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EDUCATING RECORDKEEPING PROFESSIONALS IN AFRICA: THE CASE OF MOI UNIVERSITY, KENYA

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Moi University

Introduction

Moi University is one of the few universities in Africa that offer education and training in recordkeeping (i.e. records and archives management). The University, established in 1984, has eight faculties, two schools and two institutes. Among its faculties is the Faculty of Information Sciences (FIS), which was established in 1988. It has four teaching and research departments, namely Archives and Records Management (ARM), Publishing and the Booktrade (PBT), Library and Information Studies (LIS) and Information and Media Technology (IMT).

The Faculty of Information Sciences offers a four year Bachelors degree (B.Sc.) in Information Sciences to cater for the education and training needs of the information industry within and outside Kenya. The programme is based on the concept of harmonization which was developed and promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) from 1974 onwards. Rosenberg notes that the harmonization concept is based on the premise that there are areas of knowledge and skills which can create a common basis for education and training of information professionals to allow graduates flexibility in their future careers.[1] Consequently, the students admitted into the programme undertake core and common courses during the first, second and third years of study in LIS, ARM, PBT and IMT.

During the fourth year of study, students have the option to specialize in any one of the four disciplines, including ARM. Since its establishment, the faculty remains one of the leading Information Science education and training institutions in Africa.

Constraints and challenges faced by the Department of Archives and Records Management

The Department of ARM was established in 1991 and it offers core courses in records and archives management. One of its core objectives is to produce recordkeeping professionals who are able to initiate, implement and evaluate records and archives management programmes in the private and public sectors. The Department endeavors to train recordkeeping professionals who have a good grounding both in the theory and practice of recordkeeping, taking into account the record life-cycle and continuum concepts.

With the advent of Information Technology (IT) and its growing use in many organizations, the Department faces the challenge of producing graduates who are

not only conversant with the use of IT in recordkeeping, but who also understand how electronic records can be managed in a computerized environment.

In most countries, records in electronic formats are now being created in abundance. This has resulted in many challenges, some of which have been highlighted by various scholars. Sue Mckemmish, a professor of records and archives at Monash University, Australia, notes that the challenge of capturing and managing electronic records has forced records managers and archivists back to the fundamentals of their professional work.[2] Kemoni and Wamukoya observe that electronic records present a number of managerial, technical and professional issues which recordkeeping professionals should be conversant with.[3]

Wamukoya further notes that the need for archival schools in Africa to produce graduates with skills in IT and management of electronic records was created following a major international seminar held in Kenya in 1996 entitled "Making the Transition to the Electronic Age: Managing Electronic and Paper Records as a Strategic Resource for Good Government".[4] One of the recommendations of the seminar was that the need for archival schools in Africa to design and implement curricula that inculcated IT skills to its graduates be addressed.

The Department of ARM since its inception has endeavored to train graduates who are conversant with ways of managing both paper and electronic records based on the records life-cycle and continuum concepts. However, in pursuit of this goal, it has faced a number of constraints. The discussion that follows highlights some of these constraints.

Inadequate teaching and learning resources:

A variety of teaching and learning resources are required in order to effectively train recordkeeping professionals. These include:

- well-equipped laboratories such as computer and preservation laboratories
- relevant and up-to-date textbooks in ARM
- subscription to journal publications
- adequate computer hardware with relevant application software
- teaching staff with relevant knowledge and skills in IT
- connectivity to the Internet

The department does not possess most of these cited resources. For example, whereas each department in the faculty has a computer laboratory, none is allocated to the Department of ARM. Even in situations where fourth year students in the Department access these laboratories, the absence of relevant application software(s) for recordkeeping is a major problem.

The absence of a preservation and conservation workshop also hinders training in preservation and conservation. Although students visit the university library to undertake practicals in book binding, this does not expose them to other techniques of document preservation. To address the problem, students spend at least a week every year at the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service (KNA&DS) where they undertake practical sessions in preservation and

conservation.

The lack of connectivity to the Internet is a major constraint. This denies both students and staff access to the most current information on recordkeeping issues. In view of the fact that the university library has been unable to subscribe to key journal publications including ARM journals, the role of the Internet cannot be over-emphasized. Some ARM journals can now be accessed in the Internet on-line. For example, Aina notes that the *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science* (AJLAIS), a leading journal publication in the field of Information Sciences in Africa, can now be accessed on the Internet.[5] Furthermore, many ARM publications by the International Council on Archives (ICA) and UNESCO can now be accessed on-line on the Internet.

Insufficient teaching staff

Kenya, like other countries in Africa, has few people who have acquired relevant qualifications at masters and doctoral levels in ARM. Ingaji notes that the number of staff trained in the areas of Information Sciences (to include ARM) is hardly sufficient, as the availability of training programmes for extending knowledge in this area are limited.[6] At present, the Department of ARM has a staff establishment of three, of which one has a doctoral qualification, another a masters qualification, while the other one is pursuing a masters degree in Information Sciences. This situation has impacted negatively on the education and training of recordkeeping professionals. For example, it has not been possible to start a post-graduate programme in ARM as the existing staff are hardly sufficient to teach and supervise post-graduate programmes in addition to their existing workload. There are hardly any other Kenyans with relevant masters qualifications in ARM who can be recruited. Furthermore, it has proven difficult to recruit and retain teaching staff from outside the country due to their unavailability, owing primarily to poor salaries offered in Kenyan public universities. The Department lost a colleague with a doctoral qualification to a sister university in Africa due to poor terms of service. This situation depicts a gloomy picture with regard to the strengthening of the current undergraduate programme and the development of graduate programmes in ARM in Kenya. The situation in other African countries is not any better.

