

## ARCHIVES AS AN ASSET OR A BURDEN? A REFLECTION ON TWO DECADES OF SAFEGUARDING INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

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**ABSTRACT.** Archives in university are often understood ambivalently: on the one hand, as strategic assets that preserve institutional memory and knowledge; on the other hand, as administrative burdens that become relevant only during audits, accreditation processes, or disputes. This paper reflects on the author's more than two decades of professional experience as an archivist at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), integrating empirical observations with the theoretical lens of critical archival studies. The method employed is autoethnography using a critical reflective approach grounded in professional practice, analyzed through a synthesis of literature on archives as symbols of power, collective memory, institutional assets, and managerial burdens. The reflection reveals a persistent gap between the conceptual understanding of archives as socio-political instruments and institutional memory, and the operational realities of universities, where archives are still treated as bureaucratic outputs constrained by limited space, budgets, human resource competencies, unclear responsibilities, and uneven digital transformation. The findings also highlight the emotional and professional burdens experienced by archivists due to limited recognition and enduring occupational stereotypes. This paper concludes that archives can become tangible assets only when they are treated as part of an institution's identity, supported by standardized policies, continuous competency development, appropriate technological adoption, and collaborative and participatory approaches to archival governance.

**Keywords:** archives; institutional memory; information assets; management burden; critical reflection

### INTRODUCTION

Over more than two decades of working as an archivist at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), I have witnessed how archives are positioned, interpreted, and treated within university life. The positive values and meanings embedded in archives are often overlooked. Rather than being viewed as strategic institutional information resources rich in meaning and value, archives are frequently regarded merely as the by-products of administrative tasks.

This experience raises a reflective question: when do higher education institutions truly consider archives as strategic assets? Or are archives instead perceived only as burdens that must be managed to comply with legal requirements, such as national laws and other government regulations, or simply to meet the demands of audits and accreditation? This question has remained central to my thinking, and I continue to seek answers.

This paper presents a reflection framed within both theoretical and practical perspectives in archival studies. Although reflective writing is often regarded as non-academic, practitioners' experiences, in this case, an archivist's offer valuable insights deeply rooted in archival practice. In the context of higher education, such reflection can deepen our understanding of the

role of archives within the complex dynamics of institutions, particularly when examined alongside established theoretical frameworks in archival studies.

Conceptually, archives cannot be understood merely as repositories of documents. They are part of broader social, political, and cultural constructions that shape knowledge and power. Foucault (1969), in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, views archives as instruments of societal governance, reflecting how records are produced and used within power relations, as also discussed by Haines (2019), Pandey (2013), and Pouchepadass (2008). Foucault further connects archives to parrhesia, the courage to speak truth, which enables the emergence of alternative narratives that challenge dominant histories (Lee, 2019).

Derrida (1996), through the concept of *Archive Fever*, emphasizes that archives are not neutral entities; rather, they exist within tensions between preservation and erasure, or between memory and control (Lothian, 2013; Pouchepadass, 2008). Through a deconstructive approach, archives become spaces of interpretation that never remain fixed, as meanings continuously shift according to context (Gorza, 2019; Hendricks, 2016; Herland, 2019). Within critical perspectives, Ketelaar and Caswell stress the importance of understanding

archives as products of social and political construction that must be critically examined (Lappin, 2022). Archives may even function as instruments of social justice by providing space for marginalized groups to articulate their histories (Farrugia, 2021).

At the same time, archives serve as memory. They have been described as “memory factories” because they support processes of remembering by preserving documents and historical artifacts (Lemay & Klein, 2012; Millar, 2006), and by building and sustaining collective memory as a foundation for understanding the past (AL-Hooti, 2022). In family contexts, archives function as cultural repositories that preserve intergenerational knowledge and contribute to identity formation and emotional value (Reyes & Irvin, 2024). In socio-political contexts, archives are also essential for activism, as they document activists’ actions and aspirations so that significant events are not forgotten (Rigney, 2024), while also enabling participatory spaces for diverse narratives. Archives may even become centers of community memory that connect the past with the present through public engagement and cultural involvement (Blanco & María, 2020).

However, in university archival practice, effective archival management ideally requires standardized policies and procedures (Bajwa & Rafiq, 2025), trained professional staff (Scheurkogel, 2006), modern technological support (Hujda et al., 2016), and sustainable strategies for both physical and digital preservation (O’Flaherty, 2015). In reality, many universities face similar challenges: inconsistent policies and procedures (Bajwa & Rafiq, 2025), organizational structural issues (Cardoso et al., 2019), and even neglect of preservation when archives are merged into library structures (Guill, 2009). These conditions suggest that archival management challenges in higher education represent a global issue.

