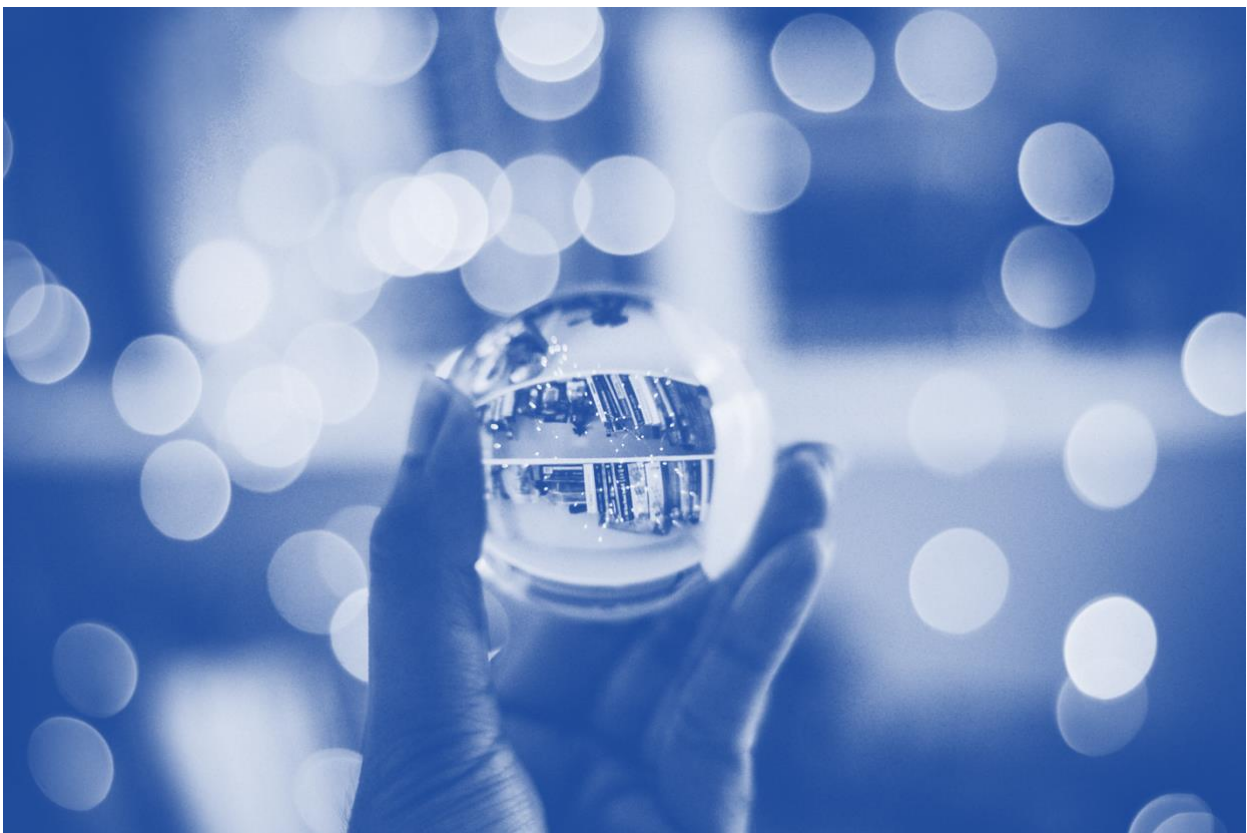


Archival Arrangement & Description: Global Practices



Report on the survey undertaken by the ICA Training Programme, with a foreword by the ICA President.



International Council on Archives
Conseil International des Archives

ICA Training Programme

Foreword

We're pleased to share the results of ICA's recent survey on archival description. The survey sought the views of people working in archives around the world (both ICA members and non-members), and we are delighted to see a consensus on the importance and usefulness of archival standards.

However, it is clear that there is work to do to support the archival community in implementing standards. We are using the survey results to inform our work including a new Arranging and Describing Archives online course. The new course will help ensure more people have the practical skills and knowledge to increase the quality and quantity of archival descriptions.

At ICA, we are committed to ensuring our standards are relevant and useful. The ICA's Expert Group on Archival Description is working on a new standard, Records in Contexts, to ensure our standards are fit for tomorrow's archives. The survey responses echo ICA's own view that there needs to be greater practical support to the global archival community if we are to maximise the impact and investment in standards as they evolve.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to share your practices through our survey. We value the findings and will use these to inform our work to empower archives and the people who care for them.

ICA's online learning platform is open to members and non-members. For the latest courses visit ica.org/training-programme

David Fricker
President, August 2021

Archival Arrangement and Description: Global Practices

This report documents and analyses the results of a survey on archival arrangement and description around the world. The survey was undertaken to inform ICA's arrangement and description online learning course that is currently being developed by the principal author as part of the ICA Training Programme. The survey results provide a picture of global practice with particular respect to tools, the adoption of standards and the challenges faced by archive practitioners.

