60th Anniversary of the Archivschule Marburg: Greetings from the International Council on Archives

It is a great pleasure to be with you all today and to pay tribute to the many achievements of the Archivschule Marburg over the last sixty years, on behalf of the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the international archival community more generally. At around the same time last year I had the somewhat melancholy task of attending a farewell party to mark the imminent closure of the Dutch Archives School. So I am especially glad to be here and to look forward with you to the healthy and vigorous activity of the Archivschule for many years to come.

The ICA is only slightly older than the Archivschule, as it was established in 1948 and celebrated its 60th Anniversary at the International Congress in Kuala Lumpur in July 2008. ICA is the voice of archives and archivists on the world stage, a role that has never been more important than it is today, because of the ever more pronounced trends towards globalization. Any profession that does not operate on the world stage will ultimately be unable to defend its values and interests and will not survive. Today ICA is a network of over 1400 institutions and individuals spread over 195 countries and territories, all of whom are committed to advancing the cause of archives. We have improved our governance, made the selection of our leaders more democratic, formulated a clear ten-year strategy and are now implementing a full professional
programme of funded projects and other initiatives to achieve our strategic goals. We are currently modernizing our communications through the construction of a new website that explains clearly to external audiences what ICA is trying to do and offers our members access to the latest publications and standards produced by our organization.

One of our six strategic objectives is to develop capacity in the archive profession through education, training, publications, standards and tools. Given the multiple challenges that archivists face in the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century– preserving archives on traditional media in the face of the problems of climate change, energy efficiency and reduced budgets, coupled with the need to address the issues posed by the massive growth of born digital records and the increasing public demand for digital copies of the most popular records – it is not surprising that there are more ICA projects devoted to training and education than any other area.

The main theme of our recent annual conference (CITRA) in Malta was to identify more precisely the competences that today’s archivists must possess and how best to enable them to acquire them. The role of archival educators featured prominently in the conclusions of the conference. They must equip their students to cope with the fast pace of change in the working environment as well as the technologies that are used there; to operate in a digital
environment, managing electronic records as well as maintaining the historical perspective; to understand business processes; and to develop the interpersonal skills necessary to advocate and promote the role of the archivist. Many of my younger colleagues regard themselves as digital natives – that is to say, they have not really experienced a world which did not have digital technology deeply embedded in social activity. However, the digital world is a highly anarchic and lawless place. Indeed, it can be likened to a highly dangerous jungle, with many traps lying in wait for the unsuspecting young archivist who does not have a firm grasp of the underlying principles of the profession to guide their path.

It will not be possible to pass on these principles and cope with the additional challenges of the early 21st century through online resources and short training courses alone. The efforts of the profession crucially depend on the existence of permanent schools of archival education that act as centres of excellence. In the view of many in the profession, including myself, the Archivschule in Marburg is one of these precious institutions. Indeed, it is not going too far to say that it is a jewel in the crown of archival education.

It seems to me that the key to the long lasting success of the Archivschule is to remain in touch with the changing needs of the profession in its daily work while respecting the importance of continuity. It has been able to combine its teaching of the
traditional skills of the profession (paleography and diplomatic, preparation of finding aids) with an ability to identify the latest trends at an early stage. In the volume of ARCHIVUM devoted to archival training published in 1988, Frank Evans noted that the Marburg Archivschule had revived the high standards and rigorous training of the pre-war Berlin-Dahlem Institute. However, the curriculum, while retaining Latin and the traditional subjects, was already expanding to cover records management, reprographics, and audio-visual and electronic records, with more practical training focusing on the World War Two and post-war records kept at the Federal Archives in Koblenz. The School continues to modernize, with the introduction of a master’s degree in records management scheduled for next year. At the same time the curriculum for the so-called traditional archivist includes IT applications in archives, public relations, project management, budgetary law and human resources – all indispensable skills for anyone who wishes to run a large archival institution.

