Thriving on the power of a record: experiences from Mzuzu University, Malawi

by

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Abstract
Most organisations, whether publicly or privately owned produce records in the course of transacting their daily businesses. Such records need to be properly managed and preserved for various reasons. For example, it is common knowledge that proper keeping of records helps the organisation to avoid unnecessary law suits that may results from misplacement of important records. Mzuzu University, like other public universities in Malawi, generates numerous records which are critical to its existence and proper functionality. However, much as Mzuzu University has a registry (where a sizable amount of records are officially kept), there is an official proposal by Mzuzu University Management to establish a record centre. This paper reports on the findings about how Mzuzu University is managing its vital records. A mixed method approach is applied in this study. First, conducted interviews with the University Registrar and secondly, we sent a questionnaire to staff working in the university registry and five deans of faculties at Mzuzu University. The study reports in various benefits of proper records management and it also identifies key challenges affecting the proper management of records at Mzuzu University. Based on the findings, the study also makes various recommendations.

Keywords: Mzuzu University, records, records centre, records management

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1. Introduction
Increasingly, more and more records are being created by organisations as they transact their daily businesses. However, as Penn, Pennix and Coulson (1994) point out, institutions' successes and survival depend not only on creations of a record in the course of business

transaction but mostly importantly, on proper maintenance of these records. It is reported in the literature however that despite visible advantages accrued from investing in proper records management, both public and private organisations have committed little resources in this cooperate resource (Chinyemba & Ngulube, 2005; Mnjama, 2002). To meet obligation of their existence, universities are some of the organisations that produce numerous records on daily basis. Specifically,in the course of working towards meeting their three core business of teaching, learning, research, and community engagement (See Chipeta & Chawinga, 2017), universities produce records, which provide evidence that the university is carrying out its statutory functions (Chinyemba & Ngulube, 2005).If these records are not properly managed, the obvious consequence is that universities will misplace and eventually lose valuable records that are vital for the proper running of these universities.

1.2. The concept of record and its characteristics

Regardless of many attempts to demystify a record by various scholars (Schellenberg 2002; Yusuf & Chell 2005), there is still confusion on the part of young scholars in the profession about what really a record is. More so, the confusion is mostly pronounced amongst scholars from non-information sciences fields. One of the sources of confusion according to Erima and Wamukoya (2012:25) is the notion that whilst all records are information, not all information is a record. This really poses a challenge in understanding records to non-records management specialists. In this study, we adopt a definition which seems to be universally accepted and adopted as provided by the International Standards Organisation on Records Management (ISO): 2001:1) which defines a record as "information created, received, and maintained as evidence and information by an organisation or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business". Worth noting according to Shepherd and Yeo (2003:4) is that a key feature of any record is that it provides evidence of a business transaction. From the works of Shepherd and Yeo (2003:4), we learn further that records may differ in various aspects such as age, format and the type of information they contain. However, the striking similarity off all records is that they aim to offer evince of a transaction. In a university context, the University of Pretoria (2010) refers to a record as information that is recorded in any form; created or received routinely in the course of the university's business or correspondence; and retained by the university as evidence of such activity.

From the record management perspectives, all records are information but not information are records (See Erima and Wamukoya (2012). In right of this statement, it becomes important to understand what constitutes a record by looking at some common characteristics that uniquely identify it from other types of information. Some common cited characteristics in the literature are as follows: a record is an evidence of an action and transaction (Reed, 2005; Thomassen, 2001); it is a physical entity containinginformation which is contextual (Hofman, 1998); supports accountability meaning that individuals and organisations are held accountable for their actions and decisions (International Standards Organization, 2001); it contains process-bound information meaning it contains information linked to particular work processes (Thomassen, 2001) ; and a record must be preserved (temporally or permanently depending on the purpose) (McKemmish et al., 2005).