Absence of collaboration and links with other universities

In order for any university teaching department to offer quality education and training, there is a need to develop and strengthen academic links with universities offering similar programmes at regional and international levels. Although the Department has in the past made proposals to initiate links with leading universities in ARM in Africa, Europe and North America, such attempts have not been successful due to the lack of a funding agency. Academic links are useful in various ways. Kemoni observes that academic links are likely to offer some advantages to both students and teaching staff.[7] These include:

- providing exchange programmes to both staff and students
- providing scholarships and short-term study visits to members of staff

- provision of teaching resources and opening up opportunities for research.
- exposing staff to new and up-to-date technologies and teaching resources

The Department has benefitted in the past from an Overseas Development Agency (ODA) link with the FIS in the years 1988-1992. Out of this link, two staff members from the Department were able to train and obtain doctoral qualifications from the United Kingdom (UK). In addition, two other staff members were attached to various universities in the UK on short visits. The absence of academic links is therefore an obstacle to the provision of effective education and training for recordkeeping professionals.

Inadequate funding

Kenya at the moment is undertaking structural adjustment programmes at the behest of major international donors, namely the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This development has led to decreased funding of public universities by the Treasury. Due to insufficient funding, teaching staff in the Department and most other departments are not able to engage in activities that promote education and training on a sustainable basis. These activities include:

- conducting research on topical recordkeeping issues and disseminating findings
- purchasing teaching resources
- participating in local, regional and international professional ARM seminars, workshops and conferences
- setting up and running communication facilities such as electronic mail
- subscribing to international ARM journals and periodicals
- conducting seminars and workshops for practicing ARM professionals locally and regionally

To address the problem of inadequate state funding, university departments are now encouraged to develop income generating programmes. However, due to the problem of inadequate staff as explained earlier, it may not be feasible for the Department to initiate such programmes. Examples of income generating programmes include conducting continuing education programmes for practicing ARM professionals in order to keep them abreast with new developments and also to enhance their competencies. Other programmes include offering distance education programmes, a concept which many countries worldwide are now embracing. Distance education programmes would cater for those ARM professionals and non-professionals who are not able to afford formal training sessions in archive schools. Distance education offers numerous advantages. Waihenya observes that distance education offers a realistic mechanism for the delivery of life-long learning and is freed from the restrictions of time, physical space and shortages of staff which bedevil conventional educational modes.[6]

Lack of investment in information technology

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) resources can be utilized not only for the education and training of recordkeeping professionals but also for stimulating socio-economic development. To achieve this goal, there is a need to have in place an appropriate ICT infrastructure. In recognition of this fact, the United Nations in 1995, launched a special initiative for Africa in partnership with the World Bank, UNESCO and the Economic Commission for Africa, titled "Harnessing Information Technology for Development". It was to cover 20 African countries and was set to cost US $ 11.5 million. Some of the areas the programme was to cover included securing the necessary policy reform to enhance Africa's participation in the information age and the setting up of infrastructure for full Internet connectivity in selected African countries.

Kenya, like other developing countries, lacks adequate power supply and reliable telecommunication systems. At Moi University, faculty staff and students normally use the Internet services provided by the university library. However, these services are unreliable due to frequent telephone line breakdowns and non-payment of telephone line fees. This undermines the maximum exploitation and use of the Internet for academic purposes. This situation, however, is not unique to Kenya. Chalmers notes that in Africa there are a mere 14 million phone lines, fewer than in Manhattan (USA) or in the city of Tokyo (Japan).[10]

The absence of an IT policy further undermines the exploitation of ICT resources in Kenyan universities. A recent newspaper editorial decried the lack of such a policy in Kenya.[11] It proposed the enactment of such a policy in order to liberalize the information technology sector, leading to easier access to e-mail, the Internet and other related services.

The absence of an adequate ICT infrastructure and information technology policy in Kenya therefore hampers university departments such as the Department of ARM to fully exploit ICT resources for academic and research purposes.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted some of the constraints and challenges that the Department of ARM at Moi University faces in its endeavor to educate and train recordkeeping professionals. It does not provide solutions to these constraints. The purpose is to open up debate on how to address them. In spite of these obstacles, the Department continues in its efforts to offer quality education and training. First, the Department enjoys close collaboration with the KNA&DS and other institutions which provide education and training opportunities to faculty and departmental students. Second, teaching staff in the Department are actively involved in the provision of ARM consultancy services at local, regional and international levels. Furthermore, their attendance at local, regional and international professionals forums has ensured that they have contacts with other professional colleagues who have continued to assist the Department in various ways. Finally, through research and publication initiatives, departmental staff have been able to secure some teaching resources.

Endnotes

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