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Charles Kofi Arthur Mr.
Catholic University of Ghana, chiefnm@hotmail.com

Emmanuel Kwadwo Kaba
emmanuel.kaba@cug.ed.edu.gh

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Archiving in academic institutions: a case study of Catholic University of Ghana

Charles Kofi Arthur

University Library

Catholic University of Ghana

Sunyani Fiapre

Email: chiefnm@hotmail.com; charles.arthur@cug.edu.gh

Emmanuel Kwadwo Kaba

Registry

Catholic University of Ghana

Sunyani Fiapre

Email: emmanuel.kaba@cug.ed.edu.gh; emmanuel_kaba@yahoo.com

Abstract

The study looked into issues surrounding the custody of records considered be of timeless value to the University. The population of study were the administrative and library staff of the University. Purposive sampling was used to select the staff who handle the records at the University. Interviews and observation were the data collection instruments. Findings showed existence of multiple archives across the various departments, faculties and secretariat of the Vice-Chancellor and a lack of university-wide finding aids to accessing records among others. A policy on archiving, the establishment of a centralized archival unit, engagement of a professional archivist, adoption of an electronic media for archiving and promotion of archival material for teaching and learning were recommended for the consideration of the University.

Key words: Archives; Academic archives; Catholic University; Ghana

1. Introduction

Since antiquity humans have been known to generate information and knowledge from observations of the universe as well as their experiences from interactions with one another and other living and non-living things. The information and knowledge generated are oftentimes deemed useful for future actions and decision-making processes when they prove efficacious and beneficial for overcoming not only present challenges but possible future ones.

Generation of information and knowledge is however not limited to individual persons in private life but also persons working in the public spaces as well as corporate organizations in commerce, medicine and education amongst others. Various means including archiving are used to preserve the knowledge acquired during past decades to ensure that future generations do not lose out on information that have proven useful even when the information is no longer in active use (Paliienko 2019:19; Sibhidla-Saphetha 2013:74; Clarke 2017:49-51). Therefore, any organization that denies itself the opportunities of archiving its past, could be denying itself the benefits of learning from its own experiences. The inactive records in the custody of various offices of the departments and faculties are not being kept there merely for the sake keeping them without any purpose. Hence the investigation into the handling of the inactive records to assure that they remain beneficial to the University, its staff and students in an effectively-run centralized archive.

2. Background

The Catholic University of Ghana (CUG) was established as a university college by the Catholic Bishops' Conference in 2002. The first batch of 50 students were admitted in March 2003 to pursue four-year degree programmes into three faculties namely:

- Economics and Business Administration (EBA)
- Religious Studies (including Philosophy, Theology Adult Education) and
- Information and Communication Sciences and Technology (ICST)

An aggressive marketing drive ensured that the University had three hundred and seventy-eight (378) students by the time first batch were ready to complete their four-year BSc/BA degree programmes with forty-four (44) graduands in November 2006. Today the University has over four thousand (4000) students and two additional faculties namely:

- Faculty of Education; and
- Faculty of Health and Allied Sciences

All the official administrative work, including official records on sheets of paper, videos, photographs, etc., at the University right from the inception have been within the purview of the Registrar and other administrative personnel who were deployed to the various departments within the faculties.

3. Problem statement

With the dawn of Information Technology, Universities are now in a position to deliver innovative ways of information archiving and retrieval. Through digitalization and the use of other modern soft wares, archives are now able to deliver “smart service”. Students and staff are able to access the requisite documents without compromising security through shared networks, PCs and apps (Sun, Zhao & Wang 2020). Archival of records has now become more accurate, scientific, standardized, efficient and convenient (Sun, Zhao & Wang 2020). However, in the developing world not all universities are able to afford these state of the art services, especially in private universities like CUG that has been operating without any financial support from the Government. That notwithstanding, CUG has been keeping its vital records and documents. Also,

the institution has been ensuring that staff and students can access needful information. However, over 20 years of operation, the institution is getting inundated with records. Within the next few years the University will be 25 years and will be celebrating its silver jubilee. Over these years of its existence the University has generated large volumes of official records that in various formats. These records, be they minutes of meetings, correspondence or examinations in print or electronic format can be found in the various departments and offices in the faculties at the University.