Background

The ICA learning module on archival arrangement and description is being designed to supplement, rather than replicate, existing education and skills provision that is available to people working in archives. In particular the course is aimed at ICA members and others who do not have access to university education in archives and records management. Understanding 'real life' practices and challenges around the world is fundamental to meeting this need, and a survey was devised and promoted to people working in archives in order to better understand current practices and challenges. This report shares the key findings of the survey.

The survey was built using [SurveyMonkey](#) (with an offline version available on request) and issued in English, French and Spanish languages. The English and French language versions closed on 30 April 2020, the Spanish language version, 10 May 2020.

Results

The survey received over 250 responses from over 60 countries¹, providing a picture of archival arrangement and description around the world.

How much of the world's archives are fully described?

Respondents were asked to indicate how much of their archives are fully described.² The most common response was 'Up to 50% archives have basic descriptions only' (29%). A quarter of respondents indicated that 'Up to 80% archives are fully described' (25%) and a further quarter 'Up to 50% archives are fully described' (24%). At the far ends of the spectrum, 3% indicated that 'No archives have descriptions' and a further 3% that 'All archives are fully described'.

¹ For demographic analysis see Appendix B: Survey respondents. However, the data supplied is insufficient data to provide analysis at ICA regional level, beyond the examples provided in this report.

² Q2. How much of your archive is fully described? (Select one answer only; 249 respondents.)

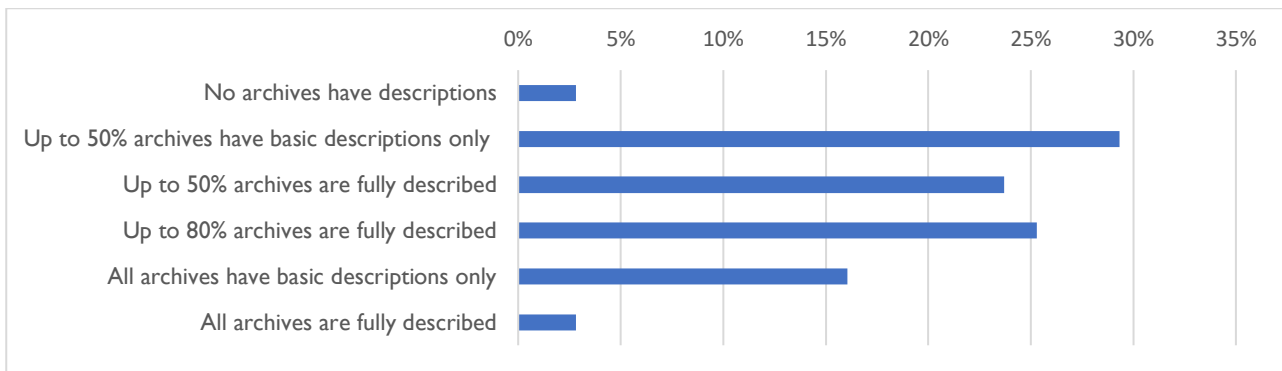


Chart I: How much of your archive is fully described? (Q2)

Respondents that offered a definition of what ‘fully described’ meant to them, predominately agreed that this implied a detail to file level or below (89%). A common note was that ‘fully described’ meant different things for different formats e.g. photographic items required item-level descriptions. However, this consensus was not demonstrated in practice, with the percentage of respondents citing that they described to series, file and item-levels each at 24%.

Despite the wide range in reported completeness of description, 45% of respondents indicated that their archive has an online catalogue.

Further analysis of the results can largely be framed around three key themes – tools, adoption of standards, and challenges.

- **Tools 1: Excel and AtoM are dominant in a fragmented landscape**

There is a vast array of different IT tools being used for archival description. Excel and AtoM are the most dominant this fragmented landscape being used by 16% and 12% of respondents respectively.³

Respondents cited 340 different systems (excluding MS Office, bespoke/in-house, and manual/paper-based). This is 13 times the 25 systems identified in the last ICA market survey in 2003⁴ (although that report excluded for example library systems that would not have met the ICA market survey criteria).

- **Tools 2: People are still relying on manual and word-processing systems**

A quarter (26%) of respondents are reliant on manual or word-processing systems for all or part of their archival description. This is a cause for concern, given the limitations and inefficiencies of these as tools when trying to adopt ICA standards.

³ Q1. Which digital or manual tools do you use to manage and describe your archives? This might include software you use, finding aids in hard-copy only etc. (Free text, 249 responses.)

⁴ https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/ICA_Study-12-Survey-of-archival-management-software_EN.pdf (last accessed 6 July 2020)

- **Standards 1: People think standards are important and useful...**

87% of respondents state that standards are 'very or extremely important, and 84% say that standards are 'very or extremely useful'.⁵

This trend is global, and, as chart 2 demonstrates, in four ICA regions 100% of respondents believe that standards are both very/extremely important and very/extremely useful.

