

## ARCHIVAL PRINCIPLES

—draft, v.2.6—

### 1. Background: the EGAD mandate

ICA appointed the Experts Group on Archival Description (EGAD) in late 2012 and charged the group with developing an archival conceptual model.

The model will:

- identify and define the essential components of archival description and their interrelations
- promote a shared understanding of archival description,
- position the archival community to take full advantage of opportunities presented by current and emerging communication technologies
- facilitate working cooperatively within the archival community as well as with allied cultural heritage communities and academic and non-academic users, in a shared quest to provide enhanced access to and understanding of the human record.
- respect traditional principles of archival description as well as pave the way for new understandings

### 2. Why do we need an archival conceptual model?

For a broad acceptance, the archival conceptual model must satisfy professional needs, reflect the core principles underpinning archival description and answer the challenges currently facing the profession.

The existing four ICA standards for archival description have certain limitations:

- The principles and concepts of archival science are not always well defined and it is therefore difficult to define archival entities and create relationships between them
- It is difficult (or not too easy) to accommodate national traditions
- They do not support exploiting the full potential of current and emerging communication technologies
- This in turn makes it difficult to work cooperatively within the archival community or with allied communities

The new archival conceptual model will address these needs. It will give a new framework for archival description with clearly defined entities and all significant relationships between them. It will facilitate more economic processing and effective description, and improve the discovery and enhance the understanding of records for users. Further, it will provide a solid foundation for collaboration within the archival community for providing convenient, integrated access to archival records, and for collaboration with allied professionals in providing integrated access to cultural heritage resources.

#### a) What makes the “archival approach” different?

Archival materials are not created as cultural materials as such. On the contrary, records are the by-products of organisations, families or individuals, generated in the conduct of their current business, serving their current needs. Implicitly, the records and the aggregation of records contain the information used, reflect the business environment that created them and present inner connections generated by the recordkeeping context. Some of those records are preserved by archivists, because of the enduring value in the information they contain or

as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator. Protecting the organic nature of records, preserving their original context of creation and use as well as their subsequent history in order that they can be understood are responsibilities that distinguish archivists from other information professionals.

## b) Professional legacy

At a theoretical level, the “archival approach” has been underpinned by the core notion of Fonds and by the Principle of Provenance (PoP). Various criteria were initially employed for arranging and describing archival material, but by the 19th century the PoP had tended to prevail, leading to the elaboration and application of consensual methods for professional practice, which were codified through standards and regulations in France, Italy, Prussia, the Netherlands etc.

At the heart of the PoP is the assertion that records of different provenance should not be intermingled and the original order (established prior to the transfer to the Archives) should be respected or (if missing) re-constructed. “Original order” is to be understood here also as physical order (traditional understanding) and/or intellectual order (more recent understanding). In this regard, one can identify both *archival* provenance (corporate body, person, or family who created or receive the records) or *custodial* provenance (the subsequent history of the records, including transfers in custody).

The PoP was based on both practical needs and theoretical reflections and has been promoted as “the only sound principle for the classification of the archives”<sup>1</sup>, or even “the only principle of archival theory”<sup>2</sup>.

Dealing with an increasing amount of records and facing an ever-changing fashion of historical research topics, archivists endorsed the PoP for its many benefits. Firstly, it was observed that “documents can only be interpreted with knowledge of the administrative, legal and social context, which will be preserved by respecting provenance (internal/external)”; applying the PoP thus preserved “the objectivity of the records and provided insight into the functions, processes, and personal relationships of the records creator”<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the PoP, conceived in physical terms, improved the process of arrangement. Hence, it “obviated the need for contentious rearrangement according to subject”<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, it was a convenient method for retrieval, by gathering and describing records generated and received by the same institution or person.

## c) A change of perspective: shifting to a more dynamic and global approach

The evolution of professional practices and thinking led in time to the development and adoption of other points of view concerning archival principles. A records creator is a living organism and it is rare that a single, unchanging order can be reconstructed in a records aggregation. Records “are a complex result of the activities of the creator, political decisions, organizational behaviour, record-keeping methods and many other unexpected events”<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, it has been recognised that archival fonds cannot always be identified with a single creator. In practice, archival aggregations created by the same creator can be found in more than one fonds, while a fonds can contain organic archival aggregations created by more than one creator. Hence, the actual fonds has to be seen as a result of historical processes of records creation/accumulation/transmission over time while the description of the fonds can be regarded as an intellectual, abstract construct. Also, it has been recognised that for promoting a full understanding of records, a notion of context, broader and thus more encompassing than provenance and original order, should be adopted by archivists. Therefore the need has emerged for describing in a more dynamic way the content and contexts in which archival materials are

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Schellenberg 1965, 45.

<sup>2</sup> Horsman 1994, 51

<sup>3</sup> Schellenberg 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Gilliland-Swetland 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Horsman, 1994, 57.

created, managed and used.

The parallel and rapid development of records management practices has added new dimensions to the notion of original context as well as promoting a records management specific approach to records. In addition, the expansion of digital records has raised new challenges to the traditional archival approach, calling for a re-interpretation of basic archival concepts. These developments have led to the need for a global, dynamic approach both to enable the effective reconciliation of records specialists and to promote sound principles.

Digital systems and tools for managing and describing records and archives support the adoption of more dynamic visualisations. Similarly, emerging communication technologies provide archivists with the means to express the archival description in a more semantically precise and logically structured network of interrelated data that can be computationally exploited.

ICA standards have been part of this dynamic movement in their attempt to differentiate the components of archival description (archival records, agents and functions). However, the standards are quite limited in their capacity to express the full range and complexity of the archival understandig (i.e. records, their context, the relationships between the records and their context, as well as among the records themselves).

The archival conceptual model encompasses the records as such, as well as a description of the context of their origin and enduring existence. *Records in Context*, necessarily places records in a vast network, of the people (individuals and groups) that created, used, and managed and continue to manage them, of other records related in a host of different ways, of business and work activities documented in them, and of rules that govern these activities. Further, by embodying an accurate articulation of context, *Records in Context* promotes interrelating archival records with other cultural heritage resources, the discovering and expressing new connections within and without the records, and making archival descriptive data available to be used in ways not envisioned by the creators of that data.

## References

- Horsman 1994 Peter Horsman, *Taming the elephant: An orthodox approach to the Principle of Provenance in The Principle of Provenance. First Stokholm Conference on Archival Theory and the Principle of Provenance (2-3 September 1993)*, Stockholm, 1994
- Schellenberg 1961 Schellenberg, Theodore, *Archival Principles of Arrangement* in *American Archivist* 24 (1961): 11-24
- Gilliland-Swetland 2000 Gilliland-Swetland Anne J., *Enduring Paradigm, New Opportunities*, Washington, 2000 (online at: <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub89/pub89.pdf>)
- Schellenberg 1965 Schellenberg Theodore, *The Management of Archives*, 1965.