# A Case Study on Records Management Practices of the Open University of Sri Lanka

Gunasekara R.M.
*The Library, The Open University of Sri Lanka*
*rmgun@ou.ac.lk*

Marasinghe M.M.I.K.
*The Library, The Open University of Sri Lanka*

## Abstract

Records management plays a significant role in universities in effectively delivering programmes for the students, carrying out research activities, and performing all the administrative functions of the University while ensuring the quality of those services and operations. The study was carried out at the Open University of Sri Lanka with the main objective of evaluating the current records management practices adopted by the Open University of Sri Lanka and suggesting potential improvements needed for enhancing the effectiveness of records management practices. The study used the life cycle model in discussing records management procedures adopted by the Open University of Sri Lanka in its service delivery. The qualitative research method was used, taking both primary and secondary data. The primary data were mainly collected through observations and personnel experiences, and secondary data were obtained from internal university records. The study documented the records management practices followed by the Open University of Sri Lanka in compliance with the records life cycle theory. The study detailed the records numbering system adopted by the Open University of Sri Lanka which is an essential process to retrieve records effectively for different institutional purposes. Lack of awareness and proper training on records management practices among staff members, lack of adequate resources to support records management practices, inadequate documentation and accessibility to documents on records management policies, regulations of the university, and absence of online centralized records management practices are the main challenges faced by the university in performing records management practices. Based on the challenges, the study suggested several improvements needed to be initiated at the university level to ensure an effective records management process.

**Keywords:** Records life cycle theory; Records management; Records numbering system; University records management system.

**Introduction**

Records are documentary pieces of evidence of regular transactions that an organization makes or receives in order to fulfill its legal obligations. Universities and other higher educational institutions maintain records that provide evidence of all university statutory businesses in teaching, research, and other community works carried out in line with its vision and mission statements. These records are saved as evidence of the university's administration, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities. Records give the institution a base for making decisions at various levels, ensuring transparency and accountability of actions, continuing administrative functions smoothly, and providing a point of reference for planning required future changes.

Records management is a systematic process devoted to the management of information in any institution, enabling the institution to carry out its functions smoothly. It involves all activities that an institution performs to ensure proper records management. The process of records management starts with the creation of a new record and ends with the consideration for reformatting or disposal after reviewing and evaluation (Read & Ginn 2016).

Universities maintain various kinds of records, including minutes, correspondences, memorandums, policies and regulations, financial records such as invoices, vouchers, financial accounts, purchase orders etc. and all other information about official matters. Thus, adopting a standard method for the records management procedure is essential for effective retrieval whenever and wherever necessary, which can be considered as a measure of the service quality of the university. Adoption of proper records management practices is important in universities to effectively manage their information, fulfill their mandate, protect them from litigation, preserve their corporate memory, and foster accountability and good governance. (Seniwoliba et al., 2017). Failure to develop such a method or procedure for managing the records could adversely affect service delivery in a university (Musembe, 2016).

All organization's records go through five stages in their life cycle, i.e., creation or receipt, distribution, use, maintenance, and disposition (Read & Ginn 2016). The records life cycle theory presented by Read-Smith, Ginn, and Kallaus in 2002 provides a conceptual guide for developing and implementing records management procedures and the different stages through which a record moves during its life cycle. Understanding the records life cycle process is vital in planning, developing, and implementing a proper records management process at the institutional level to effectively carry out all institutional functions. Figure 01 illustrates the records life cycle presented by Read-Smith, Ginn, and Kallaus in 2002.

The records life cycle consists of five (05) key elements representing the different stages in managing records in any media. The process begins with creating records, followed by distribution, use and reference, maintenance, and ends with destroyed or archived.