1.2. The concept of records management

Hitherto, there is no consensus to what constitutes records management thereby signalling a rather complex field of study that requires further research. Nonetheless, a number of scholars (Taylor, 1996; Yusof & Chell, 2005; Roper & Millar, 1999; Shepherd & Yeo, 2003) have led a foundation on which accepted definitions are based. However, in this study, we adopt a definition expounded by ISO (2001:3) which defines records management as the field of management which aims at realising an efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use, disposition and capturing of records for the purpose of maintaining evidence of business activities and transactions. Similarly, The University of Melbourne (2001) defines records management as activities which involve the capturing, maintaining and documenting organisational records which are accurate, complete, and reliable for the purpose of meeting legal, evidential, accountability and social/cultural requirements. Based on these similar definitions, we conceptualise records management as the process where organisations and individuals produce and record a business transaction in form of paper or electronic which is properly preserved for current and future reference or use as proof that a business activity has taken place. Coetzer (2012) agrees with our conceptualisation by concluding that records management is concerned with the process of efficiently and systematically controlling the creation, use, maintenance, archive or disposal of records that are routinely generated as a result of activities and transactions.

Records management plays a vital role in an organisation according to Shepherd and Yeo (2003:4) as follows: To conduct current business and as a basis for decision making and actions to be taken; for accountability purposes as records can be used to prove that organisation have carried out their obligatory activities in line with established policies; and for cultural and research purposes as preserved records are vital for preserving the organisation's memory. Records also need to be managed because they help organisations in keeping track of actions, achieving consistency in decision-making, providing effective service to citizens and achieving greater efficiency (Kemoni *et al, 2007)*. This is important because Erima and Wamukoya (2012:25) and Piggot (2002) independently argue that fraud can never be proven in an organisation where there is poor records management considering that no meaningful audits can be executed in absence of proper records. The records management process is complex and it requires some standards to be followed. Managing records entails coming up with a proper records management programme which outlines how records management is implemented in the organisation. Such a programme encompasses various activities such as how records are captured, stored, classified, accessed and deposed of (Coetzer, 2012). Classification of records which is one of the activities in the records management programme is vital because according Erima and Wamukoya (2012:25) and Mat-Isa (2005:63), it facilitates the access to these records.

2. Motivation for the study
Our inspiration to conduct this study is premised on three factors. First, as employees of MZUNI, we have personally experienced missing of records containing vital information as these records move from one office to another for the purpose of decision making. Similarly, we have also heard our fellow employees complaining that their records sometimes get misplaced or lost as they move from one office to another. Secondly, the Malawi Government has been championing the obligatory but not legal binding concept of public sector reforms

with the aim of promoting efficiency, transparency and accountability in all Government ministries, departments and statutory corporations. Therefore, being public institutions that largely run on tax payers' money, implementation of reforms in Malawian public universities is not an option. Being a statutory corporation itself, MZUNI knows the significance of proper records management which indisputably is vital for the University to conform to good governance practices and audit issues. Finally, the University does not have a dedicated records centre. Instead, record keeping is mostly decentralised in departments and sections, a development that increases chances of records being misplaced or lost. Therefore, our study turns from these aforementioned issues to investigate how records are managed at MZUNI. To address the research problem, we answer the following research questions:

- What types of records are created and preserved at MZUNI?
- How are records and documents managed at MZUNI?
- To which extent does the University depend on proper record keeping to defend its decisions?
- What are challenges the MZUNI faces in managing its records?

3. Significance of the study

The study is specifically important to MZUNI considering the fact that findings are expected to offer a true analysis about the strengths and shortcomings of records management at the University. After all, the study is partly inspired by the assertions of Ngulube (2003:21) that research in records management trends and practices leads to a better understanding of records management and challenges thereby coming of up with solutions that perfect records management. Considering that universities in Malawi and possibly in Africa, operates in somehow similar economic environment (which eventually impacts quality of records management), the study will provide recommendations that will help in the modification of records management policies and strategies at MZUNI and other universities in a similar state.

