Study Unit 3: Archives Acquisition, Description & Finding Aids

Introduction

In this study unit, you will familiarize yourself with forms of acquisition of archives, archives description and arrangement, finding aids and the process of archives transfer.

Learning Outcomes of Study Unit 3

Upon completion of this study unit, you should be able to:

1.1. Explain how archives are acquired.

1.2. Describe the principles of archives description.

1.3. Describe the processes involved before and after archives transfer.

1.4. Explain the levels of arrangement for archives.

1.5. Explain the findings aids for Archives.

3.1   Archives Acquisition

This is the process by which archival institutions add to their holdings / collection by accepting materials. The process of acquiring must be very carefully and elaborately managed since it is a commitment to preserve material of continuing value.

- **An Acquisition Policy** is a tool that defines the scope and content of any archival institution or potential institution. It is a guide for any possible acquisition and also acts as the standard against which materials are either accepted or rejected. It also specifies the nature of documents of interest, their condition and any subject specialty.

3.1.1.   Forms of Acquisition of Archives

(a) **Donations**

This is the most common type of acquisition where the transfer of the legal title (material) is vested into the acquiring institution. A donation to the archives should be documented in a deed of a gift. It should have a clear description of the material, signatures of both the donor and the

recipient. Any restrictions on the usage of this material should be documented and approved prior to the acquisition. It should also detail the disposal of such materials.

(a) Transfer

This is a means of acquisition in an in-house or government archives. As in-house archives acquire material from their parent organizations, the title to the material is not transferred because the parent organization still owns the material.

It is recommended that the branch, division or unit proposing the transfer do so in writing indicating the area transferring, the officer authorizing the transfer, the series being transferred together with an item-by-item listing of the material.

(c) Purchase

This is a means of acquiring materials against monetary means. The vendor of the material must have clear documentation showing the copyright of the material, authenticity, pure and genuine and if it qualifies as an acquisition item to the archives.

(d) Field Collection

This is the activity of identifying, negotiating for, and securing historical materials for an archival institution.

(e) Bequest

This is a gift of personal possession made in a will. For any archival item to be bequeathed to the institution, it must be specifically mentioned in a will. It should also detail the donors' wishes as to the disposal of unwanted materials and the research use of these materials.

(f) Loan

This involves the archival institution borrowing an archive for a particular period of time.

If the archive decides to accept materials on loan, an agreement must be drawn out clearly defining the materials, their conditions and usage. It should also stipulate the loan period.

The archival administration must consider the benefits of temporarily acquiring these materials focusing on the outcomes once the material is reclaimed.

(g) Legal Deposit

This is a legal obligation that requires publishers to deposit a copy (or copies) of their publications within a specified period of time in a designated national institution.

It helps to ensure that the published record of human memory, creativity and discovery are acquired by the nation so that it can be preserved and made available to future generations.

3.2. Archives Description

Archival description serves to identify and explain the context and content of archival material in order to promote its accessibility.

Purpose of Archives Description
- To provide access to archival material through retrievable descriptions.
- To promote understanding of archival material by documenting its content, context and structure.
- To establish grounds for presuming the authenticity of archival material by documenting its chain of custody, arrangement, and circumstances of creation and use.

3.2.1. Principles of Archives Description

Archivists apply the 2 principles of 'Provenance' and 'Original Order' when managing their collections.

(a) Principle of Provenance

The principle means that the archival records should be maintained in groups that correspond to their source, creators or originators.

Provenance provides essential contextual information for understanding the content and history of an archival collection. So records received from any organization should not be mixed with those of another organization under any kind of superficial order.

Knowing the owners/custodians allows you to judge whether anybody has altered it in any way, meaning that it is easier to tell if it is authentic.

(b) Principal of Original Order

This principle states that records be left or maintained in the order that existed when they were active for current use. This will help reflect the flow of actions on any correspondences.

However, if the records were not in any organized order during their current state of use, effort should be put in order to give them some minimum order to help the archivists in retrieval.

The order of the records established by the creator should be maintained by physical and/or intellectual means whenever possible to preserve existing relationships between records and the evidential value inherent in this order.

This original order allows custodians to protect the authenticity of the records and provides essential information as to how they were created, kept and used. For example letters are usually kept with a different file for each person who wrote the letters. Within each file they are often in chronological order, starting with the earliest and finishing with the most recent.

3.3. Transferring records to Archives

Where the records come from may affect the way in which they have been prepared for transfer.

Records may come to the archival institution from:

• The records centre

• records offices

• Non-government or non-corporate agencies

• Private individuals.

In all cases it will be necessary to document:

• What body or person has transferred the material to the archival institution.

• What has been transferred.

• What has been done to the material by the archival institution during the process of receiving and accessioning the material.

