Standardisation 1987 : A Recapitulation

A Report on standardisation was submitted by the author to the Australian Council of Archives in 1987. This article summarises and develops the main points of that Report. It is argued that in large measure the advantages of standardisation can be achieved without the adoption of strictly uniform common systems and that there would be resistance to any other approach. Particular emphasis is given to the achievement of standardisation through the adoption of uniform output formats and the development of a common classification at the higher levels of description. The implications of standardisation for the development of the proposed National Register of Archives in Australia are considered.

In 1986, the Australian Council of Archives (ACA) commissioned me to prepare a report on standardisation of systems of arrangement and description as part of the emerging discussion on computerised applications in archives. The Report was delivered to the 1987 ACA meeting in Perth. Reaction ranged from the predictable

> "The Archives is devoting all its resources to its own priorities in program development from which it cannot deviate and in due course etc., etc., etc...."

to the incredulous

> "It can't be that simple!"

to the inevitable

> "I don't understand it!!"

of which latter response a variation was

> "I don't want to understand it!!!"

At any rate, no one (quite literally, no one) outside the Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV) and a few members of the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) evinced the slightest wish to discuss the matter further.

I determined not to become a bore on the subject and the Report was allowed to sink without trace. Just how completely without trace apparently was revealed at the 1990 Biennial Conference of the ASA in Hobart when the matter was raised and it seemed (I am told) that some present were ignorant of its existence. Since then, some ASA members have asked that I write a recapitulation of the 1987 Report to ACA for the more general information of ASA members. Since it was long, diffuse, and badly written – not something of which I am especially proud and probably a factor in its virtual rejection – it could well do with such treatment. Over two years have passed, however; new issues have arisen and I have moved on. What follows, therefore, is a freshening up (and honing down) of key points in the ACA Report with some new speculations on a complex, but important, issue.

What Is Standardisation?

It means many things to many people. We have first to standardise what we mean by standardisation. These are some meanings (by no means mutually exclusive) which I think it has :

    a. uniform terminology – trying to use the same word to apply to similar things;

    b. common descriptive practices – expressing things like dates, quantities, series titles and so on in a common way;

    c. common descriptive formats – common practices determining what data elements should be used to describe similar things in different systems (e.g. describing record series in terms of title, date range, quantity, reference/citation, etc.);

    d. common or uniform systems – standardised methods or systems for arranging (recording, processing and displaying) data about archives ;

    e. producing data about archives for sharing, exchanging, or merging – e.g. the proposed National Register; networking; shared databases.

I should point out that neither in my 1987 Report nor in this article have I attempted, what perhaps the ACA expected, a synthesis of others' views on, or an exposition of, these issues. Both contain a robust and, in the absence of practically any subsequent debate, increasingly settled personal view. Those aware of the work being done overseas (in the U.K. and Canada, for example) will also be aware that it is idiosyncratic. For the present, I have neither the inclination nor the stimulus to present the subject any other way; but even if readers disagree with my conclusions, there will, I hope, be a sustained interest in the topic at least to the extent of keeping abreast with overseas developments.

Susan Woodburn, who delivered a paper at the Hobart Conference entitled "The MARC AMC Format and the Role of Standard Formats in the Automation of Archival Management", has commented on an early draft of this article that I should make very clear the distinction between format and system. I agree the distinction is important and that I have not been altogether innocent of confusing them. While I agree also that more detailed consideration should be given to that issue if the standardisation debate talks off, I think it would be too great a diversion from the thrust of this article to attempt it or a rectification of my original failure to explore it here.

Standardisation for What?

Standardisation is a good thing! In 1987, I fudged my views on this in an attempt to appease those who had said they feared or despised attempts to construct a "master plan". I have since concluded they can't be appeased and (moreover) aren't genuine. The affected fear/scorn is, in fact, largely a cranky unwillingness to consider any new way of doing business which disturbs their routine.

There are at least four grounds for standardisation.