4. Literature review

Records in an organisation form part of the organisation's memory and they are inevitably used to support management's actions and decisions (Coetzer, 2012) hence, the need for organisations to put in place good and robust preservation practices. A record carrying evidence of action or transaction can only exist if it is well preserved implying that without proper preservation, the record will not exist (Cox, 2001:6) as it will be misplaced or ultimately damaged. There are many benefits associated with proper record management practices in an organisation (Kemoni et al., 2007; Ngoepe, 2003; Shepherd, 2006:6). Among others, records provide a basis on which important actions and decisions are built hence promoting transparency in an organisation (Shepherd, 2006). Since those in authority are responsible for the actions they take (Shepherd, 2006;), good record keeping is critical for well-organized procedures of an organization (Mnjama, 2004; Shepherd, 2006). More importantly, effective record keeping promotes protection of rights and obligations of employees and contributes to the fight against the ills of fraud and corruption in an organisation (Gunnlaugsdottir, 2002). One other reason for embracing proper management of records is that they help to preserve historical value and posterity (Coetzer, 2012; Wamukoya, 2000:26; Erima and Wamukoya, 2012:25; Piggot, 2002). In summary, Richmond (2010) highlights various reasons for implementing proper records management.

Records help to preserve corporate memory whereby contributions such as research and work of an employee' tenure at the organisation is properly captured and accessed even after the employee has left the organisation (Richmond, 2010). Records help support better decision-making whereby all decisions made are documented asa proof (Richmond, 2010).A proper records management system helps to guide the creation and disposal of organisational records whereby policies and procedures are laid out to control how records are created, retained and disposed of. Here, a records management system dictates which records must be retained for day-to-day business operations and which ones should be disposed of (Richmond, 2010). Managing records reduces the costs of operation whereby an organisation reduces unnecessary costs by efficiently keeping records that can easily be retrieved without necessarily starting the process all over again (Richmond, 2010). For example, proper keeping of recordsin the procurement departments such as maintaining a database of prices, suppliers and supplies can exponentially cut the expenditure.

Records management requires proper equipment and policies which can keep and preserve their evidential value (Cox, 2001). In a survey study carried out by Coetzer (2012) at to investigate the status of records at the University of Zululand, findings revealed that records were kept and preserved using filing cabinets, special records boxes, special paper folders, empty carton paper boxes, especially empty rota-trim boxes. In addition, the study showed that there was no specific policy that stipulated proper records management. Coetzer's further revealed that members of had awareness about records management through various methods such as In another survey study which was conducted by Phiri (2016) to compare South African universities and Malawian universities, he found out that due to lack of policies Malawian universities had no units that can take responsibility in providing advice in the proper management of records.According to Asogwa (2012) if staff members who handle records are not trained records handling can never be efficient and effective. Therefore to ensure proper and proper handling of records requires the institution to provide training to staff members from time to time.

Some researchers (Wamukoya, 2012:25; Chinyemba & Ngulube; 2005; Wema, 2003) have conducted research that examined records management practices in some African universities. By adopting a case study design where data was collected using questionnaires and interviews, Erima and Wamukoya (2012:25) investigated the alignment of risk management and records management with business processes at Moi University. The study revealed that records are generally poorly managed due to various factors including lack of qualified staff to manage records and absence of records management policies. Chinyemba and Ngulube (2005) investigated how the Universityof KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus managed its records. The study revealed that the University produced records in line with its core businesses of teaching, learning and research. Some common record series included lists of registered students, staff records and financial records(Chinyemba & Ngulube, 2005). Wema (2003) reports about the challenges encountered by universities in managing semi-active records in Tanzania. The challenges according to Wema (2003:47), include lack of proper accommodation, in adequate filing facilities, lack of qualified personnel to manage records and absence of record management policies.

5. Methodology

This case study took place at a medium sized university, MZUNI in Malawi.Data was collected both, qualitative and quantitative data in two ways: distribution of questionnaires

and observations. First, a questionnaire was sent to all five deans of faculties, the University Registrar and to five members of staff who work in the Mzuzu University Registry. This study adopted purposive sampling in choosing its study respondents. A questionnaire was sent to the following:

University Registrar

Usually heads the administrative functions including records management. The registrar was selected because he usually acts as secretary to council, senate and executive management team. The registrar is a custodian of most crucial documentation about strategic decisions of the universities implying that all the records that the university creates in the course of discharging its daily duties are taken care of by this office. The registrar was in better position to answer questions on records creation, records management policies, benefits of proper records management and records centre.

