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Technical Subcommittee on *Describing Archives: A Content Standard: Records in Context (RiC)*

(Prepared by: Regine Heberlein, Maristella Feustle (co-chairs), Dan Michelson (Standards liaison), with contributions from Gregory Wiedeman (immediate past co-chair of TS-DACS) and Hollis Wittman (TS-DACS))

TS-DACS is seeking the support of SAA Standards and Council in responding to the ongoing release of Records in Contexts.

BACKGROUND

Release of Records in Contexts

Records in Contexts (RiC) is a descriptive framework developed by the International Council on Archives to replace ISAD(G), ISAAR(CPF), ISDF, and ISDIAH. It consists of four parts:

1. Foundations of Archival Description (RiC-FAD; a very brief overview formerly titled Introduction to Archival Description)
2. Conceptual Model (RiC-CM)
3. Ontology (RiC-O)
4. Application Guidelines (ADG; planned but not part of this release)

While the release date of the RiC suite has been postponed several times, it occurred in December 2023.

Cross-service on EGAD and SAA Standards Technical Subcommittees

RiC is being developed by an Experts Group appointed by the ICA (Experts Group on Archival Description (EGAD)). Several members of the SAA Standards Technical Subcommittees also serve on EGAD: Florence Clavaud, who leads the development of the ontology, is an ex-officio member of the TS-EAS EAD team. Silke Jagodzinski, a member of the TS-EAS EAD team, and Regine Heberlein, current co-chair of TS-DACS, both serve on EGAD. EGAD's liaison with SAA Standards is Stephanie Luke.

DACS and ISAD(G) / ISAAR(CPF)

DACS is an SAA-approved standard that was originally developed as the U.S. implementation of ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF). Like those ICA standards, DACS provides guidance for day-to-day practice, including e.g. regarding the completeness of description, sources of information, how to supply information etc. DACS is output-neutral and can be applied to all material types.

Over time, DACS has evolved from ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) in significant ways, e.g. to include the Statement of Principles (a set of professional and ethical standards defining archival description), the section Rights Statements for Archival Description, and to bring it into closer alignment with RDA, among others.

Impact of RiC on DACS

At the heart of Records in Contexts is the Conceptual Model (CM) (the ontology is a graph-based implementation of the CM). As a conceptual model, it is a fundamentally different kind of standard from ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF), and for that matter, DACS, and recognizes as much: “RiC-CM is not...[a] standard or set of rules for composing or forming descriptive content.”¹ RiC also applies narrowly to documents where DACS applies to all material types, and assumes graph-based implementation (despite some protestations to the contrary) where DACS is output-neutral.

As such, it is worth pointing out that while RiC supersedes the former ICA standards, it does not *replace* the practical guidance expressed in them so much as it abandons that guidance in favor of abstracting from it. This means that with the release of RiC 1.0 and superseding of the former suite of ICA standards, the ICA standards for archival description are moving profoundly away from DACS. They are also essentially leaving the international professional community without a content standard.²

Since TS-DACS is charged with working “to ensure that DACS is compatible with other national and international descriptive standards,”³ the adoption of RiC as an ICA standard has some potentially stark consequences for DACS: it implies that TS-DACS is now tasked with unilaterally bringing DACS back into alignment with RiC-CM.

DISCUSSION

Scope of the Alignment Work

Not least because the two standards are now as apples are to oranges, aligning DACS with RiC-CM is going to be a big project and will involve a major revision. That revision will need to ensure that DACS primarily continues to serve as a content standard. TS-DACS wishes to proceed deliberately, analytically, and pursuant to SAA’s procedures for a major revision.⁴ This includes gathering community feedback, engaging in dialogue with communities from companion standards, especially (though not limited to) TS-EAS, and scoping the alignment before beginning any actual alignment work. In other words, it will take time.

DACS complements RiC-CM

¹ <https://github.com/ICA-EGAD/RiC-CM/releases/tag/v1.0> (p.2)

² It remains to be seen whether the Application Guidelines, once completed, will address this need, or whether they will focus on the Ontology.

³ <https://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section7/groups/Standards/TS-DACS>

⁴ <https://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section7/groups/Standards/Procedures-Review-Approval-SAA-Developed-Standard>

A content standard and a conceptual model complement one another. The community needs both—guidance on what entities to describe, and guidance on how to describe them. The decision by ICA to replace one with the other seems abrupt and ill-informed, in a way pulling the rug out from under the practitioners. The community might have been better served by a concurrent update of ISAD(G) to reflect new record-creating practices. Unless or until the Application Guidelines eventually fill that void, we may safely assume that ISAD(G) will continue to be used by the community.

The focus of any alignment of DACS with RiC-CM undertaken by TS-DACS will be on mapping the entities identified and discussed in DACS to the RiC entities. That way we serve the user community by continuing to serve as a content standard while also ensuring interoperability with the RiC-CM for those who implement it, as is our charge.

