspect of the business and ensure the protection of the rights of the organization and employee; the existence of an adequate record-keeping system to document the activities for each records unit; and the maintenance of records that are organized in a system to enable the authority to obtain the most benefit from the rapid and simple retrieval of information (Kermoni, 2007 in Nwaomah, 2013).

The second stage of the records lifecycle model is records maintenance and use. In order to maintain the information's validity and dependability, the usage and value of the information must be controlled inside the business.

Retention and disposal of records: According to Ndenje-Sichalwe et al. (2011), an efficient records management procedure should be able to facilitate and implement decisions about the retention or disposal of data in any business. Choosing how long to keep records for (creating a retention plan) and maintaining them to make them accessible and usable for the duration of the time period are both part of this step of the records life cycle.

The records life cycle hypothesis generally presupposes that records are first preserved for organizational purposes and that they may be retired into archival care once their usefulness has passed. When a record is created, it goes through three steps before being disposed of. Current records are created, received, retained, and maintained at the Departments where they are necessary for

ongoing operations according to the National Open University of Nigeria's records management practices. Semi-current records are those that are only occasionally needed to carry out current University operations. These ought to be moved from user offices to a records centre until they are finally disposed of. Records no longer required for ongoing operations are referred to as non-current records. If they have lasting worth, they are retired to the records centre as archive files.

### **Records Management Maturity Level**

The records management maturity level is intended to assist institutions in realizing that efficient records management practices have the potential to help institutions achieve their goals and objectives while complying with the Freedom of Information Act and other information-related laws. A successful records management procedure is essential to any firm.

The records keeping principles define the fundamental characteristics of information and records governance and offer both a code of conduct for handling information as well as metrics to assess that conduct. The guiding principles guarantee that all organizations, regardless of kind, are carrying out their obligations with regard to the governance of information. The Principles are applicable to all sizes of organizations, across all sorts of industries, and in both the public and private sectors since they define and evaluate the essential characteristics of information governance. Universities and international organizations can use the Principles to develop uniform practices across national boundaries because they are independent of local law and custom. A more comprehensive picture of what constitutes an efficient records management approach is provided by the records maturity level (Maturity Model), which is based on the Principles. The Maturity Model defines the features of information governance initiatives at varying stages of maturity, completeness, and effectiveness, going beyond merely restating the Principles. The Maturity Model describes traits that are typical for its five stages for each of the eight principles of maturity:

Level 1 (Sub-Standard): This level describes circumstances in which issues with information governance and recordkeeping are not addressed at all, are only slightly addressed, or are addressed on an as-needed basis. Organizations that predominantly fit these categories should be concerned that



their programs might not stand up to legal or regulatory scrutiny or properly meet the organization's commercial needs (ARMA, 2013).

Level 2 (In Development): This level reflects a situation where there is a growing understanding that information governance and responsible recordkeeping affect the organization and that the latter might profit from a more elaborate information governance program. However, due to the organization's processes being vague, immature, incomplete, or only moderately effective at Level 2, it is still susceptible to examination of its legal or regulatory obligations and commercial requirements (ARMA, 2013).

Level 3 (Essential): The requirements that must be met by the company in order to comply with legal, regulatory, and business requirements are described at this level. Level 3 is distinguished by clearly defined policies and procedures as well as the application of procedures created especially to enhance information governance and recordkeeping (ARMA, 2013).

Level 4 (Proactive): An organization at this level has implemented a proactive information governance program throughout all aspects of its business and has set up a continuous improvement system for it. Issues and factors related to information governance are frequently taken into account when making business choices (ARMA, 2013).

level 5 (Transformational): This level refers to an organization that has so thoroughly incorporated information governance into its corporate infrastructure and operational procedures that it routinely complies with program requirements and other obligations (ARMA, 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research methodology that was used in this report was the case study approach. One of the top Open and Distance Learning institutions in Nigeria and the African continent, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), had its records management procedures reviewed using document surveys, observation and oral interviews of staff. The records management policy and procedure manual, records management processes and controls, monitoring and records audit techniques, and staff training were all examined by the researcher. The standards of ISO15489 were matched with

these important records management processes. The researcher made some observations while conducting the research and the personnel of the Records unit of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) were also interviewed by the researcher.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

1. Does the records management system at the National Open University of Nigeria adhere to best practices internationally?

The researcher observed that the Records unit of the Registry largely handles the management of university records. A policy statement that outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Records unit serves as its guide. It is handled by personnel with training in records management. The researcher noticed through the oral interview that the records unit is directed by five principles: comprehensiveness, reliability, integrity, and compliance.

