

Edinburgh University Library

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Archival Selection Criteria

General Background

This document provides some basic guidance on how to identify records holding potential archival value. As mentioned in section 4d of “Developing a retention schedule” you must decide whether any of your records have long-term research value for historical or other purposes. If so, and if the University Archivist agrees, the records can be designated part of the University’s official archives. Much of the guidance contained in “Developing a Retention Schedule” is also relevant to the archival selection process. Discovering what records you have, identifying duplicated or related records, determining legal requirements and deciding how long to keep the records may already have isolated the core of potential archives from your area of work. By applying some basic archival selection criteria you should be able to define the archive still more clearly, either by reducing or adding to your list of what may need to be preserved permanently as the unique archives of the University.

Aims

Probably less than five per cent of records generated by the University need to be preserved permanently as archives. The archival process therefore aims to preserve only a small selection of records. These will reflect and provide the essential evidence of the University’s most significant functions and activities, and will also serve legitimate research needs either on the part of the University itself or the wider academic and public user community. The surviving archives should show what the University has done and why, how it was organised and operated, and its effect on the wider community.

Underlying Themes

The main themes to bear in mind when determining archival value are underlined in bold text below. The themes are closely related to the University’s main functions, but when making recommendations for archival selection try to think beyond your own functional area. It could be for example that an academic unit will retain the original layout drawings for building alterations that will explain a new development more clearly than the set held by the University’s drawing office. It is better therefore to have some awareness of all the main themes, and not just those that relate most closely to your own area of work.

Remember also that archives created as part of routine administration can contain information that can be used profitably by researchers for a wide range of purposes. For example, matriculation records created as part of normal business practice could be used by a social scientist to analyse students’ social backgrounds, so it is always important to consider the potential informational value of the records for research purposes.

Origins Growth and Organisation: This relates not only to the University as a whole but also to its constituent parts, so is not merely concerned with older official documentation such as ancient charters. Records showing how an amalgamation with another institution came about, or how a new school, centre, institute or student service arose can be especially valuable. Records describing or depicting how the university or parts thereof were organised and operated within overall structures are also useful, as well as any changes over time. Record types can include administrative files, working group minutes, organisation charts and formal documents under seal such as signed agreements.

Policies Planning and Decisions: Records that demonstrate how major policies and strategic plans for the University's teaching, research and supporting services were formulated and developed, the debate and decision making processes, and the communications amongst the governing elements in the university often form the essential framework of a university archive. Researchers frequently begin their research by consulting main records series such as minutes, meeting papers and annual reports of main governing bodies and committees such as those generated by the University Court, Senate, Colleges and Schools and their main sub-groups, but often need to pursue more detailed information held amongst the key administrative files, minutes and other documentation generated by senior management teams.

Teaching: Records that provide a summarised view of what subjects were taught, how they were taught and assessed, together with records that show how the curriculum developed are all valuable. Record types might include course handbooks, lists of courses offered and syllabi, examination and other regulations, departmental minutes and minutes of boards of studies.

Research: The published results of research normally reveal little about the research processes involved in conceptualising and following particular research lines. At the very least there needs to be a minimum record of what research is being carried out so records that reveal project proposals, grants awarded, annual progress and final reports should be retained. Any regular summary descriptions of current research in progress are also useful, especially if the research does not have designated financial support. Information relating to patents registration and commercial exploitation of research should be kept, and records summarising the research assessment exercise, including the monitoring and review processes also have archival importance.

Beyond this, research data itself may also need to be retained or referred to specialist data archives, especially data created by projects of major national or international significance and in those instances where the data is crucial to substantiating research results. The extent of public interest and controversy in particular areas of research, such as genetics, is also a good indicator of likely archival value as is the professional standing of the principal researcher and research teams. The terms and conditions of external sponsors and the extent to which external interests own and preserve the resultant data will also influence archival selection decisions. Research record types can be very wide ranging. Administrative material will normally be held in file formats, but many other types of recording media may be held, including photographs, samples and objects, some of which may need to be referred to preservation specialists.