    • **First.** It provides a platform for co-operative endeavour to improve professional standards in arrangements and description. Each archives, in

developing its descriptive system, has to solve similar descriptive problems. Working in relative isolation, they will be forever rediscovering the wheel or making do with inadequate solutions to problems for which someone else has found a better way. It is the aggregation of our expertise, based on a necessary minimum of conformity, which will produce the best results for everyone.

- **Second.** It is helpful to our users. When they have mastered the guides and finding aids in one archives, the disparity is now so great that they often cannot apply the knowledge gained in learning one system in the next archives they visit. Standardisation, even of something basic like presentation, assists users by helping them transfer the skills developed in one archives to another. This in turn promotes and reinforces the public image of archives in place of the eclecticism and diversity which is presently our image.
- **Third.** It assists us in the transition to and continued development of automated systems. The move to computerisation compels archives to modify their systems and standardise internally. Even assuming, as I do, that no single computerised system can meet the needs of all archives, it is likely that many archives will be able to borrow and adapt both format and system design concepts and even specific computer applications from others rather than follow the whole painful path of system development afresh and that growing use of common formats/systems will be part of this.
- **Fourth.** It facilitates merging of data about archives. The development of the proposed National Register requires merging of data in compatible formats in some way or another. Compatibility implies some degree of standardisation.

What We Do and Don't Know About Arrangement and Description in Australia

When I started to think about it, I was startled to realise that I knew next to nothing about archives systems applications in Australia. There was a good deal to be learnt on the theory of arrangement and description applied in different archives but practically nothing which told me what they were actually doing.

I knew the series system well. I had learnt it under Scott, spent over 10 years using it, and been involved in an early (abortive) computerisation study in AA. I also knew PROV's own variant system (which we were coming to call the group modified series system). As for everywhere else, what little I knew was based primarily on published finding aids.

This was really embarrassing. To write a report on standardisation, you should know something about how people are deviating. None of us seem to have spent enough time contemplating that. I was driven, therefore, to conclusions based on the published finding aids.

As we all know, and as people who actually got as far as reading the 1987 Report pointed out (often), the system of arrangement and description in the published finding aid may bear little or no relation to the system employed within the archives - especially for repository control but in some cases even for reference in the search

3

room. Nevertheless, until more information is available, it is the best we have to go on. By a combination of observation and guesswork, I delineated at least five systems in use which I called : the pure group system; the pure series system; the group modified series system (my own); the record class system; and the accession system.

This is not the place to explain these concepts or argue my analysis of them. The Report itself (which must still be fairly freely available) does that. It was a crude first attempt to analyse what actually goes on. As we get better at it, I hope my first attempt will be replaced by others much more refined and accurate.

The next step was to develop a model for comparative analysis of the five systems (and variants within each). The Report had 2 diagrams - and a glossary - which attempted (inadequately) to do this. My frustration was reflected in a footnote which said that, in order for my diagrams to work, they would really need to be in three dimensions.

Comparative Systems Analysis, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Became a MAD Archivist

The answer, when it came, was astonishingly simple. I was reminded of Thomas Huxley's alleged response to Darwin's theory: "How stupid not to have thought of that".

At the University of Liverpool, Michael Cook and others involved in the Archival Description Project have been developing the Manual of Archival Description (MAD). Alan Ives mentioned my work to them. They asked to see a copy of the 1987 Report and very kindly sent me a copy of A "MAD" User Guide (version 3.3; 24 May 1988). It outlines an analytical method applicable to the structural analysis of the hierarchical relationships in any system of archival description.

The MAD analysis is deceptively simple. That's probably what gives it strength. It gave me my third dimension.

There is neither space here nor need to go into what the MAD analysis is or does. The whole project deserves to be better known in Australia and, if possible, emulated.

Using a MAD analysis, it is now possible to compare and precisely correlate similar and/or identical data elements in different systems as well as the overall structure of different systems. Such a tool, I believe, is essential to the development of standardisation.

How Archives Are Computerising in Australia and How This Will Lead to Greater Standardisation or, at least, Greater Systematisation

Systems development is taking place largely in-house and largely without much publicity - in small archives, medium size archives, and our one large archives (i.e. Australian Archives - AA). As more becomes known about these applications, archives which have not yet computerised will be able to adapt (if not adopt) the

systems developed by others.

