



HEI Records Management

Guidance on Developing a File Plan

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	3
2	Development of a File Plan	4
3	Implementation of a File Plan	6
4	Maintenance of a File Plan	7

1 Introduction

1.1 What is a File Plan?

A File Plan¹ is a tool for classifying records to bring together records with common characteristics.

The basic component of a File Plan is a hierarchical classification structure, with the top level containing the broadest categories and the lower levels becoming increasingly specific. This classification structure is derived from an institution's Business Classification Scheme, providing a framework for classifying records according to the business functions and activities which generate them. A unique reference code² may be allocated to each category.

1.2 Why develop a File Plan?

A File Plan is an essential component of a records management programme developed in line with ISO 15489, the international standard on records management³.

A File Plan provides a framework for a consistent approach to classifying records across an institution, irrespective of its organisational structure, the subjects/bodies/individuals it deals with or the media and formats in which its records are held. When applied, it makes it easier for business units to comply with corporate records management policies and delivers practical benefits for both staff and the institution as a whole by:

- improving intellectual control of records;
- improving access to records;
- reducing the costs of maintaining records.

For HEIs, as for other organisations, there are two compelling reasons for having a File Plan.

1. Consistent retention and disposal of records – across all record formats and in all physical locations – is essential to ensure compliance with legislation and to control the costs associated with maintaining records. It is also a significant challenge in institutions which have devolved management structures. A File Plan which is derived from an institution's Business Classification Scheme can be integrated with its Records Retention Schedule (which should also be based on the Scheme) by assigning retention periods to classification categories. This makes it easier to locate and remove records which are time-expired, minimising the need for complex and time-consuming 'review' or 'weeding' processes.
2. Quick and easy access to records and the information they contain – within and across business units – is essential to support day to day work, to facilitate external audits, reviews and investigations and to comply with legislation on access to information. A File Plan which is derived from an

¹ A File Plan is also commonly referred to as a 'records classification scheme' or 'file classification scheme'.

² These are commonly referred to as 'file codes' or 'file references'.

³ ISO 15489-1:2001 Information and documentation – Records Management – Part 1: General

institution's Business Classification Scheme can be used to identify and retrieve records relating to the same function and activity anywhere in the institution, irrespective of which business units produces or receives them.

2 Development of a File Plan

Developing a File Plan is a six-stage process which is described below. It requires staff with good research, analytical and communication skills, as well as a sound knowledge of records management principles. An institution which does not employ suitably-qualified staff may be able to obtain advice from a professional records manager employed by another HEI. If this is not possible, it should consult an independent professional records manager.

For more detailed advice on developing a File Plan, contact JISC infoNet.

2.1 Stage 1: Developing a Business Classification Scheme

The first stage is establishing a Business Classification Scheme which covers all the institution's business functions and activities.

The remainder of this guidance assumes that an institution has already developed a Business Classification Scheme by customising the *HEI Business Classification Scheme*.⁴

2.2 Stage 2: Identifying the records which are held

The next stage is locating and identifying all the records which are held by the institution.

This is done by conducting a records survey to compile a Records Inventory, i.e. a catalogue of all the record series held in the institution.

An institution which has already developed a detailed records retention schedule by extending the *HEI Records Retention Schedule* will have compiled a Records Inventory during that process.

2.3 Stage 3: Developing the classification structure

The next stage is developing the File Plan classification structure which is a hierarchy of categories and sub-categories representing business functions and activities, and individual record series. This hierarchy should have at least three levels but will usually have more. For example:

LEVEL 1	FUNCTION	GOVERNANCE
Level 2	Activity	Statutory Committee Administration
Level 3	Sub-activity	Senate Administration
Level 4	Record Series	Senate Minutes

⁴ See the HEI Business Classification Scheme User Guide for guidance on this process.

Developing the classification structure involves classifying each record series identified in the records survey into a category in the Business Classification Scheme. Each series should first be classified into a Level 1 (Function) category, then progressively classified into lower-level categories until it is classified at the lowest possible level in the Scheme.

