PARBICA Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit – Interview with Eric Boamah

Eric Boamah is a Lecturer in Information and Library Studies at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.

He worked in Ghana as a trained teacher for many years after obtaining his Teacher's Certificate 'A' from Wesley College of Education in 1998. He is currently a co-secretary of ICA Section for Education and Training - SAE and the web administrator of the group's website. He was one of ICA's Flying Reporters in the 2012 ICA Congress in Brisbane, Australia. Eric had his First Degree in Information Studies with Linguistics from the University of Ghana in 2005.

He received a European Union Erasmus Mundus Scholarship to complete his Master's Degree in Digital Library Learning, with a consortium of three European Universities; Oslo/Arkeshus University College, Norway; Tallinn University, Estonia and Parma University, Italy, in 2009.

In the same year, Eric received a Vice Chancellor's Strategic Research Scholarship to undertake his PhD with Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Eric's PhD study explored contextual factors influencing the management and preservation of digital cultural heritage resources in Ghana, which falls in the broader area of digital preservation and cultural heritage. He has presented different topics in this area of his research interest in numerous conferences. Other areas of Eric's research interest include information literacy, social informatics, information culture, electronic records management and the information industry.

Eric recently spoke to PARBICA about how he moved from teaching in a school in rural Ghana to working in information management in New Zealand. He also spoke to us about the challenges facing information management professionals in the Pacific and Africa.

Eric, how did you start to work in information management?

My career in information management started in Ghana. I worked as a trained teacher in some Ghanaian villages for a couple of years. In 1998, I was posted to Tontokrom - a small cocoa farming village, deep in one of the forest areas of Amansie West District of Ghana – where I worked as a class teacher in a Roman Catholic primary school. In 1999, I transferred to another village - Ampabame II Roman Catholic primary school as a class teacher.

At Ampabame II primary school, I was given the additional responsibility of looking after the children's reading sessions. The school did not have a library building but there were some donated books in metal boxes, stored in the head-teacher's office.

When it was time for reading for a class, I would bring out the box containing the books for that class and sit under the shade of a tree near the office to do the class reading with the children. Usually, I would read a chapter and the class would read after me. After some time, the children silently read on their own then I would ask questions from the passage they had read. Doing the reading under trees made it look a bit informal and the children loved it.

Some of the books had traditional stories so I included songs in the reading sessions so it was like the traditional way of telling stories just as it was done at the homes of the kids.

This made the children enjoy the reading sessions. The books were only for children from class 4 to 6. Those in lower primary (class 3 to 1) did not have books but wanted to be part of the reading sessions because of the singing. Sometimes some of the children in lower primary would come and stand nearby to enjoy the songs and the fun the other children were having with the reading.

I designed a reading time for the lower primary kids too. But because they did not have books for kids in lower primary, I made them read physical objects they saw in the environment, like a tree, stone, sky, air, sun, cars, and house, just anything. Then after pronouncing the names of as many objects as they can see, they would discuss those objects and make a song around them. The head-teacher of Ampabame II was pleased to see this and reported it to the district education office. In the next school term, the education office sent some used books for me to use with the kids in lower primary too.

When the head-teacher saw that the reading sessions were developing well and the children were becoming more interested, she recommended me for a *Reading for Children* training workshop, which was organised for primary school teachers by the Ghana Book Trust in August 2000.

This workshop opened the door to my future career as an information management professional today.

While the workshop helped me attain initial skills and knowledge on teaching reading to kids and organising the library for school children, it also opened some networking opportunities with some influential personalities in the field in Ghana. At the workshop, I met Mr Samuel Nii Bekoe Tackie, who was a lecturer at the then Department of Library and Archival Studies, University of Ghana (now Department of Information Studies). I also met Mr Seth Edekor, who was the then Director of the Ashanti Library and later became the Director of the Ghana Library Board, and Mr S. Insadoo, who was the then chairman of the Ghana Library Association. My connection with these people, which started very modestly at a rural workshop, provided a very strong foundation to build my information management career in Ghana and now worldwide. Since meeting at the workshop, I have worked on different projects in Ghana, either with these leaders of the field in the country or with their help and support.