Considering the importance of adopting records management practices in institutions, the study was carried out at the Open University of Sri Lanka with the main objective of evaluating the current records management practices adopted by the Open University of Sri Lanka and

suggesting potential improvements needed for enhancing the effectiveness of records management practices. The Specific objectives of the study were;

- To evaluate the current records management practices at the Open University of Sri Lanka
- To detail the records' numbering system adopted by the Open University of Sri Lanka
- To discuss the challenges facing the Open University of Sri Lanka in its records management practices
- To suggest potential improvements needed for enhancing the effectiveness of records management practices
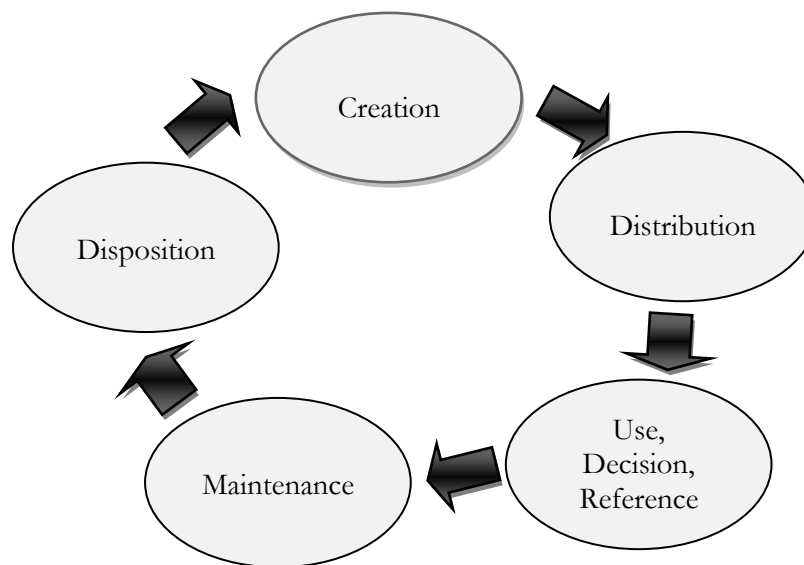
**Figure 1.** The Life Cycle of a Record (Read-Smith, Ginn, & Kallaus, 2002)

The study provides useful information to the authoritative body of the Open University of Sri Lanka to further strengthen the records management practices and develop necessary policies and regulations to ensure the sustainable adoption of these practices by all the functional divisions of the Open University of Sri Lanka. Further, the study provides a point of reference for other institutions that plan to adopt effective records management practices.

**Literature Review**

Records play a significant role in higher education institutions in effectively delivering programmes for the students, carrying out research activities, and performing all the administrative functions of the University. Records are essential information for the sustainability of the University. Effective service delivery of an institution cannot be achieved without proper records management practices.

Records management is a key responsibility of all the staff members of the university, and activities need to be carried out in accordance with records management standards, policies, and procedures of the university. International Standards Organization 15489-1 (2016) discovered the

responsibilities of establishing a comprehensive records management program which includes establishing which records should be created during organizational business transactions, establishing which form and structure should be created and captured, establishing in which record metadata must be captured in order to facilitate continued use and management through the entire life span of the record, establishing conducive preservation conditions for records, establishing proper records arrangement, compliance with legal and regulatory requirements, standards and organizational policy, and identifying and evaluating opportunities for improving efficiency and effectiveness of records management practices and procedures. This provides a useful guideline on how an institution should work in developing effective records management practices for their institution.

A records management programme is a combination of different key processes that an institution takes place to ensure the maintenance of records needed to carry out all its functions. Key processes are creation, distribution, use and, maintenance, storing, and, disposal. The process involves efficient and systematic control of records in printed or electronic format throughout their life cycle. Records management is a process of maintaining the records of an institution from the creation of records up to their eventual disposal; this may include classifying, storing, securing, and destroying or, in some cases, archival preservation of records (Seniwoliba et al., 2017). Kennedy and Schauder (1994) pointed out elements of a records management process, including 1) a records management feasibility study and survey, 2) filing system for active records, 3) records retention and disposal planning, 4) management of semi-active and inactive records, 5) management of the creation and generation of different types of records, 6) vital records protection programme, 7) policy and procedures documentation, 8) training programmes, and 9) ongoing review. These elements cover the different functions from records management planning up to the evaluation of the records management process.