The Business Classification Scheme may have as many levels as are required to classify all record series adequately, or it may be necessary to extend it. If the lowest level category in any section of the Scheme contains a very large number of record series, it may be advisable to extend the hierarchy in that section (i.e. for that activity) to separate smaller units of activity, steps in a process or groups of individual transactions. There are no absolute rules about the number of levels in a File Plan classification structure and, as in a Business Classification Scheme, it is not essential to have the same number of levels throughout the hierarchy. There is no need to extend the hierarchy for a function any further once all record series relating to the function can be easily classified. The final task is determining the order in which the record series categories should be listed within the function and activity categories in the hierarchy.

In extending the Business Classification Scheme hierarchy to develop the File Plan classification structure, it is important to achieve a balance between:

- user needs for quick and easy classification and retrieval (which suggests fewer levels and 'larger' categories)
- corporate needs for accurate and easy application of retention and other policies (which suggests more levels and 'smaller' categories)

As a guiding principle, it should be possible to allocate realistic records management 'rules' (e.g. retention periods) to categories in the File Plan which are then inherited by records as they are classified.

2.4 Stage 4: Determining the arrangement of records

The next stage is determining how the records within each record series should be arranged (e.g. alphabetically by surname, numerically by contract number). A logical arrangement may be obvious, or it may be necessary to determine one. For example:

- a record series consisting of 'Staff Expenses Claims' may consist of paper documents (claim forms, attached receipts etc.). These records would be most logically arranged by date.
- a record series consisting of 'Maintenance Contract Files' may consist of a series of folders/binders containing all the records relating to a single contract. These records could be arranged alphabetically by company name or numerically by contract number.

Where there is a choice, the most appropriate arrangement is the one which will make it easiest to apply retention periods and remove time-expired records. It is essential to consult staff in making decisions about how records should be arranged within the File Plan structure.

2.5 Stage 5: Devising file codes (optional)

The next stage is devising a system of file codes to provide a convenient way of referring to categories in the File Plan and to individual folders or items within them. Codes can be alphabetic, numeric or alpha-numeric but they should be as simple and as short as possible. Whatever form they take, they should reflect the File Plan hierarchy. It is essential to consult staff on proposals for file codes. It is also

essential, if the File Plan is to be implemented in electronic systems, to consult specialist IT staff about the content and format of any proposed file codes.

2.6 Stage 6: Documenting the File Plan

The final stage of developing the File Plan is documenting it. The documentation must include:

- the classification structure, with file codes if these have been used;
- details of the record series in each category and how files or other items in the series are to be arranged.

3 Implementation of a File Plan

Implementing a File Plan involves making it available to staff and supporting them in applying it to classify the records they deal with, and to find records they need in the course of their work.

The File Plan must be made available:

- to all staff who produce and receive, or use, records;
- in a format which is easy for them to use.

Depending on how the Plan will be used, it may be appropriate to make it available as:

- a document (e.g. a Word document, an Excel spreadsheet)
- a web page
- a hierarchy of folders in Windows Explorer

However it is made available to staff, the File Plan must be supported by guidance on using it to classify records which they create or receive, and to identify records they need. It is helpful to supplement written instructions by:

- organising training sessions where staff can study the Plan and ask questions about using it for 'their own' records;
- providing 'floor-walkers' and/or a telephone or e-mail 'helpline' to advise and assist staff as they learn to use the Plan in their day to day work.

It is also important to provide training for new staff who need to learn to use the File Plan, and to support them as they do so.

When staff begin to use a File Plan, it is important to monitor how many records they classify, and how accurately. Monitoring should be intensive in the early stages of implementation so that misunderstandings and errors can be identified and corrected. It should become less frequent as users become more familiar with the Plan and more experienced at using it. However, monitoring should continue, as this can help to identify requirements for changes.

Although it may not be necessary to provide intensive support for staff after the initial implementation, it is important to continue to provide a mechanism for them to ask questions or to provide feedback on the Plan, as this can also help to identify requirements for changes.

4 Maintenance of a File Plan

A File Plan must be maintained to ensure that it remains relevant, accurate and up to date. It might be necessary to:

- add new first or second level categories from the institution's business classification scheme if a new function or activity is added to a unit's responsibilities;
- remove categories which are no longer required;
- add new record series;
- remove record series which are no longer produced or received.

Any such changes to the File Plan must be controlled and documented.