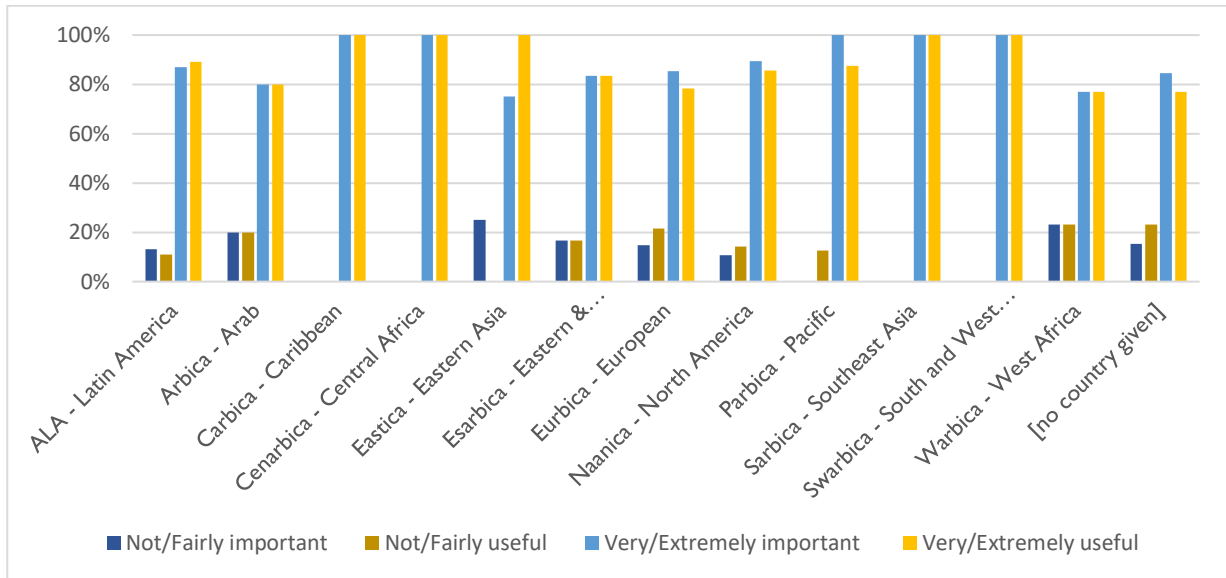


Chart 2: How important and useful are standards? (Q5&6, select one only, 232 responses.)

Just 3% of respondents state that standards are not important, or not useful. Analysis of comments indicate perhaps a lack of understanding of standards e.g. *'they are not important as we do not have trained archivists'*, *'they are not useful as we do not use them'*, *'the files are not organised like that'* etc. Unsurprisingly, people who say standards are not important or useful, typically indicate a low level of adoption. There is a high, but not exclusive, cross-over of people who believe standards are neither important nor useful.

- **Standards 2: ...but adoption of standards is low**

Respondents were asked how far the ICA standards ISAD(G), ISDF, ISAAR (CPF) and ISDIAH had been implemented in their work,⁶ and 58% of respondents indicated that they were 'Not adopted at all', or 'Adopted in theory, but not begun to be implemented'.

The most widely adopted standard was ISAD(G), with 54% of respondents indicating that within their archive this standard was 'Mostly implemented; up to 80% of descriptions meet standard', 'Implemented for all archives that have descriptions', or

⁵ Q5. When you are describing archives, how important are standards? (Select one only, 232 responses) and Q6 When you are describing archives, how useful are standards? (Select one only, 232 responses)

⁶ Q7. How far are these standards implemented in your archive (Select one of seven statements for each of four standards – ISAD(G) (232 responses), ISDF (227), ISAAR (CPF) (228), and ISDIAH, (229)

'Fully implemented - all archives held meet this description'. Yet, this still leaves 46% of all respondents reporting that ISAD(G) is implemented for less than half of the collection.