2. The file plan of the National Open University of Nigeria

The researcher observed that the National Open University of Nigeria has a file system that makes it easier to sort and store the papers in its control in an organized manner. The current file system makes it possible to quickly retrieve information and saves time by storing records only once. It was also mentioned that the file plan for the university supported the procedure handbook. The file organization, active file locations, file transfer instructions, file retention and disposition instructions, and other particular instructions that provide assistance for successful management of records, especially vital records, were all included in the file.

3 Personnel files; student records; and administrative data

When a new employee is hired, a personnel file is produced and promptly updated by the storing of personal correspondence relevant to the employee. These correspondences may comprise letters produced by the University's many departments and offices, such as action plans and performance review forms. Information on the transfer of a staff file from one office to another is recorded on an activity tracking form (Ndudzo, 2014).

The study demonstrated that making individual student files is how student records are processed. The essential information and papers, including birth certificates, test results, transcripts, and admission forms, are gathered to build a student file. The study centres of National Open University of Nigeria creates and maintains student files according to programmes registered for and each file has dividers that distinguish various activities, papers, and information recorded in the student's file.

#### 4. Records preservation and security

Through observation and interview of staff, the study noticed that the University's data are shielded from things like water, sunlight, fire, dust, theft, vandalism, sabotage, illegal access and viewing, computer-assisted fraud, computer viruses, and theft. The university uses a number of safeguards, including the usage of security systems and locking cabinets and drawers (Ndudzo, 2014). According to the university's records policy, records must never be filed or put on the floor where they could be exposed to biological, physical, or environmental hazards, the researcher noted. The University Records unit has created mechanisms for the preservation of documents under the security, access and use, maintenance, storage, and vital records management processes, both at the Headquarters and study centres.

#### 5. Records access, use, and storage obtaining vital records

Through interviewing of staff, the researcher noted that the University's crucial records can be accessed, used, and stored. All vital documents are identified as such, listed, and given the utmost attention to ensure their security. In order to preserve important documents from fire, flood, earthquake, and potential destruction during armed conflict, they are kept in a disaster-resistant safe or vault, together with staff files, financial documents, and administrative documents. The researcher observed that offices storing these important records are equipped with smoke alarms detectors and fire extinguishers. The University also employs a vital records management programme to cater for such type of records.

## 6. Processes and Controls for Records Management

The researcher noted that documents are created/received, preserved, used, retained, and disposed of at the National Open University of Nigeria in a methodical manner in accordance with established records management principles and the University's policy. In accordance with the requirements and performance standards of the university's records management as defined in the policy document and procedure manual, the Registry Unit is in charge of developing the human capacity of all workers in the Records Unit.

Any company or institution that desires adherence to the ISO 15489 (2001) standards must prioritize the continuous human capacity building of staff on records management procedures.

## 7. Schedule for Retention and Disposal

The researcher observed that the staff records' unit set the retention time for all of the records, and they make sure that regular disposal is done. It is significant to highlight that the staff of the records' unit is aware that keeping records for an excessive amount of time would make them harder to find and create storage issues.

## **CONCLUSION**

The goal of this study was to assess how closely National Open University of Nigeria's (NOUN) records management procedures adhere to global best practices. The study found that National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), an Open and Distance Learning institution, has a Records section in place that is in charge of keeping all institutional records and making sure they are completely compliant with global best practices. In order to completely comply with the standards of worldwide best practice, the University has also established the structures, policies, procedures, and guidelines for the Records unit and the institution's records management role.

The study finds that the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) complies with international best practice to a larger extent. It has created a records policy that outlines everyone's responsibilities in detail. The Unit and other offices that create and maintain University records are still waiting to receive adequate and suitable office space and furnishings. To hold documents as they are made,

received, and maintained, the institution needs a desk with locks and fire-resistant cupboards. The lack of proper management of electronic records was another finding of the study. The electronic records file plan for National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has not yet been created for employee access and sharing. Software for electronic records management, such as FileHold, NAVEX, PinPoint, DocSavy, OnBase, M-Files, ZenQMS, and Acquia, has not yet been purchased and installed at the university. The intention of this study was to compare records management methods at National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to global best practice has been its most significant contribution. According to worldwide best practices, this information will let the institution monitor the operation of its records management unit on a regular basis. The major contribution of this study is its ability to reference records management practices at National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) against international best practice. This information will assist the other Open and Distance Learning Institution in Nigeria to monitor on a regular basis the performance of its records management unit in line with international best practice.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

On the basis of the study's findings, the following suggestions were made:

1. It is recommended that NOUN invests more in office spaces and other important resources such as continuous training of the staff on good records management practices.
2. The National Open University must adopt cutting-edge information technology for records management. In order to maintain electronic records efficiently, the institution should buy and install electronic software.

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