Students and Staff: The main undergraduate student record, registers and statistical information required for archives are generated centrally. Other information that may be held at more local levels mainly by academic units includes; prizes and awards, outstanding performances, class photographs and lists, biographical summaries of graduates and postgraduates, staff/student liaison groups, departmental student statistics, and social/clubs/societies material. All such material helps build a comprehensive but compact picture of student life. Record types include prize lists, year books, class registers and lists, student handbooks, event programmes and alumni newsletters.

Material that reflects how the university manages the relationships with its staff may have archival importance. Staff handbooks and manuals, codes of conduct and practice, collated employee statistics and staff survey results, staff directories and industrial relations information can all help towards understanding how staff policies evolved and were implemented. Matters relating to significant/new appointments or establishment of Chairs should also be retained. Record types can include printed diaries, directories and instructions, annual reports, and administrative files of senior officers.

Finance and Physical Resources: The management and deployment of the University's finances generate very large amounts of data, but relatively few records need to be retained permanently, especially at departmental level. The controversial nature of Higher Education funding does however guarantee a ready research interest. Apart from the annual financial report, records summarising acquisition of funds (including external fund-raising activities), investment management, the authorised annual budget and year end accounts have archival value. Endowment information/conditions are also useful. Additionally, lists/indexes of accounts and the general ledger should be retained as should main audit reports. Record types can include reports, accounts ledgers (usually held as computer generated microfiche), and key correspondence files of senior officers.

The physical environments in which the University operates reflects the educational mission of the University, and can offer great insight into how it perceived itself at different times as well as how it expanded to cope with growing demand. Campus plans, property registers of buildings owned, rented or acquired, space planning information in summary, and consolidated buildings insurance information can all help paint an overall picture of the University's physical presence over time. Photographs of buildings during both construction and working life are valuable and the main floor plans, (especially if layout/equipment information is given) and elevations also need to be retained. Record types can include ground plans, building plans, models, photographs and correspondence files of senior officers.

The University and the Wider Community: The University has a very wide range of contacts in the local, national and international arenas, including government departments, other universities, local councils and schools and its own alumni. Unpublished information showing how the university relates to other HEI's, how it markets itself, how it manages its public relations and its role in the local community can all be of value, as can summaries of fundraising and alumni initiatives. Record types might include market research reports and analyses, promotional designs and materials, official press releases and clippings, minutes of joint ventures with other bodies, alumni statistics, events and newsletters, and special events photographs.

Specific Guidance

Assessing archival value is rarely straightforward but the following guidance may help the process. For further help and advice please contact the University Archivist, Mr. A.Wilson on 650 6865, email Arnott.Wilson@ed.ac.uk

- By their nature archives are a unique record of past activity. Unless otherwise advised only the final/principal/main copy of an archival document is required. The records custodian or designated responsible officer for each major committee/working group likely to have archival value must take responsibility for ensuring the completeness and security of the archival record, and ensuring its eventual transfer to archival storage. Circulation copies of, for example, agendas and supporting papers are not required.
- The records of minor committees or working groups whose main findings/reports are relayed to and engrossed in the records of policy making committees or officers at a higher point in the administrative hierarchy are not required.
- Check with relevant support group offices as to those records they intend to transfer to archives. For example, Edinburgh Research Innovation and Enterprise may retain and transfer copies of project proposals and other documentation, thus reducing or even eliminating the need to transfer such material to archives from academic units.
- Avoid the 'cherry-picking' approach to archival selection. To aid their understanding of archival material researchers need to know the context in which it was created, so even if an unstructured administrative file of correspondence contains only a few archivally important documents, retaining the entire file may be the best course of action.
- In most cases archival retention decisions should be made at series level, for example, a series of departmental management team minutes, and not individual minutes of particular meetings.
- Records of the most substantive functions and activities dealing with information on for example, - organisational structure, management of business, operational policy and precedent, are usually more valuable than those that deal with the implementation of established policy and practice, (transactional material) such as paid invoices.
- Records that have long-term value to the University as part of its ongoing business administration often have high potential as archives.