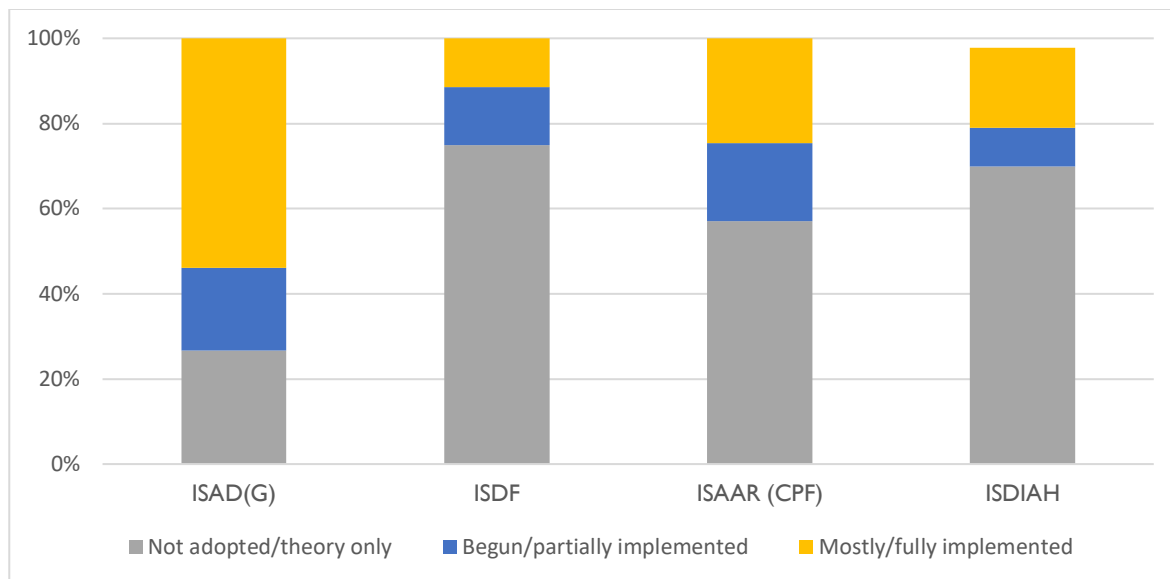


Chart 3: How far are these standards implemented in your archive? (Q7)

People were asked 'What other standards do you use to describe your archives?' (Q7), and 82 respondents identified 52 different standards. Notably, there were 48 references to national/regional standards and 22 references to technical/exchange formats. There were also references to standards that are not concerned with archival description (17 references to records management, quality and library standards), and six references to superseded standards.

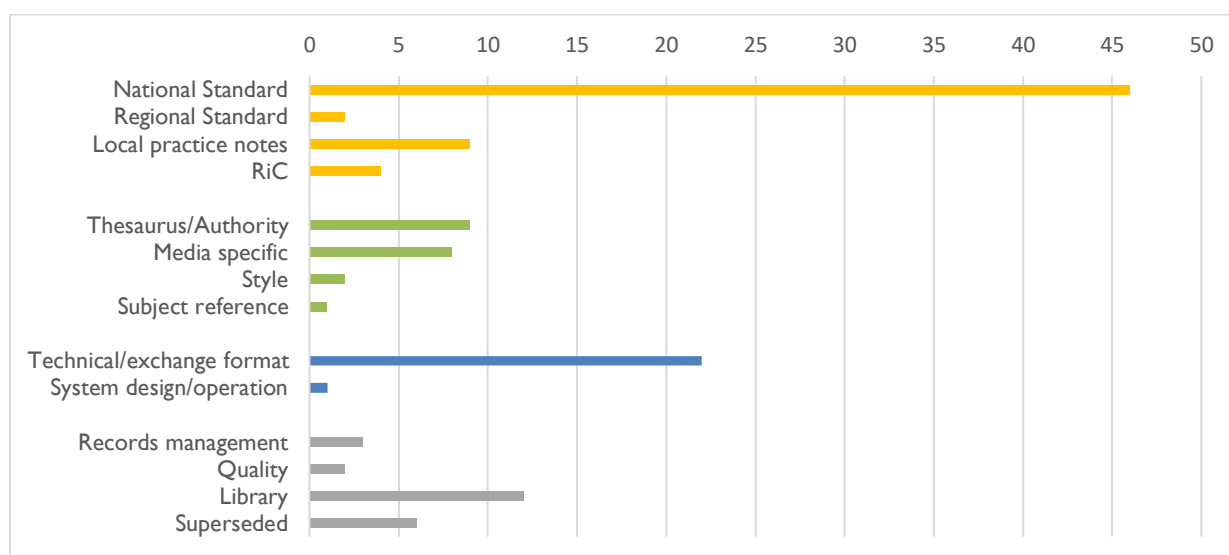


Chart 4: 'What other standards do you use to describe your archives?' (Q7)

The relationships between the adoption of standards and the extent to which they are considered to be useful and/or important is complex and difficult to represent

visually. However, a word cloud (chart 4 - the most frequent responses appear as the largest sized text) allows us to see the more popular responses.



Chart 5: Data visualization of statements indicating how important, how useful and how far adopted archival description standards are. (Questions 5, 6 & 7, 227-232 responses).

- Challenges 1: More expertise is required for describing and arranging archives**
 The biggest challenge identified with regard to describing and arranging archives is professional knowledge/professionalised processes as indicated by 29% of respondents.⁷ This includes issues around implementing standards, localised guidelines, consistency, and skills in describing and arranging archives.