Records play an essential role in ensuring that the institution performs effectively and efficiently and is accountable to its staff and clients. Alegbeleye and Chilaka (2019) noted the importance of records management for an institution which is, it supports an organization to make decisions based on evidence, meet operational, legal, and regulatory requirements, be open and accountable, enhance operational efficiency and effectiveness, and maintain organization or collective memory. Seniwoliba et al. (2017) stated effective management of records and other information carries benefits to the institution, such as supporting the institution's business and carrying out its functions, promoting business efficiency and underpinning service delivery, supporting compliance with other policies which require records and information to be kept, improving accountability, enabling protection of the rights and interests of the institution, its staff, and stakeholders, increasing efficiency and cost-effectiveness by ensuring that records are disposed of when no longer needed. Hence records management is a vital process for any institution to attain effective service delivery. Thus, this study seeks to provide information on how the OUSL manages its records to ensure effective service delivery.

**Research Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative research method as the study aims to document the current records management practices adopted by the Open University of Sri Lanka, the challenges faced, and potential improvements needed. The study was carried out at the Open

University of Sri Lanka. The case study was the research design used for the study. A case study is best suited to generate an in-depth understanding of an issue in its real-life context, and the study also involved a careful and complete examination of a single aspect of an institution and systematically detailed the records management practices of the OUSL. Both primary and secondary data were used. The primary data were mainly collected through observations and personnel experiences, and secondary data were obtained from internal university records which were published and none published.

**Results and Discussion**

*The Current Records Management Practices at the Open University of Sri Lanka*

The study assessed the compliance of the records management practices of the Open University Sri Lanka with standard records management procedures at each stage of the records life cycle theory. Therefore, records life cycle theory (Figure 1) presented by Read-Smith, Ginn & Kallaus in 2002 serve as a base for this study. The study discovered several researchers have applied records life cycle theory to study records management in universities (Asogwa, 2013; Purcell, 2012; Atulomah, 2011; Bantin, 2001; Luyombya & Ndagire, 2020). This section detailed how the Open University of Sri Lanka carry out the records management practices in compliance with the records life cycle theory. All the staff members of the university are responsible for the records management process in accordance with relevant university regulations, policies, and practices.

The process of the records life cycle starts with creating or receiving records. The university routinely creates new records and receives records from different internal divisions and external sources relevant to the academic, administrative, and other functions of the university. The OUSL keeps records in physical and electronic format whenever and wherever necessary. Each functional division of the university determines the records they must create based on their normal practices, meetings, and external entity's requirements. Whenever an activity does not automatically generate records, processes are established to create records intentionally in different ways such as taking minutes at the meetings, recording important discussions, keeping backups of electronic systems regularly, etc. The OUSL always maintains records with enough information and bibliography details or source data to ensure the record's reliability and trustworthiness and to give meaning and context to the records.

Once the records are created, they will be distributed to the staff members who are responsible for them or external entities through a proper channel after keeping a copy in the respective division. The most popular method of distributing the records is by email. Additionally, postal services, courier services, and other online media are used to distribute records. Maintaining an updated collection of records with an appropriate retrieving mechanism in the university is ongoing, and, importantly, practiced to refer the records back whenever necessary. Procedures are established to ensure that only authorized staff members are permitted access to the records during record retrieval. This protects the records from unauthorized access, destruction, loss, deletion, or alteration.

The OUSL stores records manually or online using an appropriate system to effectively identify, retrieve, and access for as long as required. High-value records such as financial records, resource acquisition records, inventory records, and records on students' performances are manually registered in different information registers. Additionally, some records are maintained in a university management system to facilitate effective retrieval by the OUSL staff members and users. The records numbering system adopted by the OUSL is followed in preparing and filing records to facilitate identifying, retrieving, and accessing for as long as they are required.

Retention and disposal of records are mainly based on assessing their requirements for ongoing and future processes. Retention periods vary among records. Some records are kept in the university perpetually, especially those that deal with financial matters, while the lifetime of other records decides based on their need for ongoing and future activities of the university. Each functional division of the university is responsible for following a regular records disposal program after assessing the value of records for ongoing and future activities. This will ensure the proper maintenance of records in an appropriate and timely manner. The records disposal program consists of key functions such as identifying records, reviewing, listing, and carrying out disposal actions.