It has been truly remarked that ‘war is too important to be left to the generals’. However, it seems that the much more doubtful view that ‘archives are too important to be left to the archivist’ is also gaining ground quite rapidly. The reason often given for the failure of archivists to be appointed to the top positions in the national archives and other large archive institutions is their lack of these
essential management competencies and advocacy skills. Thanks to the wide ranging curriculum of the Archivschule in preparing archivists for leadership roles as well as professional work, this scenario is unlikely to occur in Germany.

In the archives profession solutions to common problems are often to be found through the exchange of information across national borders and international co-operation. Colleagues in the Archivschule have played a significant part in ICA’s activities in the Committee on Professional Training (CPT) and its successor, the Section on Archival Education and Training (SAE). Dr Fritz Wolf organized the first meeting of the Committee in Marburg in 1979; Professor Eckhard Franz was president of the Section 1989-1992 while a lecturer at the Archivschule; Professor Angelika Menne-Haritz was a member of the Steering Committee 1992-2000 while director of the Archivschule; and Dr Karsten Uhde has been a member of the Steering Committee since 2000 and acted as Secretary until last year. If further proof of the School’s commitment to international activity was needed, one need only point to the availability of the third edition of the ICA Dictionary of Archival Terminology, alas unpublished in conventional form, on its website. Earlier this year the ICA Executive Board recognized the continuing value of this publication by voting funds for the compilation of a new online Dictionary of Archival Terminology.
In addition to the above achievements, the Archivschule has managed gradually to build up its research capabilities since the mid-1990s, often in co-operation with the German National Research Fund. Without any research activity to act as a catalyst for renewal, the curriculum of an archive school risks becoming mechanistic and it will gradually go out of date. If archival educators do not carry out the ground-breaking research that needs to be done in the digital era, then others, perhaps less well versed in the fundamental principles of the professions, will attempt to do so in their place. Some in the profession consider research activity as an expensive luxury but this view is short-sighted; today’s research often leads to tomorrow’s programmes and standards.

The subject of this 14th colloquium, digitization and retrospective conversion, is a major preoccupation of our profession throughout the world. It was most recently the subject of a seminar organized by our South East Asian Branch (SARBICA) meeting in Hanoi in early October of this year. Perhaps only the management of the huge quantities of born digital records, which are now being created by many administrations, rivals digitization as a topic for professional discussion.

Digitization offers huge opportunities to archives to make their holdings much better known and accessible to researchers and the wider public. At the same time it is a major challenge. The funds
available to an archive institution are unlikely to cover all the records and finding aids which it wishes to digitize. So what criteria should define the priorities in digitization programmes? What professional standards should be adopted and how should compliance with them be encouraged? Without a solution to these questions, digitization initiatives are likely to be, at best, only partially successful.

We are currently in the throes of an Information Revolution where large amounts of information are available on the Internet. However, it is not always easy to establish where the information comes from and to determine its authenticity. In the absence of authoritative metadata to give the information its context, then its validity can be questioned. ICA is currently developing a freely available open source software package, known as ICA-AtoM (Access to Memory), which will enable archive services to put information about their holdings online, without having to invest in any commercial software. It is multi-lingual, web-enabled, and will conform in full to ISAD (G) and other ICA descriptive standards. The descriptions can be linked to individual record images. It was originally intended for smaller archive service but large institutions in Scotland, Canada and France are now showing serious interest in the software. The important general point to stress is that, without
the explanatory metadata, record images on their own lose much of their meaning and significance.

Digitization programmes can boost the public profile of archives and result in the development of large online services. In addition, they play a crucial role in disaster prevention and recovery, the sharing of archival sources that are needed by several countries with a common history, and can help to provide access to archives that have been displaced through colonization, armed conflicts, or large scale population movements. Digitization raises many technical questions but its implications are far-reaching and profound. Decisions about what records and finding-aids to digitize and how to digitize them must not be taken on unrealistic assumptions. They must at all times be based on what is technically and financially possible.

I would like to conclude by wishing colleagues in the Archivschule continuing success over the next sixty years and far beyond. The School has a richly deserved international reputation which is a great asset to your country. The international archival community really needs your continuing participation and engagement in ICA.

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