



**Access to Archives at the National Archives of
Namibia**

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Introduction

- Background to the study
- Objectives of the study
- Methodology
- Findings
- Conclusions and recommendations

Background to the study

- Archival world and democratic and scholarly claims to access (Tener, 1978)
- ICA – facilitation of more frequent use of archives; encouragement of greater freedom of access (UNESCO, 1948);

Background to the study (continued)

- Several ICA documents underscore the importance of access
 - ✓ Code of Ethics of 1996
 - ✓ Universal Declaration on Archives of 2010

Background to the study (continued)

- The *Code of Ethics* states in principles 6 and 7: “Archivists should promote the widest possible access to archival materials and provide an impartial service to all users” (Principle 6); and “Archivists should respect both access and privacy, and act within the boundaries of relevant legislation” (Principle 7) (ICA, 2012, p.1).

Background to the study (continued)

- The *Universal Declaration on Archives* “identifies one of the vital roles of archivists as ‘making archival materials available for use’, and pledges that archivists will work together in order that ‘archives are made accessible to everyone, while respecting the pertinent laws and the rights of individuals, creators, owners and users’” (ICA, 2012, p.1)

Background to the study (continued)

- *access* refers to the “terms and conditions of availability of records . . . maintained or held by an archive for evaluation or consultation by its users” (Jeremy, Woodley, & Kupke, 2008, p. 351).

Background to the study (continued)

These terms and conditions include:

- legislation;
- sensitivity or confidentiality of the materials;
- privacy;
- donor restrictions;
- users;
- equity;
- levels of access;
- control of the holdings;
- physical conditions; and
- security

Background to the study (continued)

- The ICA advises that since conditions are frequently attached to the access allowed, extensive enquiry is necessary to determine how most of these rules of access actually work in practice (Tener, 1978, p. 18).
- The study was guided by a conceptual framework drawn from the access terms and conditions highlighted above.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Establish the terms and conditions that guide access to archives at the National Archives of Namibia;
2. Determine how rules and regulations of access actually work in practice at the National Archives of Namibia;
3. Investigate the strategies in place to promote accessibility to archives; and
4. Come up with recommendations on how to enhance access to archives.

Methodology

- This case study research design
- Face to face interviews.
- Respondents purposively selected and these included three researchers and two archivists.
- The three researchers, they had been using the National Archives of Namibia for one week, nine weeks and thirteen years respectively.

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- Two semi-structured interview guides, one for the researchers and the other for the archivists
 - Data was analysed using content analysis.

Findings

Promotion

Users = indicated that the National Archives promotes access through email, the catalogues and book launches.

Staff = “Ideally we should be going out to market ourselves. We have lack of people’s knowledge knowing what we have. What we need to do is to market ourselves for people to know what we have.”

User = “...there have been concerns in the past that the archive is inaccessible to the general public.”

Findings (continued)

Legislation

- Staff = “... reducing the closed period (30 years) would be beneficial to researchers; and clear guidelines to deal with personal related records because interpreting the constitution alone is a vague guideline.”
- User = “...The period should be reduced to 15 years. There is a clause in the Namibian constitution which guarantees freedom of expression that includes academic freedom and access to information. Therefore, blocking the entire generation to access to that information is somehow unconstitutional.”

Findings (continued)

Sensitivity and confidentiality (continued)

- Staff = “There is no legislation guidelines so that affects mainly materials from private accessions which is very tricky because a donor might donate records to the archives which he or she thinks they are not confidential if one looks closely it actually could be for example private correspondence in that case the archives has to make sure that the sender of the correspondence agrees that it should be made public.”
- Staff = Asked on whether users always agree with them on this issue one said not always
- User = rules are unreasonable and an infringement on constitutional rights

Findings (continued)

Privacy

- User = “I don’t think much thought was put into this issue. I think the interpretation of privacy in non-existent ... a very important and sensitive book got lost or misplaced and when they looked for it they went to check on biographic papers users fill in when they ask for materials and a certain user’s name who used the book last was even mentioned in the newspapers and other media forums which highly prejudiced this person for about 5 years that he had stolen the book but the book was later found in the Archives...”
- Staff = “The Archives has not held any consultation on this issue apart from comments users might make, there is no user forum but it could be nice to have one.”

Findings (continued)

Donor restrictions

Staff :

“If the donor has some instructions on the use of the materials the archives abides”; and “The policy is that we accept materials if we think they are or will be useful for future research and if the restrictions or conditions imposed by the donor are reasonable.”

“It has been going on well. The National Archives made use of materials without contacting the donor which was a once off issue.”