## METHOD

This study employs an autoethnographic design using a reflective–critical approach grounded in the author’s professional experience as a university archivist over more than two decades. The primary data consist of empirical experiences in archival management within Universitas Gadjah Mada, which are analyzed by comparing institutional realities

with conceptual frameworks in archival studies. The analysis is conducted through a synthesis of literature in critical archival studies and records management, focusing on: (1) archives as symbols of power, (2) archives as memory, (3) archives as institutional assets, (4) archives as institutional burdens, and (5) strategies for transforming archival management so that archives function as institutional assets.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Gap Between Archival Concepts and Institutional Reality

Conceptually, archives are viewed as fundamental components of social and institutional frameworks. Derrida (1996) argues that archives embody the authority of the archive, a space and power to preserve, judge, and regulate meaning. Yet in everyday university operations, this understanding is not readily apparent. Archives are often reduced to piles of paper or digital documents stored merely to satisfy regulatory requirements, without additional meaning. As a university archivist, I have experienced this conceptual gap firsthand.

### Archives as Assets of Information, Knowledge, and Institutions

Archives serve as assets of information and knowledge. From economic and managerial perspectives, archives are not only historically valuable but also generate cultural, social, and strategic value that can be converted into economic value through accounting methods (Biondi & Chiarelli, 2022). In corporate contexts, archives directly contribute to organizational value chains and connect data, information, and knowledge to the business environment (Foresti et al., 2023). Archives also ensure accountability and institutional transparency through authentic and reliable evidence (Frings-Hessami, 2024), including in highly regulated sectors such as healthcare services (Banat-Berger & Meissonnier, 2015).

As institutional assets, archives hold historical and cultural value (Frings-Hessami, 2024; Ghosh, 2024), as well as strategic and economic value (Biondi & Chiarelli, 2022). They support information continuity, internal reform, and change agendas (Allen, 2006). In large corporations, archives are used to adjust strategies, improve services, and secure external

accreditation (Hull & Scott, 2020). In higher education, institutional repositories support research visibility and institutional reputation (Onwubiko, 2020).

### **Archives as a Burden in Institutional Practice**

Although archives can be assets, in practice, they are often perceived as burdens. The costs of digitization include infrastructure, software, data security, and staff training (Hajtnik, 2019; Jimerson, 2004; Jin & Xu, 2021). Regulatory burdens also arise through selection and destruction biases (Banat-Berger & Meissonnier, 2015; Blouin Jr. & Rosenberg, 2006), including ideological and political biases in determining what is archived and what is neglected (Beroš, 2020; Blouin Jr. & Rosenberg, 2006).

Institutionally, limited funding, infrastructure, and professional staffing remain major obstacles (Luyombya et al., 2023; Rakemane & Mosweu, 2021). Digitization is further challenged by inadequate infrastructure, limited understanding of sustainable digital archival management (Odhiambo, 2018; Paliienko, 2024), technological obsolescence, and the demand to maintain long-term data integrity (Hajtnik, 2019; Mkadmi, 2021). In addition, unclear policies and limited training reduce the quality of archival management (Bajwa & Rafiq, 2025; Hansen & Sundqvist, 2016; Luyombya et al., 2023). Archives are also frequently perceived as passive documents with little relevance (Bajwa & Rafiq, 2025; Todd-Diaz, 2023).

### **Unequal Understanding of the Records Life Cycle**

In my experience, many staff members, even faculty archivists, do not fully understand the records life cycle. As a result, records accumulate because staff are afraid to dispose of them, or office spaces become “clean” without clarity about where the records have been relocated. When units transfer records to the university archives, they often arrive in disorganized condition: without inventories or with metadatas that do not meet standards. Consequently, central archivists are forced to handle records tasks instead of focusing on archival records.

### **Space, Budget, and Governance**

Archives often become victims of space governance: they are relocated when rooms

are needed for other purposes, and sometimes stored in emergency spaces such as warehouses shared with damaged items. Unclear archival responsibilities also remain problematic: many faculties lack dedicated archival staff, records management is assigned to administrative staff without training, and personnel turnover is frequent. The organizational structure of archival units (Processing Unit and Archiving Unit) is also not well understood.

### **The Emotional and Professional Burden of Archivists**

I have come to realize that the work of an archivist is not merely administrative; it also involves emotional and moral burdens, especially when records are neglected, scattered, or threatened by deterioration. The archival profession has yet to gain appropriate recognition within academic ecosystems. Stereotypes of archivists as passive figures reinforce negative perceptions (Pearson, 2022). Archivists' roles are often equated with other professions despite differing responsibilities (Kearns & Rinehart, 2011; Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2017). Archivists must also demonstrate contributions that are not immediately visible (Ataman, 2009) and balance theoretical principles with practical realities (O'Meara & Tuomala, 2012). Yet archivists play critical roles in ethics and advocacy, including accountability, transparency, and social justice (Cline, 2009; Jimerson, 2007), as well as educational roles that are not always recognized as such (Fic, 2018; Krause, 2010).