In 2001, with the help of Mr Tackie, I was admitted into the University of Ghana to undertake my first degree in Information Studies, Linguistics, Russian Language and Archaeology. I completed this with a First Class Honours in Information Studies as my major and a Linguistic minor. Mr Tackie mentored me throughout my university education. After my first degree, I went back to Wesley College of Education to work as a College Librarian from 2005 to 2007.

In August 2007, I received a European Union Erasmus Mundus Scholarship to undertake a Masters of Arts in *Digital Library Learning (DILL)*, with a consortium of three European Universities; Oslo/Arkeshus University College, Norway; Tallinn University, Estonia; and Parma University, Italy, completing in 2009. The DILL programme was very rich in terms of educational, inter-cultural, technological, travel and people experiences. I was part of the first cohort of the programme, which included 18 students from 16 different countries in

Africa, Australia, Canada, United States, Asia, India, Middle East and Europe. I was the student representative for our group.

While completing the DILL programme in June 2009, I received a Vice Chancellor's Strategic Research Scholarship to undertake my PhD with Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Before taking up this scholarship in New Zealand in February 2010, I took 6 months' leave to spend some time with family in Ghana. My PhD research explored contextual factors influencing the management and preservation of digital cultural heritage resources in Ghana. This topic falls within the broader area of digital preservation and cultural heritage.

In 2013, I received a Victoria University PhD completion scholarship for completing my PhD within three years. In that same year, I gained employment with the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand as a lecturer. There I teach courses in Information literacy, social informatics, electronic documents and records management, principles of records management, information industry and digital asset management, which are also the areas of my research interest. In addition to my research in these areas, I am involved in various reviews of programmes and articles and books in different journals and programmes.

I really enjoy this profession and sharing my views and perspectives through various publications and presentations at conferences and workshops. I'm currently involved in a major research projects in Information Culture Analysis, including other academics from Monash University in Australia, the University of British Columbia in Canada and Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

What makes you passionate about information management?

A passion for reading, writing and telling stories drove me into the information management profession. My passion for information management stems from the way I value information. I see information as the most powerful tool in the world. I believe that having the right, timely, authentic and accurate information means you are stronger and better equipped to face life's challenges than if you had all other resources, but inadequate information to help you put those resources into appropriate use.

From my perspective, the need to be able to identify, access, evaluate and use the right information at the right time in our modern world of fast developing digital technologies, cannot be over-emphasised. The most successful people in such a world are those who know what information they need and can effectively use it for their purposes.

An important aspect of information management that I am very passionate about, relates to how people can understand the need to record the information they use today so that society can be able to use it again for other purposes in the future. Identifying and using information is just part of the information management process. Keeping records on the information we use relating to our daily activities today can provide useful evidence to save all of our other resources, including our lives and properties.

My passion is for everybody to understand the usefulness of information in our present daily lives and follow proper procedure to identify useful ones as records, preserve them as a valuable asset and the memory of what we do today. This will help us to avoid gaps in our future memory.

What do you think are the most important issues facing archives and records management at the moment?

There are many challenges and issues that confront information and records management profession. Most experts have discussed the various challenges, with a focus on *resources* such as inadequate funds, inadequate skilled personnel, inadequate tools and equipment, in adequate collaboration and support, just to mention a few. But to me, the most important issues facing archives and records management at the moment go beyond the lack of resources. They are *attitudinal issues*. The attitudes of stakeholders in the archives and records management influence all the other issues facing the field. For instance, an institution or a government may have some money which they need to plan their activities with. But because their interest may not be in the archives and records management area, they will not prioritise archives and records management to get some of the 'limited available funds'. They will rather spend the money on other areas of priority to them. In such an instance, the real issue is not that the institutions lack or has inadequate funding. The issue is actually lack of interest, which is an attitudinal issue rather than a resource one.