Deans of faculties
Apart from being part of MZUNI Management, deans of faculties are heads of thefaculties which are composed of various departments. At this level of the university, various records such as students' records, members of staff records are created and preserved. Faculties also receive records that are created by other sections of the University.

Registry staff
These are housed within the University Administration section. This is the busiest office when it comes to handling records of the University records which range from active to inactive records. The registry department is responsible for storing, distributing and archiving records. This is because the University does not have an archives or records centre where inactive records can be kept and preserved. Focus groups will be used to collect data from these respondents.

Like the study by Chinyemba & Ngulube (2005), we also collected data through observation to supplement the data collected using the questionnaire. To achieve this, an observation schedule was used. We visited offices of the five deans of faculties, offices of principal officers, directors and the registry section. A decision to use two data collection instruments in this study was arrived at considering the fact that McMillan (2004) indicates that following this research procedure helps to gather satisfactory and more reliable data.

6. Dissemination of results

The results will be disseminated in various ways. First, a report of the findings will be compiled and submitted to MZUNI Management highlighting key findings and recommendations. Second, we will present the findings at Mzuzu University local colloquium to be organised by the Research Directorate Office. Third, the findings will be presented at the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) General Conference, 2017 which will be held in Lilongwe from7th to 11th August 2017.

7.0   Presentation of findings

The findings will answer the following questions

- What types of records are created and preserved at MZUNI?
- How are records and documents managed at MZUNI?
- To which extent does the University depend on proper record keeping to defend its decisions?
- What are challenges the MZUNI faces in managing its records?
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7.1   Background Information

We sent six questionnaires to five (5)Deans from the five faculties of Education, Environmental Science, Hospitality and Tourism, Health Sciences, Information Science and Communications and a Registrar from the Department of Administration. Only five deans responded giving 80 percent response rate. Data was collected from these highest offices because of their principle role in making decisions of the University. As it can be noted in table 1 below, all the deans and registrar were males. This could be attributed to a very small number of women working in higher education which makes them not to compete with men in managerial and decision making positions. This finding is in agreement with Morley (2013) who found out despite having increased enrolment for women in higher education internationally;women are underrepresented in academic leadership positions.

7.2   Types of Records produced at Mzuzu University

Table1: Gender and Faculty/Department

Faculty /Department	Gender	
Name	Male	Female
Education	1	0
Environmental Science	1	0
Hospitality and Tourism	1	0
Health Sciences	1	0
Information Science and Communications	1	0
Administration	1	0
Total	6	0

7.2.1 What are the common types of records that are produced in your faculty?

When asked to indicate types of records they produce during when performing university duties, respondents clearly listedrecords they generate making decisions relating to the business of the University. Their responses support the fact that their offices were decision making offices since their activities relied on records. Coetzer (2012) support this by stating that records in an organisation form part of the organisation's memory and they are inevitably used to support management's actions and decisions. Respondents listed records they produce as follows:

- Academic records
- Program records
- Staff records

- Student records
- Project records
- Financial records
- Meeting minutes
- Memos
- Correspondence with other external bodies (institutions/organisations)
- Student grades
- Dissertations

The results correlate with findings of Chinyemba and Ngulube (2005) who investigated how the Universityof KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus managed its records. The study revealed that the University produced records in line with its core businesses of teaching, learning and research. Some common record series included lists of registered students, staff records and financial records

7.3 Records and Documents Management at Mzuzu University

7.3.1 What Equipment does your faculty use to keep and preserve records?

Basing on the experiences of the researchers on storage facilities provided at Mzuzu University,respondents were provided with a list of storage facilities for records to choose from. As it can be depicted in Table 2 below the major filing equipment that are used to preserve records at Mzuzu University in all the five faculties are filing cabinets seconded by desktop computers and followed by flash disks, laptops and external drives.The findings are partly in agreement with Coetzer (2012) who found that filing cabinets as one of the storage facilities and on a different note mentioned special records, boxes, special paper folders, and in empty carton paper boxes, especially empty rota-trim boxes. Mzuzu University records keeping systems are electronic in nature as compared to Coetzer's findings from the University of Zululand.