“There was an experience where photographs of a donor were used without following the rules of the donor. It led to legal matters.”

Findings (continued)

Donor restrictions (continued)

- Responses from the users show confusion or lack of knowledge regarding donors and their rights to their materials:
- User = “Some restrictions by their nature are unreasonable while others are reasonable. What is reasonable is what at least allows a wide range of people to use donated materials without having to beg for permission from the donor or even spending amounts of money to access that information. Why have the materials donated if you want a small group of people to access them?”

Findings (continued)

Users

- Academic, hobby researchers (hobby historians), science researchers, birth certificate/ family tree (administrative researchers) foreign and local researchers
- **Question:** Is the national Archives always able to satisfy the information needs of the users?
- Staff: “Not always sometimes they ask for information that is not in the Archives and we have to refer them to other institutions such as Ministry of Lands, Home Affairs and the courts.”
- Users = yes always. Responses to another questions regarding control over holdings and condition of the materials suggests it is not “always”.

Findings (continued)

Equity

- User = have observed some preferential treatment “for acquaintances)
- Staff = “No there is no equity; one of the reasons is the language issue. Much of our archival materials are in languages that are not understood by users. Most used archives are records from Germany colonial period which is not a problem for academic researchers because they can learn the language but a problem for all other users. Likewise Afrikaans which was dominant in South African colonial period, the percentage of users fluent in that language is rapidly shrinking”

Findings (continued)

Control over holdings

Staff = One staff member who has been in the National Archives for five years said the following about finding aids: “I cannot say I am satisfied because I don’t even know how to use them”;

and another: “Our staff skills to find what you are looking for is a challenge.”

Findings (continued)

Control over holdings (continued)

User = One researcher revealed that he had two requests turned down because the materials had not been processed

Findings (continued)

Physical condition of the materials

- Staff = “There is no policy on damaged records but if I find it on the shelves I will give it to the researcher but caution the researcher to be careful with the record since it’s damaged. There is no conservation unit the records just get worse.”
- User = Only one of the three researchers interviewed had had requests to materials denied on two occasions, because they needed to be repaired. It was explained to the researcher that the materials were old and in a fragile state.

Findings (continued)

Security

User = One researcher's response was that there were no security measures. The only one he was aware of was that researchers were requested to leave their bags at the door.

User = "the security measures are non-existent. Any person can take a page or even the file or book away."

Conclusions and recommendations

- The Archives does not have a programme to promote or market its archives. This has resulted in some sections of the Namibian population not being aware of the Archives and not benefiting from what it has to offer. A promotion/marketing programme taking advantage of information and communication technologies, including setting up a web-site and use of social media is recommended.
- The 30 year rule as stipulated in the Archives Act No.2 of 1992 is considered restrictive. There is need to revise the Act, in consultation with stakeholders including the researchers with a view to reducing the closure period as well as how to deal with personal related records (Namibia does not have a data protection law).

Conclusions and recommendations (continued)

- There are no guidelines on how the National Archives interprets the sensitivity and confidentiality of materials; as well as issues of privacy. The National Archives should consider coming up with guidelines to help it interpret what constitutes sensitivity or confidentiality of materials; as well as how to deal with privacy issues.
- Some users do not always understand restrictions placed on access to materials due to donor restrictions. There is therefore a need for the National Archives to clearly explain their rules to users, in terms of what they mean and the rationale behind them

Conclusions and recommendations (continued)

- The language in which archival materials are is an important consideration in terms of access to archival materials. Further research could look into languages in which archival materials, how it impacts the researchers and strategies to address the matter.
- Although the National Archives grants access to materials which need repair, restrictions are placed on photocopying. Alternative strategies to capturing the information such as the use of digital cameras to capture the information should be encouraged but clear guidelines have to be set to avoid harm to materials in the process.

Conclusions and recommendations (continued)

- Some members of staff who work with researchers seem not to know how to use the finding aids. One of the tasks of archivists is to ensure easier and full use of archival materials. This is done by guiding researchers into the collections through the use of finding aids. It is imperative that members of staff be well trained on the finding aids and their use.

Conclusions and recommendations (continued)

- Backlogs in processing archival materials deny researchers access to materials even when they have satisfied the 30 year rule closure period. Libraries have been known to hire consultants to address issues of backlogs in cataloguing and classification. This is probably a route that the National Archives could consider in dealing with the issue of unprocessed materials.
- Security measures at the National Archives are considered inadequate. The National Archives should consider the use Closed-circuit television CCTV (video surveillance) in the search room.



The End

Thank you for your attention