This raises a number of questions requiring attention when the records reach the end of their 'active usefulness' including the following.

- what happens to such records?
- how beneficial are archived records for the University?
- who has the duty to preserve such records?
- how can the current situation be improved?

4. Objectives

Generally, this paper seeks to advocate for the establishment of a university archive. The specific objectives are:

- to ascertain how the records generated in the university are handled
- to identify the benefits that the University could derive from keeping its inactive records
- to examine the human resources available for the task.
- to make recommendations on the way forward

5.0 Literature review

5.1 Definitions

Archiving could be referred to as the process or the practice of moving inactive data or information in digital or paper formats into separate storage for preservation for long-term retention because the data or information is no longer used on regular basis (Malak 2023; KPMG AG 2021). Archiving can be carried out on daily basis where persons, organizations, and governments create and keep records of their actions (Grimes, Lemay & Valenzuela (n.d). Akman (2016:28), however, indicated that the term “archive” was derived from the Greek word “Ἀρχειον” and the word Latin “Archivum”. Akman (2016:28) also pointed that term archive has various definitions, a position which is shared by Otu and Asante (2015:22) and the Kings College, Cambridge’s (2023) “what are archives?”; from these authors the term ‘archive’ can be used differently depending on context and could mean:

- the materials generated as a result of an activity of organization or a person
- the building in which the material generated are held
- the institution in charge of the management of the archival materials
- papers that have aged with time and are not used oftentimes

Cole, Breuer, Palmer & Blakeslee (n.d) also posited that one of the best definitions of the term was given by Laura A. Millar in her book “Archives: principles and practices. Millar (2010:3) defines archives as:

“those records, created or received by a person, a family, an organization, a business, or a government in the course of their life and work, which merit preservation because they provide enduring value: because they provide evidence of or information about either the functions, responsibilities, actions or transactions of the creator or about the life and times in which the creator conducted his or her affairs and the society in which he or she lived and worked.”

This definition has two components thus “records” and “enduring value” (Cole *et al.* n.d). This is supported by Kamatula, Mkeni-Saurombe and Mosweu (2013:110) who also indicated that archive as documents can be referred to as “records of enduring value”

The records refer to pieces of recorded information including minutes of meetings, correspondences, announcements, reports and photographs that are in print as well as productions in videos audiotapes in electronic formats (Cole *et al.* n.d; Kenney 2010). The “enduring value” component refers to the fact that the records are kept because the content regardless of its age and who or what entity created it, its importance is in what it says about the past (Cole *et al.* n.d).

Since time immemorial, gathering of things, be it informal or not have been with humans (Hedstrom 1996). According to Hedstrom (1996) archives is one of the institutions that came into being when the practice of collecting items were institutionalized and sustained over a long period of time. Archive are therefore “as old as script” (Delmas 2001:27). The records that were kept in archives became institutionalized in ancient times included six “constants in record creation”:

- the laws of a particular jurisdiction;
- records of administrative precedent;
- financial records of all kinds;
- land records;
- records that asserted control over individuals (tax and military service obligations, for instance); and
- "notarial" records through which the state certified and endorsed transactions between individuals (Posner 1972 cited in O'Toole 1993:236)

Archives and libraries share similar objectives but they are oftentimes distinguishable by the different purposes for which they are used (Hedstrom 1996). Libraries deal largely with published works such books, magazines, newspapers and electronic databases which are produced in multiple copies for informational, education and other needs for a variety of users (Cole *et al.* n.d).

The individual collections are therefore not unique since copies can be found in other libraries because they are produced in multiple copies (Cole *et al.* n.d). Archival holdings on the other hand are unique to a repository, therefore, the records available in one repository are not duplicated elsewhere (Cole *et al.* n.d). The unique materials are generally primary source documents that grow in quantity with time over the course of an organization's or an individual's lifetime (Bowen 2023; Senturk 2013:108). Besides, unlike libraries that are used by variety of users, archives are generally for those desiring to create knowledge hence the old cliché "libraries are for readers, while archives are for writers" (Cole *et al.* n.d).

