
Records Retention Management in HE – The Way Forward

Expert Forum, 10th November 2006

JISC infoNet and JISC invited a small group of the most experienced and innovative records management practitioners in Higher Education to discuss the effective management of records retention in HEIs. The project to update and relaunch the JISC HEI Business Classification Scheme and Records Retention Schedule was the catalyst for the event but the purpose of the Forum was to explore issues and challenges beyond the use of these tools, focusing on two key themes:

From Policy to Practice – Implementing Records Retention Schedules

There is a great deal of practical experience of successfully establishing and implementing records retention schedules within HEIs. However, many institutions still struggle to bridge the gap between theory and practice, despite – or perhaps because of? – the range of tools and guidance that JISC and others have produced. Why is this and, in particular, how does the organisational context within which they operate influence the success of retention programmes?

The Future of Records Retention Management

It could be argued that, although the way in which organisations create, manage and use records has changed out of all recognition, the established theory and methodology of retention management has not been fundamentally questioned for several decades. Are retention schedules still ‘fit for purpose’ and, if they are, for how much longer will this be true?

Each theme was introduced by Steve Bailey, Records & Information Manager, JISC Executive and then opened up for discussion by the group. Discussions were facilitated by Margaret Procter, Lecturer in Archives and Records Management, University of Liverpool.

The Forum concluded with smaller group discussions to generate ideas and suggestions for ways in which JISC could provide additional support for the management of records retention in HEIs.

A summary of the themed sessions and a ‘wish list’ can be found in the following pages of this document.

A list of the participants in the Forum is available [here](#).

From Policy to Practice – Implementing Records Retention Schedules

There is a great deal of practical experience of successfully establishing and implementing records retention schedules within HEIs. However, many institutions still struggle to bridge the gap between theory and practice, despite – or perhaps because of? – the range of tools and guidance that JISC and others have produced. Why is this and, in particular, how does the organisational context within which they operate influence the success of retention programmes?

Steve Bailey opened the session on this theme with a short [presentation](#) in which he emphasised that:

- establishing a retention schedule is only the start of the process of managing records retention;
- a records retention programme is not a ‘project’ but rather a core operational procedure;
- success depends on the support of management and on the involvement of record creators/users as well as on the expertise of the records manager.

He outlined some of the organisational, cultural, technical and logistical challenges which records managers can face in implementing a records retention programme. He then introduced Matthew Stephenson, Records Manager, University of Salford who gave a short [presentation](#) about his own experience of developing and implementing records retention schedules, focusing on these challenges.

In the discussion which followed, there was general agreement on many key points.

- Records management cannot be successful in isolation. To achieve records management objectives, records managers must forge strong working relationships with colleagues in other functions which have a corporate remit and a direct interest in good records management. Information Technology, Audit and Risk Management are key ‘allies’. ‘It’s a lot easier to make headway if we’re all singing from the same hymn sheet.’
 - Establishing effective communication with these ‘allies’ can be difficult, particularly with Information Technology which is often perceived to have priorities and objectives which conflict with good practice in records management. At the same time, there is some evidence that, having experienced difficulties in recovering electronic records to meet FOI and similar requests, IT staff are becoming more willing to discuss approaches to managing records retention.
 - It is also important to recognise that there is often widespread distrust of anything that comes from ‘the centre’ in universities.
-

-
- A centralised approach to records management, and to records retention management in particular, is no longer (if it ever was) practicable - 'Big RM' does not work in universities. A devolved approach is the only realistic way to achieve records management objectives. This takes more time but is more effective. Edinburgh University is a model for this approach.
 - Compliance is a major factor in influencing people to take notice of records management. The introduction of FOI legislation in particular was a catalyst for many institutions to think about records management.
 - Other key drivers for improving records management, and records retention management in particular, include (in no particular order):
 - **Marketing**

Institutions need to market themselves effectively in an increasingly competitive HE sector.
 - **Risk management**

Institutions need to identify, assess and respond to business risks, and have effective plans for maintaining business continuity. Disasters get attention!
 - **Quality assurance**

