

the Archive-Skills consultancy

Info-shot:

ISAD (G): The Basics

What is ISAD (G)?

ISAD (G) is the International Standard for Archival Description (General). It was developed by a Committee of the International Council on Archives. The Committee based its work where possible on existing national standards for archival description. The first edition came out in 1996 and it was revised in 2000.

Why is a standard necessary?

There was much scepticism about the need for a descriptive standard - international or national - when the idea was first mooted. Many archivists believed that as archives are unique, and their descriptions are unique, there was not much to be gained from standardising description methodology. The advent of computerised description and more significantly the realisation of the possibility via computer technology to create merged finding aids has diffused much of the resistance. The profession world-wide has come to see the advantages of sharing description data and of developing more consistent and portable methodology for carrying out that description.

Is the standard too general?

"ISAD defines the concept of hierarchical structure and states which data elements should be included at each level. It is gaining rapid acceptance amongst British archivists ... But ISAD represents a conformity of approach rather than a detailed cataloguing standard."¹ ISAD (G) is a rather general standard and it states that it should be used in conjunction with existing national standards or as a basis to develop them. The nature of archives and thus of their arrangement and description tends to reflect national, cultural, regional and organisational idiosyncrasies. ISAD (G) has been purposely left at a general level.

The four principles of ISAD (G)

ISAD (G) follows four principles:

- description proceeds from the general to the specific
- information should be relevant to the level of description
- descriptions should be linked between levels (by making clear the level of the unit of description)
- non-repetition of information (do not repeat information already given at fonds level)

¹ Brenda Weeden, 1999

The six essential elements

Only 6 elements are considered essential for international exchange of descriptive information:

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Reference code | 4. Dates |
| 2. Title | 5. Extent of the unit of description |
| 3. Creator | 6. Level of description |

The 26 data elements of ISAD (G)

There are 26 data elements in ISAD(G), for use at all levels of an archival catalogue:

1. Identity Statement Area

- 1.1. Reference code
- 1.2. Title
- 1.3. Dates
- 1.4. Level of description
- 1.5. Extent and medium of the unit of description

2. Context Area

- 2.1. Name of Creator
- 2.2. Administrative/biographical history
- 2.3. Archival history
- 2.4. Immediate source of acquisition or transfer

3. Content and Structure Area

- 3.1. Scope and content
- 3.2. Appraisal, destruction and scheduling information
- 3.3. Accruals
- 3.4. System of Arrangement

4. Conditions of Access and Use Area

- 4.1. Conditions governing access
- 4.2. Conditions governing reproduction
- 4.3. Language/scripts of material
- 4.4. Physical characteristics and technical requirements
- 4.5. Finding aids

5. Allied Materials Area

- 5.1. Existence and location of originals
- 5.2. Existence and location of copies
- 5.3. Related units of description
- 5.4. Publication note

6. Notes Area

- 6.1. Note

7. Description control area

- 7.1. Archivist's Note
- 7.2. Rules or conventions
- 7.3. Date of description



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