

PRESS RELEASE: Avoiding Amnesia in a Digital World

The world's archivists have been looking into a collective crystal ball, imagining the future of their profession in the 21st century. Meeting in Malta, 240 archives and records professionals from 90 countries recognised the enormous challenges they face in a fast changing world.

Documents and records previously on paper are turning digital. Archivists need to act swiftly to save these fragile electronic entities and make sure we don't all suffer a memory loss in future. They need to exploit new technologies to reach out to new generations of users. And to do this, archives staff need the right training, the right skills and the right experience.

"We're aiming to create a new generation of archivists, completely comfortable with Google and YouTube" commented conference chair Nolda Römer-Kenepa from Curaçao. Running through the meeting was the idea that today's archive leaders are digital immigrants, coming to terms with a new world of electronic communication, while a new generation of digital natives is now growing up.

Delegates to the conference on the theme "Imagining the 21st Century Archivist: New Strategies for Education and Training" agreed to work together through national and international networks, promoting internships and exchanges for archives staff, sharing online resources, setting up mentoring programmes and collaborating on research. Of particular concern to participants were problems of indigenous and minority peoples, calling for more flexible options for entering the profession. Distance learning using the internet was seen as a key way for developing countries to acquire education and training.

The International Council on Archives (ICA), which meets every year to exchange views and develop policies, was hosted this year by the National Archives of Malta. Welcoming delegates, National Archivist Charles Farrugia said: "Malta has a long archive tradition, with records going back 700 years. We face the 21st century with new confidence: we renewed our Archives Act in 2005 and started courses in archives and records management at the University of Malta the same year."

Today's archivist needs to manage change, to master technology and to operate in an electronic environment, while keeping a historical perspective. Beyond that, delegates recognised the need to understand business processes, to develop communication and advocacy skills and to be able to capture oral traditions.

Conference goers were concerned with the whole learning cycle, from initial education, through on the job training and taking in continuing professional development. They called for a constant review and update of education and training curricula, using feedback from educators, professional associations, employers and students.

Another key conclusion was the need for a strong relationship between research and teaching programmes in universities offering recordkeeping education. Archives organisations too, need to foster research and development projects, drawing in partners from the academic world, the voluntary sector and business.

Summing up the proceedings at a dinner in the historic surroundings of the La Valette Hall, ICA President Ian Wilson from Canada said: "Malta is a small country and it took courage and determination on the part of its National Archives to invite their worldwide colleagues here. Charles Farrugia's vision, the support of his Minister Dolores Cristina and the government have produced a most memorable conference in Malta."

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

ICA, the International Council on Archives, is based in Paris, and has nearly 1,500 individual and institutional members in 195 countries. For further information, contact:

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