3.3.1 Preparations for Transfer to Archives

Preparatory work done prior to transfer:

- Appraisal and selection for transfer according to the disposal schedule
- Cleaning and tidying
- Removal of metal pins, clips, staples, and so on (these will rust and damage the records and, if possible, should be replaced by plastic or a non-ferrous metal such as brass)
- Labeling items with necessary identifying information

- Boxing (if boxes are not available, material should be tied in orderly bundles with paper protection)
- Listing [giving the name of the series, the original agency file numbers and titles and the covering dates]
- Completing an accessions form

3.3.2 Upon Arrival in the Archives

As soon as the records arrive at the archival institution, staff will:

- Check the material for signs of insect infestation or mould and identify if they need treatment
- Check that the records are properly labeled
- Place them in a secure temporary storage area set aside for new accessions
- Check the records against the **accessions form** and **transfer list/summary list** to make sure that all items which are supposed to have been included are there
- Complete an **accessions form** if none has been prepared beforehand and obtain a signature authorising the accession from a representative of the agency sending the records.
- Make an entry in the **accessions register**
- Acknowledge receipt of the accession so that the transferring agency has a record of the transfer.

NB: It is important that staff enter information into the accessions register promptly, preferably on the same day the material is received but certainly within five working days, so that formal transfer of custody of the records is documented and any problems are identified immediately

3.3.3 Documents Required

(a) The Accession Form

- The accessions form is a formal document noting the transfer of custody of the records to the archival institution.
- Because the accessions form is signed by both sender and recipient, it is evidence of their agreement to this transfer of custody.

- On the back of the accessions form is a checklist of actions staff should undertake for that accession. All staff carrying out any of the actions listed will initial and date this checklist when an action is completed.
- There should be an accessions form for each accession of records into the archival institution.
- If possible, the accessions form will be completed by the person sending the records to the archival institution. The form will accompany the records.
- Alternatively, the form may be sent beforehand to serve as advance notice that the records are coming. If the form has not been completed already, archives staff will complete it as soon as the records arrive.

Archives Accession Form

Accession Number:	Depositor:

Transferring Agency:

Is this a transfer from the records centre?   Yes ☐   No ☐

Covering Dates:

Will more items be added to this series?   Yes ☐   No ☐

Quantity (number of items or boxes):

Physical Type (files, volumes etc.):

Physical Condition (note any problems):

Can Records be Opened After [statutory closed period]? (Specify any items to be opened earlier or later)

Further Information (note any items missing or retained, or containing special materials such as photographs, maps, coins and so on. Note here any special conditions of transfer applying to records from external sources):

Proposed for transfer to Archival Institution by

Name:

Position (of representative of agency/depositor/records centre):	
Date:	
Accepted for transfer to Archival Institution by	
Name:	*Position:*
Signature:	*Date:*

Figure 1: Archives Accession Form

(Source: IRMT)

(b) The Accession Register

- The accessions register is a formal document that records the archival repository's acceptance of responsibility for the materials it documents.
- The accessions register also confirms the transfer of custody of the records to the archival institution.
- It is an internal control tool for the archival institution and is not generally open to public inspection. When a register volume is full, it should be accessioned for permanent preservation as part of the institution's own archives.

Contents of the Accession Register

- *Accession number:* A separate accession number should be allocated to each entry in the accessions register. This number is usually composed of a sequential number and the year, starting again at '1' each January. For example, 98/1 refers to the first accession in 1998, 98/2 the second, and so on.
- *Date received:* Enter the date on which the accession was received.
- *Details of records received:* If the series number and title are known, enter them. If not, give a brief title or description to identify the materials. Enter also the covering dates and the number of boxes or some other indication of quantity.
- *Source/depositor:* Enter the name of the creating agency responsible for the materials. If they have come from the records centre add '(RC)' after the ministry's name.
- *Archival references:* Enter the final reference numbers given to the archives in the accession, including group, series and file/item numbers. They should be entered as soon as they are decided.

- *Remarks:* Enter any details of access restrictions applying to the archives, or of items missing from the accession or retained at the time of transfer. Also include here any other notes that the archivist considers useful.
- *Initials of person receiving accession and date:* Enter the initials of the archivist undertaking the work and the date the register was completed.

Archives Accession Register

Accession Number	Date Received	Details of Records Received	Source or Depositor	Archival References	Remarks	Initials of Person Receiving and Date

Figure 2: Archives Accession Register

Figure 2: The Accession Register

(Source: IRMT)

(c) Location Register

This is for locating the archive once it is stored.

