



HEI Records Management

Guidance on Managing Transitory Records

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| What are transitory records? | 3 |
| Do transitory records have to be kept in formal recordkeeping systems? | 5 |
| Where should transitory records be stored? | 5 |
| How long should transitory records be retained? | 5 |
| How should transitory records be destroyed? | 5 |
| It is important to remember ... | 5 |
| It is important not to assume ... | 6 |

Introduction

The records which an institution generates and receives in the course of its work are collectively a vital and unique source of:

- **information** for the management of the institution and its business;
- **evidence** of the institution's expertise, integrity and compliance with legislation;
- **knowledge** about the institution's work and achievements.

However, not all records have the same value, and all records are expensive to maintain. It is obviously important to retain those which are required to meet:

- operational needs for information about, and evidence of, past or planned decisions and actions;
- legislative and other external requirements or recommendations to maintain or retain records;
- long-term research needs or wider societal expectations.

It is equally important to dispose of those which are not needed, to improve efficiency and to minimise the overall costs of maintaining and managing records. This applies particularly to transitory records which have only temporary value and should be routinely destroyed in the normal course of business.

All institutions should establish a policy on managing transitory records to ensure a consistent approach across all business units. This policy should be supported by detailed procedures to guide and support staff in fulfilling their responsibilities for managing the records they create and receive in the course of their work.

This guidance document outlines some of the key issues which institutions should consider in developing a policy on, and procedures for, managing transitory records.

What are transitory records?

Records are documents or other items which:

- contain recorded information;
- are produced or received in the initiation, conduct or completion of an activity;
- are retained as evidence of that activity, or because they have other informational value.

The recorded information may be in any form (e.g. text, image, sound) and the records may be in any medium or format, including three-dimensional objects.

Transitory records are records which have only temporary value. They are produced:

- in the completion of routine actions;
- in the preparation of other records which supersede them;
- for convenience of reference.

They are NOT official copies of records which need to be retained as evidence of an activity and they have no significant informational value after they have served their primary purpose.

For example?

These are some common types of transitory records:

- Duplicates of records which are produced for reference only and which are exact copies (i.e. not annotated or changed in any way) of official records which are maintained in formal recordkeeping systems.

Examples: photocopies of paper documents; electronic or printed copies of electronic documents; duplicate copies of photographs and audio or video recordings; reference sets of meeting papers, technical reports, plans etc.; departmental 'reading' or 'circulation' (paper) files. Chronological files of correspondence (often referred to as 'day files') may or may not be transitory records, depending on institutional policy.

- Draft documents and working materials which do not document significant steps in the development of a final version and which are not needed to track the development process or provide evidence of decisions or precedents.

Examples: draft documents with only proofreading marks; initial outlines of ideas, designs, calculations etc. which were discarded or incorporated into other work which superseded them; unused audio/video material which was discarded during editing; unofficial work planning or scheduling materials or communications.

- Documents containing requests for information which have no further value after the information is provided/received (e.g. requests for 'stock' publications, maps/directions, arrangements for events).
- Transmittal documents which accompany records but which do not themselves contain substantive information and are not required as evidence of receipt.

Examples: fax cover sheets/header slips, compliments slips, Post-it™ notes, routing slips etc. (paper or electronic) which contain only transmittal information (names, contact details etc.).

- Items received for information only from elsewhere in the institution, often as part of a distribution list.

Examples: 'All Staff' memoranda and notices (e.g. concerning holidays, special events, maintenance programmes); publications for staff (e.g. magazines, newsletters, directories); publications for general distribution (e.g. prospectuses, plans, marketing materials).

Note: The business units where these items originate should retain the official records and maintain them in formal recordkeeping systems, in line with institutional records management policies. For example, 'master' copies of publications produced by or for an institution are not transitory records and they should be retained by the business units responsible for the publications (or by a central publications unit). Other copies distributed within the institution are duplicates and are therefore transitory records.

- Items received (solicited or unsolicited) for information only from external organisations.
For example: advertising material (e.g. brochures, catalogues, price lists); e-mail messages received from listservs; publications (e.g. magazines, newsletters).

These categories are not intended to be prescriptive or exhaustive. There will always be exceptions where records could appear to be transitory but, because of the way they are used or because of particular individual circumstances, they should be retained as official records and maintained in a formal recordkeeping system.

Do transitory records have to be kept in formal recordkeeping systems?

No. Only official copies of records should be maintained in formal recordkeeping systems.

Where should transitory records be stored?

Transitory records should be stored wherever they are most readily accessible, subject to the constraints of storage space. However, they should not be transferred to inactive storage facilities (e.g. a records centre). They should be retained for only as long as they are actively used or referred to and they should then be destroyed. They should not be retained as a substitute for, or as a supplement to, official records maintained in a formal recordkeeping system.

How long should transitory records be retained?

Transitory records should be retained for only as long as they are useful to the person who produced or received them and they should then be destroyed. They should not be retained for longer than any official records (maintained in formal recordkeeping systems) which they gave rise to, or which they duplicate. For example:

- reference sets of meeting papers should not be retained for longer than the 'master' official set (which are usually held by the secretary to the committee or working group);
- local copies of purchase orders and invoices should not be retained for longer than the 'master' official records (which are usually held by staff in a 'finance' unit).

However, there are two situations where transitory records should not be routinely destroyed. First, where they are relevant to a request for information, e.g. under Freedom of Information legislation. Secondly, where they are relevant to a current or forthcoming legal action.

How should transitory records be destroyed?

Like all other records, transitory records should be destroyed:

- securely, using methods appropriate to their security classification;
- completely, to prevent inappropriate disclosure of information.

Destruction of transitory records should be controlled in the same way as destruction of official records which have been maintained in formal recordkeeping systems. The fact that they are of no further value to the institution does not mean that they have no value to others who might obtain them if they are not stored and transported securely, or if they are not completely destroyed.

It is important to remember ...

- that transitory records, like any others, may have to be disclosed in response to a formal request for information (e.g. under Freedom of Information legislation), even if:
 - they have been kept when they could have been destroyed;

- the 'official' copies of the records (held in formal recordkeeping systems) which they gave rise to, or which they duplicate, have already been destroyed.
- that notes/comments written on transmittal documents (e.g. fax cover sheets, compliments slips, Post-itTM notes etc.) are part of the record they accompany and are not separate transitory records;
- that if a duplicate copy of a document has been altered (e.g. by the addition of handwritten or computer-produced corrections, comments or notes) it is a new record and not automatically a transitory record.

It may still be a transitory record if the annotations are, for example, only proof-reading corrections. However, if the annotations are substantive, the new document is not a transitory record and it should be classified and filed with other records relating to the same activity in a formal recordkeeping system.

It is important not to assume ...

- that all drafts or working papers are transitory records. In some cases, it is necessary to retain an audit trail of the evolution of a final document (or other product) so it is important to retain records showing what changes were made, why, when and by whom;
- that all e-mail messages are transitory records;
- that apparently 'transitory' items have no value. In some functions and in some circumstances, these would be important records:
 - a telephone message slip which provides evidence of the date and time that a person called;
 - an e-mail message containing only the word 'OK' which was sent in response to a request for authorisation;
 - a 'proof of posting' receipt.
- that any copy is - or is not - the official record.