TS-DACS has begun [mapping the RiC-CM entities](#) as part of its effort to understand the scope of the alignment work.

SAA Values and SAA Endorsement of RiC

While it recognizes the considerable achievements of RiC, TS-DACS has additional reservations about SAA ultimately endorsing RiC, a standard that has been developed outside of SAA’s norms for developing standards with, not for, the user community.

Throughout the development of RiC, TS-DACS has sought to be an active participant in the development process. It has responded to EGAD’s calls for comment ([documented in the TS-DACS Drive](#)), communicated with EGAD via members and the Standards liaison, and submitted feedback via email. EGAD has never responded to any of the feedback either directly or indirectly, and the feedback is not reflected in the upcoming release of RiC.⁵

This lack of transparency reflects a fundamentally different approach to standards development by the ICA Experts Groups from that practiced within SAA. Where SAA affirms norms “to ensure that all reasonable opinions are considered in the development process”⁶ and much of the development process happens in the open via public github tickets and similar mechanisms, ICA follows a more hierarchical model in which standards are developed by the appointed experts in relative isolation and outside of public view.

TS-DACS has felt frustrated by EGAD’s failure to engage in dialogue and by seeing its good-faith efforts to discuss user needs and provide well-considered feedback seemingly ignored. It feels hesitant about SAA adopting a standard that does not reflect the community needs that were so clearly and repeatedly communicated over the years via the established channels. TS-DACS feels the community should wait for the publication of the comments and responses in order to understand the reasoning behind the decisions made by EGAD, if such publication is indeed forthcoming, and to make further decisions based on whatever consensus may arise from receiving them.

Proposed Statement

⁵ In response to the urgings of some dual members, EGAD has signaled that the feedback will eventually be published, but it has not been as of the time of this writing.

⁶ <https://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section7/groups/Standards/Development-and-Review>

TS-DACS proposes the following statement on RiC and DACS:

Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) is a content standard maintained by the Society of American Archivists' Technical Subcommittee on DACS (TS-DACS) based on standards developed by the International Council on Archives (ICA), in particular the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G)) and the International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR-CPF).

ICA has retired ISAD(G), ISAAR(CPF), ISDIAH, and ISDF as of the 1.0 release of the Records in Contexts (RiC) suite of standards: Foundations of Archival Description (RiC-FAD), Conceptual Model (RiC-CM), Ontology (RiC-O). A fourth part, Application Guidelines (RiC-AG), is planned. TS-DACS is hesitant to plan for implementation before the standard has been fully completed and this crucial piece of guidance for practitioners has been provided.

RiC-CM, is a major contribution to the landscape of archival standards, defining for the first time the entities that constitute the realm of archival description. DACS complements RiC by offering guidance for composing descriptive records, and doing so with a broad focus on any material that a repository might collect, both of which RiC explicitly considers out of scope. DACS will continue as the Society of American Archivists' content standard distinct and separate from RiC and regardless of the extent to which RiC may be adopted by the Society of American Archivists in the future.

The DACS development cycle currently under way focuses on harmonizing DACS with the Statement of Principles and will proceed on course, deferring any consideration of RiC to a subsequent revision cycle. TS-DACS will take under consideration strengthening the alignment between DACS and RiC-CM based on input from the archival community and in consultation with other SAA subteams, representatives of companion standards, and external organizations including ICA-EGAD, as stipulated by the SAA bylaws. It will do so transparently and in the spirit of seeking consensus and hearing all voices pursuant to SAA's strategic goals.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

Position of TS-DACS

TS-DACS asserts that while RiC-CM is a long-overdue and welcome addition to the ecosystem of interrelating archival standards, it cannot take the place of a content standard; rather, it should be used in conjunction with a content standard. Retiring ISAD(G), ISAAR(CPF), ISDF, and ISDIAH rather than updating and maintaining them in lockstep with RiC risks leaving the international archival community without concrete practical guidance.

TS-DACS intends to continue maintaining DACS in its current form. Any alignment with RiC will be a deliberate, community-driven process as mandated by the SAA by-laws and strategic goals. To facilitate immediate use of RiC-CM in conjunction with DACS, TS-DACS will work towards mapping the RiC-CM entities to DACS.

Support Requested from Council

In consultation with SAA Standards, TS-DACS asks the following:

- That SAA Council endorse the statement on RiC and DACS detailed above;
- That SAA publish the statement on their website

Impact on Strategic Priorities:

Action on this item is consistent with the following items from the Strategic Priorities:

- 3.1. Identify the need for new standards, guidelines, and best practices and lead or participate in their development.
- 4.1. Facilitate effective communication with and among members.
- 4.3. Foster an inclusive association and profession through educational and leadership opportunities.

Fiscal Impact: No fiscal impact.