### Records Categorization and Numbering System Adopted by the Open University of Sri Lanka

Categorization of records is the primary function in developing a numbering system. A proper numbering system for records is necessary in order to retrieve records effectively for different institutional purposes. Initially, this standard record numbering system of the OUSL was developed by the library of the OUSL in 2018, and the necessary guidance was provided to get other divisions of the OUSL to adopt the system.

Record numbering is an essential task that each organization should carry out systematically. It should be carried out with an understanding of the governance structure and functioning of the organization. Records categorization was performed to identify main divisions of records, and codes were assigned to represent each category.

A total number of 5,864 files were identified covering total of 41 different faculties, departments, and other units of the OUSL. All these university records were divided into 18 main subject categories as shown in Table 01.

**Table 1. Main Subject Categories of University Records**

| Description | Code |
|---|---|
| Administration | AD |
| Association | AS |
| Audit | AU |
| Committee meetings | C |
| Commercial | CM |
| Correspondence | CO |
| Documents | D |
| Education: Teaching/ Learning | E |

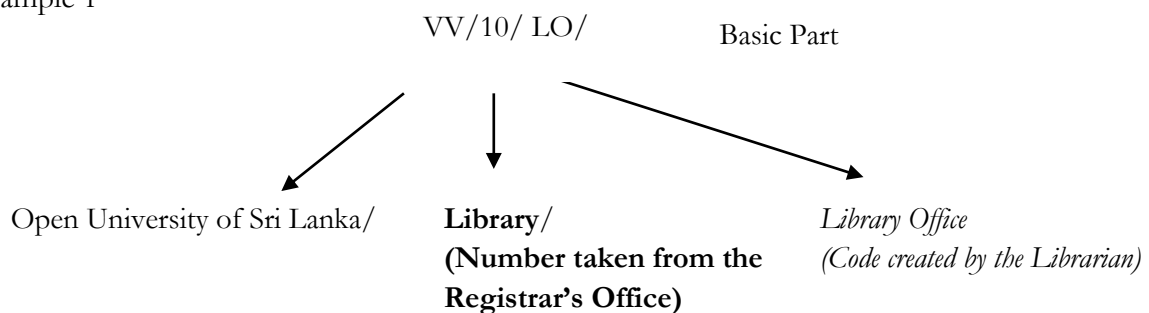| | |
|---|---|
| External Relations | ER |
| Finance | F |
| Human Resource Management | H |
| Inventory | IN |
| Legal Documents | L |
| Miscellaneous | M |
| Properties | PR |
| Publication | PU |
| Services | S |
| Students | ST |

**Source:** Authors' presentation

Letters, numbers, and symbols were used in developing file numbers for each record. The file number consists of 02 parts. The basic part of a file number should be reserved for representing the organization and the division. The second part comprises numbers and symbols to identify file categories and easily retrieve the record whenever and wherever necessary.
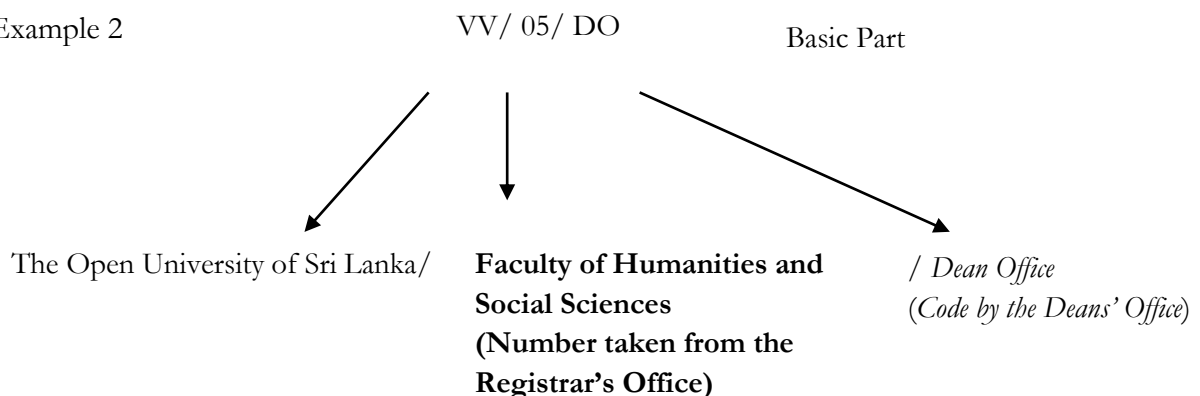
### The First Part of a File Number

The First part of a file number is to identify the location of the record which indicates the organization, faculty or division, department or unit where the record is located. The registrar's office of the university provides index numbers to indicate the faculty or division. The respective dean of the faculty or head of the department or division creates a specific code to represent the department or unit.