Quality is a key issue in core functions. Evidence and audit trails are vital.
 - **Space management**

Institutions need to manage space at a strategic level to maximise the use of their property portfolio and to respond to innovation (e.g. in the design of teaching and learning spaces). Does this mean less physical space for storing records? Are estates strategies driving the e-records agenda?
 - **Information technology**

Institutions are planning and implementing more, and more sophisticated, electronic systems, leading to an increase in electronic record-keeping;
 - **Information access and security**

Like all other organisations, institutions need to ensure that their electronic systems are both accessible and secure.
 - Electronic systems often become additions to current working and recordkeeping practices rather than replacements, which adds to staff workload and the problems of holding duplicated records.
 - Most people still see records management as a 'back office' activity which is not business-critical. Again, establishing strong working relationships with colleagues in related functions which are seen as business critical (such as Information Technology) is essential to change this perception. Records managers also need to work on embedding records management in business processes wherever opportunities arise.
-

-
- There are different approaches to establishing records retention schedules and to obtaining internal approval for them as a formal basis for taking action to preserve or dispose of records.
 - Research councils are highlighting the importance of retaining research data in their funding guidance and, in some cases, they are imposing specific requirements for data retention. As a result, academic researchers are aware of a need to manage records retention but need guidance on how to do so.
 - Many university administrators do not see records management as something that involves them. It might help to advocate records management more forcefully through organisations such as the Association of University Administrators (AUA).
 - It is important to look for ways and opportunities to make records management in general, and records retention in particular, relevant to staff at every level. For example, records managers can be proactive in offering advice and assistance to staff who are moving to new accommodation or implementing new computer systems.
 - The terminology of records management can be a barrier to communication with other functions and with 'end users'.

However, the participants were divided on the issue of whether records management, and records retention in particular, had become too closely linked with compliance rather than with everyday efficiency and effectiveness – with 'sticks' rather than with 'carrots'. Some felt that compliance is time-limited as a driver for improving records management and that, in any case, emphasising compliance is not the most effective way to interest staff in records management (the comparison with Health and Safety is not particularly helpful). Other participants had found the compliance link helpful in progressing records management in their institutions.

Opinions also diverged on the question of records management terminology and, specifically, on the question of whether 'records' should be abandoned in favour of 'information'. Some participants felt that 'information' is a better term to use because staff understand it, whereas they do not understand 'records'. Others argued that records managers should emphasise the distinctive qualities and values of records, and educate staff to understand the difference between records and other information resources.

The Future of Records Retention Management

It could be argued that, although the way in which organisations create, manage and use records has changed out of all recognition, the established theory and methodology of retention management has not been fundamentally questioned for several decades. Are retention schedules still ‘fit for purpose’ and, if they are, for how much longer will this be true?

Steve Bailey opened the session on this theme with a [presentation](#) in which he posed some challenging and provocative questions, including:

- Are our retention schedules making a difference?
- Are our retention schedules sophisticated enough?
- Are EDRM systems the answer to all our prayers?
- How do we sell records retention management to the Google generation?
- Are we over-reliant on the compliance arguments?

A lively and wide-ranging discussion followed. There was a general consensus that, although the records management environment has changed and is still changing, a records retention schedule is still a valid tool and that taking a functional approach to retention is helpful. The value of a model retention schedule, such as the JISC HEI Records Retention Schedule, was seen to be in providing a basis for adaptation and refinement within individual institutions. It was also thought that it would be helpful to integrate records retention schedules with other ‘information management’ tools, e.g. to incorporate data about information access and security.

Echoing the earlier discussion, it was emphasised again that records management, and records retention management in particular, needs to be a core part of business processes. In relation to this, it was suggested that it would be interesting to compare records management with other functions which involve ‘retention management’ (although this phrase might not be used). For example, librarians manage collections of publications and routinely appraise materials to determine what should be kept and what should be disposed of, according to predetermined criteria. Similarly, those with responsibility for Asset Management carry out asset appraisals to decide which assets should be retained and which should not. Participants felt that emphasising the similarities between the processes of managing different types of assets/resources could be helpful in making staff aware of records management as a routine part of institutional operations.

