

Records management practices in ecumenical tertiary institutions: the Trinity Theological Seminary in focus

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed at examining the records management practices at the Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana and was underpinned by the life cycle concept. The researchers drew qualitative inferences from interviews, complementing personal observations, with 25 purposively sampled staff. The study revealed the creation, maintenance and use of records to support administrative and decision-making processes. Problems hampering effective records management included non-existent records management policy, inadequate staff training and erratic power supply. Among the recommendations proposed to overcome these setbacks were: formulating a written policy statement for managing records, providing staff with formal training and installing a standby generator.

KEYWORDS

Records; records management; life cycle concept; ecumenical; Trinity Theological Seminary

Background

Records are created in daily business activities and are vital in meeting administrative needs as well as supporting decision-making processes of individuals, institutions, organisations and governments. Records provide evidence, information, symbolic affordance, memory, accountability, legitimisation of power and a sense of personal or social identity and continuity.¹ Examples of records kept by religious institutions include correspondence,² minutes, memoranda, reports, sermons, title deeds, baptismal registers, publications, photographs,³ oral histories⁴ and financial documents.⁵ Archival records and religious archives are valuable;⁶ religious records contain informational value, evidential value⁷ and symbolic value,⁸ making their management imperative.

The International Organisation for Standardisation's (ISO) International Records Management Standard (ISO 15489-1) defines records management as:

the field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposal of records, including processes for capturing and maintaining evidence of and information about business activities and transactions in the form of records.⁹

Akussah and Asamoah opine that a sound recordkeeping infrastructure is essential to conduct business and make public administration more efficient and effective.¹⁰ Unstructured records systems result in the loss of critical records.¹¹ Effective management of records in organisations must ensure that recordkeeping is carried out throughout the life of an organisation's records.

Kalusopa cites Shepherd and Yeo as positing that the life cycle concept espouses the management of records as involving different stages and also defines specific records management responsibilities.¹² Shepherd and Yeo, according to Kalusopa, add that records are born at the creation stage; later used and maintained within the office of creation; and in their old state (disposal stage), they are either transferred to the archives or destroyed.¹³ Thus, records undergo three main phases, namely active or current, semi-active or semi-current, and inactive or non-current stages where the responsibility for their upkeep begins with the office of creation, to the records centre and lastly disposal or permanent storage as archives.¹⁴

Some African records management authors have restricted their studies to South Africa's provincial government,¹⁵ Botswana's labour sector¹⁶ and Uganda's oil industry.¹⁷ While studies by Garaba,¹⁸ are among the very few published articles that have assessed records management practices in religious archives on the continent, the United States alone has several records management studies on religious institutions' archives. Some of these studies have been authored by Edwards,¹⁹ Geary,²⁰ O'Toole,²¹ Presutti²² and Slater and Hoelscher.²³ In Ghana, authors like Akussah and Asamoah,²⁴ Nottinson,²⁵ Adams,²⁶ Musah and Ibrahim,²⁷ Boamah and Tackie,²⁸ and Mensah and Adams²⁹ have conducted records management studies focusing on the public sector, tertiary education, local government, business, cultural heritage and the health sector respectively.

Shepherd and Yeo emphasise the need for all organisations to have a formally agreed policy for the management of their records.³⁰ According to Slater and Hoelscher, a clearly articulated policy helps archivists to 'define and document priorities and direct collecting and outreach activities accordingly'.³¹ However, organisations are beset with challenges such as lack of policy frameworks,³² lack of trained staff³³ and lack of awareness³⁴ in performing records duties. In effect, Akussah,³⁵ and Musah and Ibrahim³⁶ lament the state of document deterioration as well as the low emphasis placed on recordkeeping respectively. Besides, Garaba reiterates the poor state of religious archives in the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Libraries.³⁷ To create a recordkeeping culture, Musah and Ibrahim,³⁸ and Akussah³⁹ stress the need for awareness and training programs for staff, while O'Toole⁴⁰ underscores the importance of professional education for diocesan archivists.