### **Waves of Technology and Uneven Transformation**

Archival digitization faces global challenges such as software and hardware obsolescence and semantic drift (Caerols Mateo, 2025), metadata costs and intellectual property issues (Tibbo, 2003), limited infrastructure (Bishi, 2015; Ngongo et al., 2023), and the need for political legitimacy, funding, frameworks, and supporting tools (Novák et al., 2023). Storage systems also often struggle to manage large volumes of data efficiently (Khan, 2013; Wang et al., 2011; Yaya & Bi-Geng, 2020).

In my experience in Indonesia, electronic correspondence systems began to emerge around 2007, but they were often developed without fundamental archival principles: applications changed frequently, training was

minimal, and responsibilities were still assigned to non-archival staff. Digital records were stored without metadata or quality control, rendering them ineffective as evidence and institutional memory.

**Table 1. Summary of the Gap Between Archival Concepts and Institutional Reality**

Theme	Key Point
Concept vs. Reality Gap	Archives are conceptually powerful and meaningful, but in universities they are often treated as mere compliance documents.
Archives as Assets	Archives create informational, cultural, strategic, and economic value; they support accountability, transparency, reform, and institutional reputation.
Archives as Burdens	Digitization and governance bring high costs, risks, and workload; archives are often seen as passive and irrelevant.
Weak Records Life Cycle Understanding	Staff often misunderstand records life cycle, causing accumulation, unclear relocation, and poor transfers without proper inventories/metadata.
Space, Budget, and Governance Issues	Limited space, funding, infrastructure, and trained staff lead to unstable storage, unclear responsibilities, and weak organizational structure.
Archivists' Emotional & Professional Burden	Archivists carry moral and emotional pressure, face stereotypes, and struggle for recognition despite their ethical and advocacy roles.
Uneven Digital Transformation	Obsolescence, metadata costs, infrastructure limits, and big-data storage challenges slow sustainable digitization.
Indonesian Context (Experience-Based)	Early e-correspondence systems often lacked archival principles, with minimal training and weak metadata/quality control, reducing record reliability.

These reflective findings suggest that archives exist in a constant tension between grand concepts (power, memory, identity, and institutional assets) and institutional realities (administration, budget burdens, space constraints, and negative perceptions). Within power frameworks, archives may reinforce elite dominance and control historical narratives (Poncet, 2025), as also emphasized by Jimerson (2003) and Millar (2006). Archives may function as tools of administration, data protection, and even citizen surveillance (Poncet, 2025), and they carry symbolic value in shaping national identity (Rydén, 2023). In broader socio-political

contexts, archives become arenas of contested ideas and rhetorical instruments in debates about identity and social justice (Houdek, 2016).

Yet within universities, archives are often considered important only when needed for audits, disputes, or specific institutional interests. Outside such moments, archives become “unimportant” in everyday practice. This is the institutional paradox: archives are celebrated in discourse but neglected in implementation.

Therefore, transforming archival management requires more deliberate institutional strategies. Pacios and Ramos (2021) emphasize the need for strategic archival planning aligned with institutional missions and publicly communicated to foster transparency and accountability. Strategies to build an archival culture may include promoting cultural heritage (Sawagvudcharee, 2024) and developing collective archival compilations that encourage active public participation (Volberg, 2024).

Improving archival human resource capacity is also essential. Archivist recruitment should consider both academic background and practical experience (Packalén & Partanen, 2024). Continuous learning on emerging technologies such as AI and machine learning is necessary to address digital archival challenges (Hernandez et al., 2024), along with certification programs to strengthen professionalism (Dominick et al., 2024). Moreover, collaborative and participatory approaches should be reinforced through multi-stakeholder engagement in cultural heritage governance (Cruz, 2024) and through understanding participation regimes that influence the effectiveness of archival institutions (Huvila, 2024).

## CONCLUSION

Two decades of archival practice have taught me that archives are not merely dormant documents that accumulate and are preserved indefinitely. The ultimate purpose of archiving is not simply to ensure the survival of records, but to enable archives to be used optimally in support of education, research, and community engagement. This reflection confirms that the archival management paradigm must shift from burden to strategic asset. Archives can only become assets when they are treated as part of an institution’s identity, rather than as incidental by-products of administrative

work. Such transformation requires concrete actions, time, patience, consistency, stronger policies, continuous competency development, appropriate technology adoption, and collaborative engagement across all stakeholders. To safeguard archives is to safeguard the story and soul of an institution; from the records of the past, archives weave foundations and hopes for generations to come.

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