5.2 Reasons for archiving 'records of enduring value'

A number of reasons have been proffered by individuals, businesses, governments and other institutions on the need for archiving in several sectors of human endeavors including, civil engineering, medicine, administration of justice and education (Bowen 2023; Clarke 2017:51; Jimerson 2008).

5.2.1 Administration of justice: Materials that have been preserved in archives can be crucial in settling legal matters (Bowen 2023, Senturk 2013:108). Governments globally have used legal records in the enforcement of rule of law and constitutions as well as protection of rights and interests (Paliienko 2019:20; Cole *et al.*, n.d.). Private individuals, businesses and other institutions have also used archived records as evidence to claim rights under contracts, and settled disputes on ownership of properties amongst others (Cole *et al.* n.d.). This is supported by the fact that in adjudication of cases too, the courts make references to previous judgements in similar cases from the archives of the courts judgements to substantiate their rulings (Importance of archives 2019)

5.2.2 Medical: The essential role of medical records in the provision of health services and health related research cannot be overemphasized (Moosavi, Farshid; Abadi 2021:509). Medical professionals make use previous diagnosis,

therapies, prescriptions etc., from patients' medical records to keep track of the treatments as well as study related diseases and epidemics (Bowen 2023; Moosavi *et al.* 2021:509).

5.2.3 Civil engineering: Archiving has always played a critical role in civil engineering (Bowen 2023; Clarke 2017:51). Civil engineers make use of historic plans and maps amongst others during their projects (Bowen 2023). This is because archival records made up of drawings, photographs and reports are essential during the span of civil engineering projects (Clarke 2017:49-51). This is because there could be changes occasioned by change of use, technology, regulations or catastrophic events (Clarke 2017:49). The creation and maintenance of records, therefore, become a responsibility to future generations on works requiring some civil engineering (Clarke 2017:49-51).

5.2.4 Symbolic: "There are certain kinds of records in which the symbolic values out- weigh the practical values" (O'Toole 1993:236). They serve as symbols of life experiences or notable accomplishments (Cole *et al.*, n.d). Even though they may contain information that can be used in response to questions "their symbolic character is nonetheless predominant" (O'Toole 1993:236). These records include marriage certificates, family Bibles with genealogy information and school diplomas as well as wills and epitaphs (O'Toole 1993:236-239; Cole *et al.* n.d.).

5.2.5 Economic: The "most fundamental acts of an organized people," according to Peterson (1982 cited in O'Toole 1993:236) is "counting and accounting," which is at the core of record keeping. The records of that nature created during the course of events were used in ancient world as documentary evidence to account for funds including personal funds, those in trust for others or owed (Briston 2004:3; Cole *et al.* n.d.)

5.2.6 Public Administration: Public administration can be simply defined as government in action (Shafritz, Russell, Borick 2009:6). Last few decades have witnessed growth in the administrative functions of governments (Floyd 1990:19-22). Accompanying the growth in the administrative functions has been increased paperwork because information gathering is required for effective public administration. (Paliienko 2019:20; Floyd 1990:22). Archive is one of the avenues where the information for the day to day running of government machinery can be found (Paliienko 2019:19; Importance of archives 2019). In fact, archives for centuries have been the storehouses of official documents and therefore where the knowledge of past administrations are stored (Paliienko 2019:19; Importance of archives 2019). It is, therefore, not surprising that governments, oftentimes make efforts to get insight into related documents to inform the drafting and passage of new bills (Importance of archives 2019).

5.2.7 Cultural: Human beings are social creatures and therefore live their lives preferably in communities. The way a group of people live their lives can be described as their culture. Archives serve as the collective memory of the society and represent documentary evidence of the past by playing an essential role in the preservation of culture and heritage (Paliienko 2019:19; Otu & Asante 2015:22; Sibhidla-Saphetha 2013:74). The practice of preservation of materials makes archival materials the medium through which past generations transfer their values and culture to posterity. This is so because the only way that posterity gets to know what past generations cherished the most is through what they preserved for them (Paliienko 2019:19; Sibhidla-Saphetha 2013:74).