Table 2:Types of Equipment for keeping and preserving records

Filing Equipment	Frequency
Filing cabinets	5
Flash discs	3
Compact discs	
Desk Top computers	4
Lap tops	3
External hard drives	3

7.3.2 Why do you think it is important to effectively manage records created in the Faculty?

As noted in the previous section respondents stored different records in the faculties. To ascertain these benefits respondents were asked an open ended question to list their perceived benefits for managing records when conducting business at Mzuzu University. The aim of

this question was to get respondents' feelings as regards to why they store and preserve records. As listed below respondents felt that records are very important in conducting the business of the University citing reasons as follows:

- Records facilitate effective management of programs, activities and aid in proper design making
- Future records
- Every decision that is made depends on the right information for the decision to be effective and it is records that keep and are a source of data and information
- To solve future problems
- To make sure that records are safe and preserved for future reference

These benefits as highlighted by respondents emphasise the fact that records are important as an organisation's memory for future business activities. Shepherd (2006) supports the reasons cited by respondents by stating that records provide a basis on which important actions and decisions are built hence promoting transparency in an organisation.

7.3.3 Are you aware of any formal (written) policy, procedures and filing system for managing records at Mzuzu University?

A follow-up item to the preceding aimed at ascertaining as to whether respondents manage their records in accordance with a policy provided by Mzuzu University. To solicit this data, participants were given a closed ended question to respond to. As clearly shown in table 3 below all five (5) respondents were not aware of the existence of records management policy.One of the critical success factors of managing records is availability of a policy that guides faculty members to implement records management policy (Coetzer, 2012). In Coetzer's survey study which investigated the status of records management at the University of Zululand results showed that there was no specific

Table 3: Awareness of the University Records Policy

Response	Frequency
Yes	0
No	5

7.3.4 If NO (there is no records management policy), what is your existing guiding principle or strategy for managing the records and documents in your faculty?

Taking into account that all respondents as custodians of records had no policy to guide them in managing records, they were asked an open ended question to explain their guiding principles used in managing records. There was variation in responses provided by the respondents since there are no laid down principles at Mzuzu University to guide staff membersin the maintenance of records in their faculties. The variation ranged from those with experience in records management to those who had no experience. From theresponsesprovided it can be easily noted that two (2) respondents relied on experience while one respondent cited common sense, another one cited records safety and access by authorisation while one participant was not aware of the filing system and only relied to secretary. Experiences cited as follows:

- The records should be safe and only accessed by authorised people
- Common sense
- Experience from elsewhere
- Previous policy experience
- I am not aware of any particular policy; secretaries file and keep records/information according to their capabilities

According to Asogwa (2012) if staff members who handle records are not trained records handling can never be efficient and effective. Therefore to ensure proper and proper handling of records requires the institution to provide training to staff members from time to time.

7.3.5 If NO, how soon would you want Mzuzu University to develop and implement a Records Management Policy?

Taking into consideration that respondents did not have a guiding principles and had various experiences in records management, a follow up question was asked for the respondents to explain if MZUNI had any plan to formulate a policy anytime soon and if not how soon would they want to have this policy formulated. Responses quite clearly indicated that they are very much in need of a records policy to guide them in proper management of the records. This is an indication that they are meeting challenges and the introduction of the policy would minimise them.This is evidenced by their responses as follows:

"As soon as possible" (2)

"Now"

"Today"

"Very soon"

7.3.6 What is the name of the unit responsible for records management at Mzuzu University?

Since the University has no policy a follow up question was asked for respondent to name a department that is responsible for records management at MZUNI. The responses in this question clearly show that there is no single centralised department that is responsible for the management of records in the University. Due to lack of clear policy of a unit to be responsible for records management, one respondent clearly indicated that that he does not know the Unit that is responsible for management of records in the University respondents mentioned different departments as having a role in the management of records as follows:

"I do not know"

"The Registry and the University Library"

"Secretary/Dean"

"Library"

"Academic Office (records)"

The findings are in agreement with Phiri (2016)who compared case studies from South African and Malawian universities and found out that Malawian universities do not have records management units in the management of records.