Just like all organisations, records created and received in the Trinity Theological Seminary (TTS) have increased significantly over time since its establishment and it stands the risk of losing its documentary heritage if not well managed. The Seminary is the premier and leading ecumenical or theological tertiary institution in Ghana and the West African sub-region. Notwithstanding the challenges mentioned above, a descriptive survey by Akussah and Asamoah represents a case in Ghana with good records management practices in the public sector institutions while some private institutions, especially in the financial sector, are also improving management of their records.⁴¹ Akussah and Asamoah found out that as part of reforms, immense capital was injected into the public sector in the 1990s that led to improvements in its records management system. These included: the restructuring of all public sector registries, making critical records accessible; the establishment of a new legislative framework; the establishment of a functional records centre; the development of an omnibus retention schedule; and the training and retraining of many records staff.⁴²

Overview of the TTS

The TTS is located on a 70-acre site at Legon, seven miles from Accra. It was founded in 1942 as an ecumenical effort in ministerial training by the original three sponsoring

churches, namely: the Methodist Church, Ghana; the Presbyterian Church of Ghana; and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. In 1967, the joint Anglican Diocesan Council of Ghana joined, followed shortly thereafter by the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Currently, the Accra Diocese of the Anglican Church is a sponsoring member. However, non-sponsoring churches including the African Methodist Church, the Mennonite Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, African Independent Churches, and Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches have utilised TTS as a training ground for their clergy. The Board of Governors consists of 30 members from the sponsoring churches.⁴³

The TTS has attained its charter and is accredited by the National Accreditation Board of the Ministry of Education of Ghana. The Seminary offers the following programs: Certificate in Ministry, Certificate in Transformational Urban Leadership, Diploma in Ministry, Diploma in Theology, Bachelor of Arts in Theology, Bachelor of Divinity, Master of Theology, Master of Arts in Ministry, Master of Divinity, Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Ministry. The certificates, diplomas and degrees awarded by TTS are fully recognised both in Ghana and internationally. Currently, the TTS has special relationships with: the University of Ghana, Legon; St Victor's Catholic Seminary, Tamale, Ghana; the Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, USA; and the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, USA.⁴⁴

Research problem

Since the establishment of TTS in 1942, the volume of records created and received has witnessed continued growth. The Seminary, being the premier and leading ecumenical tertiary institution in Ghana and the West African sub-region, could have developed a much wider range of records management practices and practices for other ecumenical institutions. However, preliminary investigations carried out by the researchers identified problems such as inadequate space, the lack of qualified and skilled staff, and the lack of a procedure manual to ensure effective management of records. These problems prompted the conduct of this study to examine the records management practices at the Seminary.

Research objectives

The study sought to achieve the following specific objectives:

- (1) To identify the practices for managing records over their life cycle.
- (2) To find out if staff are aware of the need to manage records.
- (3) To find out if there is a records management policy in place.
- (4) To identify the obstacles to the development of effective records management.

Research questions

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the practices for managing records from creation to disposal?
- RQ2: What is the extent of staff awareness of the importance of records and the need to manage them effectively?

- RQ3: What guidelines and policies exist to guide the management of records?
- RQ4: To what extent has TTS adopted the use of computers in the creation and management of records and what are the problems experienced?

Methodology

The case study design was adopted to carry out the study. The TTS was selected as a case firstly, because it is the oldest and only theological institution with a charter and also trains pastors from almost all denominations and secondly, because the first author had previously carried out this study as part of his Master's program. The total population of staff at the time of the study was 29. However, the sample size was 25, excluding four cleaners who were not relevant to the study. The sample comprised two senior members, three senior staff and 20 junior staff who had been performing records tasks or using records in the offices. The senior members were the President and the Dean of Graduate School. The Finance Officer, Administrative Secretary (General Administration) and Librarian constituted the senior staff. The junior staff included four secretaries, two receptionists, two typists, six clerks, three cashiers and three library assistants.

Data used for analysis was collected in 2015 through face-to-face interviews using unstructured interview schedules (see Appendices 1 and 2). In addition, a structured observation checklist (see Appendix 3) was used to observe the following phenomena: the media used by the staff for capturing information; the kind of ordering assumed under the classification system in place; the mode of shelving files; security procedures; the state of inactive records; and facilities in the offices. There were six observation sessions, each lasting one hour and taking place over the same period as interviewing at the offices. The researchers made brief notes while observing the phenomena and made detailed notes in narrative form soon after the observation. Data analysis involved drawing qualitative inferences from interviews and observations of the Seminary's records management practices.