It is important to take note of the following:

- Use a separate page for each archive group.
- Make a separate entry for each series, arranged in numerical order.
- Enter the locations in the following form:

  repository number/bay number/shelf letter

  for example: 3/598A is Repository 3, Bay 598, Shelf A
- If the whole series is stored together in one continuous run of shelving, enter the series number and the location of the first and last items for example: RG 1/2 3/598A-E

• Group _____Series Number_____					
• Series Title_____					
• _____					
•					

Item Numbers	Bay Number	Shelf Location	Item Numbers	Bay Number	Shelf Number

Figure 3: Location Register

3.3.4. Storage of new Acquisitions

- If the archives show signs of insect infestation or mould growth, staff will ensure that they are treated before being placed with other materials in the repository.
- All paper-based archives should be boxed to protect them the usual causes of deterioration: water damage, light damage, pests and dirt.
- Boxes should be of sufficient quality and strength to withstand many years of use.
- Staples and fasteners should be plastic, brass or a non-ferrous metal that will not rust.
- If it is not possible to box the archives, because they are of a size or shape unsuitable for boxing or because no boxes are available, the archives staff will need to pack the materials into bundles and provide an alternative protective covering.
- Usually this means wrapping them with good quality paper and securing the bundles with cotton tape. The bundles will be labeled with archival references in the same way that boxes are labeled so that the contents are clear.

(a) Archival boxes

They should conform to archival standards; that is :

- They should be made of materials which will not deteriorate or harm the archives.

- The board making up the boxes should be at least 1.5 mm thick and not too acidic, that is, with a pH value of between 5 and 8

(b) Secure Storage

- If the accession contains items that are particularly sensitive and require especially secure storage, these materials will be placed in a locked storage area.
- In order to find these materials later, the staff will either
- make a separate entry for the items in the location register

or

- insert dummies in place of the items, directing staff to them.
- When the archives have been placed in storage, staff will enter their location in the location register.

3.3.5. Listing Archives

- If you do not have time or resources to catalogue everything, you should set time aside to make **a quick box, file, volume or item list.**
- This gives you an overview of the contents of the collection.
- It allows you to make a quick assessment of any major issues with the condition of the material or any special storage needed because of its format (e.g. photographs, textiles, audio-visual or digital material)
- It allows you to identify material that might be particularly significant for research and it enables you to spot any material that might need special access restrictions.
- When material is listed, it allows you to take physical and intellectual control of it.

3.4. Arrangement of Archives

Arrangement and description bring control over the archival institution. One of the essential professional tasks of archivists is to analyse sets of archival materials in order to obtain a clear understanding of how and why they were created and how they were originally arranged for use.

(a) Group

A group consists of all the archives arising from a distinct organisation or individual.

Examples of groups include;

- Records of the Ministry of Works

- Records of Ministry of Education
- Records of the Supreme Courts
- Records of Civil Service Commission

Reference codes are usually two or three letters, though some archival institutions may use numbers as codes. Meaningful codes should be used as they have the advantage of being easy to recognize and remember. E.g. MOW representing Ministry of Works

(b) Subgroup:

- This is a discrete subdivision in the arrangement of archives below the level of the group, usually the archives of a subordinate administrative unit with its own record-keeping system.
- Subgroups may exist within a group where the originating organisation of the group has administrative or functional subdivisions, each of which created records that were managed separately.
- Series may or may not correspond precisely with administrative or functional subgroups. Where a new records system containing a number of series is created, the new system as a whole is usefully treated as a subgroup.

(c) Series:

- This is the level of arrangement of the files and other records of an organisation or individual that brings together those relating to the same function or activity or having a common form or some other relationship arising from their creation, receipt or use.
- The term series is used to refer to specific organised sets of records kept and used together as a system in the creator agency, and from which the archives have been selected.
- Normally, a series documents a particular function or process in government or in the creator agency or in the activities of the person.
- It is not always easy to decide what constitutes a series. The determination of series will usually depend on the size of the agency and the quantity of its records as well as the way in which they were kept.

Example: A large banking organisation might have kept various records such as vouchers, stop payment order, credit loan documents, recovery letters, clearing transaction details and so on. Each of these different types of records would naturally be regarded as a separate series.

- The basic unit of control for all archives is the series.
- This is because the series usually represents how the records were originally created and used.

Arrangement within the Series

Determining the arrangement of items within the series is usually based on the nature of the series and the original order of the archives.

The order is derived from the way in the records were created, used and kept by the creating agency or individual.

- ➢ **Numerical order:** uses numbers to arrange records.
- ➢ **Alphabetical order:** arrange records by names of individuals, businesses, institutions, government agencies, subjects, geographic locations or according to the sequence of letters of alphabet.
- ➢ **Alpha-numeric order:** uses a combination of letters and numbers.
- ➢ **Chronological order:** Arranging records by calendar date. Chronological order may be based on the first date or last date of each item.
- ➢ **Hierarchical order:** This is the normal method of arrangement when a series consists of the archives of a body with a clearly defined structure reflecting levels of importance or activity e.g. a committee followed by its subcommittees.
- ➢ **Geographical order:** according to geographical location.