- Try to apply retention decisions as soon as possible after records are created or received, - this is especially important for electronic recording media which require special measures to be in place for long term preservation.
- Any 'historical' signed/designated final minutes of significant major committees or working groups that may still be held by records creators or administrators must be referred to the University Archivist, as should any other significant 'principal/final copy' item.
- Please take particular care regarding material generated by teaching units as this is one of the weakest areas of coverage in the existing archive.
- Retention decisions for the majority of records will be governed by the University's retention schedules but in those instances where older (fifty plus years) records are uncovered, please contact the University Archivist even if the schedule indicates destruction. Older records whose modern equivalent is not required for archives may nevertheless retain some archival value, particularly if they constitute the only surviving contemporary evidence of a significant function or activity.

Alphabetical Listing of Main Records Groups With Potential Archival Value

The following list provides a note of records groups, series and types which are likely to hold archival value. The list is not comprehensive and is unavoidably general in nature. It should be used alongside and not instead of the guidance in the preceding sections and covers records in all types of recording media. For further advice and guidance, please contact the University Archivist, Mr A. Wilson on 650 6865, email – Arnott.Wilson@ed.ac.uk.

Accounting and Financial Records

Annual financial report
 Audit reports and summary actions
 Capital ledgers
 Endowments –reports, summaries, conditions
 General ledger
 Investments and disposal of assets
 Pension funds ledgers
 Year end accounts

Committees, Meetings, Groups etc. (includes General Council, Court, Senatus, Central Management Group, Principal Committees, Colleges, Schools, Boards of Studies, Sub-units Centres and Institutes, Support Groups and Planning Units)

Agendas and supporting papers including draft minutes
 Minutes/minute books signed and unsigned
 Any other directly related records series e.g. annual reports, terms of reference, standing orders

Correspondence Files

Central filing (University Secretary's office)
 Key senior officers' and management teams' files, (policies, planning, developments)

Legal/Regulatory

Codes of Practice
 Charter, Ordinances, Trust Foundations etc.
 External review reports
 Formal legal opinion/advice
 Formal agreements, contracts and documents under seal
 Insurance, Health and Safety, Environmental audits/reviews and actions
 Legally based directives/orders
 Legal precedents
 The University's role in HE sector legislation development

Maps Plans and Properties

Buildings plans - architectural including site plans floor layouts, elevations
 Campus/space maps and plans, models
 Major projects policy planning and management files
 Photographs
 Property registers and property acquired and Title Deeds

Personal Papers

Papers and files owned by University staff and alumni

Personal/Staffing Records

Appointments to Chairs and senior positions (matters relating to)
 Codes of Conduct and Practice
 Employee Relations – industrial, collated statistics and survey results
 Honours lists
 Organisation charts
 Pay reviews/reward schemes
 Staff handbooks and manuals
 Staffing structures and reviews etc.

Photographs

University staff, students (groups) /buildings/events etc.

Printed Matter

Departmental publications (2 copies)
 General publicity/promotional materials including designs, newsletters, posters, events programmes, menus etc
 Newspaper cuttings
 Occasional papers – research in progress
 Official press releases
 Prospecti and Calendar
 Student recruitment campaigns/materials

Registers/Directories

Awards, endowments, research staff, property students, alumni, honorary graduates
 Visitors books

Research and Research Support

Final reports
 Grant proposals and awards
 Patents applications and information
 Related companies annual reports
 Research Assessment reports
 Research data
 Sealed and official documents, agreements

Schools and Academic sub-units (General)

Chairs – files relating to
 Course handbooks/lists/syllabuses
 Entry qualifications and guidelines
 Open Days, major conferences, special events
 Research projects
 Taught course assessments – final reviews
 Teaching quality review/reports

Special Events, Lectures, Occasions, Memorials

Ceremonies including installations, openings, graduations including videos and photographs (groups) and programmes
 Honorary Degrees citations and correspondence
 Inaugural Lectures

Students' Records

Biographical summaries
Class lists and registers including postgraduates
Photographs (student groups)
Prizes and degree awards lists (recipients)
Registry records (including printed degree examination papers)
Student publications including handbooks
Staff/student committees and groups
Statistics
Student associations, clubs and societies
Student/alumni newsletters and events
Year books

Surveys

Market research analyses
Quality audit reports
University policies and initiatives, - collated results