

Vital Records

Introduction

Vital records are the recorded information which enables your area to perform its core function. Identifying your vital records will begin with defining your core function. It may be teaching and research, student administration, or personnel administration. There is no definitive list of vital records. What constitutes a vital record will vary across the University.

Identifying your vital records

We can think of records as vital, important, useful, and non-essential.

Which records, if they were unavailable for any reason, would stop you being able to perform your function, or stop you providing evidence that you have performed your function? These are your vital records. They might include:

- evidence of the legal status of the University,
- records which protect the assets of the University,
- minutes of board meetings,
- current and recent staff contracts,
- current accounts payable and received,
- the University's business plan,
- graduation records,
- research information, including ongoing research and reports of research projects,
- records which are subject to a legal requirement to be kept for a certain amount of time ,
- historical records, if needed for evidential or other legal purposes.

Important records enable the continued operation of the organisation. They can be reproduced or recreated from original sources, but only at considerable time and expense.

They might include:

- procedures,
- training manuals,
- teaching materials,
- curricula,
- teaching timetables,
- minutes of some meetings,

- current REF submission.

The loss of useful records would cause temporary inconvenience to the University, but they are replaceable. Examples of useful records are:

- most correspondence,
- records of old curricula.

Non-essential records have no value beyond the immediate purpose for which they were created. They might be:

- staff and student circulars about one-off events which are now completed,
- advertisements.

Protecting vital records

Once you have identified your vital records you should take steps to protect them. There are various threats to records. Most commonly these are: loss, theft, fire, flood, pests, and mould. These threats can be mitigated in various ways, some methods are quick, cheap, and easy. Others are costly in terms of time, finances, and expertise. All have positive and negative aspects. Vital records may need an enhanced level of care depending on the particular risks each record faces.

The following questions can help you consider the issues involved:

- How serious would the consequences be if the records were destroyed or stolen?
- How serious would the consequences be if the records were unavailable for a few days?
- What is the cost of the backup and protection measures?
- What is the volume of records that need to be protected now?
- What is the volume of records likely to need protection liable to be in 10 years' time?
- How likely is it that another copy already exists elsewhere?

Cataloguing vital records

Identifying and protecting vital records is an ongoing process. A record of vital records, and information about how they are managed in your area should be devised. The information you should keep about your vital records includes:

- name of record,
- category of record,
- where it is stored, and information on where copies (if any), are held,

- reasons for protecting,
- method of protection,
- supporting records / applications (to aid in finding the record), if needed to access or interpret the record,
- a deadline for the next review (to consider whether the record is still vital).

You might choose to keep this information in a spreadsheet. Be sure that the location of this information is known to more than one person, and that a method of maintaining the information is devised. A set of vital records procedures is recommended. This should include: the person or persons responsible for maintaining the vital records programme, procedures to ensure that new vital records are identified and included in the programme, procedures for transferring the records or copies to a secure storage area, if used, and details of who has access to the secure storage area, if used.

About this guidance

Version control	Author/editor	Date	Edits made
9	Claire Friend	February 2018	Removed repetition. Reformatted for accessibility.
8	Antonia Kearton & Susan Graham	February 2005	

If you require the guidance in an alternative format, please contact the Records Manager at Rob.Don@ed.ac.uk