Some archives contacted during the writing of the 1987 Report, had taken a cargo cult approach to computerisation - waiting for someone else to provide the answer. I didn't criticise them for it. If you can afford to wait, it's a good strategy. My guess is that many of the small and medium size archives will end up borrowing or buying technology from each other and that, at each of the two levels, 2 or 3 (maybe half a dozen) applications will eventually become more or less standard.

Regardless of whether you develop your own system or use someone else's, computerisation forces an archives to systematise in ways which many of them find unfamiliar and of which, to be frank about it, some archivists in the past have been contemptuous. If computerisation settles down to 2 or 3 standard applications each for the small and medium size archives, it is clear that gradually most archives will become perforce both more systematised and more standardised. It is possible, of course, that there will be greater diversity in computer applications than I anticipate in which case there will still have to be systematisation but less likelihood of standardisation (or less diversity in which case certain possibilities which I have rejected may appear more feasible).

It is interesting to note how "standardised" different computerised applications have already become - apparently independently of each other - notably in the practice of establishing significant separation within the data base of series and agency data. If the archives community were to do no more now than take note of such ad hoc "standardisation" in emerging computer applications much would be achieved.

The crucial point for any archives contemplating applying or adopting someone else's system is going to be : How well can I adapt to the input/output demands of this system?

Why RINSE Won't Wash

In the course of preparing my 1987 Report, it became apparent that some "cargo cultists" were convinced that the development of AA's system (RINSE) would meet their needs - possibly because AA was then further down the path of computerisation than most. I frankly doubted it but that was a question which could be left for time to settle.

I also found a great reluctance in some medium size archives (especially the State Archives) to modify existing manual systems to achieve standardisation. This reluctance, as I have suggested above, will be swept away by the imperatives of computerisation. There is no longer any question that they must be modified; the question is how and whether any advantages come from looking at standardisation at the same time. Another question is whether the expectations of some that the RINSE system will be adaptable to environments other than that of the huge archives (the only one of its kind in the country) in which it developed be realised or will the medium size archives have to develop systems of their own, more appropriate to their size and

function. Even if it is adaptable, will it prove to be the most cost-effective systems solution for other archives?

Paradoxically, I suspect small archives would find it easier to use RINSE (if they could find a way of applying it in their situation) because they can more easily adapt to the pure series system of which it is an extension than the medium size archives. What PROV has found, and I suspect other medium size archives are finding, is that the pure series system (as developed by AA) cannot be adopted without significant variation - especially in documenting agency relationships. To what extent, therefore, can RINSE serve (as some seemed to suppose) as a national standard?

The question as yet unresolved - the covers are still coming off RINSE - is how flexible will it (or adaptations of it) be in accepting non-series system and variant series system data input. Given its origin and development as an in-house system, will the format be flexible enough for other archives to meet its data input demands? This is still an open question.

Another issue is one of cost. It is a <u>big</u> system. If it were adapted by small or medium size archives, it is difficult to see how this could (without substantial modification) be done except at comparatively great cost or heavy subsidy.

Finally, there is the question of the potential for on-line access and networking. We now know that public, on-line, networked access is a contemplated future development (<u>Archives and Manuscripts</u>, Vol.17, May 1989, No.1, p.30). The "cargo cultists" placed great store on this facility in anticipating even conjoint use of the system. PROV, on the other hand, had already concluded that on-line public access was not cost justifiable and it will not, therefore, be a high priority for us to develop this feature of our system in the foreseeable future (i.e. PROV will remain at AA's present level of development which allows on-line access by staff only). As far as networking is concerned, having RINSE or any other system's terminals in search rooms would do no actual harm (if they can be installed at little or no cost) but it would seem more effective for archives to plug into an established data base network affording wider access - possibly one distributed through the public library system. There appeared, moreover, to be a serious confusion in some of the expectations I discovered between the development of an on-line data network capacity (for distributing and accessing data) and the integration of data within a common system.

