Society of Archivists Data Standards Group

A Guide to Archival and Related Standards
Standards applicable to archives; for the digital delivery of repository guides, finding-aids, and images of material from collections.

Title
EAD – Encoded Archival Description

Name of Standards Developing Organisation
EAD Working Group on behalf of the Library of Congress and the Society of American Archivists

Current version
EAD 2002: available from <http://www.loc.gov/ead/>

Replaces
EAD v1.0

Abstract
EAD is the standard for the electronic capture of hierarchical archival finding aids.

Description
EAD started life as a Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML) Document Type Definition (DTD) first published in 1998. This was revised taking into account international usage, and to bring it inline with the revised 2nd edition of the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G))¹ as EAD 2002. This, the current version, is again available as a DTD now compatible with Extensible Markup Language (XML) as well as SGML. It is also available as an XML schema in two syntaxes: Relax NG Schema (RNG) and W3C Schema (XSD).

These formal technical documents are supplemented by the EAD Tag Library, which provides a human readable explanation of the structure of EAD, with details of its data elements and their attributes, encoded examples and mappings (crosswalks) to ISAD(G) and MARC 21². All this documentation and other information can be found at the official EAD Website hosted by the Library of Congress³. This includes instructions for joining the EAD listserv which brings together the international community of EAD users and is very useful for users starting out with EAD. It also provides details of the international working group responsible to the Library of Congress and Society of American Archivists for the development and maintenance of the standard.
EAD provides a set of elements (or tags) with which a finding aid can be marked up (or encoded) to produce an XML or SGML text file. As such EAD files can be created using any text or word processing software. In practice though proprietary XML editing software is used, which has the advantage that the rules in the DTD or schema are automatically enforced thereby lessening the opportunities for error.

There are two parts to the EAD document. The EAD Header provides control information about the finding aid itself: its identity, ownership, creation and revision. The content of the finding aid is encoded within the Archival Description section. This includes data elements for the descriptive content of a finding aid (such as title, creation dates, scope and content etc) and it is also possible to tag names, places and subjects that are controlled in terms of format and content. It should be noted that EAD provides a great many of elements, many more than those suggested by ISAD(G) for example and also that EAD does not provide rules for the content of these data elements: it is not a content standard.

The Archival Description section also has elements indicating the hierarchical structure of the finding aid, so that descriptions at various levels (fonds, series, file etc) may be designated and the relationships between them captured. EAD though can be used for single level descriptions as well. It is possible to encode basic formatting (such as italics or bold etc), tables and links to other resources. A number of EAD finding Aids may also be bundled together as an EAD Group to form a guide perhaps.

EAD then is not a ‘cataloguing system’ (such as CALM or ADLIB) but a tool that provides an electronic version of a finding aid in standard technical languages. As such it can be used as part of a number of activities. EAD has been extensively used in the UK as the format for standards conformant retroconversion of paper or unstructured electronic finding aids, most notably by the Access to Archives (A2A) programme\(^4\). There has also been some use for initial cataloguing and ongoing maintenance of finding aids, particularly within the higher education sector. Once created, finding aids as EAD may be used as the basis for online searching, presentation and browsing as has been the case with A2A and the Archives Hub\(^5\). Finally, finding aids in EAD format facilitate data exchange and interoperability: They may for example be included with digital objects and related metadata in a Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard (METS)\(^6\) file or as part of metadata held in an Open Archives Initiative – Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH)\(^7\) repository available for harvesting.

Next month

Next month we will look at SPECTRUM which is the metadata standard for collection management and cataloguing of museum objects.

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British Library and EAD Working Group
2 Official MARC 21 Web site: <http://www.loc.gov/marc/>
3 Official EAD Web site: <http://www.loc.gov/ead/>
4 A2A (Access to Archives): <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/>
5 Archives Hub: <http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk/>