(d) File:

An organized physical assembly (usually within a folder) of documents grouped together for current use or in the process of archival arrangement because they relate to the same subject, activity or transaction. A file is usually the basic unit within a record series.

(e) Item:

This is the basic physical unit of arrangement and description within a series

3.4.1. Assigning Reference Codes

- **Archival reference code** may be defined as the combination of letters and numbers allocated to groups, series and items in order to identify and control the materials.
- In order to control and retrieve archival holdings, the archival institution needs to develop and maintain a system for allocating reference codes to all materials in its care. These codes should be allocated and written on labels as early as possible in the process of accessioning
- Recommended practice is for full reference codes to consist of letters identifying the group, followed by a number identifying the series, followed by an oblique stroke(/) and ending with a number identifying the item.
- For example, KIU 7/32.
- This arrangement has three main levels of archival description: group, series, and file or item.

3.5. Findings Aids

They may be generally defined as guides that establish physical and intellectual control over the holdings of an archive and make it possible to receive particular records or information from these archives. Its objective in the preparation of finding aids is to make records in the custody of an archival institution accessible for use.

(a) Inventories

Inventories (list) there are basically three types of inventories that are prepared for public archives: Numerical inventory/ Summary; Descriptive inventories and Institutional inventories

- **Numerical inventory:**

This is one in which the record series are merely identified by title. This type may be prepared to serve specialized research needs. Summary inventories consist simply of numerical lists of the items as per the boxes or file units in a record group. They represent the first step of the analysis of records.

- **Descriptive inventories:**

These are compiled after summary inventories have been completed and they contain quiet detailed descriptions from the contents of boxes and files in a record group.

In addition to an introduction to the series, the descriptive paragraph on each series is also provided.

- **Institutional inventories:**

These are prepared for single agencies or administrative units. They are normally organized as per the functions and activities of the creating agency.

The only deference here is that institutional inventories deal with one independent agency and they are less elaborate than the descriptive inventories.

(b) Guides

A guide is a description of a collection or a group of documents within the archives. It's purpose is to indicate to the users the records, the general contents and the collections specifying there arrangement and nature of the subject that they deal with.

A guide is considered very necessary to researchers intending to use records from a particular office or agency. It will normally contain narrative information about the organization and its structures i.e. it will provide a descriptive note on each department, division and section or unit.

(d)Catalogues

In preparing a catalogue, the archivist provides an introduction giving the origin or provenance of each record as a whole. The introduction should provide the general view of the character and the contents of an archival group. The catalogue provides information helpful in understanding the character and content of the record group. Also the information will normally relate to the organization and the subject matter of the individual records.

(f) Calenders

- A calendar is defined as a document generated in the archives with an abridged content of the archival records. It is normally arranged **chronologically**.
- A calendar defers from descriptive lists in that it contains an abridged content of the records in such a way that consulting the original becomes unnecessary.
- The compiler of the calendar will normally have in mind very much the needs of the researchers who don't intend, or who will not be able to visit the archives.

(g) Transfer Lists

A Transfer List is prepared in the time of actual transfer of records from the creating agency to the archives. In other wards, it is a list of files which accompany the records at the time of their

transfer from the creating agency to the archives. It is a permanent record which actually reveals custody of files in the possession of the archival institution.

(h) Check List

After the preparation of the transfer list, the records are transferred to the archives for custody, and on the basis of this transfer list, the files are checked. As a result of such checking, the check list is prepared. This is another useful finding aid that the archivist will always maintain in the archive.

(i) Accession List

The accession list is the primary reference media prepared for record series which have no other finding aid or whose finding aid was not availed to the archives at the time of accession.

It is a list of files with the following details,; accession number, provenance, description, date range, quantity, location, access conditions, physical conditions, acknowledgement date, compiler and date.

Self-Review Questions (SRQ) For Study Session 3

Now that you have completed this study unit, you can assess how well you have achieved its Learning Outcomes by answering these questions. Write your answers in your Study Diary and discuss them with your Tutor at the next Study Support Meeting or Online interactive sessions.

1) Describe the Finding Aids for Archives.
2) Explain the different modes of acquisition of Archives.
3) Differentiate between an Accession Register and an Accession Form
4) Explain the different levels of arrangement for Archives.
5) What is the role of a Location Register in an Archive?
6) Describe the three major categories of Archives.
7) Your supervisor has asked you to explain to the Director of the Organization the different ways in which archives are acquired. What would you include in your explanation?
8) You have been recruited as an Archivist at PHN Consults and one of your tasks is to conduct archives description. Explain the principles you would follow in conducing this task.

9) Explain the preparatory work done prior to transfer of Archives.