Also, the archive and records management field is full of professionals having conflicting ideas and power struggle among themselves. To give one example, let's look at a situation in Ghana. I found as part of my PhD study that Ghana hasn't got a national library. The institution responsible for public libraries services is the Ghana Library Board (GLB). There is also the Ghana Library Authority (GLA), which performs a similar function to GLB. The institution responsible for Ghana's archival records is a Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD). Although the structuring and arrangement, including the naming of these institutions, bring their own challenges, the professionals within these institutions do not agree on their ideas to move the profession forward. For instance, the Ghana government requested the leaders of these institutions to present a proposal on how the country can establish a national library. But, because the views of the leaders from the GLB conflicts with that of the leaders of GLA, the discussion is now on which institution is superior to present the proposal to the government. As a result, the real issue of a need for a national library has been forgotten and energies are being channelled to fight for authority and supremacy. The same issue of power struggle is affecting how PRAAD can present its grievances to the Ghana government to attract interest and support. The government is therefore looking at other areas with its limited resources. Thus, in this situation, the information management profession is suffering not because there is no money or resources, but because its professionals are fighting for power and authority to the neglect of the real need of the industry.

The same power struggle situation can also be seen in some New Zealand information institutions. In New Zealand, the struggle is between information technology and information management professionals. The information management professionals complain that information technology professionals perceives themselves to be superior and do not want those from the information management field to see what they do, yet they can both collaborate to make information management work effectively. Such attitudes do not enhance effective collaboration, which is very important to achieve success in information management projects.

There is also a lack of respect for the archives and records management profession among stakeholders. In Ghana, for instance, many institutions do not regard the records and information management section. In one particular institution, the records office is a small room, which has been created with space beneath a staircase and to make the situation worse, when a staff member proves to be stubborn or recalcitrant, that staff is punished with a transfer from their section to the records office within that organisation. Using the records office as a punishment for bad staff members says a lot about the respect this institution has for the archives and records profession or role.

What do you think are the biggest challenges and opportunities faced by archivists and records managers in the Pacific and Africa?

The biggest challenge facing archivists and records managers in Africa and the Pacific region is more political than strategic or resources issues. Some countries that have achieved progress in archives and records management started with the development of clear policies and the implementation of strategies. Policies and strategies guide the effective application of resources to achieve goals in records management. So, on the face of it, one would easily think that archives and record management in Africa and Pacific region are not progressing because they do not have effective policies and strategies in place or maybe they do not have enough resources. But that is just a small aspect of the challenge. The real issue - which can also relate to the attitudinal issues discussed above - is political.

Why countries in Africa and the Pacific region do not have effective policies and strategies in place, you ask? It is because the government and key decision makers do not feel comfortable in an environment where there are working policies and strategies. The essence of effective recordkeeping is to ensure that needed records are available as and when required, to provide evidence of transactions, both within private and national institutions to enable accountability and good governance. But many governments are not willing to avail themselves to be made accountable. So, government, decision makers, opinion leaders, managers and heads of institution do not pay proper attention to the archives and records management field.

There are also opportunities for archives and records management field in both Africa and the Pacific. Most institutions in these areas have the opportunity to collaborate with other institutions. For instance, the National Archive of Fiji has had some collaborative activities with the National Archives of Australia and some other private institutions in Australia, which helps to preserve the digital records of Fiji. National archives of most countries in Africa have different projects going on, which are being supported by the national archives of countries from the West. These archival authorities or institutions also provide training programmes either by sending their experts to deliver training or offering opportunities for key staff members to obtain training abroad. Examples include the ICA Africa Programme, Digital Curation Programme and the PARBICA Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit. All these collaboration and training support programmes provide opportunities for archives and records management in countries in Africa and the Pacific region.