5.2.8 Educational: It is no secret that archives are one of the few organisations that existentially have the capacity to provide primary source records (Senturk 2013:109). The records held by archives also have value beyond the legal, economic and symbolic value. (Otu & Asante 2015:22; Senturk 2013:109). Academia is identified as one of the areas where the primary source

materials held by archives can also be used for research and teaching purposes by educators and their students (Otu & Asante 2015:22; Senturk 2013:109). This was supported by Bowen (2023) who indicated that archives provide educators with materials that can be used to supplement textbooks and lecture notes.

5.3. Some common challenges with archives

Lee (2015:5-8) posited that the use of archives comes with a number of challenges including:

- the time-consuming procedures that is required to request for files in archives;
- fragmentary and cryptic nature of finding aids; and
- biases such as “transfer bias” arising from the unwillingness of the individual or institution to transfer material that they find embarrassing.

Ntewusu (2014 cited in Otu & Asante 2015:23) also shared similar views by indicating that the under-listed are some of the challenges of archives in Ghana:

- the physical conditions of the files;
- classification;
- accessibility;
- terminology

6. Methodology

The eighty-six (86) administrative and library staff of the University constituted the population of study. A purposive sampling approach was adopted in selecting those deemed suitable for the information required for the study. The study employed a qualitative approach to data collection. Interviews and observations were used for the data collection.

7. Findings and discussions

The findings from the interviews and observations of the study are discussed below.

7.1 Types of materials kept for their 'enduring value'

The study revealed the various types of materials that are no more being actively used, were being kept. These materials included:

- minutes of meetings;
- announcements;
- letters;
- memos;
- flyers;
- reports; and
- university publications

This is in sync with Kenney's (2010) conclusion that most of the materials kept in university archives include "meeting minutes, correspondence, announcements, university publications, reports, building plans, photographs, posters, drama productions, videos, audio tapes, personal papers, artifacts, theses and dissertations".

Barut & Cabonero's (2021:6) assertion that records have evidential and informational value on the actions of the organizations that created them while carrying out their mandates was also supported in this study. An interviewee indicated amongst others that "we have kept all these records because we find them important for the work we do... we make references to them once in a while and sometimes we are called upon to provide them to clarify a point, justify a decision or support the action that is being taken."

7.2 Locations of the archival records

Note (2021) posited that an academic institution can have a single archival unit or multiple archival repositories. It was observed that university records were not kept in a single location, instead records were kept in the various departments

and other offices in the Registry and Finance Office as well as the secretariat of the Vice Chancellor. This is similar to the situation in University of Lethbridge where much of the material generated in the university are kept in the various departments across the campus (Kenney 2010).

7.3 Requisite personnel

Young and Hendry (2006:20) posited that archives need among others, personnel to be responsible for their management. This was supported by Huaiyuan, Perey, Jie and Xiaoling (2020:101) who indicated that the required educational background for the management of university archives include both professional knowledge in archive management and computer literacy. Checks conducted on the backgrounds of officers in charge of records in the various departments including the Registry and at the Vice Chancellor's office showed that all the them have adequate computer user-skills. What was lacking was the professional training in archival studies.

7.4 Training in management of archival records

The role of training in ensuring employee effectiveness in the performance of their duties on job cannot be overemphasized (Ogar, Rhoda & Alabi 2015:15). Its absence could derail the attainment of organizational goals (Ogar *et al.* 2015:15). It should, therefore, be given prominence in staff development (Ogar *et al.* 2015:15). Asked whether they have been given any training in records management, the officers positively affirmed that training sessions are conducted for them though they are irregular.

7.5 Finding aids

For decades archivists have been concerned about effective means for making the materials in the archives accessible to those in need of them (Stazić 2016:16; Stevens 1977:64). Finding aids have been the means that have been traditionally

used to access the materials in archives (Stazić 2016:16). National Archives and Records Administration(NARA) (2016), United States defines finding aids as “tools that help a user find information in a specific record group, collection, or series of archival material”. The finding aids take the form of an inventory, a register or a collection guide (Stazić 2016:17).