Findings and discussion

The findings are presented and discussed, generally, under 'records management practices', incorporating the phases of the records life cycle concept – records creation, records maintenance and use, and records disposal. Other themes include staff training and awareness, records management policy, and problems militating against effective records management.

Records management practices

The study revealed that within the TTS, a centralised records management system was non-existent and proper records management procedures were not followed. However, records were created, maintained and used, and disposed of in the following five offices: General Administration, Finance Office, President's Office, Graduate School and Williamson Library.

Creation and capturing of records

Records created and received related mainly to the functions performed in the offices and were mainly of the types listed as follows: memoranda; invitations; general correspondence; personnel records; and academic records such as transcripts, certificates and students' progress reports. Other records were: policy files; circulations registers; books; letters of attestation; letters of recommendation; and letters of admission. The rest were: church directories; annual reports; minutes of meeting; programs of activity; and financial records including payroll records, banking records, invoices, receipt books, payment vouchers, ledger cards and general ledgers. Records were captured on appropriate media after creation to ensure their support for the TTS's business.

The bulk of the TTS's records were in paper formats while the few records in electronic formats were held on pen drives, compact discs and computers as back-ups. The findings of Garaba,⁴⁵ Kalusopa and Ngulube,⁴⁶ and Keakopa⁴⁷ which revealed the creation and capturing of records in both paper and electronic formats, support this finding. The researchers observed that electronic media in use were the TTS's own media. Personal electronic media for the capture of information were disallowed. This form of restriction ensured the security, integrity and authenticity of electronic records as evidence for accountability in the TTS. The various media available for capturing information means the TTS had back-ups for its records.

Maintenance and use of records

The study established that the TTS had the alphabetical classification system in place, with records assuming ordering by subject. Observations revealed that files were shelved by subject matter.

The majority of the staff used both paper and electronic records very often, that is, on a daily basis to meet the administrative needs of the TTS and to support decision-making, among other purposes. Apart from the President's Office and Graduate School, where secretaries assigned titles to files, the General Administration, Finance Office and Williamson Library had their heads assigning titles to files. With the exception of the Williamson Library, which used computerised systems, records issued out were tracked using file movement books. ISO 15489-1 requires that organisations record the movement of records to ensure that users can locate the records whenever they need them; the system should track the issue, the transfer between persons and the return of records.⁴⁸

The staff attributed the reasons for not getting records readily to problems of misplaced files, lost files and slow retrieval. It was inferred that most of the problems encountered by the staff in retrieving records were related to slow retrieval. Though the TTS made use of storage equipment as a means of protecting records, the study found that only the President's Office and the General Administration had storage equipment fitted with locks to ensure maximum protection of records. It should, however, be noted that the lack of adequate security measures in the Finance Office, Graduate School and Williamson Library could result in unauthorised access to information.

Only the staff assigned responsibilities for the care of records had the right of access to the TTS's records. As a result, the Seminary's electronic records were accessed through the use of passwords. This implies any criminal activity performed on the computer system could be

traced to a particular holder of the password. This restriction was useful because it ensured the privacy and confidentiality of records. Again, this restrictive measure conforms to the ISO's requirement for electronic records systems to 'include and apply controls for access to ensure that the integrity of records remains uncompromised. They should provide and maintain audit trails or other methods to show that they protect records effectively from unauthorised use, alteration or destruction.'⁴⁹

The facilities in the offices were air conditioners, computers, printers, photocopiers and fire extinguishers. While only the President's Office and Finance Office had fire extinguishers to fight fire outbreaks, none of the offices had fire detectors and air filters. The fire extinguishers available were those that used carbon dioxide. These leave residues (white foam) which stain documents and ultimately destroy the intellectual contents of records. The air conditioners in most of the offices were not functioning because of the lack of maintenance. This situation, coupled with frequent power outages, brought about fluctuations in temperature and humidity in the offices. As a result, unlike Garaba's⁵⁰ discovery of proper temperature and humidity controls, records were not effectively preserved. Also, computers, printers and photocopiers could not function smoothly, thereby affecting productivity.