7.3.7 Are you aware of any records management awareness campaigns conducted by Mzuzu University to members of staff in your faculty or University wide? If so, how often does the University conduct the awareness campaigns?

In the absence of a records management unit at MZUNI, respondents were asked to explain if at all they had any campaigns in records management. From the responses generated below, it can be easily noted that the majority of the respondents never heard about any awareness about records management in the University. Only one respondent heard awareness from the University Senate.

"Yes, senate reminds the faculties to keep appropriate academic records"

"I am not aware"

"I am not aware of any"

"No"

"Not aware"

The findings are in disagreement with Coetzer (2012) who found out that 100% of the respondents received awareness about records management through intranet, e-mails, circulars, memorandums, meetings, workshops and training at the Zululand University. This lack of awareness about records management can be attributed to the fact that there is no body who can take responsibility in taking care of the records.

7.3.9 How frequently does your faculty lose vital records to misfiling, damage?

Lack records management policy results in many challenges including loss of vital records for decision making (Cetzer, 2012). The author adds that it is difficult to account for decision that mangers take. However, when asked to cite the frequency of losing records in the faculty, the majority of the respondents (3) indicated that vital records are rarely lost while two respondents admitted that records are frequently or often lost in their faculties.

"Not frequently"

"Cannot tell the frequency with precision but it happens so often"

"Very frequent"

"Never happened"

"Rarely"

7.4 Extent the University Depend on Proper Record Keeping to Defend its Decisions

7.4.1 How frequently does the faculty and Mzuzu University faces fall a victim to legal losses a result of misplacement of vital records?

When asked this question the two of the respondents indicated they are not sure of whether faculties while one indicated not frequently meaning sometimes the records are lost and while two respondents accepted to be frequently aware of instances when Mzuzu University became as a victim of legal losses due to misplacement of vital records. Respondents' responses were recorded as follows.

"I am not sure"

"Not frequently"

"Most often"

"I am not sure how often but I am sure legal losses due to record/data loss do happen"

"Not too sure"

The findings resonate with Phiri (2016) findings who found out that some universities withoutrecordspolicieshad higher probability of losing vital records and documents would expose them to both legal and other business costs.

7.5 Challenges the University face in Managing Records

According to the table 4below, all respondents agreed that they totally face challenges such inadequate staff to perform record management, lack of formal record management policy, and lack of records management procedures or guidelines in managing records. It was interesting to note that one respondent added lack of knowledge of staff to effectively keep records.These findings are not different from the results of Wema (2003:47) who found out that lack of proper accommodation, in adequate filing facilities, lack of qualified personnel to manage records and absence of record management policies.

Table 4: Challenges faced by Deans in managing records

Challenges	Frequency
Inadequate staff to perform record management	5
Lack of formal record management policy	5
Lack of records management procedures/guidelines	5
Others: Lack of knowledge of staff on how to effectively keep records	1

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings conclude that Mzuzu University is many vital records as it performs its functions of providing quality education in Malawi. In addition, its records are stored in a number of equipment that include filing cabinets, desktop computers, laptops, flash disks and external drives. However, lack of policies in the implementation of records management activities is creating an environment where custodians of these records are unable to enforce proper records management practices. This has resulted in some vital records missing in some other departments which is exposing the institution to legal losses. Furthermore, record managers are facing a number challenges such as inadequate staff to perform record management, lack of formal records management policies and guidelines to enforce uniform implementation of records activities across the University Campus.

The study recommends as follows:

- Formulation of records management policies that will enhance good record keeping
- Establishment of records management unit that will provide training to all staff members on matters of records management
- Continuous awareness and training of records management activitie

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