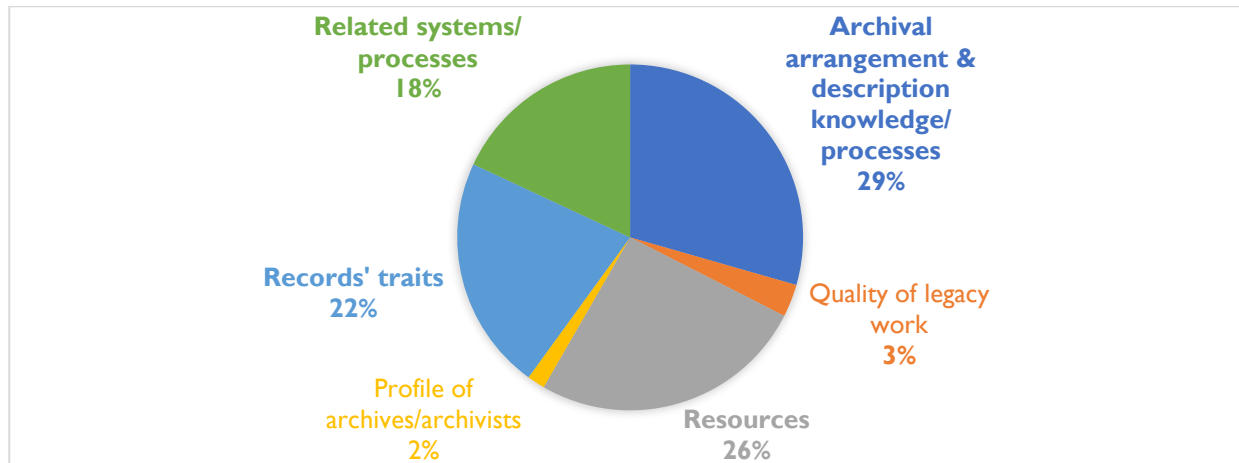


Chart 6: What is the biggest challenge that you and your colleagues face when describing archives? (Summary)

⁷ Q4: What is the biggest challenge that you and your colleagues are face when describing archives? (Analysis of 232 free text responses)

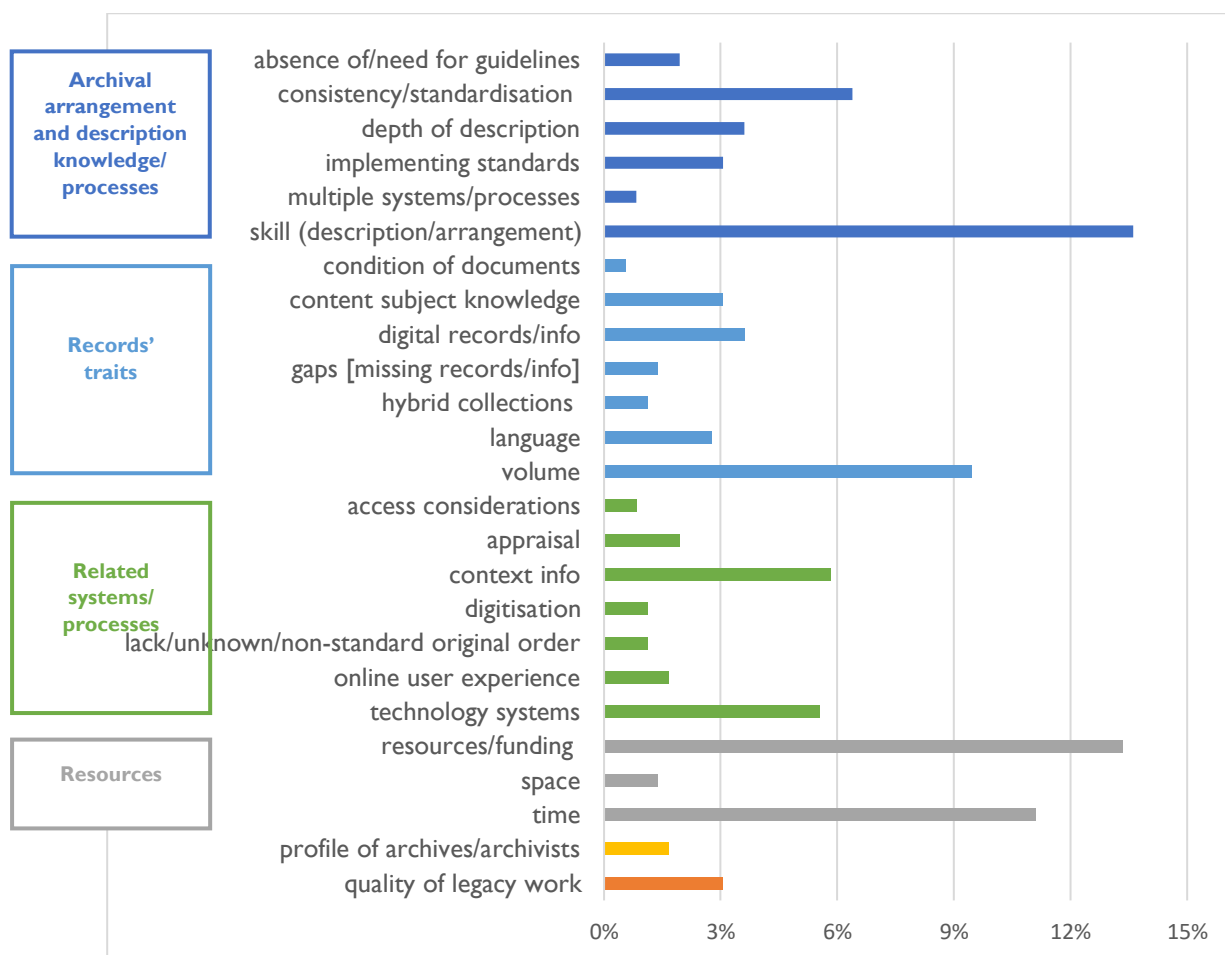


Chart 7: What is the biggest challenge that you and your colleagues face when describing archives? (Detail)

