

Developing a filing scheme

This guidance is for University staff responsible for setting up records management systems in their part of the University.

The annexes referred to in this guidance can be downloaded from our webpage:

[Filing scheme creation](#)

What is a filing scheme?

A filing scheme provides a framework for organising a business unit's records within a hierarchy. This is often reflected in the physical organisation of the records and usually involves a numbering or reference system. It is sometimes also called a 'business classification scheme'.

Why do we need a filing scheme?

A filing scheme supports the survival and accessibility of important University records by promoting consistent storage of information within a shared information structure. It serves the following purposes:

- It ensures that the same types of information are usually given the same name.
- It serves as a table of contents to help us to locate information.
- It preserves the context within which records were created – instead of dealing with isolated pieces of paper we have a coherent set of papers derived from a particular function.
- It provides links between records created by the same or related activities.
- It helps with the development and implementation of a retention schedule
- It will assist with legislative compliance. It will help us to retrieve information within the statutory 20-day deadline required for a response to requests made under the freedom of information legislation, and will enable us to identify information subject to data protection legislation.

Who compiles and maintains the filing scheme?

It is the responsibility of each business unit to develop and implement a filing scheme for the records it holds. This might be done by those responsible for

carrying out the functions covered by the schedule, or by the nominated records officer for the area concerned. For functions carried out within a number of parts of the University, the Records Management Section has made available model filing schemes, but it is the responsibility of the business units concerned to customise these for their own use.

What different types of filing scheme exist?

There are three main types of filing scheme:

- Subject-based
- Organisation-based
- Functional

See Annexes A-C for an example of each. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, but the Records Management Section recommends the use of a functional-based filing scheme. A functional-based filing scheme will make it easier to implement retention schedules, survives organisational change and is less open to variations in individual interpretation than the other types of filing scheme.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of filing scheme?

A subject-based approach

This involves drawing up a classification scheme for records, based on their subject matter. It can work well for case files, for example, where there is a file for each individual or organisation dealt with, and for some research records. However, this approach is not recommended for other types of records, as drawing up a comprehensive and usable subject-based classification scheme is a lengthy and time-consuming process. As records are not produced on a subject basis, and one record can relate to more than one activity, it can be difficult to know to which subject a particular record relates. This can lead to records on the same topic being filed in different files and makes it difficult to locate information.

An organisation-based approach

This involves structuring the filing scheme to reflect the structure of the organisation. This makes it easy to decide where to file things, but means that the filing scheme has to be revised each time there is a reorganisation. Over time it will become more

difficult to locate information, as those who remember earlier filing structures leave the organisation.

A functional-based approach

This involves structuring the filing scheme using a hierarchy based on the functions, activities and transactions carried out by the organisation. This approach is less subjective than a subject-based approach, and more enduring than an organisation-based one, as underlying functions change far less frequently than organisational structures. However, if carried to extremes this approach can become over-complex and is not always intuitive, so use of this approach should be tempered with a strong dose of pragmatism.

This guidance will focus on the preparation of a pragmatic functional filing scheme.

Major and minor filing systems

Irrespective of whether you have chosen a subject, organisational or functional approach to your filing scheme, you might find it useful to set up major and minor filing systems. In this approach two filing systems are set up using the same filing scheme. One is for 'major' records, that is, items of long-term significance, and the other is for 'minor' records, or ephemeral material. For example, a 'major' file for a committee might contain the final minutes and papers, while as the 'minor' file would contain drafts and meeting arrangements. This approach produces better quality records and ensures that resources are not wasted in preserving material of little significance simply because it is filed with more important material. Alternatively, material of low value could be designated as 'working papers', retained by the relevant member of staff only so long as it is needed for day-to-day reference, and destroyed as soon as it is no longer required.

Do I need a referencing system?

You should adopt a referencing system as this provides convenient shorthand for referring to files. However, it is not necessary in some circumstances; for example in a small office it might be sufficient to rely on a keyword referencing system.

The referencing system adopted should relate to the filing scheme hierarchy. The most common types of file referencing systems are:

- alphabetical
- numerical
- alpha-numeric (for example, AB 12 / 1/1)
- keyword

Examples of file lists using each reference system are at Annexes D to G. Whatever referencing system you choose, the reference assigned to each file must be unique and easily understood by the users of the system. An alpha-numeric system is usually the most accessible for users as the references are easier to remember.

If you are using an alphabetical or an alpha-numeric system, avoid mixing upper and lower case – all upper case is preferable.

How do I compile a filing scheme?

A filing scheme should ordinarily consist of a three or four level hierarchy, with the lowest level being individual files, and the highest broad functions. The upper levels of the filing scheme can be drawn directly from the functions and activities identified on your information map. An outline University filing scheme can be seen at Annex I.