What is said here about RINSE applies, of course, to any other system development and is relevant because I suspect some may still foresee the eventual adoption of a common system as the vehicle for standardisation. RINSE need not have been singled out as precipitately or as provocatively as I have done here were it not for one other matter : the future of the proposed National Register of Archives.

And What About the National Register?

One of the meanings I have given to standardisation is clearly relevant here : merging of data about archives/records. Quite apart from the National Register, some people

look forward to the future possibility of cumulating data input from different archives into a single (probably distributed) data base (? the National Register) or networking or sharing data about archives/records described by different archives. To achieve this, some level of standardisation will be needed. Whether such ambitions are, in fact, ever realised is a question which might be left for the future to decide except that it arguably involves presuppositions about the proposed National Register, the nature and form of which are still open questions and the future of which remains unclear. What goes into the National Register need not, I think, be determined by the feasibility of merging (networking/sharing) data at all levels of description. It was fundamental to my 1987 conclusions that it was both possible and desirable to explore development of the National Register apart from the question of merging data at all levels of description. I concluded that both the feasibility and the cost-effectiveness of merging descriptive data at the lower levels (e.g. data on records) was open to serious question, while I accepted that some co-operative effort at least at the higher levels of description was justified.

AA must sooner or later establish a National Register or change its Act. As yet, there has been practically no debate within the archives community about its character and format. Nor has there been any suggestion of which I am aware, that the National Register (if it ever eventuates) should be generated by aggregating data in RINSE or any other common system. RINSE has not been developed to provide a common format (like MARC:AMC) but as an in-house system. There is no logical (or, I believe, practical) reason why the National Register should be generated by, in effect, merging descriptive data on the holdings of other archives in RINSE or a development of RINSE (or of any other system for that matter). That, at any rate, was my conclusion in 1987 and it remains my view now though others, I know, held the contrary opinion then and may do so still.

It might be argued, however, that the obligation to establish a National Register would have been discharged once an offer to accept data from other archives into RINSE (or a RINSE network) has been made (if it ever is made). This would have the result that an opportunity to debate the desirable character and format of the National Register would have been lost by default. It was essentially these conclusions, combined with the almost complete absence of any debate about the future of the National Register, which led me to deal extensively with the issue of merging of data in the 1987 Report. It was my view that, however congenial some archives might find AA's version of the series system and the RINSE format to be, archives could not be expected to adopt them as a precondition for contributing to the Register and this conclusion needed to be demonstrated in the face of contrary expectations.

It was assumed in the 1987 Report that much of the descriptive data on holdings did not in fact need to be brought into the Register, that the task of guiding users to the records would always be done by the disaggregated finding aids of the archives and that, though much could be done over time by standardising formats to overcome some of the difficulties users have with great diversity in descriptive practice, absolute uniformity for the purpose of merging data was not the primary goal - still less the adoption of a common system. In this vision of the future, a large part of the contents

of each archives' finding aids might never be merged or networked (even if this should, one day, become technically possible); rather, the register would be needed to guide users to the finding aids. All that was necessary or desirable was cumulation or networking of data sufficient to enable the user to proceed, with reasonable confidence, to the finding aids of archives selected from the Register for more detailed searching.

Conclusion: In Which We Observe that Data, In Order to be Consumed, Must First Be Digested

It remained then to reach some tentative conclusions about how a National Register might be set up and what impact this might have on standardisation.

The 1987 Report concluded that wholesale merging of data about records - for any purpose, including a National Register - was neither feasible nor desirable. It further concluded that merging of data even about record creators should be regarded as an optional extra rather than an essential feature of any national standardised descriptive project.

Moreover, I placed great weight (almost certainly too much weight) on the need to develop national data standards which did not initially disturb or actually require the modification of existing diverse systems or involve any archives in a substantial new work load to reformat data. It was assumed that adoption of loosely standardised output formats would gradually provide a basis for greater standardisation as archives individually modified and developed their systems accoding to their individual perception of their needs but little or no such modification was required, for all practical purposes, in order for an archives to adopt the output formats proposed in the Report. The central idea involved doing what was apparently impossible - viz. to get all archives doing more or less the same thing without changing anything.