- Challenges 2: Challenges are interlinked and extend beyond the arrangement and description function**

Along with professional knowledge and professionalisation of processes, three other key challenges are apparent. Resources (26%), records' intrinsic qualities, such as formats, language, volume (22%), and other processes outside of, but related to, archival arrangement and description (18%, including appraisal, technology systems, and provision of context information) can also be identified as important challenges. Whilst these challenges all impact on the work of arrangement and description (resources being a key issue for tools, for example), they are distinct from them.

Next steps and wider considerations

The survey provides useful insight that will inform the development of the ICA online learning course on archival arrangement and description. There are clearly key issues that need to be considered if we are to improve the quantity and quality of archival arrangement and description. Particularly, for example in relation to the tools, the specific challenges of digital/hybrid collections, and global representation, as identified from this analysis.

The rate of adoption of standards is cause for reflection, particularly considering that none of the standards asked about in the survey are new. The oldest, ISAD(G), was first published in 1994 (second edition published in 2000). Even the most recent, ISDIAH, was published over 10 years ago, in 2008. There is a disconnect between the value people place on standards in theory and the implementation of standards in practice.⁸ Perhaps it is unclear to people what the ICA expects them to do with standards. Clarity on this ambition, once articulated, could be usefully included in the ICA online learning course on Archival Arrangement and Description. The ensuing discussion is also likely to have implications for developing, and supporting implementation of, standards in the future, in particular ICA Records in Contexts, the new archival description standard due to be published soon.

The survey received over 250 responses and provides strong indicators for archival arrangement and description globally. However, the responses provide insufficient data to discern trends within or between ICA regions with confidence. ICA regions may wish to repeat the survey in more depth locally.⁹

The ICA's online archival arrangement and description course will go some way to support the global body of professional knowledge and expertise, and work towards the elimination of the key challenge identified. The other challenges give further insight to the skills and experiences needed to manage archives effectively.

Acknowledgements

We are thankful to all respondents in providing such useful and candid insights. We are also grateful to the translators and language advisors, the ICA's communications team and everyone in PCOM who helped the survey reach a wide audience and obtain the responses which have enabled this analytical report.

Siân Wynn-Jones & Margaret Crockett
9 July 2020



⁸ 87% of respondents state that standards are 'Very' or 'Extremely important' vs 58% of respondents indicating that standards are 'Not adopted at all', or 'Adopted in theory, but not begun to be implemented'

⁹ Survey questions (English language) are provided in Appendix A. (French and Spanish language versions are available on request from the report's authors.)

Survey Methodology

Survey schedule and timing

The archival arrangement and description survey was soft-launched at the ICA's Designing the Archive conference in Adelaide in October 2019, where it was shared with a number of people who were identified during networking conversations with the principal author. Following the conference, the survey was translated into French and Spanish by Dr Claude Roberto and Maria Paula Garcia Mosquera respectively, to ensure a wider representation of responses. In March/April 2020, the survey was promoted directly to ICA members and network through the ICA website and social media channels, direct emails to the Programme Commission (PCOM) network, and through the ICA list-serve.

The English and French language versions closed on 30 April 2020, the Spanish language version, 10 May 2020. Kolya Abramsky assisted with translation of responses in Spanish.

Survey design and analysis

The survey was designed to seek a mix of quantitative and qualitative responses over 10 questions divided into three parts 1) Tools for archival description, 2) Standards for archival description and 3) About you. It was developed and shared using [Survey Monkey](#), with a separate survey for each language version.

The questions were:

Part 1: Tools for archival description

1. Which digital or manual tools do you use to manage and describe your archives?
This might include software you use, finding aids in hard-copy etc
[mandatory, free text]

2. How much of your archive is fully described?
[mandatory, select one only]
 - No archives have descriptions
 - Up to 50% archives have basic descriptions only
 - Up to 50% archives are fully described
 - Up to 80% archives are fully described
 - All archives have basic descriptions only
 - All archives are fully described

Please tell us more about how much of your archive is described, for example any strategies or guidance for describing archives that you have in place, to what level of detail does 'fully described' mean in your archive (to fonds/series/file/item) etc
[free text]

3. Is your archive catalogue online and available to be searched by the general public?

[select one only]

- Yes
- No

Please tell us more, for example, the website address, how much of the archive the catalogue represents.