Other key questions were raised and discussed:

-
- Should records management in general, and records retention management in particular, be made 'invisible' to end-users?
 - How can we justify the investment in developing and implementing records retention schedules? Do institutions and records managers have different measures of success?
 - How can we measure success?
 - It is difficult to quantify the impact of implementing records management in general and records retention schedules in particular. It is difficult to establish metrics and there are pitfalls in 'time and motion' studies. It is easier to point to practical examples of the positive impact of introducing records management (e.g. the establishment of well-managed storage facilities for non-current records).
 - Is the absence of the negative a real measure?
 - Universities are not aware of how much information they lose (e.g. when staff leave).
 - Is EDRMS the answer?
 - An EDRMS will only work if records management processes are already established and working.
 - There was no consensus on whether an EDRMS is an improvement on a paper-based system.
 - It is often difficult for records managers to get involved in EDRMS selection and procurement.

There was a clear consensus was that EDRM systems are not the 'answer' to records management 'problems', but opinions varied on the other issues discussed.

The earlier discussion about terminology was extended into whether the role of a records manager is changing into the role of an information manager, with records management as part of that role. Participants were also interested in the links between EDRM systems and Institutional Repositories and there was agreement on the need to join up the various communities of practice to inform developments in both areas.

How could JISC provide additional support for the management of records retention in HEIs?

The participants put forward a wide range of ideas and suggestions for ways in which JISC could provide additional support for the management of records retention in HEIs. This is a summary of their 'wish lists'.

- Provide more money:
 - a small purchase scheme for institutions which have no records management budgets
 - a 'matched funding' scheme for other institutions
 - funding decisions involving records managers (not just JISC staff)
 - Improve co-ordination on records management issues within JISC and with other organisations in the sector. Ensure good practices are known across the sector.
 - Negotiate with major IT system suppliers (e.g. SITS) on behalf of the sector to ensure inclusion of records retention management functionality within these systems.
 - Develop guidance on compliance with Environmental Information Regulations
 - Provide guidance on integration of records management with Content Management Systems
 - Expand the HEI Records Retention Schedule to:
 - include functions and requirements which are not currently covered (e.g. disability, handling of human tissue)
 - include potential exemptions under FOI and EIR legislation
 - include information security classifications
 - highlight personal data
 - cover different legislative frameworks within the UK, i.e. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in addition to England/UK
 - Make the HEI Records Retention Schedule available in manipulable format
 - Provide guidance on:
 - Research Councils' requirements for retention of research data and records
 - professional bodies' requirements for retention of 'student records'and maintain complete historical sets of these requirements on the JISC website.
 - Evaluate Microsoft Sharepoint on behalf of the sector and provide guidance and training on how it can be used to best advantage.
 - Take on advocacy roles in the HE sector.
 - Address current key agendas.
-

- Establish a strategic records management forum with links to professional courses.
- Develop toolkits
- Promote records management through Funding Councils.
- ‘Stake a claim’ in work on Institutional Repositories.
- Develop more case studies to share ideas and approaches across HEIs.
- Provide more training and linking to toolkits.
- Improve the JISC website to make it easier to navigate to ‘records management’ and provide links to other activities.
- Provide more professional briefings to ensure that people are made aware of the key agendas.
- Improve scheduling of JISC initiatives/projects to give institutions more time to respond to calls for proposals etc.

Steve Bailey acknowledged that the evaluation of JISC’s records management activities, undertaken by CIMTECH in 2005, highlighted some areas of weakness. He explained that JISC is trying to address these but that budgets are set so far in advance that it does take time to develop ideas and implement proposals. He also pointed out that, at the moment, there are no archivists or records managers on JISC committees and he suggested that the profile of records management on the JISC agenda would be improved if records professionals working in the sector were willing to join committees as vacancies arise.
