

Report of the National Library of Australia on guidance for digital preservation: a summary

In 2004–2005, ICABS initiated a second survey on digital preservation, alongside the survey of KB, which was carried out by the National Library of Australia (NLA). This survey focused on the availability of suitable guidance documents for preserving materials. It also resulted in a report entitled, *Report to ICABS on guidance for digital preservation. Report on a survey of Sources. National Library of Australia* (July 2005). Both reports of KB and NLA had been sent for review to the ICABS Board by the end of July and were jointly presented during the IFLA ICABS Session on digital preservation during the World Library and Information Congress in Oslo in August 2005.

The NLA survey was carried out in 2004 by Jennifer Hodgeman, and was updated and analysed in mid-2005 by Colin Webb. Most of the resources found, were identified through the NLA's PADI subject gateway. As digital preservation is a rapidly evolving field, the conclusion was that the body of guidance literature is by no means static. Even during the months between the first and second survey, many new guidance resources appeared. Therefore the report aims to be a reasonably well-informed impression of the state of guidance, based on a subjective analysis of a snapshot of available resources taken in mid 2005. The NLA/ICABS survey will be made available online. A summary of this second ICABS survey is added here.

Although at present few resources offer standardising guidance, the report provides an extensive, though by no means exhaustive, overview of current existing resources with a guidance potential. Six main types of resources are distinguished:

- *Primary sources* – resources written specifically to provide broad guidance (not just describing a specific technique), and with apparent broad community endorsement. Only one standard (for OAI), a very few guidelines, and some training courses seemed to fit into this category.

- *Secondary sources* – resources written to provide guidance, but considered likely to be dated or without apparent community endorsement.

- *Local sources* – resources written to provide endorsed guidance for specific projects, programmes or communities. In many cases, these situation-specific sources may provide useful guidance for a wider audience, but those intending to use them would need to carefully consider their applicability to their own circumstances.

- *Embedded sources* – resources containing some useful preservation guidance within other information, such as reports on projects or articles debating issues, proposing approaches, or critically analysing experience. The great majority of literature on digital preservation, and most relevant conferences and seminars, may best be approached in this light: as sources of some potentially useful guidance that require a critical effort to extract the guidance and decide what is useful.

- *Standards and tools* – resources describing specific approaches or facilities. Except in a very few cases, most resources of this kind appeared to be marginal as guidance documents. Many relevant standards exist, especially in the area of file formats; there are also many partly-developed tools such as format registries and metadata extraction software, which may play a key role in digital preservation. In terms of guidance, however, these resources are of themselves relatively less useful than guides to where, when and how best to use them in the context of managing collections.

- *Current awareness sources* – resources that provide a convenient way of keeping up to date on recent developments and locating leads that may be worth following. A number of subject gateways, discussion lists, project ‘knowledge bases’, and conferences seem to fulfil this kind of role.

The NLA Report assumes a definition of digital preservation that covers the processes required to maintain access. As such, digital preservation should not be seen as a single process, but as a cluster of many contributing processes covering the life cycle of information resources and many aspects of their management. The report contains two overviews. The first overview classifies guidance sources in eight digital preservation process areas:

- taking responsibility for archiving and preservation;
- managing digital preservation programmes;
- creating preservable digital content and working with producers;
- deciding what to preserve;
- transferring digital objects to an archive; naming, describing and controlling;
- digital objects;
- managing legal issues that impact on preservation;
- protecting and storing data of digital information resources;
- and maintaining the means of representing archived objects for access.

Since libraries may be interested in a wide range of digital resources, the second overview is subdivided in 13 different kinds of digital materials. These materials range from online web-based materials to digital art, and from scientific data sets to electronic games: general – covering a wide range of materials;

- archival records including e-mail;
- audio-visual materials (audio & moving image);
- digital art and e-literature;
- digital games, virtual reality and software;
- digital ‘manuscripts’;
- images;
- miscellaneous digital materials;
- online information and web resources;
- physical format digital materials;
- scientific, statistical and research data;
- spatial, geospatial and similar data sets;
- current awareness resources.

Within each category a summary of core issues on which guidance may be needed is given. The criticality of being able to find guidance in each category is considered, along with the availability of guidance sources. Areas of particular strength and weakness are noted. Then an overview of surveyed guidance resources is given, with a short description of the contents, the URL, and some short notes on the source and scope of each resource. The resources chosen for inclusion in the report are considered to be either representative of a wider range of relevant resources, or to be considered to be the most relevant. Most of the resources were identified through the NLA’s PADI Subject Gateway (Preserving Access to Digital Information, available at <http://www.nla.gov.au/padi>) and are therefore limited to guidance resources in English only.

The cautious conclusion of the survey is that since most digital preservation programmes are operating in an environment where much still has to be decided or agreed upon, it is hardly surprising that many people find it difficult to locate guidance that meets their needs. However, there are some ‘wellsprings’ of guidance that have produced a steady stream of help over the past decade, and to whom it is reasonable to look for further guidance in future. These include the following categories:

- Projects and programmes that investigate existing best practices and standards for their own needs, and then make their findings publicly available (such as literature reviews that occur in the set-up stages of many digital preservation programmes);
- Projects and programmes that undertake original research for their own needs, and then make their results available (such as a number of research projects that have been funded to explore specific processes);

Appendices

- Collaborative groups that set standards or benchmarks that all partners agree on (such as standards-setting bodies, collaborative digitisation projects, digital preservation alliances);
- Agencies set up to provide training or guidance to a specific industry or sector (such as bodies that organise training programmes, seminars, and reports for the Higher Education sector); and
- Agencies with a mission to enable the preservation of digital heritage, wherever it is found (such as UNESCO, IFLA).