Disposal of records

The study established that the practices for disposing of records were not properly followed. This emanated from the fact that the TTS had no policy specifying the procedures for retaining and disposing of records. Hence, in the Seminary, decisions for the retention or destruction of records were taken by the heads of department without any reference to records disposal schedules. Mensah and Adams⁵¹ study also discovered the absence of retention and disposal policies. Owing to the lack of a records centre, both active and semi-active records were kept in the storage equipment in the offices of creation. Besides, in the TTS, unneeded records, which were disposed of after five years, clogged up limited office space and this situation did not enhance productivity. In Ghana, Mensah and Adams⁵² and Nottinson⁵³ established that, owing to space problems, both active and semi-active records were kept together. Garaba also uncovered the lack of space for keeping records in South Africa.⁵⁴

Staff training and awareness

The study revealed that, except for the Administrative Secretary, who has responsibility for records management, in-service training was the only kind of training provided by the TTS for the majority of the staff. In addition to this informal training, the TTS has been sponsoring the Administrative Secretary to attend short records management courses organised by the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) and the Management Development and Productivity Institute (MDPI). On the contrary, studies conducted by Akussah,⁵⁵ Kalusopa,⁵⁶ Mensah and Adams⁵⁷ and O'Toole⁵⁸ identified the lack of training among staff. The Administrative Secretary in turn provided newly appointed staff with in-service training. However, such informal training was not adequate to keep the majority of the staff abreast of current records management trends. Only the Administrative Secretary had adequate training as a result of the short records management courses he attended at PRAAD and MDPI.

The staff were aware of the need to manage records and this awareness, created by management, arose out of the in-service training they had had at the TTS. This finding disagrees with the identification by Akussah⁵⁹ and Garaba⁶⁰ of the lack of awareness in performing records duties. Owing to the lack of formal training for the staff, records management awareness was not at a level high enough to guarantee proper management of records; an indication that management paid little attention to recordkeeping. Similarly, Musah and Ibrahim's⁶¹ study revealed that little emphasis was placed on the importance of recordkeeping.

Records management policy

Another issue that came to the fore was that proper records management procedures were not followed. This was due mainly to the fact that the TTS had no written records management policy. Studies by Kemoni,⁶² Mensah and Adams⁶³ and Nottinson⁶⁴ also ascertained the lack of written records management policies. The absence of a records management policy implies there was no written document at the TTS to specify the procedures to be followed by staff in carrying out records work. As a result, the procedures for managing records had evolved over time. The study also established that there were no plans to formulate a records management policy for the TTS, suggesting an organisational culture that did not value the benefits of good records management. The President pointed out, however, that the conduct of the study served as a sensitisation exercise for management of the TTS to see the need to seek the services of a private consultancy with expertise in records management to formulate a records management policy for the TTS.

Problems militating against effective records management

Problems militating against the development of effective records management in the TTS included slow retrieval, lack of proper preservation practices, absence of a written records management policy, lack of qualified records staff and lack of funds. The slow retrieval of records resulted from space limitation in the case of paper records and fluctuations in power supply in the case of electronic records. Again, the lack of maintenance of facilities (air conditioners) as well as frequent power outages ensured neither the effective preservation of records nor the smooth functioning of computers, printers and photocopiers. Moreover, the absence of written guidelines and qualified records staff deterred the TTS from conducting effective records management. That is, the staff carried out records work without reference to any document for guidelines and they were not equipped with the skills needed to be conversant with records management procedures. Owing to the problem of funding, the TTS could not allocate enough funds to purchase all the facilities needed for the management of records.

Conclusion

The TTS needs to manage records properly to ensure that records are available for use when needed, that privacy and confidentiality is ensured and that redundant records are destroyed. Though records were managed throughout their life cycle, proper records management procedures were not followed mainly because of the lack of a written records management

policy. The study has also shown that, owing to the lack of formal training for the staff, records management awareness was not at a level high enough to guarantee proper management of records. Given these setbacks, there is ample opportunity for management to improve the Seminary's records management system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations have been proposed by the researchers for the improvement of the Seminary's records management practices:

The TTS should seek the services of a consultant to formulate a written policy statement for carrying out records work. The policy should have the goal of creating and managing authentic, reliable and useable records and should be adopted and endorsed at the highest decision-making level and promulgated throughout the organisation. The written records management policy should specify the responsibilities of staff with regard to records as well as the guidelines for performing records work. In addition to being reviewed regularly to reflect current needs, the policy should be accessible to all staff and be easy to read and understand.