Preliminary research is key to the preparation of a successful filing scheme. If you have not already developed an information map, it is advisable to do so. If this is not possible, you should ask the following questions to develop, in effect, a rapid information map:

- What are your section's responsibilities?
- What activities do you carry out to fulfil that responsibility?
- What information do you receive to carry out that activity?
- What information do you produce?
- To whom do you provide information?
- What records do you need to keep?
- What records do other parties need to keep?
- What is the best way of organising this information?

The responsibilities and activities will form the top two levels of the filing scheme, and the remaining questions contribute to the setting up of individual files to populate

the scheme. To prevent the scheme from becoming difficult to use, restrict a filing scheme to four levels of hierarchy, with the fourth level being the individual files.

Annex I contains an outline filing scheme that you can use as the starting point for compiling your own scheme. On the whole, it covers the first two, or in some cases, three levels of the filing hierarchy; entries for individual files should be made at level 4.

A filing scheme should be accompanied by a scope document which gives further information about the types of information intended for filing under each section of the scheme. Annex J contains the function and activity scope definitions for the outline scheme.

All filing schemes should include a 'zero file'. This is a file which contains information (or metadata) about the filing scheme, including: its structure, dates of usage, and details of alterations and additions. For large filing schemes, you may also need a zero file at lower levels of the hierarchy, for example at the series level, to record the development of these parts of the scheme. In Annex I, the 'zero file' is at T.2.2.1.

When setting up files in the filing scheme, you should distinguish between University-wide activities and services and local activities and services. For example, Human Resources provides a University-wide service, but every part of the University (including Human Resources) will have its own local staff management files. If your business area carries out both University-wide and local responsibilities, then these two aspects should be distinguished in the filing scheme, perhaps by setting up separate level 2 entries for University-wide and local responsibilities. Several examples of this approach can be found in the outline scheme at Annex I. For example, T.1 is the section for University-wide records management. Within this section, the Records Management Section would file its advice and guidance on records management for the University as a whole. T.2 is the section for a business unit's management of its own records. Within this section the Records Management Section would file its papers about its own filing scheme.

When you are setting up a file, record the file's position in the hierarchy, its title, reference and date of opening in an inventory. File titles must accurately reflect their

contents. They should be brief, yet sufficiently comprehensive to describe the contents clearly. For example:

- Industrial relations: government White Paper 1975: Minutes of meetings with local authorities.

Avoid the use of acronyms, abbreviations or loosely defined terms, such as “general” or “miscellaneous”.

Obtain input from all parts of the relevant unit, either by asking them to participate in the development of the scheme for their area of work or by inviting them to comment on the work in progress. This will ensure that the scheme is fully comprehensive and meets all the needs of your business area.

How do I implement a filing scheme?

This section gives detailed, practical advice on the details of managing a set of files.

Managing paper records

It is usually not cost effective to convert legacy paper material to a new system; existing files should be closed down and new files opened instead. Do not open a new file unless you are confident that records will be created to go on that file.

If you do not already have a filing system in place, then you should sort through any existing collections of paper and add them to files in the new filing system.

For most business uses, strong cardboard files with a single punched hole in the top corner and an internal fold-over flap, stored in suspension files, are the easiest and most efficient way of storing and referring to paper records. However, if you need to take papers in and out of files regularly consider using ring binders or lever arch files. Document wallets or box files are the most appropriate way of storing bulky documents which will not fit on a file, but are not suitable for loose papers, as the papers will quickly become disordered, if not lost.

Regardless of the type of file used, the file cover must have space to enter the dates when the file was opened, when it is closed and when it is due for review/destruction. Always file papers with the most recent on the top, to avoid having to rearrange papers whenever new information is added. Files should not be allowed to become unmanageable because they are too large to handle or because they span a long

date range. They should be closed and a new file opened when the file becomes too thick (usually 1" or 2.5 cm), or once files have been open for five years.

Managing electronic records

For electronic records, use folders and sub-folders to set up a filing structure in a shared area accessible to all those who are to use the scheme. Unless existing electronic records are already held in a clear and usable structure, they should be brought into the new structure.

How do I maintain a filing scheme?

Organisations change over time, and for a filing scheme to remain of value it must be kept up to date. It is advisable to review schemes every five years to confirm that they are still relevant. Issues to consider are:

- Have the functions changed since the schedule was compiled?
- Have the processes changed?
- Has the information generated and used changed?
- Does this filing scheme meet users' needs?

This review should be conducted at the same time as a review of the information map on which the filing scheme is based. It is intended to identify changes which might otherwise have been overlooked. It is not intended to replace *ad hoc* changes and additions made to the filing scheme as and when the need is identified.

About this guidance

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| 6 | Rob Don | May 2024 | Amended broken links. |
| 5 | Sara Cranston | March 2018 | Reformatted, separated annexes, minor wording edits |
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If you require the guidance in an alternative format, please contact the Records Manager at Rob.Don@ed.ac.uk