Asked about tools for accessing the materials being stored due to their enduring value to the unit/university, the interviewees showed copies of indexes that could be used to access each record in their possession. There was no uniformity in the preparation of the indexes, each unit had its own unique indexing system hence lack of a university-wide finding aid for recording items to be kept.

7.6 Use of archival records

Also asked whether requests are made of them for archival records, the responses were also in the affirmative. Even though formal statistics are kept on the types of records request, it became clear through the interview sessions that many of records requested were from the Management and were in relation to:

- Policy formulation
- Staff appointment renewals
- Leave accumulation challenges
- Legal matters involving the law courts
- Student grading systems
- Time tabling
- Disciplinary issues

There were also requests for records to assist in teaching or conduct research, but these were more irregular compared to requests made for records to assist in the administrative functions of the University. This largely supports Greene's (1989:32) position that there are difficulties in convincing college and university faculty and students of the relevance of archival records for teaching and learning.

7.7 Archival policies

Yusuf (2013:27) asserted that the development of archives across Nigeria is hindered by a lack comprehensive policies on what should be kept, weeded or destroyed among others. This is true of the records that were generated at the Faculties and departments of the University. It was also found that there are no clear policies on what the officers at the faculties and the departments could keep for their enduring value. Therefore, copies of almost every record that is generated was archived. There are cases of “double archiving” where an ‘originating unit’ of a record keeps a copy of a record for archival purposes and the ‘recipient unit’ also keeps a copy of same record for archival purposes. This duplication negatively impacts on office space and time required for operations of the University as records that should be archived keeps on increasing and crowding-out space for active records.

8. Conclusion

It can be said in conclusion that the decision to archive records was in the right direction as failure to archive could have dire consequences on the operations of the University. Huaiyuan, *et al.* (2020:101) admonition that “school leaders should realize that archives ... [are] indispensable part of the school [and] to achieve the rapid development of the whole school requires paying attention to the construction of archives [because] the construction of archives ...is of great significance to improve work efficiency, save management costs and ensure the security of archives...” should be given much more attention in the academic institution.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

- **Policy on archiving**

A policy to provide guidelines to direct the university's archival activities. According to Public Record Office Victoria (2023) an archive policy should clearly outline the purpose of the archive and should also include the following:

- a. An acquisition statement policy
- b. An access statement policy
- c. The scope and nature of the University's archival activities
- d. Roles and responsibilities of the staff who work with the University archive
- e. Disaster preparedness plan for the collection
- f. A process for de-accessioning materials from the collection
- g. Procedures for accepting/refusing donations into collection and donors forms

- **Centralized archival unit**

A centralized archival unit is also recommended because in comparison with multiple archives, a centralized archives comes with a number of benefits including:

- a. Easy monitoring and provision of security for records
- b. Enhanced office space utilization
- c. Provision of one-stop-shop for records retrieval where necessary thereby reducing time spent for searches

- **Retraining and engagement professional staff**

There is the need to invest in engagement of a professional archivist and regular retraining of staff who handle the University archival records in modern archival records practices and management as well as ICT user skills. This should definitely impact positively on staff effectiveness and efficiency.

- **Adoption of electronic media for archiving**

Electronic archiving can be seen as the use of an electronic media such as audio tapes, video tapes, desktop computer or a social media platform for the purposes of inactive records. This also has a number of benefits including:

- a. Opportunities to optimize the use of office space since most of these media can be used to store several records in electronic formats
- b. Reduction in organizational expenses associated with paper and printing
- c. Reduction in the dangers associated with the possibility of data/record loss since it is much easier to do back-ups

- Archival materials have been known to be useful for teaching and learning as pointed by authors such as Lu (2022:383-387) and McNally (c. 2016) as well as Senturk (2013:108-114). Therefore, every effort should be made to promote the use of archival records for teaching and learning.

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