Also, there is the need for TTS to build staff expertise through the provision of formal training in the most efficient manner. The TTS needs to employ staff purposely for managing its records. The Department of Information Studies at the University of Ghana has produced several graduates with specialisation in archives/records management. The person should have lead responsibility to regularly train the rest of the staff.

Again, the study revealed the need to set up a purpose-built records centre for storing semi-active records to enhance records work. The purpose-built records centre will enable the TTS to address space problems because the practice of keeping both active and semi-active records in the storage equipment in the offices of creation will be discontinued.

Moreover, continuous appraisal should be an integral part of the TTS's records management practices. The reason is that appraisal will be useful in determining which records need to be retained to meet business needs and which records need to be destroyed. This will rid the TTS of records that are of no use in the performance of its legitimate functions. Consequently, productivity will be enhanced because more shelving space will be created to accommodate new records and records will be retrieved on a timely basis to meet administrative needs.

In addition, the TTS should procure and install a standby generator to address the problem of power fluctuations. This will minimise, if not completely eliminate, the problem associated with slow retrieval of electronic records. It will also ensure the smooth functioning of facilities, namely air conditioners, computers and printers.

It is worth noting that the management of TTS should allocate some funds for the procurement and expansion of a range of facilities. This will ensure effective management of records.

In order to keep pace with current records management trends, it is further recommended that the Seminary's records management system be better organised to take advantage of information communication technology. Therefore, there is the need for all computers to be connected to the Internet to enable access to emails. Also, software needs to be purchased for the automation of all the offices in order to have a database of electronic records to facilitate the retrieval of information.

Last but not least, effective preservation practices need to be carried out to restore records to as close as their original state as possible. There are natural and artificial preservation methods. The installation of heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems is an artificial preservation method that can ensure proper control of temperature and humidity.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions for junior staff

Time of interviewDate.....
 Department Interviewee's position

1. What records are created and received in your office?
2. On what media is information recorded?
3. What system is used for classifying records?
4. Who assigns titles to files?
5. Do you track records issued out to ensure that they are returned?
6. If yes, how are records tracked and by whom?
7. If no, why are records not tracked?

8. What types (formats) of records do you use?
9. How often do you use the records?
10. Are the records readily available when required?
11. If no, what problems do you encounter in retrieving records?
12. What do you use to store records?
13. What facilities are available in your office?
14. Where do you keep records that are not frequently used (semi-active records)?
15. Are records not needed (inactive records) destroyed?
16. If yes, where are inactive records kept before they are destroyed?
17. Who gives authorisation for the destruction of inactive records?
18. Do you have a written policy as a guide in carrying out records work?
19. If yes, was it approved by management?
20. Have you been offered training in records management?
21. If yes, where or how did you gain the skills and knowledge of managing records?
22. Are you aware of the need to manage records?
23. If you are aware, who creates records management awareness?
24. What problems do you face in managing records?

Appendix 2. Interview questions for senior staff and senior members

Time of interviewDate.....

DepartmentInterviewee's position

1. What records are created or received in your office?
2. In what format(s) are the records created?
3. What records do you use?
4. For what purpose(s) do you use the records?
5. Are the records retrieved on a timely basis to serve administrative needs?
6. Do you restrict access to the records? If yes, who has access to the records?
7. What security measures are in place for paper and electronic records?
8. Are the records well preserved? Please explain your answer.
9. Is there any policy specifying the procedures for disposing of records?
10. For how long are records kept before they are disposed of?
11. Who takes decisions on records that should be disposed of?
12. Where do you keep records which have permanent retention value?
13. Does the Seminary have a records management policy?
14. If no, are there any plans for formulating a records management policy?
15. Have you ever attended any training program(s) in records management?
16. Are you adequately trained to manage records? Please explain your answer.
17. Are you aware of the need to manage records? Please explain your answer.
18. In an attempt to develop effective records management, what problems or obstacles are encountered? How do you hope to solve these problems?

Appendix 3. Observation checklist

Descriptive notes: Phenomenon observed	Reflective notes based on rating scale	Value (1–5); 1 being least prevalent and 5 being most prevalent
The media used by the staff to capture information		
The kind of ordering assumed under the classification system		
The mode of shelving files		
Security procedures		
The state of inactive records		
Facilities available in the offices		