[free text]

4. What is the biggest challenge you and your colleagues face when describing archives?

[free text]

Part 2: Standards for archival description

5. When you are describing archives, how important are standards?

[mandatory, select one only]

- Not important
- Fairly important
- Very important
- Extremely important

Please tell us why you chose this ranking

[free text]

6. When you are describing archives, how useful are standards?

[mandatory, select one only]

- Not useful
- Fairly useful
- Very useful
- Extremely useful

Please tell us why you chose this ranking

[free text]

7. How far are these standards implemented in your archive?

> ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description

> ISDF: International Standard for Describing Functions

> ISAAR(CPF): International Standards Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families

> ISDIAH: International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings

[mandatory, select one answer for each standard]

- Not adopted at all
- Adopted in theory, but not begun to be implemented
- Begun to be implemented; less than 10% of descriptions meet standard
- Partially implemented; up to 50% of description meet standard
- Mostly implemented; up to 80% of description meet standard
- Implemented for all archives that have descriptions
- Fully implemented – all archives held meet this description

What other standards do you use to describe your archives? For each standard please also indicate how far it has been implemented in your archive
[free text]

Part 3: About you

8. What country do you work in?

[mandatory, free text]

9. Are you a member of ICA?

[mandatory, select one only]

- Yes – I am an individual member
- Yes – my institution is a member
- No – neither I nor my institution is a member

10. Please tell us about you and your workplace. Please include an email address if you are happy to be contacted further about this ICA work on archival description.

[free text]

- Your name
- Company/Organisation
- City/Town
- Email address

An off-line version of the survey was produced for respondents who could not access the Survey Monkey link, due to local access restrictions. Three offline responses were received (from Republic of Korea and mainland China) and this data was copied into Survey Monkey to ensure consistency in data capture and analysis.

Survey analysis was undertaken in Excel. All responses from the English, French and Spanish-language versions being brought together in a single Excel workbook to enable and inform big picture analysis.

To enable analysis of the free text responses, surveys were examined for key themes and frequency.

This report is the first sharing of the results beyond the Training Programme team.

Survey Respondents

Number of respondents

The archival arrangement and description survey received 253 responses. Not all of the respondents completed all of the mandatory fields, and in such cases the responses were individually reviewed to ensure that they were relevant and intentional. Excluding those that were blank or incomprehensible (likely spam), the analysis was performed on 249 responses. However, it should be noted that the questions do not all have the same number of respondents.

Geography and language

The respondents represent 64 countries, and twelve of the 13 ICA regions. (No responses were received from Eurasica.) As indicated by the dark blue areas in chart B-1, the most responses were received from Switzerland (21 responses), Canada, Spain and UK (16 each), Mexico (13) and USA (12).

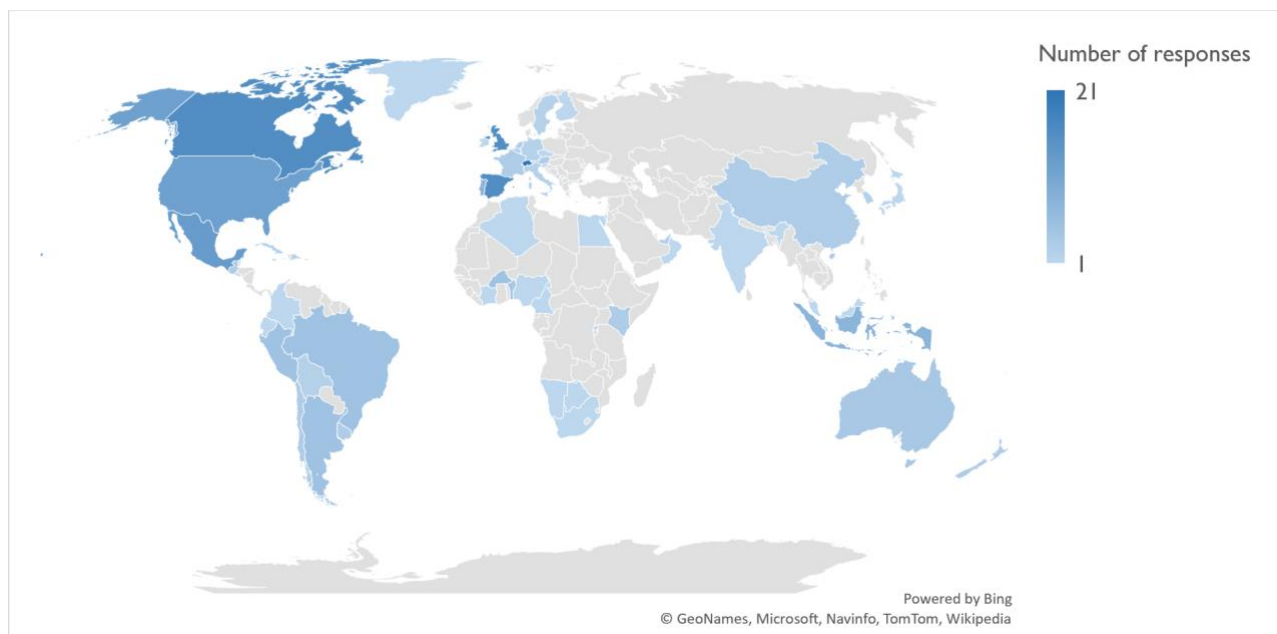


Chart B-1: What country do you work in? (Q8, free text, 219 responses)

