Digital Records Curation Programme

Week 9:
Providing Access: Description and Indexing

Week 8 Recap

What did you learn?

- Class on Planning for Digitisation
- Group Work – Digitisation Decision Tree

Online exhibitions task feedback

Week 9 Learning outcomes:

At the end of this class you will be able to:

- understand what archival description is for
- understand how descriptive standards have evolved and how they can be used
- apply ISAD(G) and EAD at a basic level

What is description for?

Role and outcome of **good** documentation and description supports....

1. Records
   - Represents and validates both context and content – maintains 'recordness'
   - Demonstrates that certain required actions on the records/ archives have taken place (accountability)

2. Users
   - Facilitates retrieval of information for many purposes
   - Helps users understand content and context (including record-keeping context)
   - Enables information to be retrieved in a more consistent manner (because it has been described in a consistent way)

3. Record-keepers
   - Assists in the organisation and management of records/ archives
   - Promotes and complies with standards (professionalism)
   - Facilitates awareness and sharing

Description in practice

- Be concise: succinct description should be used to inform users via the shortest route possible

- Supply only sufficient information to enable the user to identify material of possible relevance to their research (& at right level and depth of description)

- Exception – items in foreign languages

- Cater for broad areas of research by being aware of current use of similar material and changing research interests

Description in practice (continued)

- Be objective

- Do not privilege certain types of users

- Yeo – description is always 'beta' (can always be improved or enriched)

- Some description elements cannot be shared with users

Descriptive standards

Standards and Standardization

Benefits of record-keeping standards

- Consistency } limits
- Control } variation
- Facilitates access
- Supports best practice
- Efficiency (not reinventing, saving time & money)
- Enables data exchange
- Allows creation of single gateways to multiple collections/repositories

General International Standard Archival Description - ISAD(G)

- Developed by the ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards
- Based on analysis of existing catalogues and national standards (especially Canada's RAD)
- First published 1994; second edition 2000
- Fundamental rules
  - Description from the general (fonds) to the specific (item)
  - Information relevant to the level of description
  - Linking of descriptions
  - Non-repetition of information
- 26 elements

Levels of description

ISAD(G)
Fonds
Sub-fonds
Series
File
Item

Essential elements

- Reference code
- Title
- Creator
- Date(s)
- Extent of the unit of description
- Level of description

Problems with ISAD(G)

- Based on existing (paper) catalogues and paper archives – arguably outdated in an electronic environment
- Based on archival material – uses a life-cycle model
- Aim was data exchange – did not define archival description
- Very (too?) flexible
- Levels not adequately explained (function as sub-fonds or series?)
- Difficult to handle orphaned material (e.g. files and items without series)
- Creator/author issue
- Non-repetition rule
- Focus on content not context or structure

The solution? RiC-CM

- Created by an 'expert group' established in 2012
- Aims
  - To unify the ICA 'family' of standards
  - To address problems identified with ISAD(G), practical and theoretical
  - To create a truly international standard
  - 'RiC is intended to enable archivists to improve archival description, to make it better.'
- Draft version published 2016, final version expected 2021
- Based on 'entities' with 'properties' and 'relations'
- RiC-O (ontology) has also been drafted – using W3C standard OWL to create descriptions using Linked Open Data

RiC entities

Data category type	No	Example data category	Definition	Example
Entity	22	Record Set	One or more records that are associated by categorization and/or physical aggregation by the creator or other Agent responsible for preserving the creator's records	• Cotton Manuscripts Collection • Papers of the Earls of Liverpool • Official correspondence of the 1st Earl of Liverpool
attributes	41	Physical Characteristics	Information about the physical features of the Instantiation	• Carrier heavily foxed • Emulsion flaking • Watermarked • British Library binding
relation types	78	Contains	Connects a Place to a region within	The French Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region contains the French Ain département
attributes of relations	5	Date	The date or date range when the Relation occurred	No examples given, but allows for the description of territory which has fallen under different jurisdictions

Individual Work – ISAD(G) Description

Use the ISAD(G) template to describe the sample record provided.

Encoded Archival Description

Encoded Archival Description

'A set of rules for designating the intellectual and physical parts of archival finding aids so that the information contained therein may be searched, retrieved, displayed, and exchanged in a predictable platform-independent manner.'

EAD Tag Library

Encoded Archival Description - EAD

- Developed through a project by Berkeley SAA and Library of Congress
- First version published 1998; second version 2002; third version 2015
- An XML DTD (document type definition) developed for archival description
- Compatible with ISAD(G) – but not the same
- Aims to
  - Make finding aids available on the web in a standardised and structured format
  - Enable cataloguing information to be presented in varied ways
  - Enable data to be shared between repositories; allowing for the creation of single access points for multiple repositories and 'virtual fonds'
- EAD works with 'tags' - Tag Library: http://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/TagLibrary-VersionEAD3.pdf

Mark-up language

- Standard Generalised Markup Language
(1) defines syntax – that markup is by tags
<bold>**Bold**</bold>
(2) defines which tags are allowed
(3) defines how they are to be used
Standardised by ISO 8879:1986
Open source and platform independent
but not well-suited to a web environment

- Hyper Text Markup Language

- eXtensible Markup Language
  - EAD v.3 is a non-proprietary (open source) XML schema

Encoded Archival Context - EAC

- Developed by an SAA working group
- Draft schema published 2010; current version published 2014
- An XML DTD for description of archive creators, to be used alongside EAD
- Aims to provide greater contextual information about creators by
  - Separating the description of *records* from the description of *people*
  - Including detail about biographical or administrative history, creators' activities and responsibilities, and other names by which they were known
- Although ostensibly for 'creators' it could be used for indexing content
- Tag library: http://eac.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/fileadmin/user_upload/schema/cpfTagLibrary.html

Group work – EAD (20 – 30 minutes)

- Work in groups to describe two records using EAD

Summary

- Archival description underpins discovery by researchers, helps researchers to understand the records and supports global management of the archives by archivists

- Descriptive standards embody agreed professional principles and practice at an international level – they ensure consistency and provide a benchmark for quality

- ISAD(G) together with EAD allow us to share our archival description around the world

- We must maintain awareness of developments in archival description standards

Any questions?