Example 1

VV/10/ LO/      Basic Part

Open University of Sri Lanka/     **Library/**
**(Number taken from the Registrar's Office)**     *Library Office*
*(Code created by the Librarian)*

Example 2

VV/ 05/ DO      Basic Part

The Open University of Sri Lanka/     **Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (Number taken from the Registrar's Office)**     */ Dean Office*
*(Code by the Deans' Office)*
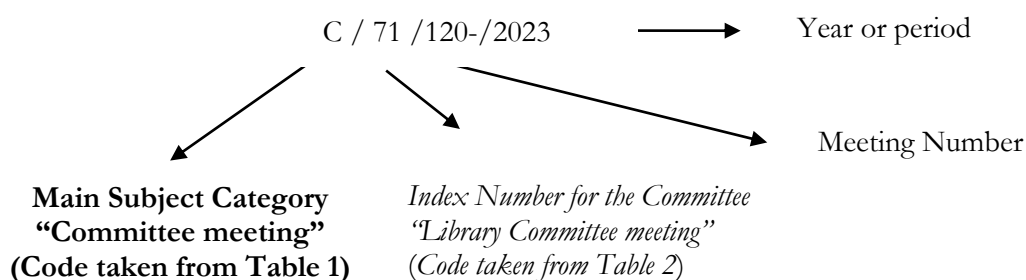
*The Second Part of a File Number*

The second part of the file number is mainly to represent the content of the record which is comprised of the main subject category as given in Table 1, subcategory (Table 2), and the year etc. The numbering of subcategories was performed by the Library of the OUSL and a list of subcategories for each main category was developed. Table 2 shows a list of numbers given for a set of subcategories that comes under the main category "committee meetings".

**Table 2. Numbering of Subcategories of "Committee Meetings"**

| Subcategory | Index Number |
|---|---|
| Advisory Committee- Academic | 1 |
| Activity Schedule Meeting | **2** |
| Administrative Staff Meeting | 3 |
| Advertising Committee | **4** |
| Advisory Committee- Academic Career Guidance | 5 |
| Anniversary Publication Committee | **6** |
| Annual Report Discussion | 7 |
| AR Meeting | **8** |
| ⬇ | ⬇ |
| Learner Support Management Committee | 70 |
| Library committee | **71** |
| Management Committee | 72 |
| Minor | **73** |

**Source:** Authors' presentation

Example 1

C / 71 /120-/2023 → Year or period

→ Meeting Number

**Main Subject Category "Committee meeting" (Code taken from Table 1)**

*Index Number for the Committee "Library Committee meeting" (Code taken from Table 2)*

Example 2

AD / 26 / 2023

→ Year or period

**Main Subject Category "Administration"**

*Index Number for the Strategic Management Plan*

The full file number relevant to the above 02 examples should be as follows.

Example 1
VV/10/LO/C/71/120-/2023 (OUSL, Library, Library Office, Committee Meetings, Library Committee Meeting)

Example 2
VV/05/DO/AD/26/2023 (OUSL, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dean's Office, Administration, Strategic Management Plan)

## *To Discuss the Challenges Facing the OUSL in its Records Management Practices*

The study identified several challenges faced by the University of the OUSL in its records management practices. The record numbering system of the OUSL introduced by the library to ensure effective management of the records was a novel thing for the staff members, and the divisions of the universities had to change their existing practices of record storage. Hence the staff members' awareness of the numbering system and records management policies and procedures varies. Part of the staff members have less awareness of the practices, while other proportions of staff members have a satisfactory level of understanding which affects the accuracy of records creation, classification, and retrieval negatively. The university mainly adopts a manual records management system due to a lack of adequate resources, especially technology, and equipment, to support records management practices. Additionally, the inadequate documentation and accessibility to documents on records management policies and regulations of the university is also a challenge faced. The absence of an online centralized records management system and inadequate training for staff members on the subject also hinders the effectiveness of records management practices.