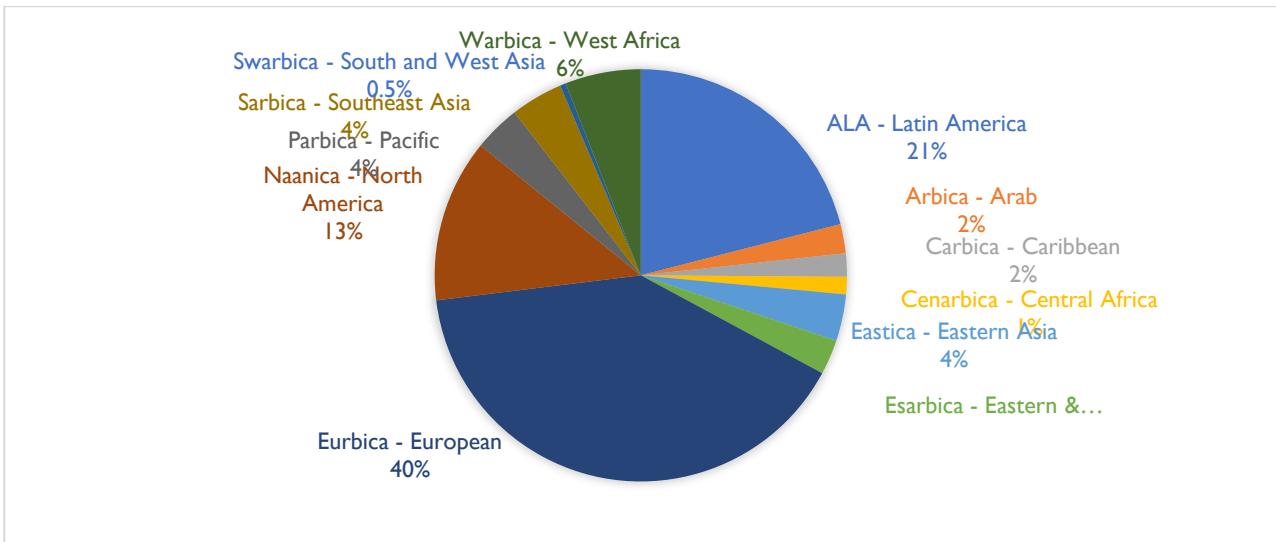


Chart B-2: ICA regions represented by respondents (from Q8: What country do you work in? Free text, 219 responses)

Two-thirds (67%) of the responses were received on the English-language version of the survey, with 19% of respondents completing the Spanish-language survey and 14% completing the French-language version.

ICA membership

Just under half (49%) of the respondents were a member of the ICA, demonstrating that the survey promotion reached beyond the 'converted' audiences of the ICA.

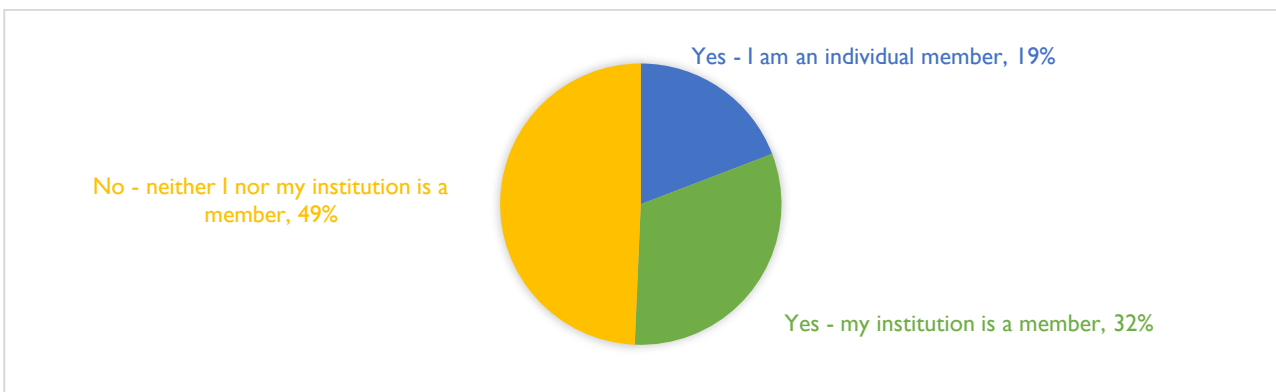


Chart B-3: Are you a member of ICA? (Q9, Select one choice only from three statements, 219 responses)