In essence, it was proposed that every archives progressively adopt the inventory format used in the AA series system (adapting their systems to generate inventories as best suited their individual methods and capacity) as a means of generating a standardised presentation of data
>   (a)   displaying details about record creators under each group/organisation/etc. identified within their system (inventories of record creators); and
>   (b)   describing series/classes/etc. for each record creator (inventories of records).

These inventories, an approximate version of which most of those archives examined were already producing in one form or another, and which otherwise might replace some existing finding aids and supplement others, were to provide the public with a familiar and recognisable set of guides in every repository. In some cases, renaming existing guides might be just about all that was required.

It was proposed that only the inventory of records creators should be in strictly standardised output format. Even this standardised format was to be initially fairly

simple embodying only a few data elements so that each archives could approximate its corresponding guide as and when it could in the hope that more strictly standardised and extensive output formats would gradually evolve. It was envisaged that the output format for the inventory of records would be even less formalised - little more, in fact, than the adoption of the name to the various listings of/guides to records produced by each archives scrutinised during the preparation of the 1987 report.

Finally, it was proposed that we collectively establish a standard national classification of archives in Australia - to be called a Digest if it did not serve as the National Register - at the broadest levels of description
> (1)   the administrative history of government, and
> (2)   convenient categories of non-government/personal archives.

Within the classifications established by the Digest, each archives could "report" its broadest "units" of description (e.g. organisation; record group; main index heading; chapter heading in a guide; etc.) or, if necessary, its total holdings as a single "unit" entry under however many of the categories in the Digest classification as were relevant. It was contemplated that the number of categories at this level of description used by each archives would range from 1 to 100-200 (maximum) the number to vary perhaps depending on the volume and complexity of holdings in each case. The development of an Inventory/Index of Record Creators belonging to each organisation, group, etc, was seen as an optional future development for the National Register and as a desirable facet in any national systems standard which might be aspired to even if a merged Inventory/Index never eventuated.

Beyond these three conventions, it was proposed that each archives would develop its system as best suited its own needs and capacity - conforming to a national standard only so far as these specified outputs were concerned. A standard format for data presentation in the inventories (much like the conventional layout of a library catalogue card) was suggested :

> |Description/Title|
> |Date(s) |Reference/Citation |Location |

for use as a summary descriptor or "header" for entries on the inventories.

The national classification would have provided a broad, common descriptive framework using which every archives could "digest" its holdings at the broadest levels by reference to a standard analysis of the archives of the nation. A practical example of the digest approach in an archives using the group modified series system can be seen in the forthcoming <u>Digest of the Public Records of Victoria</u> which will accompany or shortly follow the first computer generated <u>Summary Guide</u> to be issued by PROV in 1990.

The proposals for a common national classification embodied elements of an old idea which once had currency within AA - to develop handbooks of the administrative history of Australasia providing a common context for descriptive work broader than any single archives or archives system would develop for its own needs. Each archives, through its descriptive programme, addresses some fragmentary part of

what can be seen as a larger, unified whole. In other words, paraphrasing Tennyson:

> Our little systems have their day;
>   They have their day and cease to be:
>   They are but broken lights of thee,
> And thou, Context, art more than they.
> ....
> Let knowledge grow from more to more,
>   But more conformance in us dwell;
>   That yours and mine, according well,
> May make one music as before,
> But vaster.

One could, of course, pace Susan Woodburn, substitute "Format" for "Context" to illustrate her point. Where she and I agree, I believe, is in thinking that adoption of common systems is not the key consideration.

Postscript: In Which the Author, In Taking His Leave, Hopes to Renew the Acquaintance

Well, I've done it again - allowed the question of merging and the National Register (the tail of this issue) to wag the standardisation dog. The 1987 Report concerned itself a little with theory as well as with process and one day it may be possible to say less about the latter. We will have to get the politics of it out of the way first, I fear. And so, Gentle Reader, let us hope we will one day meet again in calm reflection on these and other matters.