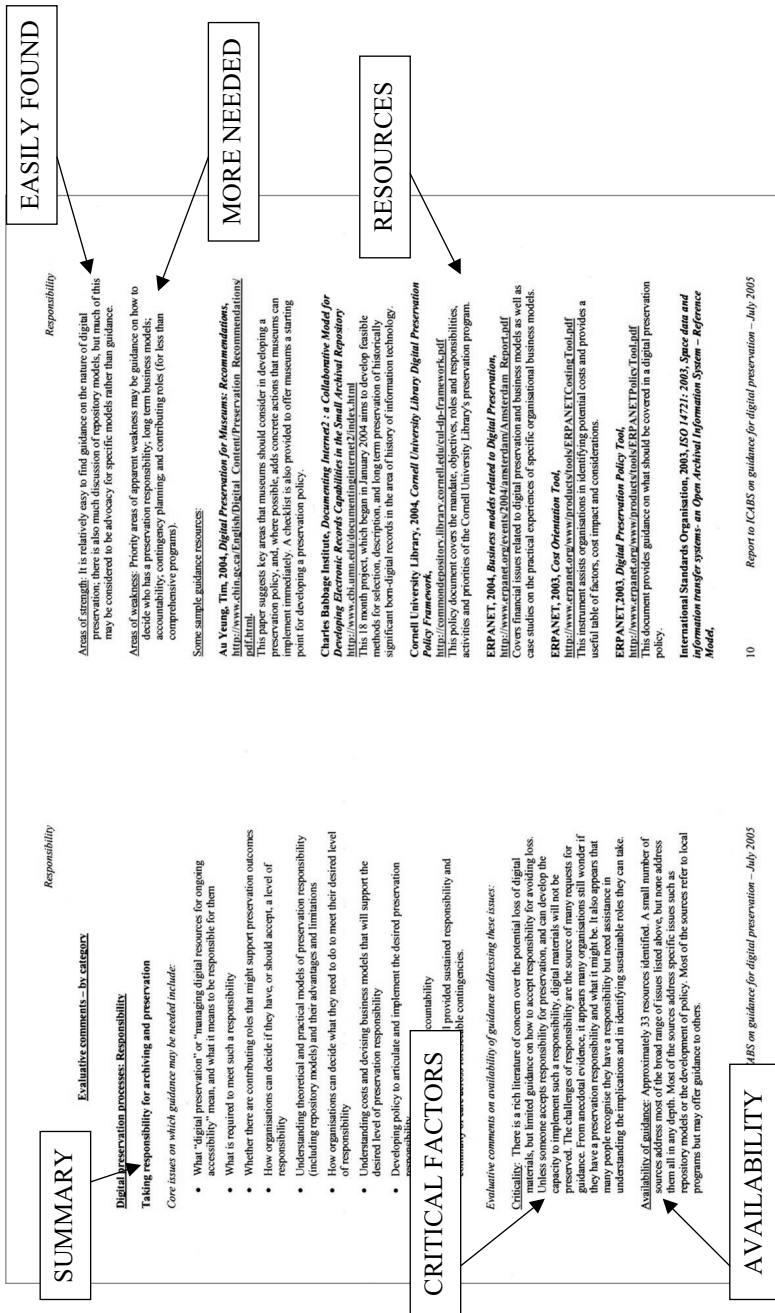
The Report concludes that at present, there is no single best source of guidance available that covers all relevant topics in the field of digital preservation. There is however a growing body of resources that can be considered as core guidance documents in digital preservation. Most of these resources are available in the form of guidelines, rather than as standards or codes of practice. Standards and codes of practice do exist, but are generally restricted to specific subjects and cannot be understood without a context.

Apart from this relatively small group of formal documents, there is a growing amount of literature that can be relevant to digital preservation processes as well. This represents a wealth of guidance, but at the same time leads to a situation in which it can be hard to see the wood for the trees. To tackle this problem, several organisations have already set up training programmes to provide a framework of basic concepts, in order to help digital preservation managers and stakeholders to find the information they need.

For the near future the Report suggests that it would help if more sectoral peak bodies would invest in the development of basic guidelines for managing different kinds of digital materials. This concept has already proven its worth in the fields of records archiving and audio preservation. These guidelines could provide the basis for creating a platform for knowledge sharing and cooperation on new developments. The future development of guidance in digital preservation would ideally consist of a mixture of basic concept guidelines, codes of practice for specific communities, standards covering specific steps and techniques, and strong mentoring and support mechanisms. And in all of this, the value of personal contact for any guidance should not be underestimated.

The full report can be found on the ICABS website and on the NLA website. <http://www.nla.gov.au/nla/staffpaper/2005/documents/webb1.pdf>

Example of a page of Guidances on digital resources



Report to ICAERS on guidance for digital preservation – July 2005

10

ICARS on guidance for digital preservation – July 2005