## *To Suggest Potential Improvements Needed for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Records Management Practices*

Based on the challenges facing the OUSL in adopting records management practices, the study suggests several improvements needed for the records management practices of the OUSL to enhance the effectiveness of those practices. The staff members of the OUSL should undergo periodically scheduled training programmes covering various aspects of records management, such as maintaining records manually, proper movements of records among stakeholders, online records management procedures, records privacy, disposal mechanism of records, etc. These programmes will increase awareness and improve accuracy in each step of the records management process, such as creation, distribution, use, and maintenance of records and disposal, and also update them on changes happening in the records management practices in parallel to the technology developments. All divisions of the university should adopt the standard file numbering system introduced to ensure uniformity in records management practices among divisions. The university should allocate adequate resources such as technology, equipment, and funds to support record management practices to ensure the effectiveness of each activity. Further, it is suggested to strengthen the activities of the centralized records management system by introducing an online records management system which will enhance the proper records

management at the university level producing benefits for internal staff members and students. It is important to properly document, review and update the university records management policies and procedures regularly to ensure compliance of such policies with practices and technological changes.

**Conclusion**

Effective records management practices are essential for universities to manage their documented information efficiently, fulfill their obligations, preserve their cooperate memory, and foster accountability and good governance. The OUSL follows all the steps of the records life cycle theory developed by Read-Smith, Ginn & Kallaus in 2002 during its records management. Adoption of a proper numbering system for records is necessary in order to retrieve records effectively for different institutional purposes. Lack of awareness and proper training on records management practices among staff members, lack of adequate resources to support records management practices, inadequate documentation and accessibility to documents on records management policies, regulations of the university, and absence of online centralized records management practices are the main challenges faced by the university in performing records management practices. The study suggests several improvements to enhance the effectiveness of records management practices, including regular training for staff members, allocation of adequate resources, strengthening the centralized records management system, introducing an online records management system for the university, and documenting, reviewing, and updating university records management policies and procedures.

**References**

Alegbeleye, G. O., & Chilaka, U. C. (2019). Evaluation of records management practices at the Ministry of Health, Abia State, Nigeria. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 2306. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/215160679.pdf

Asogwa, B. E. (2013). The readiness of universities in managing electronic records: A study of three federal universities in Nigeria. *The Electronic Library*, *31*(6), 792-807. https://doi.org/10.1108/EL-04-2012-0037

Atulomah, B. C. (2011). Perceived records management practice and decision making among university administrators in Nigeria. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, *1*(1), 7-13.

Bantin, P. C. (2001). The Indiana University electronic records project: lessons learned. *Information Management Journal*, *35*(1), 16-25.

Kennedy, J. & Schauder, C. (1994). *Records management: A guide for students and practitioners of Records Management*. Melbourne: Longman.

Luyombya, D., & Ndagire, S. (2020). Records management procedures and service delivery in private universities. *Journal of the South African Society of Archivists*, *53*, 1-19. https://doi.org/10.4314/jsasa.v53i1.1

Musembe, C. N. (2016). Records management in institutions of higher learning: towards the business support function. *International Journal of Library and Information Science Studies*, *2*(1), 13-28.

Purcell, A. D. (2012). *Academic archives: Managing the next generation of college and university archives, records, and special collections*. American Library Association.

Read, J., & Ginn, M. L. (2016). *Records management*. Cengage Learning.

Read-Smith, J., Ginn, M. L., & Kallaus, N. F. (2002). *Records management* (ed.). New York: Thompson Learning Inc: South-Western.

Seniwoliba, A. J., Mahama, A. V. & Abilla, B. J. (2017). Challenges of records management in higher education in Ghana: The case of University for Development Studies. *International Journal of Educational Policy Research and Review*, *4*(3), 29-41.